

## An Essay by Lloyd Pollak

### Rites of Passage

*"The facts of life are birth, death and every damn thing in-between."*

– attributed to Dorothy Parker

Rites of passage mark any event of major consequence in our life cycle, especially significant changes in our social or marital status. Usually they take place in societally approved ways involving the community, ritual, and ceremony, but they can also occur behind closed doors, like sexual initiation or prove entirely secular, like kitchen teas.

Birth, baptism, confirmation, puberty, coming-of-age, loss of virginity, quitting the parental home, courtship (if such still exists), engagement, marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood, retirement, loss of partner, old age and finally, death, constitute the most significant rites of passage.

The brief could not be more broad and inclusive. It raises all the perennial and most fundamental questions about the nature of human life, death, and the beyond. As South Africa is such a rich mix of ethnicities, each group celebrates these milestones in a different way, so Gallery One11 invited artists of many different colours, cultures and faiths to participate. Sadly, not all did. Straight and gay artists' records of these landmarks have been juxtaposed to investigate whether artists of different gender and sexual orientation react in the same or different ways to these key events.

The participating artists were given free reign and invited to work in any medium of their choice, be it painting, drawing, graphics, sculpture, installation, intervention, or video. We urged them to strive for emotional authenticity and be true to whatever they felt. As such key events are recorded in the family album, we urged all participants to avoid the bland factuality of the "happy snap" and unleash their imaginations, push the boundaries and invent the new...

Both the gallerist, Marita Schneider, and I were delighted with the calibre of the works submitted for the exhibition. Despite their high quality we made a ruthless selection and hung only the crème de la crème. Everything attained stringent standards of excellence, but only a handful of works can be said to be outright masterpieces, so I will commence my catalogue essay with them.

Curiously three of the best works are of religious inspiration. A visit to the Vatican Museums confirms the fact that – apart from a few extremely rare exceptions - sacred art is irremediably moribund, but, by supplanting all its exhausted clichés – all those Saints, all those angels, radiances, grieving Magdalene's, crosses and crowns of thorns – with novel imagery, Verna du Toit and Pierre Fouché have breathed a vital and thriving new life into a sclerotic tradition that seemed to be tottering on the brink of its own grave.

**Pierre Fouché's** *Cain, soon after the fall* is intended as a paean to alternative life-styles and to parenthood as a rite of passage as opposed to the curse of barrenness laid on most queer men.

A breathtaking *tour de force*, Cain is executed in a style of solemn import that immediately convinces the viewer of the decisive consequence of what he witnesses. The artist re-imagines the primal origins of man as recounted in the book of Genesis and depicts the world's first family, Adam, Eve and their first-born son, the infant Cain, as a 21<sup>st</sup> century family in the prime of life, dancing uninhibitedly at a trance festival. Everything resonates juvenescence, health, energy and vigor. Stance and gestures are expansive, sweeping and unconstrained by any inhibitive sense of propriety. Adam exultantly raises the infant Cain (equipped with ear-muffs to prevent him from being disturbed by the mega decibel level of the electronic music) up high above the horizon line. He is thus outlined and isolated by the pale blue of the sky as befits the subject.

Adam's gesture encompasses many meanings. It is at one and the same time a token of thanksgiving unto the Deity for blessing him with progeny, a sacrificial gesture whereby he offers Cain up to God in some kind of consecration, and an attempt to project his offspring into another higher realm for trance strives to transcend the human condition. It prolongs the peak experience provided by hallucinogens and enables one to break through to a state of heightened consciousness where one undergoes an uplifting rush of euphoria that verges on the visionary and ecstatic.

Eve, too, throws up her arms in rapturous thanksgiving and adoration of her child. She reaches to touch the fingers of her son and thereby transmit all the boundless love and tenderness she feels for him. Her action generates the current of love and pious devotion that flows through father, mother, and son and unites them as a family. All three are pinioned together in a three-dimensional Renaissance pyramidal composition with potent reminiscences of Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo's delineations of the Holy Family. At the same time her gesture corresponds to a maternal reflex. It is the action of the tender, nurturing mother, preparing to safeguard her baby should he tumble and fall.

In this biblical painting, the artist tackles what used to be the loftiest genre in the entire hierarchy, and in it he employs the hallowed medium of mosaic; a medium closely associated with the pagan temples of ancient Greece and Rome and the basilicas of the emergent Christian faith. Mosaic reached its apogée in Ravenna at the mausoleum of Galla Placida, and the basilicas of *San Vitale*, *Sant'Apollinare in Classe* and *Sant' Apollinaire Nuovo*, in the churches of Byzantium and the mosques and synagogues of the Levant. Thus, the very medium is itself sanctified by its immemorial usage in places of worship.



Pierre's interpretation or re-interpretation is celebratory, affirmative, and glowing with optimism as it is set at a time when the newly-minted world had just emerged from the hands of its maker - a time before Cain attained manhood and slew his brother Abel, thus committing the first murder in history, and unleashing evil,

covetousness and greed into a world that hitherto remained untouched by such crimes and untroubled by guilt, remorse and fear.

"Hoy es mañana y es ayer" wrote Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1\*</sup> In limp translation this reads as, "today is tomorrow is yesterday". To the Christian mystic, events like the Fall and the slaughter of Abel escape the trammels of time and place. They take place here, there, and everywhere. They took place all those centuries ago; they are taking place now, and they will take place in the future all of which collapse into an eternal present.

**Verna du Toit's** *The Serpent's Kiss* is a grandiose work loaded with tremendous narrative power and charged with a puissant freight of inexhaustible symbols and metaphysical riddles. It recycles the Old Testament, treats of good and evil, vice and virtue, sin, lust, seduction and shame, and forms a secular counterpart to the Last Judgement.

What have we here? A host of biblical tropes - the crucifixionary pose that identifies the dead girl as a martyr, a snake that has wandered in from the garden of Eden to expose man to temptation, the two affrighted doves, symbols of the Holy Ghost that we have seen in innumerable baptisms, annunciations and representations of the Saints apostles, evangelists, friars and ascetics. The words of John the Baptist still ring in our ears: "I saw the spirit coming down from heaven like a dove and resting upon him"<sup>2\*</sup> with its promise of redemption and God's grace.

