A Monkey’s Wedding: Carnival Impulses in the Work of Emerging South African Artists: Michael MacGarry, Nandipha Mntambo, Themba Shibase, Nina Barnett and Robyn Nesbitt

Lucy Rayner

Supervised by Walter Oltmann

A research report submitted to the Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Fine Art) (by coursework and research report)
Declaration

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts (Fine Art) (Course Work) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Lucy Rayner

Date: .....................2009
I would like to thank a number of people. Preeminently, I would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of my supervisor, Walter Oltmann. My sincere thanks to David Krut for his generosity in hosting the practical component of this research – an exhibition at his gallery in New York. On a personal note, I would like to thank my partner Michael for his patience in fielding my many questions and my parents, Chris and Lorna for their unwavering support throughout the time it took to complete this research. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the artists who agreed to participate in The New Spell: Nandipha Mntambo, Michael MacGarry, Nina Barnett, Robyn Nesbitt and Themba Shibase.
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Abstract

This research relates directly to a practical component that takes the form of a curated exhibition of works by a selected group of emerging South African artists. *The New Spell*, held at David Krut Projects, New York from 5 June to 30 July 2008 explores, as its main premise, the appearance of a carnival impulse identifiable within works by participating artists, Nandipha Mntambo (b. 1982), Michael MacGarry (b. 1978), Themba Shibase (b. 1980), Nina Barnett (b. 1983) and Robyn Nesbitt (b. 1984). I contend that these artists deploy the carnivalesque as a critical strategy to problematise the construction of social and political identities in South Africa. In response to Achille Mbembe's contentious redeployment of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of a critical carnivalesque, my intention is to explore the various ways in which their works, ranging from painting and photography to sculpture and video, can be understood in terms of contemplating this subject of contemporary cultural identity in South Africa and also reflect on it as a contested arena for negotiation. I explore the various ways in which these artists employ the carnival’s subversive and transgressive features in order to satirize and parody notions of cultural idealism contained in the homogenizing concept of a ‘Rainbow Nation’ (a term commonly applied to the miracle of post-apartheid South Africa and its reinvention as a multicultural, multiracial society), effectively replacing it with the more ambiguous idea of ‘A Monkey’s Wedding’. Notions of subversive agency are brought to bear here, with the implications for critique of the kind of catharsis and reinvention often implied by carnivalesque theory. A critical analysis of my curatorial selection and the resultant installation is extended beyond the works chosen or commissioned for the exhibition, to include other works by each artist. My intention is not to define their often multidisciplinary practices exclusively in terms of the carnivalesque, but more accurately to operationalise its theory as a useful and relevant means to better articulate and examine their work.
List of Illustrations

   Inkjet print on cotton paper
   900 x 700 mm
   Edition of 10

   Inkjet print on cotton paper
   1200 x 800 mm
   Edition of 5

   Inkjet print on cotton paper
   850 x 530 mm
   Edition of 10

   Inkjet print on cotton paper
   850 x 530 mm
   Edition of 10

   Industrial foam, wood, brass and enamel paint
   1000 x 600 mm

   Wood, industrial foam, Nippon wax and oil paint
   Dimensions variable

   Bronze
   700 x 240 x 240 mm
   Edition of 3

   Wood, industrial foam, nippon wax, oil paint and steel
   730 x 220 x 240 mm

   Life-size mannequin, decommissioned parachute, cotton, Nippon wax, enamel paint, customised replica AK-47, epoxy, Oregon pine, carved mask, ivory
   Dimensions variable

    Life-size fibre-glass mannequin, industrial foam, epoxy, enamel paint, wood
    1900 x 560 x 400 mm

    Oil and acrylic on canvas
    1750 x 960 mm
   Oil and acrylic on canvas
   1750 x 960 mm

   Oil and acrylic on canvas
   1498 x 845 mm

   Oil and acrylic on canvas
   1498 x 845 mm

   Oil and acrylic on canvas
   1000 mm x 1000 mm

    Digital print on cotton rag paper
    1730 x 910 mm
    Edition of 5

    Digital print on cotton rag paper
    1730 x 910 mm
    Edition of 5

    Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, waxed cord
    1000 x 1000 x 600 mm each

    Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh and waxed cord
    1530 x 890 x 700 mm

    Archival ink print on cotton rag paper
    Photographed by Tony Meintjies
    1120 x 1120 mm
    Edition of 5

    Video installation
    Dimensions variable
    Edition of 5

    Video installation
    Dimensions variable
    Edition of 5