

Sacred Cows: a review of Anton Kannemeyer and Daniel Naudé at Stevenson

Anton Kannemeyer at STEVENSON in Cape Town

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Daniel Naudé & Anton Kannemeyer

Ankole 2. Lake Mburo district, Nyabushozi, Western Region, Uganda, 2012 & Soccer Star (I), 2014.

It is easy to suggest that Anton Kannemeyer has been treading water for the last few years, with little discernible distinction among his last few exhibitions. These days one can predict more or less what will be in his latest exhibition with a reasonably high level of accuracy. For the most part, 'Such, Such Were the Joys' is no exception to this – although there is 'The Erotic Drawings of Anton Kannemeyer' (a smaller exhibition within an exhibition) which does prove an exception.



The trouble with going into autopilot when you work like Kannemeyer does, is that the satire runs the risk of losing critical engagement. Employing bad taste or 'politically incorrect' humour with the intent of exposing specific attitudes or prejudices is one thing, but if that aspect falls by the wayside then you are left producing images highly offensive to some and without much else to say for themselves. This raises a bit of a conundrum: if you cease to be constructive with the problematic signifiers that you have appropriated, can you still claim satirical immunity?

Works such as *Their Habitat* (2014) and *A Democracy* (2014) are two examples of this. In both of these works, the critique of liberal fallacies is generalised to the point of being fundamentally toothless. The setting of 'somewhere in Africa' is a bit too casual and throwaway. They may elicit a chuckle or two, but they perpetuate a kind of targetless 'floating' satire. Even some of the more specific works such as *O is for Oh My God* (2014) and *Untitled (Soccer & Rugby)* (2012) are often too knee-jerk to really be effective. This is not to say that Kannemeyer's works are sterile; there were more than enough cries of 'Sies!' from the family that cohabited the gallery space with me. It is just that on some level the subversive potential becomes inversely proportional to familiarity with the artist's work and there is an ever-present risk of stagnation.

But to give credit where it is due, at least Kannemeyer has simultaneously been working on diverse bodies of work over the course of these similar exhibitions. Kannemeyer really throws the viewer a curveball in the second space with *Nsala, of the District of Wala* (2011). Due to an abrupt contrast in tone, the viewer suddenly has no idea how to respond to the work. Similarly bleak works such as *African Fair Maidens I and II* (both 2011) break the tension with their 'Fair Maidens from Africa' tagline. Divorced from the dark humour employed elsewhere, *Nsala* comes across as frank and sincere, carrying significant emotional weight and depicting a unique subject rendered in a style other than the appropriated Hergé-gollywog signifier in his other works. Much of this weight can perhaps be attributed to Alice Seeley Harris's 1904 photograph, of which Kannemeyer's work is a visual re-interpretation. Here he updates the setting, from early twentieth century Congo, to a seemingly more contemporary locale including terracotta tiles and a potted delicious monster. By completely constructing the image, Kannemeyer both draws attention to the [posed](#) nature of Seeley Harris's original photograph and allows for his work to be read through it, raising a postcolonial dialogue on early twentieth century Belgium colonial atrocities and their relationship to present conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo.



Nsala, of the district of Wala, looking at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Bash, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company militia.

Anton Kannemeyer

Nsala, of the District of Wala

2011

Acrylic on canvas

170 x 235cm

Without suggesting that Kannemeyer abandon the satirical aspect of his work in favour of ‘serious’ subject matter, there is a level of depth in *Nsala’s* postcolonial allegorising that transcends the superficial Afro-pessimistic limitations of some of the other work. A similar degree of success is achieved with ‘The Erotic Drawings of Anton Kannemeyer’, a petit exhibition snuck into Stevenson’s side gallery.

This grouping of work expertly satirises the conventionally uncritical stance taken by those ‘Erotic Sketchbook’ publications that Prestel is so fond of (having covered artists ranging from Picasso, Dali and Matisse to Klimt and Rodin), while bringing back the subversive edge that is lacking in some of the larger works. Perhaps this invigoration is because the works span a twenty year period in the artist’s career (1994-2014), but the specific focus of ‘Erotic Drawings’ renders it a cohesive and pithy showing of Kannemeyer’s works that plays directly to his strengths. Even the really silly ones like *Uit die bloujob van onse hemel* (1997) have more punch to them. Without suggesting that Kannemeyer stick solely to lobbing jabs at Afrikaner identity crises, ‘Erotic Drawings’ drives the point home that his work is most effective when sharpened to a point and focussed on poking at specific tender areas.