Pagan allusions, too, augment the context. An immaculately clad and groomed man wearing a corporate suit and tie is obviously the supreme authority figure presiding over the assembly. He is placed at the dead center of the image where he cranes over the corpse. His expression is one of grave ponderation as if he were summing up the mysterious situation, and attempting to reach some kind of conclusion, and the absolute centrality of his positioning implies that he is a stand-in for God, but *what kind of god?* the painting forces us to ask. Does he embody righteousness, mercy and forgiveness? There is no doubt that it is he, and only he, who casts the shadow of the Minotaur upon the wall behind him and the Minotaur represents evil in the absolute. The beast was the bull-headed monster born of the insatiably nymphomaniac Queen Pasiphae who used a special contraption devised by Daedalus to have sexual congress with a bull. The hideous product of their coupling was incarcerated in the labyrinth of King Minos of Crete where he devoured the seven Athenian youths and seven maidens which were sacrificed to him on a regular basis as a tribute paid by Athens to Crete. In his magnum opus Paul Delacour the author of *Le symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque*<sup>3\*</sup> writes, "Pasiphae symbolizes sexual guilt, unnatural lusts, undue dominance and sins repressed and hidden in the Labyrinth of the unconscious. The willing sacrifices made to the monster are so many lies and evasions to lull the conscience. They accumulate as fresh sins... In its totality the myth of the Minotaur symbolizes the spiritual struggle against repression."

The conjuncture whereby god is rendered Satanic is probably entirely unconscious on the part of the artist. This punitive and vengeful Old Testament Jehovah will meet out cruel punishment on the dead girl on her mortuary slab who may be completely innocent for all we know as the artist withholds all information about her identity, her past and the cause of her premature death.

Given the role of the unconscious and the strangulating force of the power of repression, nothing could be more apposite than the largely subterranean site of the action. For Jung, cellars and basements were the site of the unconscious. The mourners represent society and the different cultural, social, religious and political factors which play a role in how we perceive sexuality. This rag, tag and bobtail throng of votaries of the New Age and the counter-culture comprise dissidents, non-conformists, rebels, drop-outs, punks, oddballs and weirdos and they inject a freakishness into the painting, a whiff of fetishism and sado-masochism, a tang of sexual inversion and even criminality. However, some possess decency and even feel a genuine remorse, like the curly-haired man in the front to the right whose eyes are shaded by the woman behind him. He experiences guilt and contrition for he is probably a malefactor who has wronged the dead woman. The others appear appalled apart from the women to right at rear who appear to feel nothing but a prurient curiosity and even a malign delight.

It is the mourners who introduce a second layer of far more recondite, perhaps impenetrable, significance into the *The Serpent's Kiss* steeping the scene in mystery and enigma. Their tattoos are true arcana. Look at the mandala, the unidentifiable alphabet, and other abstruse and esoteric designs on the left arms of the man and woman to right. Look at the motifs on the T-shirt of the grief-stricken fellow to left. All these insignia proclaim adherence to alternative lifestyles and belief systems indicating that in a world of moral relativism no definitive judgement can be passed on the dead girl.

Verna's the *Garden of Earthly Divide* is obviously a reworking of Hieronymus Bosch's the *Garden of Earthly Delights* in which the artist fully indulges her taste for Bosch's fantastic inventions, strange contraptions, droll bizarreries and motifs that often appear Surreal *avant la lettre* although, as art historians have proven, they are most definitely not. The range of her imagination is unrivalled, and the medieval castle rising from a rock levitating in the sky surrounded by a coven of witches in full flight upon their brooms is a wondrous visual contrivance.



Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden Of Earthly Delights*, Oil on Oak Panels, 1490-1510, Museo Del Prado, Madrid.

Bosch's triptych portrays God presenting Eve to Adam in the Garden of Eden in the first panel. In the second the scene shifts to earth where we see humanity enjoying a carefree, uninhibitedly hedonistic existence but, as this takes place before the Fall and the expulsion from Eden, there was not, as yet, any clearly defined division between Good and Evil, so the sinners sin with no knowledge that they are sinning. Nevertheless, God is seen subjecting mankind to divine

punishment in hell in the final panel, though some art historians maintain that this scene takes place at a later time when man was vouchsafed knowledge of good and evil so that no one is unjustly chastised.

In general Verna simply updates traditional iconography in a manner that calls for no comment beyond unstinting praise for the artist's unflinching fertility of imagination and ingenuity. The right panel which portrays hell and the moment when the dead awaken, submit to God's last judgement and are subsequently punished for their sins falls in line with traditional 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century delineations of the end of history, except that the entire *mise-en-scene*, the landscape, the torturers and the exquisite cruelty of the agonies they inflict, are entirely re-imagined by Verna.

However although she shares Bosch's concern with good and evil, she shifts the focus and appears to take a Marxist slant and indict the multiple iniquities of unbridled capitalism and human greed rather than concern herself with Biblical notions of original sin and its consequences. Her Eden is not paradisiacal; the sky is overcast; the sunlight, feeble; the shadows, pervasive. The coloration is somehow oddly off-key. Look at the tiny pebbles in the foreground and note how they resemble a spilt box of Smarties. Decidedly there is something awry about this paradise.

The purchase the tree of life enjoys over earth is uncertain. It emerges from the summit of a rock formation, and its roots extend far and wide before plunging into terra firma and taking precarious root. Its upper branches are contorted, gnarled and crowned with dark, claret-colored red leaves, and the fruit it yields consists of an unlucky thirteen embryos partly peeled away to reveal the fetuses within. Neither the tufty hillock directly to right behind the tree, nor the plain, rocks, river, distant hills and cloudy grey sky are particularly idyllic in appearance.

