

'Want & Desire' at João Ferreira Gallery

Chantal Louw, *ArtThrob*, Issue No. 111, November 2006

'Want and Desire' sets out to create 'a tense dialogue between different understandings of, and approaches to, sexuality', according to the exhibition statement from João Ferreira gallery. Indeed, the most powerful dialogue created by curator Nadja Daehnke is that of perceived sexual deviancy and the construction of sexuality.

This dialogue begins with Svea Josephy's defaced magazine covers, placed on the central pillar of the gallery. Josephy photographed the covers of art magazines damaged by a patient in a mental institution. Although mentally ill, the patient possesses what could reasonably be deemed 'normal' sexual urges. However, within the structure of the institute, her sexual desire is viewed as inappropriate and constructed as deviant. Thus, using black and blue pen, the patient scratches the surface to cover the pictured women in bikini-like forms and places question marks and crosses on their bodies.

One of Josephy's defaced magazine covers is placed low on the gallery's pillar, forcing the viewer to bend and take up the same crouching foetal-like position of the depicted woman. This in turn renders the viewer vulnerable to Stuart Bird's 46 neck ties poised to strike like cobras. Bird's ties provide a humorous comment on the construction of a traditional masculinity. But in this space, the vulnerability of the viewer together with the coiled swaying of the snake-like forms forces a confrontation with a sexuality apparently intent on doing harm.

The contextual and spatial effect of the curator's juxtaposition of Bird and Josephy's work is underscored by Dorothee Kreutzfeldt's *The V6*. Kreutzfeldt's triangular paper and cardboard work is reminiscent of a car insignia but when faced by Bird's striking ties it becomes a shield shaped to cover the vulva.

Daehnke's canvas in *Untitled* (2006) is torn, painted over and scrubbed almost bare. Steel and wood bring weight to the anatomical depiction of a heart and create a circuit that runs vertically, becoming a spinal column. The concept of energy is implicit in the work with elements of the 'motorisation' of the heart and the mechanical aspect of the steel spine. This highlighting of the construction of the body in biological and mechanical terms creates a starting point for the artworks that follow in which constructing sexuality can lead to dangerous assumptions and a labeling of sexual deviancy.

Vusi Beauchamp extends in *Passion Le Noir* the same themes described in *Kaffer Paradys - the fear of young black men*. His mixed media rendering of a stereotypically colonial, fear-inducing figure of the black 'Other' brandishing a cigarette, highlights the concepts underpinning the creation of a black deviant sexuality popularised in 19th century writings.

Beauchamp's work, like Josephy's magazine covers, examines the way in which sexual deviancy is almost always termed such by an outsider. In Josephy's work, the effect of the outsider is depicted by the patient's frantic scribbles; Beauchamp renders the constant surveillance of sexuality in the obscured drawing of a face with blue eyes and rouged lips.

Below *Passion Le Noir* is *Love Letters*, wherein the presence of the floating face above seems to be the instigator for the frenzied writing and rewriting that creates a thickly layered, dark artwork in which the construction of sexuality is rendered as a constant negotiation. This modeling and remodeling of sexuality is echoed in Eric Rantisi's *Pillowtalk with Hangover* and *Miss Hollywood*. Notions around the construction of a sexually desirable body through augmentation is rendered in the cut-up drawings of legs and the face of the Venus which rise and sink in a mire of candy pink and red splatters to reveal the painful route traveled as aesthetically pleasing.

On the opposite wall, a more subtle rendering of sexuality is captured in Lien Botha's *Not the Missionary*. In her photographs of sewing equipment and clasps used in the manufacture of underwear she confronts the viewer with a variety of sexual positions. Although rendered harmless by the materials used, the slips of paper in perspex seem to create a filing system in which the images, and thus sexual acts, are horizontally categorised at eye-level along the gallery's wall - a system that, in the broader context of this show, seems to only have two categories: acceptable or deviant.

Brenton Maart's photograph series taken in a club, entitled *Factory Bareback Narratives; Strijdom in a Natural Context* depicts images of bondage as Strijdom's hands seemingly pulling or yanking a chain are completed in the portrait images of Strijdom in orgasm. The club becomes a liminal space in which desires can be exercised without fear of judgment, commenting on the lack of empathy towards certain forms of sexuality, which are similarly captured in Josephy's photographs. Sadly, it is here that that the cohesion laid out eloquently in the above works drifts into disorientation.

Liza Grobler's *Narcissist* and *Stone Blind Love* add little to the exhibition's discourse. Although Leon Vermeulen's *Absence* comments powerfully on the longing and absence that mark moments of desire, depicted in films by the German director Werner Fassbinder, the artworks merely distract from an otherwise effective critique of the labeling of perceived deviancy and the construction of sexuality.

Nicholas Hales' *My Racing, Beating Heart and Questions of Weight and Volume* beautifully captures the passing of time in a video of a landscape rushing by to the sound of a racing motorcycle, which is projected onto a melting piece of ice in a bowl of its watery remains. Unfortunately, its subject matter breaks with the exhibition's dialogue.

And finally, through photographs of iconic signifiers of female sexuality captured in pornographic centerfolds and placed in places of menial work, Adrian Kraft highlights the inhabitant's misogynistic leanings and the absurdity of our acceptance of such renderings. These artworks place a question mark, much like the scrawls captured in Josephy's defaced magazine covers, over society's categorisation of so-called normal and deviant sexuality and is an apt ending to the discussion begun by Josephy's works.