

H Jonathan Klijn

Harvard ES /Reviewing the Arts Jour E-157

Jeremy C. Fox

October, 2019

Review 2

Dada goes to iAfrika. The art of Khaya Witbooi as keeper of collective memory.

Some prefer art to soothe the soul. Non-confrontational and not the kind that would make dinner guests nervous. South African artist Khaya Witbooi confronts the viewer by pointedly flaunting troublesome assessments of history and awkward ideologies. Echoing his heroes, Warhol and Haring, he takes stylistic potshots at the expectations of a contemporary art world, steadily running out of steam due to unrealistic value expectations. Leading the wave of emerging artists, Khaya grew up poor in an isiXhosa community, which offered no comfortable pathway to economic freedom. Witbooi had nothing to lose. He still doesn't. He knows the pick-and-shovel task of rising above second-class citizenship. Khaya is the frequent recipient of comments like, "that's wonderful, and I'm not just saying that because you're black." It doesn't bother him. Instead, he uses art as a way of expressing his experience of the South African story. He doesn't merely use sanitized bits as he focuses on overlooked narratives with a capacity for healing a nation, which is still attempting reconciliation. In his 2016 work *Captain de Klerk*, Witbooi addresses the motivations that induced the birth of democracy in South Africa. It's a beautiful painting of an awkward blemish.

Witbooi is super collectible. He echoes Warhol and Lichtenstein, who distanced themselves from the Abstract Impressionism of Rothko and Pollock. In the same way, Witbooi is the leading South African artist at the intersection of Political Activist Art and Abstract Realism, which seeks to capture reality through emotional interpretation. He teases limousine liberals who take selfies while digging toilet holes to "end suffering." His Africa, however, is conditioned to accept violations motivated by entitlement, like when Uday and Qusay Trump posed goofy-toothed and proud, with

their freshly shot leopard. Witbooi echoes the sentiments of late author Binyavanga Wainaina, who railed against persistent Western generalizations about the Africanness of white natives, fetishized Mandingos, and obligatory AIDS babies in his seminal work, “How to write about Africa.” Witbooi presents a world on canvas that equally reveals the personal views of the casual observer, as it does the artist. Liberating a country is one matter. Predictably, decolonizing the mind is trickier.

Despite its medium IKEA poster size, *Captain de Klerk* is an imposing homage to the last South African Apartheid-era President, F. W. de Klerk. The work echoes the political Dada poster poems by Raoul Hausmann, unified collages, created through image fragments that propose informed narratives. Witbooi interrupts the selective memory of a country, still recovering from the injustices of the Apartheid machine, by leaving the viewer confused. He overlaps crisp stencils, vibrant graffiti, and uneven oil paint textures. Exaggerated, chaotically placed images purposely clutter the composition. Finally, he aerosols custom-made stencils and random words, creating high-calorie visual claustrophobia. Using a dated palette of clay green, soil red, and bleached yellow, the work would not have been out of place over a seventies mantle in the presidential residence in Cape Town. He adds watery cerulean details while rendering curvaceous letters with bold, black outlines. Barely recognizable, elongated Disney shapes—possibly mangled mouse hands—protrude cheerfully. Their presence hints at the omnipresence of American financial and cultural influence on South Africa before its bad-boy image became a liability for Ronald Reagan.

Witbooi layers the stenciled shapes and copied images against a distinctive, yellow background of iconic South African Lion Match packaging. The repurposed commercial packaging, and randomized screen prints of cultural icons are guaranteed to twitch minimalist eyes. It is Witbooi’s mechanism to encourage the onlooker to interact with the work. He suggests narratives, often at odds with textbooks or news media, and his creative process has more in common with The Burn Book from the movie *Mean Girls* than anything taught at the Art Institute. Appropriately, the technique allows specific images to emulsify into bedlam, ensuring a constant supply of surprises.

The work resembles thought-patterning, the process leading from one idea to the discovery of another, as it comments on South African politics. And how it got this way.

In *Captain de Klerk*, Witbooi introduces distorted floral references. It forms part of his ongoing project on the destruction of plants in Africa at the hand of the colonialist. Plants barely able to stand the summer scorch and prone to excessive thirst were imported en masse by British barons of industry. They forced Africans to replace the Africanness of their landscape with a “superior” version. Weaponized landscape imperialism created lush, informal English gardens throughout the country. Witbooi makes this point with irony as he links colonial floral banalities to contemporary consumerist colonialism.

