

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

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(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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Date:2009

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Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Declaration	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Abstract	v
List of Illustrations	vi
1. CHAPTER ONE –	
BAKHTINIAN THOUGHT AND THE PICTURING OF A VULGAR AFRICAN IDENTITY	
1.1. Introduction	1
1.2. Curatorial Orientation	4
1.3. Selection and Scope	9
2. CHAPTER TWO –	
CARNIVALESQUE OVERTONES IN THE WORK OF MACGARRY, MNTAMBO, SHIBASE, BARNETT AND NESBITT	
2.1. Positive Estrangement	15
2.2. Excess in Africa	19
2.3. Mbembe’s Vulgate	25
2.4. The Beautiful and Ugly	28
2.5. Laughter and Catharsis	35
3. CHAPTER THREE –	
THE NEW SPELL	
3.1. Curatorial Translation	46
3.2. Exhibition Analysis	48
3.3. Conclusion	51
4. REFERENCES –	
4.1. Bibliography	53
4.2. Illustrations	56

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

1. Michael MacGarry, *Spiderman* (2005)
Inkjet print on cotton paper
900 x 700 mm
Edition of 10
2. Michael MacGarry, *La Tenda Rossa* (2004)
Inkjet print on cotton paper
1200 x 800 mm
Edition of 5
3. Michael MacGarry, *The Classicist from African Archetypes* series (2007)
Inkjet print on cotton paper
850 x 530 mm
Edition of 10
4. Michael MacGarry, *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)* from *African Archetypes* series (2007)
Inkjet print on cotton paper
850 x 530 mm
Edition of 10
5. Michael MacGarry, *The Economy of Modernity* (2005)
Industrial foam, wood, brass and enamel paint
1000 x 600 mm
6. Michael MacGarry, *Tipp-Ex Politics* (2008)
From left: *J. G. Strijdom, D.F. Malan, H.F. Verwoerd, P.W. Botha, B.J. Vorster, F.W. de Klerk*
Wood, industrial foam, Nippon wax and oil paint
Dimensions variable
7. Michael MacGarry, *H.F. Verwoerd Tipp-Ex Politics* series (2008)
Bronze
700 x 240 x 240 mm
Edition of 3
8. Michael MacGarry, *Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki* from *Champagne Socialists* series (2008)
Wood, industrial foam, nippon wax, oil paint and steel
730 x 220 x 240 mm
9. Michael MacGarry, *Zhou Enlai and the Scramble for Africa* (2008)
Life-size mannequin, decommissioned parachute, cotton, Nippon wax, enamel paint, customised replica AK-47, epoxy, Oregon pine, carved mask, ivory
Dimensions variable
10. Michael MacGarry, *L'Étranger* (2008)
Life-size fibre-glass mannequin, industrial foam, epoxy, enamel paint, wood
1900 x 560 x 400 mm
11. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (Big Al)* (2008)
Oil and acrylic on canvas
1750 x 960 mm

12. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (Taylor the Dictator and Thief)* (2008)
Oil and acrylic on canvas
1750 x 960 mm
13. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (His Excellency 1)* (2007)
Oil and acrylic on canvas
1498 x 845 mm
14. Themba Shibase, *Wena Wendlovu (His Excellency 2)* (2007)
Oil and acrylic on canvas
1498 x 845 mm
15. Themba Shibase, *Economic Ascendance – A New Battle Ground* (2008)
Oil and acrylic on canvas
1000 mm x 1000 mm
16. Nandipha Mntambo, *Silent Embrace (1 & 2)* (2007)
Digital print on cotton rag paper
1730 x 910 mm
Edition of 5
17. Nandipha Mntambo, *Silent Embrace (1-11)* (2007)
Digital print on cotton rag paper
1730 x 910 mm
Edition of 5
18. Nandipha Mntambo, *Beginnng of the Empire* (2007)
Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, waxed cord
1000 x 1000 x 600 mm each
19. Nandipha Mntambo, *Indlovukati* (2007)
Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh and waxed cord
1530 x 890 x 700 mm
20. Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa* (2008)
Archival ink print on cotton rag paper
Photographed by Tony Meintjies
1120 x 1120 mm
Edition of 5
21. Nina Barnett & Robyn Nesbitt, *Warcry (Boys)* (2007)
Video installation
Dimensions variable
Edition of 5
22. Nina Barnett & Robyn Nesbitt, *Warcry (Girls)* (2007)
Video installation
Dimensions variable
Edition of 5