

## Shooting to Kill

*South African photography walks the fine line between art and intervention, writes Sean O'Toole.*

There is something perversely appealing about the photograph, the complexity we graft on to that ostensibly simple thing. Since its birth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the photograph has fascinated and perplexed us in equal measures. So much now we call it art.

Which presented a bit of a problem to the organisers of the 2004 Daimler-Chrysler Art Award. How do you reward a craft that now encompasses everything from photojournalism to outré art photography?

Otherwise put, how do you reward a creative product claiming such a diverse provenance, a craft that is increasingly threatened by the cumbersome nature of its own taxonomy? Simple, you choose the slippery slope of verbal imprecision.

Late last year documentary photographer Guy Tillim won the 2004 DaimlerChrysler Art Award for Creative Photography. This decision is still hotly debated, largely because of the sketchiness of that well-meaning yet inexact pairing of words: creative photography.

Why not simply call it photography and be done with it? In the end, the judges did just that, ultimately rewarding Guy Tillim for his unusual portrayal of strife-ridden conflict zones in Africa. Personally, I am intrigued by the way Tillim's photographs eschew the prescripts of his genre, presenting scenarios often defined by their lack of any definitive statement.

His redemptive portrayal of conflict, his use of colour, as well as his striking visual poetic all featured in discussions by the seven-member judging pane, of which I was a part.

Not that the judging process was as straightforward a process as this summation would suggest.

South African photography, in its post-apartheid incarnation at least, is a complex thing. For many, the documentary tradition stands at the apex of the achievements of South African photography; it is sombre yet informed by a sense of moral purpose, black and white.

The impetus of this statement has led to somewhat overarching presumptions about South African photography, some of them constituting invisible biases hindering the reception of newer modes of photographic practice.

I still recall the vexed deliberations of the jury as we stood in front of one of Jo Ractliffe's DamilerChrysler exhibition photographs. While contemplating the atmospheric grey pallor of an image taken inside a Braamfontein hotel, a strongly accented German voice asserted: "This is not photography, this is just boring."

This outburst is revealing. It tends to give credence to a statement by Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, the curators of *In/sight*, an important retrospective of African photography held at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 1996: "[Photography's] allure and seductiveness conscripts our gaze, turns us into voyeurs, and utterly redefines our status as observers."

The import of this statement holds true not only of DaimlerChrysler Award's more conservative jury members, but also of the angry viewers who have talked up a storm around Michelle Booth's exhibition *Seeing White*, currently on at PhotoZA in Rosebank.

*Seeing White* draws heavily on an emergent body of academic work concerned with the ideology of whiteness. Although derisively regarded by some, the study of whiteness is far from a rogue discipline. A host of eminent academic writers, including Toni Morrison, David Roediger, bell hooks and Richard Dyer, have contributed to this rich body of thought.

In her show, Booth quite literally borrows from this debate to unearth the "embedded racism" in the supposedly normal depiction of white subjects. This she achieves by mapping a series of challenging quotes on to black and white images of white subjects negotiating vaguely familiar Cape Town topographies.

"The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it," reads one exemplary quote.

The urgency of this and similar such statements has greatly offended some white gallery audiences, as is attested to by the dismissive reviews – and the gallery's visitors book. It lists a number of terse epigrammatic complaints.

There is something revealing in all of this. After spending so much time consuming photographic images of the world, it appears that whites are ill-equipped to see themselves as a collective ideological construct. But all of this tends to say little of Booth's photography itself, the launch pad for all this annoyance.

It was Roland Barthes who once said, with direct reference to the captioning of photography, that the text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image. In Booth's case this parasitic message threatens to elevate a series of rather bland documentary styled images way beyond their measure.

Yet, and in spite of her rather mediocre product, one has to acknowledge that Booth's exhibition does exemplify yet another instance of an emerging trend in local photography. The drift of this avant-garde style, for want of a better description, is eloquently visualised in the diverse output of Angela Buckland, Brent Mestre, Stephen Hobbs and Jo Ractliffe.

All DaimlerChrysler Art Award finalists, their photographs evince a commitment to portraying reality as contingent and fragmentary, not defined by the hegemony of single, iconic or conclusive images. It is a brave proposition, one grounded in contemporary South Africa.

Not everyone is convinced by this new aesthetic. This country's fascination with the "real" in photography has some powerful lobbyists and loyalists. There are also those who object to artists posturing as photographers, as well as the aloof academism implicit in the self-conscious imagery founded on awkward theory and propositions.

Difficult images for not, however, merit a quick dismissal. After all, what is fundamentally at stake here is not whether this new photography is boring or not – that is just a deflection. At issue is a risky new subjectivity, one that claims the right to depict the world in new and unfamiliar ways.

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