

Thoughtful painter ponders art

Article by Wilhelm Snyman

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"The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself".

This aphorism by Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) seems aptly chosen when viewing Cape Town artist, Stanley Hermans's work. Defiantly and effortlessly individualistic, Hermans is one of those artists who is as verbally dextrous as he is on canvas - much as a theatre director or orchestra conductor can articulate a vision, so too, Hermans has very clear ideas that happily translate into pastels, oils, acrylics and water colour.

The University of Cape Town's Irma Stern Museum is hosting his latest exhibition, until April 26th, titled: A Selection of paintings and Drawings from 2000-2008. Hermans's earlier work tended to be very intimate, depicting scenes of domesticity, familiar surroundings and zones of reassurance. His later works incline towards the abstract. As Hermans explains: "I think I have to go where the line and the colour take me. If it has occurred over the last eight years that the line and the colour have taken me to pure abstraction then I must go there."

"I work on a number of works at the same time. It has not been a linear progression from one form through to another. It happens that when I'm working on a landscape, it moves into an interior and comes out as an abstract. "If you look at the works closely, after a while you're not really too concerned whether it's a landscape or an abstract, or an interior. You begin to see the commonalties rather than the apparent differences."

Hermans has been a practising artist since 1990 and he has never allowed trend or fashion to dictate his style. In this regard, Hermans says: "I find it very annoying this habit from across the world by those who feel so free to tell us African artists how to be African and how to be contemporary." At this point he uses an unprintable expletive. "I don't need anybody to tell me either how to be modern or how to be African." Hermans adds, "that I could have traded on being an "artist of colour", but I purposely did not".

"There are always opportunities to ride a popular vehicle, but I think that leaves with a certain degree of short-term attention. Art is my passion and I will be doing it for as long as I live. These short-term things don't really matter, I would much rather commit myself to following the tone and the line, which are universal elements of vocabulary that certainly link me to my own place and time, but it also link me to so much to the exciting history of painting and the future of painting. The context has always been global, for painting of a certain quality."

Speaking of passion and popularity, as would-be elements in an artist's life, Hermans says: "As I grow older I have less vanity and less ego to feed, which is a good thing. It increasingly has to do with pulling off a resonant surface." Some may accuse Hermans' work of being escapist, irrelevant and not pertinent to the South African milieu, an observation to which he replies: "If that is what they feel, fine, but I think I feel myself increasingly withdrawing from any form of pretension or mendacity, any form of anything that has nothing to do with serious painting."

Asked about his views on painters, that today are considered to be of a bygone era, or representative of a discredited political dispensation, such as Pierneef, to mention one example, Hermans remains adamantly loyal to an aesthetic rigour: "I think there are, as with all of us, some fantastic Pierneefs and some mundane Pierneefs. "All Pierneefs may appear to look the same to the naked eye, but they're not. The ones that are more successful are those that show the disintegration and the bringing back together of form and light. I don't think the politics of history has been kind to him. As soon as you venture into the politics of landscape you venture into the politics of ownership, and that is perilous when it pertains to art. How our South African art is understood has got to do with how people write about it. I long for a modern, generous and informed reading of someone like Pierneef.

As regards his sources of inspiration, Hermans says candidly: "I draw inspiration from everything I've seen - Pierneef, Maude Sumner, Boonzaaier, Sekoto. François Krige is one of my very, very favourites for his portraits. My old favourites are of course Matisse, Kandinsky, Klee, Ernest Mancoba, Helen Sebidi and so on." "Unfortunately, there's not a lot of contemporary writing about these artists. But that will change. Now you have Irma Stern, with people writing about her and reinventing her place. This will happen to everybody at some point."

As regards his fears for South African art, Hermans says: "My fears for South African art are the same as are my fears for South Africa, in terms of this capacity that modern thinking has to delude itself; to delude itself often into believing that you're dealing with meaning, when in fact you're not. I worry about that. It's part of modernity. I can't control that." But you can control your art: "To some extent I think that to find your own feet and your own meaning you have to drop from sight. You have to go deep within yourself, until such time as the work is done and then, you can come out and play."

"The works on this exhibition are older works that I have kept back, and new work. About two or three years ago, various works started to suggest a particular 'conversation' amongst themselves. The work is, as always, a celebration of the joys of painting."

Hermans says he continues to find Cape Town conducive to his art. "For now Cape Town is a lovely place to work creatively, but I have particularly difficulty with the light, especially in summer. It is far too bright, unforgiving. The light, in say, Paris, is so much more diffuse, such as the pinks and blues, whereas here pinks and blues are wiped out by the African sun. I work early in the morning with a layer of gauze over the curtain.

"As you'll see in the paintings there's a very rooted sense of home. There's also this fascination I have for the South African experiment. It's an important historical experiment, with these fault lines of race and class and gender. It is a microcosm of what other societies have faced and what other societies have yet to face. It is a perilous experiment, but it holds together, mostly. There seems to be a willingness and an enthusiasm to make that journey. And my art has to reflect aspects of this, no matter how I want to keep things reflective and personal. I am not unaffected by my space and time. For much of the time I don't have any control over much of what surrounds me, but, I do have choices in terms of how I might respond. I can respond in a way that either diminishes or deepens my humanity."

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