‘Erotic Drawings’ concludes with Kannemeyer’s series celebrating Soccer Stars (all produced in 2013). The drawings depict various soccer players in a typical state of post-goal posturing, sliding on their knees, fists clenched, victory cry in tow, and (Kannemeyer’s intervention) sporting an exposed and raging erection. The criticism of the spectacle of football as an ego-driven ‘dick-wagging’ contest is a valid one, but the work’s placement has unintentional consequences for Daniel Naudé’s work (concurrently on exhibition in the gallery).

The pairing of two different artists inevitably leads to each being read through the lens of the other and in this regard, context can be cruel. The current exhibition layout at Stevenson’s Cape Town gallery requires the viewer to peruse Kannemeyer’s work before entering the spaces containing Naudé’s. As a result, the last thing that the viewer sees before entering Naudé’s space are Kannemeyer’s ‘elated’ footballers. Upon venturing into Naudé’s, the viewer is confronted with Ankole bulls that appear as though they should be struggling under the weight of their own massive ‘majestic horns’ (to quote the press release). The juxtaposition is amusing to say the least. This is not helped by including works such as *Luffa plant. Buwama, Mpigi district, Central Region, Uganda 2012* in the same space. The room becomes a veritable *tour de phallus* and the reverence that Naudé intended to convey is undermined. This would no doubt have been tricky to foresee; had it been any of Naudé’s previous work then this would not have been an issue at all. It is not that these traits weren’t latent in the work, but they certainly wouldn’t have been so glaringly ‘in your face’ were it not for Kannemeyer’s extended phallogocentric critique.



Daniel Naudé

Luffa plant. Buwama, Mpigi district, Central Region, Uganda, 2012

2012

Archival pigment ink print

112 x 112cm

Moving past the initial post-Kannemeyer absurdity, Naudé uses cattle in 'Sightings of the Sacred' in a similar manner to the Africanis dogs of his exhibition 'Animal Farm'. That is to say they are an entry point into the specific cultures and locations that he is documenting. The people and the culture enter the picture through their relationships with these animals, establishing a cultural portrait that transcends pure documentary photography. Landscapes enter firstly as a setting for the portraits and then, in their own right, as subject matter in a few choice shots.

Fans of Naudé's work will find plenty to enjoy here and the works are, of course, technically excellent, perpetuating that sort of uniform 'overcast late afternoon with approaching storm clouds' look which has become a signature for the artist. Through this visual uniformity, it is the physical differences between the bulls which function as markers, demarcating which of the three locations a particular series of photographs is drawn from. The Ugandan bulls are the aforementioned ostentatiously horned Ankole, the Zebu bulls from Madagascar are behorned more conservatively, while the Indian bulls find their similarly modest horns decorated in bright primary colours.

But for me, and this no doubt points to my own cultural biases, the bulls as a whole don't maintain the same level of interest that Naudé's dogs managed when displayed *en masse*. In a sense there was an intimacy in the previous body that hasn't quite translated into the new work. Perhaps this stems from Naudé's own subject position as an outsider in the cultures that he is depicting. Alternatively it may well be that the bulls, as sacred objects of reverence, felt little need to respond to the gaze of Naudé's lens. Where the dogs were rich in personality and quite distinctive, the bulls tend to blur together. This isn't purely the result of a change in animal subject matter as *Twin Nguni calves. Stella, North West Province, 2 March 2010* and *Xhosa bull on the shore. Mgazi, Eastern Cape, 18 May 2010* were two of the strongest works in his previous series.

Rather, I suspect that it is the consequence of the significance of the cattle's cultural resonance outweighing their status as subject matter. It is the photographs depicting the translation of the reverence with which they are held into cultural practice which take centre stage, with the consequence that the sheer number of bull portraits starts to become a bit repetitious (particularly with those from Madagascar and Uganda). In searching for the sacred in each of these three cultures, it is through the broader socio-political placement of the cattle as apex that the works in Naudé's current body really take hold. This impression is, of course, substantiated by the portraits, and in no way am I suggesting that they should be discarded. It is just interesting to note the shifting dynamics in Naudé's work from 'Animal Farm' to 'Sightings of the Sacred'.

http://www.artthrob.co.za/Reviews/Tim_Leibbrandt_reviews_Sacred_Cows_by_Anton_Kannemeyer_at_ST_EVENSON_in_Cape_Town.aspx