



REFLECTING ON AUGUST

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By Sven Christian
www.thkgallery.com

Kurt Vonnegut once wrote that “if you open a window and make love to the world ... your story will get pneumonia.” The take-away for me is that the world outside is a very big place — too big, too complex, too much, to absorb. You can’t tell it all. As someone who grew up in Durban’s sticky suburbs, though, it’s not pneumonia but bilharzia that I fear. There’s value in an open window, in the free-flow of air, light, and sound. “In taking to the air”, wrote Ho Rui An, “we are taken out of ourselves, yet at the same time returned ... not quite inspired, but ventilated.”

One feels this strongly in the work of Jake Michael Singer, whose large steel sculptures—currently on show as part of the group exhibition, *Reflecting on August*, at THK Gallery, Cape Town—are as impossibly light as they are heavy. Similarly, Fatima Tayob Moosa’s abstract worlds—made through a mixture of acrylic, water, enamel, acetone, turps, glue, canvas, and paper—bleed and congeal in a wash and splatter of blues, blacks, and greys. As metallic as it is atmospheric, her work brings to mind the perforated surface of a calcified coral reef or a landscape laid to waste by fire. “Growth has everything to do with degeneration and regeneration,” she explains. “Forest fires are necessary sometimes ... Nature is doing what’s best for itself ... We really don’t need to control everything.” Reflected through her process, this sentiment harbours an understanding of the world and the invisible forces that bind us to its surface. Cycles, orbits, and gravitational pulls—the only matter depicted as ‘linear’—fold back in (or out) of themselves, like the inverse of giant thumb prints.

Journeys of the Soul 4, Andrew-Ntshabele, 2019



Above: *Consciousness is Omnipresent*, Fatima Tayob Moosa, 2018

Right: Thina Dube, *Comrades!* "He cried, Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 70 x 2cm, (Courtesy of Guns and Rain)



The gaps between these inscriptions complete the whole, occupying as much space as the contours that attempt to circumscribe them. The fragile compositions of Thina Dube's monotype prints also play with negative space. In *Transition* (2018), a figure ghosts through a circular portal, cast in sharp relief against a black backdrop. In its centre, another doorway flaps open to reveal a series of cellular forms that disappear into deep space. At the base of the work, another portal—this time rectangular—reveals the top of an electric pylon against a dark, shimmering night sky. Split by the whiteness of the page, the two vistas are loosely held by a series of entangled threads, as well as an embossed shape—half-rectangle/half-semi-circle—which serves to

bridge, but also untether, the two. The work is uncanny, in a Miró-esque kind of way. Subtle, but loaded.

Although linked by a fascination with all things surface, Vusi Beauchamp's approach is drastically different. Repeated caricatures form a vocabulary of the grotesque, which he calls upon to provoke the constructed world of stereotype, prejudice, and power. Speaking on the use of the venus flytrap as motif, Beauchamp notes: "We easily fall into these hate traps, confusing that with culture." This might explain the recent move toward more figurative work, an attempt to ground and relate his art to real people in a context in which stereotyping is fast becoming the norm.



Burning-and-Looting, Themba-Khumalo, 2019

Toni-Ann Ballenden has, in contrast, stepped away from figuration into the world of abstraction. “I find [abstraction] very healing and cathartic. I don’t have to have that stress of working from an image ... I can wait for the work to tell me what to do.” Ballenden’s approach is the result of years of hoarding what she calls ‘unresolved work’, which she cuts into strips and reconstitutes into playful artworks like *Found Pieces*, or the suggestively titled *Rooftop View*. Mingled amongst (intentionally) illegible bits of writing, these strips become something of an abstracted diary, joint together by the kind of mapping pins one might find on a mood board or in a poorly spotlighted forensics office.

Andrew Ntshabele’s work shares something of this quality. Solitary, contemplative figures sit centre stage, each superimposed onto a backdrop of newspaper articles from across the globe. Rather than being carefully selected, the articles mishmash from 9/11 through to a court appeal by five retrenched staff, flattening time and space, which the artist then re-invokes by overlaying maps. Not any old maps, but the intersecting streets of Doornfontein, where August House is located, and where the artist has lived since 2016. Having all spent time there at one point or another, the five-story building connects the hopes, fears, and ambitions of all of the artists on show. In Ntshabele’s rendition, the



Rooftop View, Toni-Ann Ballenden, 2019,
photo Bob-Cnoops



Holy Land, Themba Khumalo, 2016



Dived Murrur, Jake Michael Singer, 2019

road names have been substituted for words like 'worry'; 'pride'; 'responsible'; and 'wise'. Both figures in the series appear to search for something therein, as if racking their brain for an answer. Perhaps my favourite thing about these works, though, is Ntshabele's use of light: not the temperate, domestic interiors of Vermeer, but the radiant, contrasting vibrancy of Johannesburg's inner-city.

In the foreground of Themba Khumalo's *Burning and Looting* (2019), charcoal flames lick the skeletons of two cars. There is nobody there, bar a distant line of blue and red police lights. Looking at it, I can't help but think of Laurie Anderson's *Words in Reverse*: "The reason you always think there are fires at riots is because that's the only place at the scene of the riot where there is enough light for the video camera. Actually, maybe this fire is only something happening near the riot ... incidental to the riot. Someone's trash is on

fire or someone is having a barbecue near the riot but not as part of the riot. But that's why you think there are always fires at riots when sometimes there aren't any fires at riots, or in any case, not at every riot." This is certainly not the case here. Nobody torches a car to roast marshmallows on. But it does make me wonder about the spectacle — about why cars get burnt during service delivery strikes; about how the media are drawn to these kinds of images; and about how that might perpetuate violence and misrepresentation, if only for the guarantee of an immediate and willing camera crew. There are many ways to vent.

'Reflecting on August' is a show that brings seven artists from August House together under another roof. Held at THK Gallery, Cape Town, the exhibition will run from 5 September - 25 October 2019.