Adam and Eve certainly do not welcome us into the Garden of Eden. Adam, a contemporary male, clad in a leather jacket and jeans, holds out a crystal ball which traps the light, as he fixes the spectator with a direct and unsmiling stare. Eve kneels beside him and he firmly clasps her shoulder. The gesture undeniably conveys possession and states this is my woman. Eve shares something of his forbidding mien. Her glance too is direct, stern and without amenity. She wears an off-the-shoulder evening gown in a red that picks up the hues of the tree's leaves, the flowers and the rivers of blood in the two side panels. She holds an Excalibur-like sword before her and adopts an attitude that proclaims she is ready to defend her terrain. This is private property, and Adam and Eve hold the title-deeds.

This jaundiced view of mankind and its arrant selfishness is extended in the right panel which depicts a modern, grey, industrial city with factory smokestacks belching out smoke and intensifying the dense, toxic smog that so blurs our vision. I suspect the central figure, seated in an armchair as he cranes forward to gaze at a chessboard represents capitalism at its most naked and brutal. This figure, who is concerned wholly with profit, and to hell with humanity and ecological devastation, also doubles as the Devil. He has human features but a pig's snout and his cerebellum is exposed and contains a little open flap bidding us gaze into the interior of his brain, but we do not have to look. We know that his entire being is consumed by unbridled self-seeking, avarice and utter indifference as to the suffering he might cause.

The world is his oyster. His absolute power is conveyed by the way in which he completely dwarfs the surrounding cast who shrink to Lilliputian dimensions that make him a behemoth. The chessboard is filled with gold coins and protected by an army of gunmen which this monstrous being activates by pulling strings like a puppeteer. In another hand he holds a birdcage containing

a miniature human being probably representative of the workforce he has enslaved. Another victim is the dead girl he has heedlessly trodden underfoot. There is an open tomb in the inner recesses of which hellfire burns and the God-given beauty of the universe has become a literal and figurative wasteland littered with detritus, household trash and empty barrels of oil indicative of our dwindling resources. Such is Verna's judgment on the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its inhabitants. Out of the sky descend a bunch of parachutists, but whether they are coming to save or annihilate us remains an open question.

The painting is so profoundly pessimistic that the celestial apparatus in the arched summit of the major panel – although ravishingly beautiful – does not entirely convince us that virtue will eventually triumph over vice. Everything in the lower register of the painting remains frozen and stock-still, and motion is confined to the upper reaches. There two wingless, but surely angelic, beings fly heavenwards and soar to either side, of a bold sunburst pattern which encloses the triangular Masonic symbol of the all-seeing eye of God. These two heavenly creatures extend their arms and hands to touch, and, at the point of contact a transformative flash of light miraculously occurs.

What is so glaringly obvious about **Anastasia Nikolsky Petrauskas's** art is its blatant foreignness and utterly alien appearance in the South African context. She was trained in Russia, and the Soviet totalitarian system which ruthlessly 'liquidated' so-called enemies of the state, suppressed free speech and any form of dissidence, banned contrarian literature and pamphleteering and relegated its authors to the gulags, formed her highly distinctive sensibility as did her exposure as a restorer to Dutch, English, French, Italian, German, Russian, and Chinese old master art. With every piece she restored, Anastasia learned more of the secrets of the old masters, and her intimate knowledge of their styles and skills greatly enriched her technical and imaginative frame of reference. However, her painting remains strange and unfamiliar to South African viewers as the wellsprings of her inspiration are barely represented in this country where, in general, they arouse scant interest.

Dutch Village scenes and Northern European Renaissance artists - Adriaen van Ostade, Abraham van Beyeren, Aert van der Neer and Philips Wouwerman – exercised a transformative influence on her artistic vision, but by far the most significant shaping forces on her style and content were Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Durer and Pieter Bruegel whose paintings are not represented in our local collections. This rich heritage combined with Anastasia's origins in a terrifying police state make her oeuvre an extraordinary *mélange* of tradition and innovation, the old and the new. As Anastasia also draws on a combination of diverse 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian stylistic influences – Rayonnism, Cubo-Futurism, Neo-Primitivism *inter alia* - which are barely known within our country<sup>4\*</sup>, the *Labyrinth* strikes one as so utterly unfamiliar that it may, at first, appear outlandish, not to mention bizarre, mordant and macabre.

The *Labyrinth* depicts a self-contained police headquarters-cum-prison-cum-torture chamber cum-dungeon. It takes the form of a sinister Daedalian warren of staircases, corridors, shifting levels and cramped cells executed in a largely Gothic architectural idiom of belfries, cupolas, turrets, spires and arches which coexist with details redolent of a tottering state on the verge of collapse, such as the antiquated plumbing system and archaic industrial machinery, with

particularly heavy emphasis on the symbolic cogs and wheels. The severed head of the statue of the golden Buddha is emblematic of the overthrow of goodness, mercy, tolerance and compassion and the triumph of the bureaucratized and systematic extirpation of individuality and ruthless insistence on undeviating conformism. Anastasia's adaptation of Goncharova and Larionov's technique of reducing matter and light into angular beams, triangular shards and fractured surfaces not only heightens the drama, it also seems particularly pertinent to the evocation of a society riven by schisms and divisions.

*Labyrinth* reveals how Anastasia remains a prisoner of her dark past. The universe that she constructs is claustrophobic, with dim light, and exiguously small, partitioned spaces offering their occupants piteous little space in which to manoeuvre. This constriction becomes a metaphor revealing how Soviet tyranny deprived its citizens of agency and control over their own destinies. This is a place where spies and informers are ubiquitous, a place which the K. G. B. might raid at any moment, a place where hidden security devices record your every spoken word or telephone call. In the labyrinth there is no safety, no secrets, no privacy, no companionship, and no comforts. It is a hell on earth.

Several divergent interpretations can be equally valid as a great work of art cannot be pinned down to a single meaning. Anastasia's understanding of her work is entirely the opposite of mine. She believes the *Labyrinth* has little relevance to her experience of Soviet Russia and considers her painting a citified version of the medieval Ship of Fools in which the vessel – the ship of state – is about to founder because its crew embodies every variety of human stupidity, pig-headedness and lack of vision. She sees her theme as the absence of sense, reason, knowledge and insight, and how these deficiencies limit our appreciation of the joy of living and the beauty of the universe, blight and stifle our development and condemns us to a sterile and unfulfilling existence where we are little better than animals and sometimes even more cruel and brutal.

