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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

Abstract by Lucy Rayner

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.