

# WINDOW SHOPPING IN THE CAPE TOWN CBD

Story & Photos Ashraf Jamal

When I suggest this title for a Taschen book – WINDOW SHOPPING: LOOKING AT AFRICAN ART – Frank Schönau, the director of THK Gallery and the Southern African distributor for Taschen, looks at me perplexedly. Window shopping, I realise, is not a generic phrase but peculiarly South African. I recall as a little boy being bundled into my dad's chocolate and gold Beaumont for an evening jaunt to the drive-in, a roadhouse for a meal in the car, or to Adderley Street to see the Christmas lights and stroll from shop window to shop window to gawk at gadgets, clothes, furniture. Before any thought of becoming an astronaut – Neil Armstrong had landed on the moon and made his grand stride for Mankind – I wanted to be a window dresser.

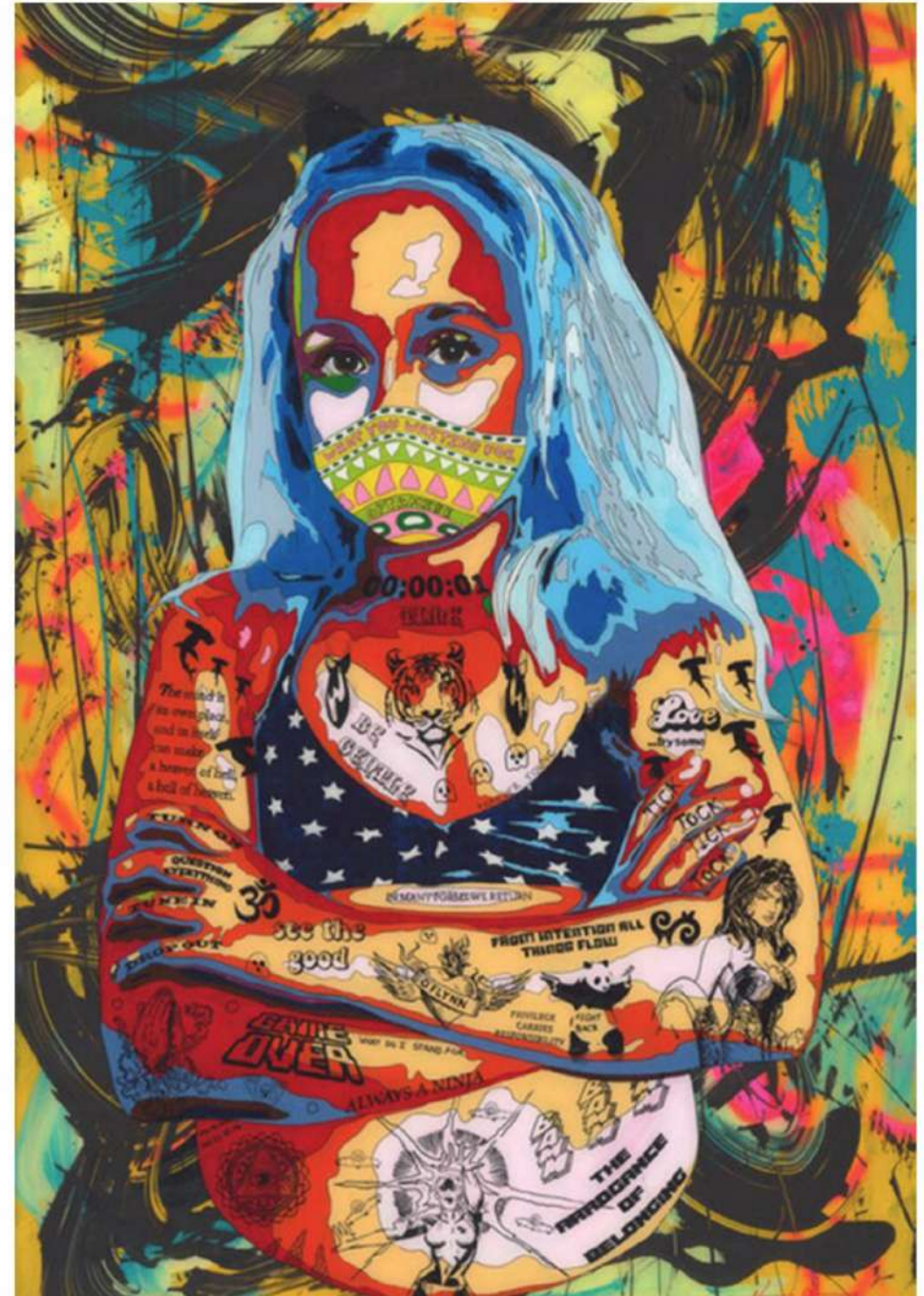
Looking through shop windows at night was a commonplace pleasure once upon a time. Things seemed more magical when bathed in a choreographed lighting design. Commodities were artworks. Even in the throes of a boycott there was plenty to see. Looking through windows under a balmy starry night proved more thrilling than a spaghetti western or a bunny-chow. Art galleries, in the 1970s, were not a thing – certainly not for a family from Athlone. The closest we came to art was beaten brass and copper from Gujarat, or a Tretchikoff print of a dying swan or weeping rose, purchased from Garlicks.