There are some works that inspire the keenest admiration through their sheer technical perfection, aloof self-containment and imperturbable cool. One such work is **Iaan Waldeck's** *Ecce Mulier*, a chilling specimen of pure conceptual art. When I first chanced upon its counterpart *Ecce Homo* at the Daor Gallery I experienced an immediate spine-chilling *frisson* of overwhelming fright, horror and recoil because of the deafening alarm bells it triggered off in my headspace. Nothing I have ever clapped eyes on has ever galvanized me with such terrifying intimations of my own mortality as Iaan's clinical assembly of all the chemical ingredients that make up our bodies, and which we will leave behind us as residue once we have shoveled off this mortal coil.

*Ecce Mulier* presents all the same elements with impeccably methodical spick and span on a table filled with serried rows of pharmaceutical laboratory bottles. Despite its objective scientific appearance, its impact is as blunt as a sledgehammer and as confronting as meeting the Grim Reaper eye-to-eye.

*Ecce Mulier* is largely fashioned, not by hand, but mass-produced and machine-made on factory conveyor belts, and the contrast between its purely industrial and utilitarian origins and its contents, lend it a glacial iciness and chill. Although utterly devoid of anything anthropomorphic,

it induces fearful imaginings about mad scientists and the gothic horrors of the Cabinet of Doctor Caligari, Frankenstein, Dracula, vampires, zombies, werewolves and the undead.

Because it catalyzes the unconscious and activates all those nightmarish fears and dreads that the Freudian censor eliminates from our consciousness, *Ecce Mulier* administers a percussive blow to our nervous system. Using subtly low-key, shock tactics Iaan's piece achieves an annihilating impact with an admirable economy of means and an absolute eschewal of sensationalism and melodrama.

Iaan Waldeck is an utterly uncompromising artist who makes no attempt to charm, seduce and captivate the viewer. His is a purely cerebral and intellectual art almost entirely devoid of any sensual, textural and chromatic appeal. It does not aim to rejoice the eye: its sole raison d'être is to stimulate the mind. Consequently the artist's *It Is It* is conceived in the most unyieldingly dry, astringent manner. Remote, cool and detached, it belongs to the Duchampian tradition of the ready-made, in other words a purely industrial product presented and exhibited as art simply because Duchamp identified it as such. The most famous or notorious example of the readymade was the mass-produced, machine-made urinal which he first exhibited way back when in 1917 in New York under the title 'Fountain'. The only change he made to this utterly banal object was to sign it "R. Mutt" – a name inspired by the popular comic Mutt and Jeff - otherwise it was exhibited untouched exactly as it might appear in a sanitary ware showroom.

In their Penguin Dictionary of Art and Artists, Peter and Linda Murray observe: 'Duchamp has been hailed as the most inventive, liberating force in modern art, as the creator of 'conceptual art' and the supreme exponent of the idea that there is no borderline between life and art. This extreme nihilism and contempt for the actual production of works of art seems to result in a dead end.' Was his influence pernicious or was it salutary?

The title *It is it* was chosen by Iaan to stress the overwhelmingly physical reality of his art work which consists, not of paint on canvas, but of solid material objects which obviously follow the tradition established by Duchamp's assisted ready-mades, or in other words, pre-existent retail stores items to which some additions have been made, in this case the table, mirrors and small black wooden stands.

At first glance, it looks like it is some unfinished piece of merchandise display at a shoe store, and all it consists of are two commercially manufactured shoes – one a handsome men's brown brogue and two, an elegant ladies black suede slipper both of which have been left intact in their original state without having been subjected to any artistic interference. The two pieces of footwear are positioned on either side of two mirrors where they have been placed on two black wooden plinths that elevate them, suggesting quality and exclusivity, and isolate them so that they dominate the space they occupy. This leathery ensemble reposes on a small, square iron table of rough and ready appearance that was fashioned by Iaan, whom is a craftsman as well as an art-maker. The viewer is fully entitled to demand what is the point? And why is this art? And part of the reason for it is its existence is to invite just such questions and thus force the viewer to reflect on what makes art *art*.



To be appreciated and understood the viewer must perambulate around the piece and view it from a full 360 degrees, and as he circulates around it, something strange begins to happen. The tip of the lady's slipper is suddenly replaced with the tip of the man's brogue both on the mirror and the other side of it, and if you move approximately 160 degrees further around the exhibit, the ladies shoe terminates in the heel and back of the brogue. In this way the two single shoes become hybridized and suddenly acquire both male and female characteristics. I think this is the very first time that hermaphroditic shoes have become available on the open market.

**M.J. Lourens** has consolidated a sterling reputation as an unconventional landscape painter of a very particular ilk. Although he now lives in Cape Town the high, high skies of the Transvaal came with his baggage as did its entrancing, ever-changing cloudscapes. The artist portrays the once idyllic beauty of his native Highveld in the process of being marred by the encroachment of featureless, industrial buildings, factories, corporate headquarters, billboards and other manifestations of so-called 'development' which include the hideous Vibracrete wall which blights the appearance of low-rent suburbia throughout the land. The rich can escape the urban blight behind their high impeccably white-washed walls but the low-salaried must reach an accommodation with the unacceptably ugly face of modernity and the way it de-sensitises their aesthetic sense.

The artist's favourite hours are dawn and dusk, the interludes when calm descends before the onslaught of traffic on the roaring highways. The horizon line is always set low, so the unsightly urban sprawl of the reef is mantled in shadow, and the boundless expanses of the heavens completely upstage the man-made mess that lies below.

M.J. strips the terrain of its inhabitants or any sign of life in the form of animals and traffic. Motionlessness and still prevail, but there is also a sense of imminence for as soon as the clock strikes 8:30 am, the implacable onslaught on nature will begin again. Billboards advertise products and political parties: M.J.'s do neither, as capitalism and its supporters no longer have anything valid to say.

