

Sean O'Toole Article:  
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## Nothing left but the recordings

### ZANDER BLOM'S JOHANNESBURG HOME IS FILLED WITH THE STRANGE, THE CURIOUS AND THE ODDLY FAMILIAR. SEAN O'TOOLE GETS TO GRIPS WITH THE LATTER. ZANDER BLOM IS ART SOUTH AFRICA'S THIRD BRIGHT YOUNG THING FOR 2007

The Anxiety of Influence is the title of a seminal piece of literary criticism. Published in 1973, Harold Bloom's "remarkable, short, frequently difficult book," as a New York Times reviewer at the time hailed it, is a study of creative influence in poetry, in particular the Romantic poets, Bloom's field of specialty. The book, lest one miss the point, is now influential in its own right. Although concerned with poetry, Bloom's statements on influence are helpful in making sense of artist Zander Blom's cryptic photographs, taken inside his Brixton home in Johannesburg.

"The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main traditions of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist," wrote Bloom.

In his own wilful act of revisionism, Blom has perversely opted to caricature and distort Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, itself a seminal contribution to the lexicon of twentieth century Western avant-gardism. Popularly described as an assemblage for its use of wood, plaster and found objects, Merzbau was nominally sculptural and notionally architectural. In its first, most evocative incarnation, this ever-expanding work in progress inhabited much of the interior of Schwitters' studio, at No. 5 Waldhausenstrasse, Hanover. Started in 1923, it was destroyed in Allied air raids in 1943. Two more versions would follow: the first in Norway, where the artist initially fled in 1937 (it was destroyed by a fire), another, an unfinished version, produced in England, where he died in exile.

Even a cursory review of Blom's photographs, which document the crude, jagged, Dadaist-inspired cardboard and vinyl installations filling his home, suggest the profound influence of Schwitters. Of course, it is impossible to verify this assertion. Nothing remains of his prototype Hanover Merzbau (literally, Merz building). To corrupt an expression popularised by William Burroughs, there is nothing left but the recordings – just photographs.

Given the fluid, constantly evolving character of the original, a photograph is certainly a poor substitute. It renders static what was essentially dynamic and fundamentally unstable. No doubt this is why Schwitters' self-described "construction of an interior space by means of plastic forms and colours" inspires such awe. It is a fugitive artwork. It cannot be quantified or measured, in a word, reduced.

Blom's photographs of his Brixton homage slash rip-off flirt with this knowledge. Collectively grouped under the title *The Drain of Progress*, his photographic studies – or documents, as he describes them – first appeared in *TEN*, a new photographic portfolio and limited edition book released by The Society of Photographers (2006).

In a statement appearing alongside his untitled photographs, Blom writes: "To stage a reading mechanism for these images, I have to mention first that I do not consider myself a photographer. I work as a visual artist and do experiments with sound. This selection is taken from a project that I have been working on for approximately a year."

The artist is adamant about the function of his photographs: "To my mind these images are more like ten paintings that illustrate the process of building meaningless, abstract constructions than... photographs of my studio. I would further describe the work as entering a kind of claustrophobic apolitical conceptual no man's land."

In an explicit acknowledgement of the burden of influence and the role of artistic legacies on his work, Blom (writing elsewhere, in a web-published artist statement) positions himself as follows: "In my failed attempt to throw any form of conceptual or theoretical motive out the window, I have embarked upon a personal language which manifests as a kind of perverse, dandified, idealised, ironic and banal form of self-expression that accidentally yet instinctively draws from and comments on various modernist ideas, ideals and practices."

Less ostentatiously, what Blom is admitting to here is his anxiety, a hipster apprehension at the fact that accident and instinct might actually be nothing more than self-saving caricature and distortion. In an age where the copy is the original, this is rather quaint – and perhaps suggests the uncertain charms of Blom's photographs.

About Zander Blom: Currently based in Johannesburg, Pretoria-born (1982) Blom studied graphic design before pursuing an artistic career. Winner of a Merit Award at the 2003 Sasol New Signatures, he has since participated on numerous group exhibitions. Last year he presented the first of a two-part solo exhibition at Johannesburg's The Premises gallery. Titled Sounds and Pictures, it offered an overview of his work in progress and studio process. His second exhibition is scheduled for 2007 and will include a book and album launch.

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