

Source: FINANCIAL MAIL

Date: 10-Jun-2011

Topic: 06

Ref No: 2719



ID: 03971708-01 Source Page: 86

FMLIFE

ART

Afrikaner identity

In a recent *Alternative Dispute Resolution* ruling, outspoken right-wing "Afrikaner activist" Dan Roodt was forced to hand over the domain names www.maxdupreez.com and www.maxdupreez.co.za to the man whose name actually appears in the URLs. This may prove to be a landmark decision in terms of how public figures protect their own online brands; it is also a small victory in the ongoing battle over Afrikaner identity.

As the founding editor of anti-apartheid newspaper *Vrye Weekblad* and as an engaged commentator on the post-apartheid scene, Du Preez represents a strand of Afrikaner cultural politics untainted by complicity with the Nationalist government and thus emboldened to criticise the shortcomings of the new regime — without fear of being labelled reactionary. Roodt, on the other hand, represents a tiny but vocal clutch of Afrikaans-speakers who have chosen to occupy the fringes of SA society and (with Steve Hofmeyr as unlikely figure-head) solemnly promulgate their neurotic and ultimately racist claptrap.

As is so often the case, those shouting from the margins manage to impose themselves on the centre; extremists drown out the common sense of the majority. Nowhere was this more evident than in the AfriForum vs Julius Malema case, in which both sides claimed to be speaking on behalf of broad constituencies — claims given credence by the attendant media circus. Ironically, if Malema has been mocked and feared in equal measure, perhaps the same could be said of the figure of the *boer*.

Yet even under apartheid, when both the Nats and the freedom fighters sought to make "the Afrikaner" an unindividuated entity — to the point of caricature — there were Afrikaans South Africans who rejected this project. From the subversive writing of the Sestigers to the *voëlry* songs of Johannes Kerkorrel and Koos Kombuis, from Beyers Naude to Bram Fischer, the notion that "being

Afrikaans" entails a homogenous identity has been widely disputed.

A new exhibition of visual artworks, "*Ik ben een Afrikaner*", continues this dispute. Taking its title from a 1707 declaration by Dutch settler Hendrik Biebouw, the exhibition does not simply reinforce Jacob Zuma's disingenuous assertion that Afrikaners are "the only white tribe which is truly African" — instead, it offers a number of provocations about the complexities of being an Afrikaans South African today.

As might be expected, a number of the works subvert (or, at least, reinterpret) traditional Afrikaans iconography. "Mea Ox" takes the distinctive shapes of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria and the Taal Monument in Paarl and creates patterns that invite mathematical or aesthetic — as opposed to overtly political — contemplation. John Murray's paintings "Jan" and "Maria" place statues of the Van Riebeecks, the "Afrikaans Adam and Eve", at the centre of a cluster of images conflating popular

consumer culture and staid conservatism. In Clare Menck's self-portraits, the artist's face is concealed behind a starched white *kappie* even as her blushed neck and chest hint at something erotic.

The statement accompanying Francki Burger's photographic compositions, in which archival images of the "Anglo-Boer War" are merged with her own landscape photographs, alludes to that conflict's multiracial dimensions: what is nowadays (appropriately) called The South African War was not simply a white-on-white, English/Afrikaans conflict. Cobus van Bosch's painting "*Die Afrikaners*" is more explicit in demonstrating that being Afrikaans does not necessarily mean being white — these "Afrikaners" were part of a coloured community living in the greater Kalahari area in the 19th century.

By way of contrast, Pauline Gutter's works might be seen to reinforce certain Afrikaner stereotypes. A video installation suggests Afrikaans farmers pick their women in the same way they choose cattle for breeding stock, while the nine paintings in "Under the Belt" emphasise the male pelvis. Given that Gutter is part of a Free State farming community, however, one assumes that this patriarchal virility is still prevalent and in need of critique.

Other works reflect personal or collective feelings of alienation that are only partly related to the artists' Afrikaans identity. Reney

Warrington's "*Verlate*" affirms the untranslatability of that title as a means of expressing exclusion and loss as a result of her family's homophobia. Hannelie Coetzee's "*Vreemdeling*" stems from her sense of the strangeness of Johannesburg, as much as her own position as a stranger in Johannesburg.

Opening the exhibition, Susan Vosloo noted that she could not discern in these works traces of "the joy, pleasure and humour" of Afrikaans people. As a counterpoint, Jaco van der Merwe of *Bittereinder* fame performed two poems that, while lyrically playful, underscored the difficult existential question at the heart of this exhibition: "*Weet ek wie ek is?*"

Chris Thurman

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Where: Artspace,
Parkwood,
Johannesburg until
June 29