The rite of passage **Henk Serfontein** addresses with such preternatural delicacy, poignancy and heartfelt compassion is blindingly obvious. It is the onset of advanced old age and all its attendant ills - piteous frailty, decrepitude, enfeeblement, pain, dependency and other incipient signs that death is impatiently waiting somewhere close, but just out of frame. The black and white assume emblematic overtones, the body is lit and its whiteness signifies continuing life, but that life is under threat. The feet and the single imploring hand form a composition like the tall flute of a champagne glass, but this compressed U is contained within a flat mass of black, the immemorial colour of death and mourning.

At the same time as Henk identifies so closely with his subject, he spares us none of the disfigurements so cruelly visited on the elderly. The age spots, blemishes, mottling's, contusions, wrinkling, varicose veins and gnarling are described with a forensic accuracy that makes the subject seem even more vulnerable, thus arousing our sympathy and commiseration.

The sitter remains faceless, sexless and anonymous and thereby the image attains universality. The odd downward tilt of the feet – although void of stigmata – immediately remind us of those of Christ on the cross and perhaps hint at some kind of redemption.

As a twelve-year-old school-going child, Henk took care of his ailing mother, a widow. He bathed her, fed her, and uncomplainingly attending to her every need until she finally passed away when he was thirty. He never felt that she was a burden, and I think his utter devotion to her is what explains the ready empathy he still feels for the aged and afflicted.

**Isabella Kuijer's** exquisite water-colour recalls the great humanitarian artists like Millet and Rembrandt who could capture the moral grandeur of humble people living difficult, although entirely ordinary, lives. They could see the glory in the prosaic as Isabella does in this intimate glimpse into the day-to-day existence of her grandparents with whom she lives when she is not with her parents in order to help her grandmother, Elena, care for her husband who suffers from Alzheimer's. Things are not as bad as that hated term may suggest, for Patrick's Alzheimer's has assumed a particularly benign form and he is a peaceable old man, calm and content to just sit in his comfortable old armchair and while away the hours in daydream, reminiscence, reverie or whatever mental activity he is still capable of. The chromium reading light which is downward angled and turned off has a cold, technological appearance which, together with the looming grey shadows, disrupt the cosiness of the homely interior and surely intimate how Patrick's condition has interfered with their placid, well-ordered lives.

Here with folded arms and an averted head he waits with just a hint of impatience for the promised cup of tea that his wife is pouring him with such tender care, patience and resignation. Despite her seniority, Elena remains a working woman who discharges all her duties in the office and the home with admirable despatch, The couple have finished their evening meal at the round table with the beautifully laundered and starched white cloth which both unites the couple, and emphasizes the space between them.

Patrick painted: his pictures adorn the wall and the larger one presents a fetishized tableau of a kraal of stylized huts which contrast with the unaestheticised domestic scene. Although the feeling is elegiac and tinged with melancholy, Isabella has rendered this vignette with such tenderness, humanity and pathos that the painting becomes a declaration of undying love intimating that long after Patrick and Elena have been laid to rest, they will still live on in Isabella's loving memories.

**Cobus van Bosch's** two paintings belong to a series concerned with parental, and more particularly paternal authority, and how it is perceived by a child, and then, much later understood far more critically by the adult he has become who has developed far keener insight into the patriarchal power structure and its strengths and shortcomings. The starting point for the suite were vintage photographs that resonated with the artist and which he amassed over the years. Then when he eventually commenced the series, he cut up the photographs to form collages and used these, though not slavishly, as the basis for his paintings. Their principal concern is with male power and authority and the artist deliberately avoids introducing any narrative element or historical specificity.

However I cannot interpret material so de-particularized and lacking in specificity, nor even understand the two image as such, and here, as so often, the artist and critic must agree to differ for I cannot help but read Cobus's two untitled paintings as addressing the consequences of war and its aftermath – surely the expression of male power at its most extreme and indiscriminate? Executed in a rough-hewn, realistic style, the first thing that strikes one about the vast, old-fashioned kitchen (the invariable site of intimate feminine conclaves) in *Untitled* is the absence of men. A gaggle of mothers, a grandmother, a babe in arms and a young girl are grouped to right, where the older women urgently discuss the progress of the war and ponder the fate of their menfolk in whispered tones so as not to alarm their children, but despite this precaution, they nonetheless communicate their intense unease and thus send conflicting messages to their offspring. They attempt to reassure them, but when their agitated state is so patent, they cannot succeed in doing so, and simply sow confusion and incomprehension in the minds of the little ones.

Right at the other end of the canvas sits a little boy in disconsolate isolation. Obviously, he is pining for masculine company, especially that of his father and possibly his elder brothers. Besides missing them so much, his pain may be compounded by the realization that they may have lost their lives and that the conflict will end in defeat, poverty and degradation.

Therein lies the pathos: the young lad is confronted by traumatic issues of loss, bereavement and national humiliation that he is neither intellectually nor emotionally equipped to deal with. The fact that his distress goes unnoticed by the women who provide him no comfort, adds another dimension of poignancy, underlining his abandonment and isolation, and the fact that they are too deeply preoccupied by their uncertain future to even notice, let alone alleviate, his anguish.

My interpretation of Cobus's second painting is that it represents the reluctant return of a *droster* or deserter to the companions-in-arms that he has forsaken. The reception committee seen from close to, from the rear form a looming mass of aggrieved and obviously antagonistic men who will obviously mete out some brutal revenge. The deserter at the other end of the wide spatial divide, cuts a pathetic figure with his anatomy cut in half by the frame so that we cannot even glimpse his head. Filled with shame and trepidation he seems to have momentarily halted his advance, and no wonder! The pronounced disparities of scale, the fact that he appears so defenceless and diminutive while his antagonists loom so large, enhance our sense of his vulnerability and dread as to what sort of humiliation awaits him.

As **Annamieke Engelbrecht** has always been an intense introvert she has always indulged in activities like painting, photography, social media and diverse online activities which she can pursue in solitude all on her own. Internet personalities have always fascinated her and she is also enthralled by how people present themselves for others to see. These preoccupations have always monopolized her, and during her teenage years and later when she was a student of the visual arts at Stellenbosch University, they became increasingly obsessive. There she delved deep into the crippling discomfort she always experienced when confronted by a camera, and it was then that she started creating the kind of anti-self-portraits exhibited at *Rites of Passage* where a variety of transmogrified internet personalities usurp her place as sitter and subject.

