

ELOQUENCE OF TONGUE & BRUSH

The irrepressible Cape Town artist, Stanley Herman, speaks to JUSTIN PIERCE about his addictions – political activism and art.

CAPE TOWN ARTIST Stanley Hermans is the sort of interviewee every journalist loves and loathes. Loves because Stanley is one of those people who deal in eloquence, casting off one aphorism after another as though begging to be quoted, maybe with a long-term view to becoming a memorable character in someone's novel.

Loathes because the wit reveals very little of what I'd come to talk about: his paintings, which are currently on exhibition at the Irma Stern museum in Cecil Road, Rosebank.

"I think the paintings are all perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. I can only obscure and confuse what they have to say."

For further information, I must refer to Herman's written commentary on his work. Here he reveals his intentions, "to paint pictures that chronicle, record and comment on the ritual and ethos of lower middle-class existence."

Somewhere between the nonchalance and the academe lurks Stanley Hermans the artist. At least, I think so.

Hermans grew up in Woodstock in the 60s and 70s. His walk to school at Harold Cressy High took him through District Six at the time of its demolition. "Quite fun — one day a shop would be there and the next day it would be gone. It's amazing how quickly people can flatten something when they make up their minds."

The rituals of the Woodstock community — parties, funerals, visits to the barber, reconstructed from early memories and from family photographs dating from before his birth — provided the initial inspiration for his present exhibition, which comprises work submitted for his master's degree at the Michaelis School of Fine Art.

I ask him how he ended up there. "Ended up is a good way to put it. There wasn't any art at

school. I had to do Latin. I made sure I flunked Latin. It was hateful; it was in the spot where I felt art should be.

"I finished school and had to go out and find a job. I had one interview and decided I didn't like any of this. I was applying for a post as a trainee something or other. During the interview I remember leaning over and saying I wanted to know exactly how long it would be before I was no longer a trainee."

Needless to say, he didn't get the job. An aunt "who's really quite special" told him about the possibility of studying art at Michaelis. The work he submitted to gain admission comprised "two pencil drawings rolled up and stuck into the inside of a roller towel".

"And so I washed up at Michaelis. I was not a good student. I was still doing politics with a



vengeance." He speaks of it as a former addict might talk of doing cocaine, yet the off-hand manner does not quite hide a sincere commitment.

Hermans was active in the Towards a People's Culture Arts Festival at the end of 1986, the festival which had barely started before it was banned under the emergency regulations.

"I was the festival's immediate trouble shooter. I coordinated media. It was such an exciting project. I had the opportunity to poke a finger into so many different pies."

He did not exhibit any of his own work though. "It clean slipped my mind."

Does he see a relationship between his political activism and his art?

"It's the same body and the same brain involved in either activity. There's just a different point of emphasis.

"After a while I realised that organisational politics was not as suitable for me as I had thought — not the most appropriate conduit for all of one's energies." (Referring to himself as "one" rather than "I" is a favourite affectation.)

"One realised it's hopeless trying to change the world. One might as well just try and keep people perky."

Hermans is horrified that I find this attitude defeatist. "I'm not a defeatist. Call me a cheerful pragmatist."

This kind of talk might well come from someone who has turned away from social concerns to paint pretty pictures with only entertainment value. This kind of artist Hermans is most definitely not.

In his commentary he writes about the frustration felt by artists who were also activists in the 80s, when the pressure to produce work in line with the demands of organisations stifled originality and creativity, which in turn hindered cultural progression and the development of new artistic forms.

One way out of this crisis for him was to take up the theme of Woodstock life in a way that was documentary. "I had to record it for posterity," he explains.

But recording specific people and places still had its limitations. "It had very little to do with me — there was no room to dream, to breathe."

Over the past few years he has tended rather to paint pictures that evoke the atmosphere and the essence of his subject matter in an intensely personal way, his own responses rather than historical accuracy becoming dominant.

In the process he has opened up a way to a species of art that is richly creative while remaining true to its origins in a particular time and place. □ PHOTOGRAPH: Yunus Mohamed