Refused entry to the AVA – then controlled by Irma Stern's beady exclusionary eye – Tretchikoff figured out a new market. In fact, he pioneered the sale of photo-lithographic prints in chain stores. His cheap quality prints framed in burnished Rembrandt gold were prized exhibits in homes across South Africa. Andrew Lamprecht's curatorial masterclass, shown at the Iziko National Gallery decades later, is testimony to the White Russian's enduring popularity. More people from very different walks of life strode into the national

museum to look at the largest collection of original Tretchikoff paintings than at any time before or since. Irma Stern, I'm sure, would not be amused. But then as Tretchikoff wisely pointed out, the art scene – then as now – was 'riddled with bitchiness like a gorgonzola with penicillin.'

Looking at art – even when not sheathed in glass – is a kind of window shopping. The pleasure lies in the looking, even though one might have an acquisitive eye. While unaffordable to most, the pleasures art affords – like the pleasure of looking at an elegantly dressed mannequin, a sleek toaster, a plump clawed sofa – are irresistible. We need things, or rather, want them. They provide our lives with body and drama. Covetousness is not only a private pleasure but a public one. We expect visitors to our homes to ooh-and-ah. Our memories are the sum – in vital part – of the things we acquire. It is those long-ago pleasures derived by looking at things through windows as a child that now race pell-mell to the forefront.

Generally, at peace pottering about my personal stomping ground – Observatory – it is always a delight when thrust outwards into the greater world. Visiting Cape Town's CBD has its peculiar pleasures. At its heart lies Greenmarket Square, the tourist emporia for Africa's panoply of graven wooden sculptures, wirework, and bolts of sumptuous and earthen cloths. A one-stop shop en route back to the Americas, Europe, the East, the square is wrapped in a glittering band of bracelets – coffee shops, eateries, art galleries. Adjacent Church Street is a mini Montmartre. It was there that I found myself in conversation with Charl Bezuidenhout, the owner of WorldArt. Over the years I have been a regular visitor to his art dealership. Perhaps it was my love for Tretchikoff, for good or ill, that sedimented my affection? Bezuidenhout is a canny broker in Pop Art. As I stopped to talk to him at the recently concluded Cape Town Art Fair, new works, plucked from the walls of a restaurant the night before, were being hung. They were by Norman O'Flynn, the local guru of atomic pop, who, Bezuidenhout informed me, were sold out. O'Flynn has this way with



Norman O'Flynn, *Timekeeper*, 150x100cm, acrylic on acrylic glass, 2019, WORLDART

certain loyal consumers and brand-new ones. His glittering gaudy post-punk vistas of our 21<sup>st</sup> century hell possess an irresistible appeal. The new works too were promptly sold. As I entered World Art on Church, there they were, again, primed to be scooped up and bubble-wrapped for a flight to Brussels. Pop sells. Tretchikoff, despite his many detractors, proved this. If O'Flynn's paintings matter, it is because they access a yearning for the squeakily bright grotesque. His paintings make us laugh, make us wince – they are strychnine. And all the better for being so.

Across the cobbled pedestrian street, bedecked with umbrellas and wrought-iron tables and chairs containing jolly tourists sipping coffee, was the once notorious AVA. It now sported a fire-engine red door and a white Cape-Dutch façade popping with Arabic calligraphy. There was nothing peculiar about this juxtaposition of the Arab and Western world. Samuel P. Huntington's book – *The Clash of Civilisations?* – was not the question uppermost in the collective caffeinated mind on that balmy summer's morn. Disinclined to enter the AVA, for now, I veered upwards to peer into the window of SMITH, another favourite with a very different ethos. It was there – excitedly pressing the buzzer – that I came across the drawings of Stephen Allwright, a recluse who lives in an artist's colony outside Barrydale, a quiet arty town three hours away from the hubbub of Cape Town. One could not imagine a starker contrast to the dark gaudy pleasure of a painting by Norman O'Flynn. The body of work was titled 'Broken Face Soliloquies'. These were intimate works. Expressed with exquisite tenderness, they tugged at the small and nagging anxieties we all feel.