Annamieke abiding interests remain internet culture, modern technology and the profound influence they exercise on our lives. She explores the dynamics between the ancient art of oil painting and modern technology by creating pixelated images on her computer using the lowest quality setting on a YouTube video or distorting the coding of the image to create a geometric splurge of colour. It is thus that she describes her *modus operandi*: "Using my wildly distorted computer-generated visual material, I then start layering oil paints and glazes to construct an image that is at once compositionally sound and chromatically seductive. I avoid any individual mark making and aim for anonymity. I only use flat hues contained within sharp contours, engineering abrupt transitions between the colour zones and switching from the three-dimensional to the flat. I consider my work as an integral part of a flourishing tradition of geometric hard-edge abstraction established by Hannatjie van der Wat, Trevor Coleman, Cecily Sash and particularly Kevin Atkinson and Albert Newall."

To my mind, Annamieke surpasses all her South African predecessors as a hard-edge abstractionist both by coming up with the concept of the anti-portrait and through the inventive brilliance of the games she plays with space and movement. Her paintings boast pristine, bright colours so fresh, clear, clean and pure, they seem to have issued straight from a freshly manufactured tube. Her dulcet chromatic poetry possess a mellifluous radiance and luminosity. These, airy, oxygenated paintings, with their buoyant floating forms, remind us that although abstract art supposedly represents nothing beyond itself, it nevertheless distils our experience of being in the world and conveys the physical and psychological sensations that our exposure to sky, space, movement, light, colour, distance and the infinite arouse.

Another arresting feature of Annamieke's painting is how it exploits all the *trompe-l'oeil* wizardry of 60's Op art in order to endow her creations with the illusion not only of movement which is brought into being by her parallel running lines, but also of quiver, flicker and dazzle.

Throughout her entire career, **Arlene Amaler-Raviv** has stared into the darkness with fearless courage and acute insight using her painting to give voice to the voiceless, the disempowered and the deprived. During her early career in Johannesburg she documented the transformation of the city, the flight of white business and capital to verdant suburbia and the massive influx of black people from South Africa and the ravaged, war-torn countries beyond our borders. Arlene is, and always has been, the quintessential Expressionist obsessed with the direct transmission of raw emotion- her pity, compassion and grief, and the poverty, privation and misery of her black subjects. Her identification with the underdog is absolute, and the insulted and injured proletariat is the hub around which her entire oeuvre revolves. Her archetypal images portray unemployed, penniless black men and women striding with resolute determination through the mean streets of our decaying cities. They carry themselves with unassailable courage and purpose as they seek to fulfill their destinies and carve out a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Although the odds are stacked against them, their mettle is heroic, they plod indefatigably on, and never do they succumb to hopelessness and despair. Arlene's theme may be misery, unemployment, homelessness and isolation from one's family and rural origins, but, by highlighting the tenacity of her questing black pedestrians, she transforms her canon into a joyous celebration of survival and the inexhaustible resilience and resourcefulness of the human spirit.

Art is so rarely funny. Must it necessarily be po-faced, solemn and portentous, **Lize Hugo's** delicious tondos ask? The answer is a resounding no, and the artists delights us by merrily reveling in kitsch, whipped cream, icing, glacé cherries and fresh mint. Lize's superb gateaux were awarded the eerste prys at die Kaapse Vrouefederasie Koekbak Kompetisie, and it is rumored that later in 2020 she will be awarded the title of Dame by the Royal Society of *Haute Cuisine* in London. She also, of course, bakes by appointment for the Queen and the Pope but all Donald Trump's offers have been curtly refused.

**Theo Kleynhans'** table setting of twenty hand-crafted plates would make the ideal wedding present for any two gay guys advancing up to the altar. How can one help but admire an artist who so trenchantly glories in his own sexuality. No apologies, no excuses are offered, nor need they be, as homosexuality is now accepted as perfectly normal, and the artist's magnificent pecker parade of engorged dongs, cocks, pricks and dicks, his most ballsiest of balls, and his winged phallus celebrate these new found freedoms with riotous abandon.

**Anton Kannemeyer** and his friend and *confrere*, **Conrad Botha** launched their careers when they started regularly issuing their *Bittercomix*, highly controversial, satirical books of cartoons in which all that Afrikanerdom held sacred was derided and ridiculed in the raunchiest in your face manner with illustrations of fellatio, cunnilingus, and sex across the colour barrier. The publication struck a chord with rebellious Afrikaans youth and formed part of a Boere counterculture of sex, drugs, and rock and roll that elevated its creators to stardom along with Koos Kombuis, Johannes Kerkorrel, and a host of other 'voelvry'<sup>5\*</sup> rebels.

Anton still uses the comic cartoon format, but the foundation of his imagery is no longer sacrilege, iconoclasm and pornography although they still occur but in a far more tempered form. The comic ceases to be a comic. It no longer seeks to amuse, nor does it form part of a narrative sequence. The image stands on its own. Anton enlarges its scale, redefines its purpose, and uses it as a vehicle to produce heroic self-portraits of himself as a mature, deeply cultivated and highly reflective man pondering over all the riddles and enigmas of life in reflections inspired by all the canonical writers he quotes. To me, these portraits capture the rite of passage whereby a wild, angry and highly combative young man evolves to maturity and becomes a calm, contemplative thinker who is on the path to achieving wisdom and a deeper understanding of life and the universe.

Anton's observations on the reasons why he confines himself to self-portraiture, introduced broader concerns which are shared by many artists who feel inhibited in their choice of subject because of the paramountcy of political correctness and the activities of its vigilant thought police forever poised and ready to accuse artists of some heinous offence, some transgression of the protocols of identity politics, or acts of cultural appropriation, lapses into racism, sexism, homophobia or manifestations of disrespect toward the sacrosanct LGBTQI+ community. Obviously, this limits freedom of expression and causes artists to self-censor their production. Another danger is posed by the intensifying visual illiteracy of youth because of declining educational standards both at schools and universities which pose a threat to the appreciation and consumption of art of any depth or intellectual complexity.