Witbooi’s work is provocative but never inflammatory, when he points out a range social epidemiologies: economic Apartheid, a culture of violence, voter disengagement, and meagre national spirit. He surrounds de Klerk with static images of Cecil John Rhodes and Marilyn Monroe. Rhodes is the pre-Apartheid bogeyman, and few men draw as much vitriol. The British imperialist annexed diamond fields, while firmly believing the English to be *the* master race. In *Captain de Klerk*, a pasty-faced Rhodes looms as guardian over the empowered de Klerk. Naturally, the Apartheid regime benefited enormously from the separatist infrastructure left behind with the demise of British rule. Randomly placed, likenesses of stormtroopers line up behind de Klerk daring us to consider whether he was *our* “dark father”?

Politically, Witbooi takes a satirical stance, while referencing pop-culture. As a result, he reframes a loaded political statement as a comment on yielded power, establishing the Peace Prize-winning de Klerk in a zen pose. He wears his South African pre-democracy flag casually, draped over his shoulders like an azure pashmina at a yoga retreat. The presence of the flag indeed raises a sensitive question: can a dominant but downgraded culture ever embrace a negotiated settlement? A quick look at the prevalence of Confederate flags, statues, and memorials in the United States indicates that the answer may be no. It recalls journalist Molly Ivins’ prophetic, “I prefer someone

who burns the flag and then wraps themselves up in the Constitution over someone who burns the Constitution and then wraps themselves up in the flag.” Nobel winner de Klerk, wrapped in his coded symbol of defeat, is a visual “I don’t see color” statement. He is the product of a world which willingly genuflects to the massive profits gained by some from the subjugation of others.

By introducing Marilyn Monroe, Witbooi suggests deeper motivational forces. He is confident in her Pop Art status, only revealing her lips and mole. Witbooi appropriates the iconic Warhol painting of Gene Korman’s publicity image for the 1953 film noir, *Niagara*. Marilyn Monroe represents American post-war prosperity. A pin-up girl for cultural imperialism, she is catnip for celebrity-driven societies that, despite never having seen any of her movies, yield to the legend. Warhol’s *Marilyn Diptych* has long been viewed as suggestive of a martyr—the sacrificing of a life for consumption by the fans. Witbooi suggests that it was equally a driving motivation behind de Klerk. As much as he professed to be a Renaissance man in a new democracy, de Klerk’s privilege preceded him. Functioning much like infrared remote, privilege validates as it opens doors, unlocking opportunity. Witbooi comments on white resistance to assimilation and the unwillingness to relent on things that divide.

Above de Klerk’s head, a bold cartoon-strip shows a blue superhero—“Bam!”—knocking out a ruddy-looking bad guy. Heavily disguised, Haring icons appear to be caught in an orgy. They are incorporated, overlaid, with the cartoon scene. Combined, this section represents a love/hate marriage. Like an abusive spouse, Britain has always sniffed around Africa for the ideal foothold. They found it in South Africa. The corrosive yet lucrative relationship lasted, on and off, for over one hundred years. When the Dutch rebelled against the British, two successive Anglo Boer Wars germinated. It would prove pivotal in weaving together the fabric of the eventual Apartheid system. As part of its Scorched Earth Policy, Britain pioneered the concentration camp as an internment facility for Dutch women and their children. The men were banished to islands like St Helena and Bermuda. Farms were burnt to the ground, cattle were poisoned, and land rendered fallow. My

grandmother lost both her mother and sister to typhoid in a concentration camp outside Pretoria. They could see their farmhouse burning from the overcrowded camp. Unrepentant, Britain instituted a separatism policy that necrotized into Apartheid. Witbooi concludes that political roughhousing bamboozles and bullies, while briskly designating the losers to second-class citizenship.

Khaya Witbooi is a master of visual narrative, innocently helping history by reminding us of forgotten truth. During interviews, he freely declares himself to be an archivist of sorts—he creates threads of information. To Witbooi, the sinewy connective parts of history, the bits bursting with suppressed memory, need to be preserved in our ongoing war against mass amnesia. But there is a fact to bear in mind, illustrating challenge and determination. As a consequence, it changes the experience of his work. Khaya Witbooi has limited education and no training as an artist. He was broke—homeless—when he sold his first work. Awkwardly, it begs the question: What did you do with your privilege today?

Khaya Witbooi *Boom!*

Gallery Victor Armendariz

300 W Superior St, Chicago

September 1 until November 31, 2019