Rarely have I come across such honesty in art. I was reminded of David Salle. Speaking with Janet Malcolm – the conversation is related in Malcolm's titular essay 'Forty-one false starts' – Salle remarked that 'the only thing that really matters in art and in life is to go against the tidal wave of literalism and literal-mindedness – to insist on and *live* the life of the imagination. A painting has to be the experience, instead of pointing to it. I want to have and to give access to *feeling*. That is the riskiest and only important way to connect to the world – to make it alive. Everything else is just current events.' If you haven't already read Janet Malcolm, do so for your own good. Her essay, 'A girl of the zeitgeist,' on the South African born editor of *Artforum*, Ingrid Sischy, is one of the most unerringly brilliant studies of the art world I have ever read. Now, however, it was Salle's words that stayed with me, because when looking at Allwright's drawings of men – solemn, semi-naked, caught in the banality of everyday life – I was profoundly touched. In those fuzzily hairy

men – gentler echoes of Egon Schiele, without the mannered self-awareness of Gustav Klimt – I saw life weaned of all self-importance, unmoved by life's noisy hysteria.

Becalmed, fortified, I ventured on to THK on Waterkant Street. Early for my lunch appointment with Frank Schönau, I resumed my window shopping. The works on display were photographs by Johnno Mellish. He is in his twenties, and his images possessed none of the quiet desperation exhibited in Allwright's drawings. Situational, rather than moody, distanced rather than engaged, they nevertheless possessed their own peculiar attraction. Perhaps it lay in the unearthly glow his images emitted. Perhaps their magnetism lay in the photographer's cool setting up of the scene. A photograph of a house shot at night emits a bilious green-yellow glow. Another – the scene of an accident, the skateboarder having fallen on his arse – occurs alongside a fairground drenched in pastel. Even a Laura Ashleigh palette assumes a nuclear intensity. Everything is irradiated. Including my favourite photograph of two young men, one standing beside a grubby mop, the other slumped on the floor, his back against a bare mattress. The scene is indecipherable, yet compelling. We are caught in the middle of something devoid of mystery or portent. This is Mellish's hovering weirdly immune world – electrified, yet devoid of affect. If the artist has nothing to say, it is because there is nothing to say. Or, if he does have something to say, then it is that we've got it wrong – nature *does not* abhor a vacuum.

After hugging two old friends who run a framing shop, swapping photos of our children, I trudged up to Deepest Darkest – surely the best moniker for something, whatever, I've come across in a while. My other favourite baptisms in the art world are Kalashnikov, Blank, and WhatIfTheWorld. I'm heading up to see the photographs of Kevin Mackintosh and to meet the gallery's director, Deon Redman. He – Redman – is overseeing the installation of a staircase in his home. Mackintosh's photographs, however, are obligingly present. I imagine Irma Stern – or our contemporary cognoscenti – feeling pompously irked. This is not art, they might say, but design. But as I pointed out at the outset of this rumination, art and design have been bedfellows since the 60s. That the two have become indistinguishable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is unsurprising – despite what the purists might have to say.

On entering Deepest Darkest one was immediately presented with a rash of red dots – SOLD! The exhibition had only opened two days prior – but there were barely any pickings left, let alone slim ones. If Mellish's images seemed as though they



SMITH, Stephen Allwright, *Broken Face Soliloquies*



THK Gallery, John Mellish, *A family of strangers*, 2019, 100 x 125cm

were produced in a nuclear reactor, Mackintosh's photographs possessed a cool knowingness. A seasoned fashion photographer who pirouettes between London and New York, he also has a passion for Africa – as a place, a fantasy, a fetish. The landscapes that form the backdrop for his images are shot in situ, then transferred to a studio in which they assume a scrim-like presence for his models. The mise-en-scene and styling is everything. We are in the masterful grasp of a great window dresser, an artist who powerful understands the synthetic. These are not artworks that make an essential or pure claim upon a continent. What matters is the photographer's imagination. Here we are as far removed as is possible from documentary realism or 'current affairs.' Rather, style is everything, and, dare I say it – beauty. Mackintosh's shimmering black bodies are iconic extensions of the image's unapologetic style. Commerce is its fold, as is desire, which is the bedrock of commerce.

Here, I am once again reminded of Tretchikoff, and returned to those summer nights long ago when my father drove us from the dereliction of the Cape Flats to Cape Town's glittering consumerist

Mecca. When Deon Redman arrives, we jointly marvel at the well-oiled elegance of Mackintosh's photographs. A beauty for its own sake? Or a reminder that nothing can survive without it? While these are sumptuously elegant tableau, they nevertheless possess a grit. It is not literalness one encounters but desire's hook. One would be churlish to dismiss this window of opportunity, and the secret pleasures it affords. As I patiently await the Excite taxi that will take me home to Observatory – a suburb far removed from this oil well with its rash of red dots – Redman informs me that the Dutch actress Famke Janssen was at the opening two nights before. Regrets I'd have a view, Frank Sinatra opined. In the taxi, chatting to Mr Repipi, a driver I've known for years, I could not stop thinking of Famke Janssen, the uber Bond girl in *Golden Eye*, with her lascivious tongue, demented eyes, and thighs that could strangle the life out of a boa constrictor. Ooh! ... Ah! ... the exquisite pleasures of looking ... recalling what one has seen ... and what one has missed!