**Sulette van der Merwe's** *The Love Letter* is set in a psychological space accessed in the first rapturous flush of youthful romantic love. Here the two lovers are incongruous and impossible beings - a normally-clothed girl and boy, the one with a snail's head and the other with that of a bird. The fact that these half-human, half-insect, and half-bird creatures mimic the accustomed rituals of courtship on a perfectly normal seaside setting renders the image heterotopic. It becomes somehow 'other': disturbing, incompatible, and contradictory. To quote Wikipedia, "heterotopias are worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside. Foucault cites ships, cemeteries, bars, brothels, prisons, gardens of antiquity, fairs, Muslims baths and many more." As Walter Russell Mead has written, "Utopia is a place where everything is good; dystopia is a place where everything is bad; heterotopia is where things are different — that is, a collection whose members have few or no intelligible connections with one another", an observation that applies most pertinently to *The Love Letter*.

**Gabriel Clark-Brown's** *Above the Lights* provides a brutally realistic account of the motorized amours of the youth of yester-year who rarely had flats at their disposal in which to pitch the woo. As parents would not tolerate such hanky-panky at home, the locus of love affairs was often the back-seat of a car. Gabriel's unsparingly sordid portrayal of the act of coitus is stripped of any hint of romance, love or tenderness. It is a purely animal act that takes place in the cramped, comfortless confines of a battered old rattle-trap. Lust, pure, naked lust has overtaken the couple with all its throbbing urgency, and everything is indicative of the hurry and rush with which they hurtle towards orgasm. Although the male's shirt and the girl's blouse were removed earlier during the more decorous rituals of foreplay, the couple did not divest themselves of their other garments, nor have they. The male has simply yanked down his jeans while his partner just pulls her voluminous skirt and petticoat open to facilitate his entry.

The fact that this is a purely carnal exchange, unmediated by sentiment or feeling, is emphasized by the flagrancy of the pose with the girl's widely outspread legs reposing on the dashboard and steering wheel, the emphasis on the naked white flesh which contrasts so starkly with the dark background and finally the girl's totally unselfconscious expression of brutish gratification with her closed eyes and panting open mouth. She is obviously experiencing the dizzy thrills of orgasm as her hand indicates. This firmly grasps Gabriel's shoulder to press him even closer and deeper within her, but all he seems to feel is the effort and strain of that heaving and thrusting.

The young man is an immediately recognizable portrait of the artist at the time the work was executed in the late 1990's, and his partner is his female double, so that Gabriel almost portrays himself in the act of fornicating with his twin. One can already sense the atmosphere of constraint, shame and embarrassment that will prevail once the love-making is over.

Through the windows we see the lights of Cape-Town's suburbia, but there are also two unaccountable apparitions which can only exist in the minds of the two sexual sparring partners, and these are the sternly disapproving faces of a middle-aged couple who surely represent the couple's consciousness of the parental taboos on pre-marital sex and the guilt the couple experienced before the act and which will again overwhelm them once they are spent.

As in all his graphics, Gabriel provides a bravura demonstration of his virtuosity in handling contrasting textures - whether they be the tangled, sweaty hair, the crumpled garments, the naked flesh, the dirty finger and toe nails, the worn upholstery or the ashtray a brim with spent stubs.

**Andrew Verster's** *Blue Barry* forms part of a small suite of portraits depicting the same sitter - a dreamy individual of uncertain sexual persuasion gazing with fond longing or nostalgia into the yonder. Andrew Verster was of course homosexual, and his famous early paintings of Durban beach boys indulge his taste for young male flesh just as thoroughly as David Hockney's nude and Speedo-clad young male swimmers and sunbathers excited his appetites. Hockney's famous naked Californian boys, awaiting their lovers in bed, standing, bathing, showering together or apart, certainly exercised a liberating influence on Verster.

Verster was a pioneer who dared to make the gay condition one of the principal themes of his art, and he went on to paint very explicit images of nude men in the throes of lovemaking. He must have been one of the first overtly gay artists in this country. Johannes Meintjies, roughly a contemporary, never displayed Andrew's courage. He catered to a gay audience by romantically evoking the carnal charms of enchantingly glamorous, young, male coloured farmworkers amidst the natural splendours of the Cape, whilst rigorously avoiding any reference to the sexual act except through tasteful symbolism. Their poverty, awareness of their desirability and dewy-eyed, acquiescent gaze, indicates that these lads would gladly oblige any admirer with a roll in the hay for a few shillings. The implicit racism and insult to the coloured community is blatantly evident.

Reticence, restraint and respect for the privacy of the sitter appear to be among Verster's prime concerns and the painting he produced hardly qualifies as a character study. The sitter remains a mystery and the portrait raises far more questions than it answers. *Blue Barry* was executed in 1973, and Barry's long hair, moustache and orange shirt spangled with stars, definitely indicates the belated influence of the swinging London of the sixties and the sitter's identification with the ethos of sex, drugs, rock, roll and bold erotic experiment. However, speculating on the sexual identity of Barry is entirely vain in the absence of any available information regarding the life style of the sitter, and it is also largely irrelevant to the artist's achievement as a portraitist.

There is certainly a marked contrast between the sitter and his outfit. Barry is attired as if he were about to attend a rave, a rock concert, or visit a disco, but his facial expression is devoid of any sense of excitement or anticipation. In fact, the mood he projects is one of wistful and forlorn yearning. The sitter is simply not there. His thoughts are elsewhere, and his surroundings and the presence of the artist hardly seen to impinge on his consciousness. Meeting Barry's gaze is a disconcerting experience as his left eye interlocks with ours whilst his right gazes in another direction entirely. Certainly, Barry's mind is absent, and the painting hints at thwarted urges and unfulfilled desires, but these elude any more precise definition. Barry could be thinking back of happier times. He could be missing someone or grieving over a break-up. The alternatives are infinite.

Another device that increases the psychological distance between viewer and sitter is that the artist paints Barry's head and neck in muted photographic harmonies of black and grey while the rest of the painting is rendered in an unusual accord of green and orange with a few colour accents

in the stars. The lack of finish in the neckline of the star-spangled shirt is an oddity that may indicate that the painting was never entirely completed.

