

Eyes White Shut

An art exhibition devoted to 'objectifying whiteness' elicits a critical gaze from Bonny Schoonakker.

One day as the human species slouches towards ever higher levels of enlightenment, we may realise that racial distinctions are artificial and irrelevant. If and when that time arrives we will then live according to assumptions, perhaps unspoken yet implicitly understood, that we are all the same sentient creatures, differing from each other only in various shades of brown.

Meanwhile, we have a long way to go. Just how far may be gauged from a neurotic art exhibition that will open at the PhotoZA gallery in Rosebank, Johannesburg, on Friday, a few months after its debut at the Brendon Bell Roberts Gallery in Cape Town. Called *Seeing White*, it's a collection of 15 images by Michelle Booth, a postgraduate diploma student at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art.

Booth seems to have put a lot of thought into her collection, probably too much, given that she spent a whole year on it. According to her own literature, she says, "I want to 'objectify' whiteness" with the pictures. "Whiteness" she defines as a "construct of power which makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorising imposition, as power that wounds, hurts, tortures". But despite wanting to "objectify" whiteness, in the next paragraph she also describes her exhibition as "an attempt to turn the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject".

On the phone this week, Booth said that she was inspired to produce her work because of her past as political activist, and the fact that she was all too aware of how notions of whiteness oppressed her black friends. Of particular concern to her was the fact that this was "of no concern to other white people".

The intentions may be worthy but what about the pictures? Booth says her images were deliberately made with nothing more than "a plastic Kodak brownie camera" – it's nothing fancy, and it shows. All the pictures are random, unremarkable images of white (now that she mentions it) pedestrians snapped while walking out and about in public. What makes her pictures art is that the images have been overlaid with text etched into glass and superimposed on her photos.

These texts comprise mainly slogans about racism, racial behaviour and racial theory, taken (says Booth) from three books. Richard Dyer's *White*, Alice McIntyre's *Meaning of Whiteness* and one by a friend of Booth's, Melissa Steyn, called *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be*. Booth says that Steyn, who opened her exhibition at the Bell-Roberts gallery, has pioneered the academic debate on "whiteness" in this country. It's a big issue in the US and Britain, particularly among academics who think that the colour of the whale in *Moby Dick* is racially significant.

Booth's borrowed slogans are equally dense. One picture of a woman snapped walking out of a shop entrance flanked by a Lotto machine is overlaid with text: "Except for hardcore racial supremacists, the meaning of being white is having the choice of attending to or ignoring our whiteness." Whatever that means.

Another slogan, superimposed on a picture of four people walking down Government Lane, is easier to understand: "The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it." This rings a bell because it brought to mind image published by David Goldblatt about 30 years ago, mainly of poor whites. Called, *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, Goldblatt took some flak because he showed white people as poor stunted and backward, perhaps even in-bred.

In all likelihood Goldblatt set out to challenge notions of white supremacy and ascendancy, as Booth sets out to do. But Goldblatt's effort is unforgettable because the images were powerful, and told strong stories without the viewer having so much as read his captions. Booth's hyper-theorised pictures lack such ability: after you read their slogans, look at the photographs and try to make sense of them, you find yourself trying to envisage the emperor's new clothes.

The art buying public seems to have found them heavy going too. Not one of the pictures, advertised for sale at R3 800 each, was sold during the Bell-Roberts exhibition, extended for a week thanks to a local daily newspaper that ran a lengthy newspaper articles worthy of the text etched over the photographs.

Booth says that she did not intend to sell any pictures at Bell-Roberts, but is counting on better luck in Johannesburg, where she hopes that all 15 images will be bought "as a body of work by a public institution, such as the Constitutional Court". She may indeed be successful: Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs has agreed to open her exhibition at PhotoZA on Friday.

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