Travel can be yet another rite of passage: it has the potential to transform your outlook and cause you to look at life and the world from an unfamiliar angle whilst at the same time evaluating what is particular about your own country, identity, mind-set and nationality. This was certainly **Daniel Halter's** experience when the manufacturers of Glenffidich whisky offered him a residency near their distillery in Dufftown in the North East of Scotland not far from Aberdeen. Here Daniel, who is Zimbabwean, by birth, appears to present his handsome person as a true-blue Scotsman born and bred, dressed as tradition dictates in a kilt, wearing tartan and sporting a sealskin sporran and furry boots as he strikes a lordly pose against the background of an ancient tower in the centre of Dufftown. In fact the only detail that hints at his origins is the crushed can of Iron Brew lying in the gutter.

However far from trying to impersonate a Scot, Daniel vigorously affirms his Zimbabwean identity, affiliations and loyalty to his place of birth. The medium by which he does this is both subtle and original. Daniel's tartan consists of exactly the same plastic weave fabric as the bag placed to the artist's right. Such bags are cheaply manufactured in China and exported in huge quantities throughout Africa where they are used to transport luggage instead of proper suitcases which are far too expensive for most blacks to afford. In Africa, these boldly patterned plastic weave bags have acquired tragic associations with the plight of refugees who are so often forced to leave their countries of origin because of civil or tribal war, tyranny, famine and many other disasters. In fact hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans have taken flight to South Africa using just such bags to convey the pitiful possessions they have acquired over a lifetime to their new host country.

Paradoxically the fabric Daniel sports functions as a badge proclaiming Daniel's Zimbabwean identity and heritage. Daniel actually registered the plastic weave's tartan pattern with the Scottish authorities under the name of refugee tartan, and by adopting it as his own personal tartan, Daniel invests both it and the millions of exiles it symbolizes, with a new dignity, status and visibility. Although Daniel is far too modest to say so, he is a true hero totally committed to the ideal of a free and democratic Zimbabwe. He has returned to his homeland time and again in order to make art documenting the atrocities that take place there, and in the process he has often fallen foul of the law, and endured police brutality and even brief spells of imprisonment in the country's cruel and hellish gaols.

The title of the work, *Furry Boots Ye Fae* employs the Doric dialect current in that region of Scotland, and what it means is where are you from - a question that must often have been addressed to Daniel during his three month sojourn in Scotland where people would have been puzzled by his accent.

**Anton Karstel's** *Willie and Salomé te Nederduits Gereformeerde* (1994) ostensibly depicts the wedding of Anton's mother and father, but, in reality, what it presents is the artist's vague, hazy, emotional attempt to reconstruct the event. The church is as it is in reality, for Anton used it again as the setting for his portraits of the church council of the NG Gemeente, Lyttelton-Oos where the



marriage took place. What indicates that the subject is a purely subjective mental event is the artist's renunciation of any pictorial logic. Willie and Salomé are presented on the same scale as the church in which they were wed, and the husband and bride-to-be are not planted firmly on terra firma, but float weightlessly somewhere high above the ground.

The viewer harbours certain expectations of a double wedding portrait none of which are met in *Willie and Salomé te Nederduits Gereformeerde*. Groom and Bride should radiate happiness, optimism and joy, but in this particular painting they emote no such thing. The nuptials took place in the 1950's, and the artist's parents adopt the demeanour that was deemed appropriate at that date. Anton's father looks like a regte Afrikaans mansmens but remains somewhat stiff, strained and unrelaxed. His pose is possessive: it indicates ownership. Salomé appears appropriately feminine and yielding. However the gaze she directs at her husband is timid, bashful and uncertain. She knows he is in entire control, but what she does not know is what to anticipate from this union. There is no sense of celebration, gaiety or joie de vivre. On the contrary, the mood is one of inhibition and constraint.

Apart from the white of the wedding gown, Anton has executed the scene in bleak shades of grey and black with particularly inauspicious, vertical streaks of some unidentifiable, but pernicious, sulphurous yellow, plus a little white and black in the right upper register. Further trails of black crack the cloudy, overcast sky up into shards. The very palette steepens the scene in joylessness. All this detail produces a lugubrious impression completely in line with the artist's disbelief in religion, the Dutch Reformed church and all the ceremonial rites of passage associated with it. It's all absurd pie in the sky as far as Anton is concerned, yet we are all so thoroughly brainwashed by society that we unthinkingly conform to its norms, values and customs. Anton too went through the same nonsensical, churchy rigmarole, and he is a happily and respectably married man, with a wife, two sons and, no doubt, a mortgage as well.

The conventional title for a wedding portrait would be the marriage of Willie and Salomé, and, by titling it *William and Salomé te Gereformeerde* instead, the artist underlines his parents meek compliance with established convention rather than the connubial bliss they should be about to share.

Marita Schneider, the gallerist, and I rejected much of the submitted work which we felt simply did not come up to scratch. The much-touted view that South Africa is a hive of creativity abounding in many artists of world stature, typifies our parochialism, provincialism and what the Australians call "the tyranny of distance", meaning our remoteness from any international art metropolis. As of yet, South Africa has not produced one universally accepted canonical artist.

Some strange mixture of the colonial cringe, embarrassment at the dire state of our economy and the prevalence of corruption, defensiveness and warped jingoism or nationalism or patriotism – call it what you will - warps the perceptions of many of us causing us to insanely overestimate locally produced art across the boards. Proof of this is that even the most execrable of theatrical productions inevitably conclude with a rousing standing ovation.

## References

1\* *Jonathan Edwards*, translated by Richard Howard and Cesar elan Rennert, *Jorge Luis Borges Selected Poems*, (ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1972.

2\* John 1.32, The old Testament

3\* Diel, Paul, *le symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque*, Paris, 1966

4\* Ignorance is becoming increasingly widespread amidst the younger generation particularly as major universities such as the Michaelis School of Art at the University of Cape Town have totally abandoned any systematic effort to teach art history.

5\* 'Voelvry' is an Afrikaans adjective meaning 'as free as a bird'. It is usually applied to the generation who as youths witnessed the fall of apartheid or were born subsequently.