

Business Day  
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*Slacker art, with slick execution*  
By Sean O'Toole

It's not just the way he wears his pants that makes me think Zander Blom is a slacker - an eminently likeable one, let me qualify. Writing in a catalogue published to coincide with his recent solo exhibition at Rooke Gallery, the 25-year-old Pretoria Tech graduate describes how moving into a digs in Brixton, Joburg, became the catalyst for a period of idle retreat from the art world.

Early in 2005, while mucking about with his ink and paper creations for a small group exhibition, Blom realised most of his youthful ambitions were "lame and redundant". He also recognised his dislike of "ambitious art" - being art that is "monumental or profound".

So he decided to spend more time at home.

"It was about living and working, about appreciating literature, music and art as much as it was about producing my own pointless scribbles," writes Blom in his catalogue, titled *The Drain of Progress*. "I was quite happy to lock myself up in my house and make random marks and words on paper."

Towards the end of last year the first bits of creative evidence from Blom's exile began to appear in the public realm. Blom's first prominent outing was a solo exhibition of mostly graphics at The Premises gallery in Johannesburg. Not long afterwards he exhibited 10 photographs on a group show at the same venue, on a show sponsored by dealer Gavin Rooke's Society of Photographers.

The photographs were homages to creative idleness, depicting his Brixton living space, an alien environment cluttered with Blom's monochromatic drawings, prints, linear cutouts and graffiti. While references to German artist Kurt Schwitters's fabled '30s studio space are unavoidable, Blom's messy universe is also thoroughly his own. "For a long time I aspired to make the kind of immaculately crafted work in media that would last forever," he says in his catalogue. "When I killed that ambition a big weight was lifted off my shoulders."

Given his interest in process rather than product, photography is a logical vehicle, offering a means to record the strange and often fleeting manifestations of artistic consciousness that occupy his home.

Fast-forward to October 2007. Blom is conducting a walkabout of his Rooke Gallery exhibition. It is a curious show, lavishly priced photographs of his home environment

presented alongside a messy installation that recreates what he once exclusively did in the privacy of his home. Almost everything is for sale.

"A lot of this stuff is supposed to be kinda funny," Blom says in his soft-spoken manner. He has just been explaining the meaning of a simple hand-lettered poster reading, "Clement Green/berg/Like, man. He/was god to us." No one laughs.

Perhaps it is the obtuse singularity of his vision that is uninviting of laughter, or the grim spectacle of a smart-Alec tripping himself up in public. Having dedicated himself to mischievous play and nonsense - "Cutting up nature, and revolting against her bourgeois sensibility!" he declared in December 2006 - here we find the artist participating in a polite market economy, gallery walkabout and all.

What's happened? Why suddenly the monumental photographs?

"I want these works to be seen as paintings, or as compositions, rather than as photographs," he responds, sounding eerily like a producer of ambitious art. "What I am doing is constructing these compositions, and then I am just framing them. It is kinda like using my house as the canvas ... I am just framing my paintings in a different way."

"Why don't you exhibit your house then?" asks a curious member of the public.

"Well, I guess I could," Blom concedes. "The work is vastly more interesting than if you do see the house." He points to his photographs: "These aren't the house; it is me framing the house in an interesting way. If you go into the house you will definitely not have the same experience."

All this wrangling over the monumental qualities of the photographs tends to overlook a basic insight: he is a polished artist. "I think he masters his own aesthetic," says Justin Rhodes, of What If The World gallery. "It is very identifiable and strong, well thought-out and conceived, not just edgy graphic imagery."

And he has skills beyond graphics and photography. Earlier this year Blom released a CD of glitchy electronic compositions. Then there are his middle-finger salutes to art history as one-third of the prankster art collective, Avant Car Guard.

It all adds up to suggest the arrival of an embryonic talent, sagging jeans and all.

ARTTHROB

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Interview with Zander Blom on the occasion of his exhibition,  
'The Drain of Progress' by Michael Smith

Artist Zander Blom has a show up at the Rooke Gallery in Newtown during October, cryptically entitled 'The Drain of Progress'. The exhibition represents Blom's exploration of Modernism from a South African context, and consists in equal measure of prints, framed paper constructions and one-off photographs of odd constructions created in spaces inside his Brixton home. I interviewed him at the gallery a week into this powerful show.

Michael Smith: What is it about Modernism that you're interested in interrogating or unpacking?

Zander Blom: I'm interested in exploring some aspects of the avant garde art movements of the 20th Century that I find compelling. Examples of this include the super optimism, idealism and seriousness of Mondrian and De Stijl, the striving towards revolution and progress that characterises movements like Constructivism, and the glorification of modernisation which Futurism is know for. My exploration has to do with trying to understand Modernism from the perspective of a young person living in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the dawn of the 21st Century - a position which is very much dislocated in time, space, and ideology from what it attempts to investigate. The works which I made in the last four years either directly mimic selected visual qualities of modernist related subjects, or comment in some way on the various ideologies of art movements of the 20th Century.

MS: There seems to be an aesthetic of messiness, stains, bits of tape left on walls, scratches, even motifs seemingly seeping out of your ceilings in some photographs. This is at odds with the clinical nature of some Modernism, particularly work by Mondrian.

ZB: Regardless of whether the work I'm referencing is clean or messy - Pollock's for example are generally very messy, while something from De Stijl is usually very clinical - in my case it's about bringing it back to: 'This is where I live, this is where I eat, sleep, and make work, this is the position from which I'm exploring these things, a very confined space with a limited budget, and limited access to the work that I'm exploring.' I live in an old house in Brixton. If I'm reconstructing a Mondrian composition on the stained pressed ceiling in my bedroom with vinyl tape and black paint or ink, from faded colour plate reproductions, then it's going to have a certain kind of inglorious, un-glamorous look to it.

MS: In a number of the works, photographs and drawings, there seems to be an interest in the accumulation of identical units into a whole: this suggests the Postmodern impulse detectable in much Pop Art. How does that fit into your programme?

ZB: To me shapes like the target, the dolphin and the log of wood are about having a unit with which to construct different compositions. In most cases I'm trying to nullify their original meanings and create a sort of formalist abstraction from them.

That said, because I'm attempting to make very formalist or modernist compositions, but the seriousness, optimism and the ideals of progress which fueled modernism are replaced with pseudo-nihilism, a demise of seriousness, and a sense of irony, these compositions become more like Postmodern voids than anything else.

In the case of the target specifically, I wanted very much to reclaim the shape from the association with Pop Art, and turn it into a formalist composition simulating a wormlike void.

MS: I notice that a number of images, paintings, drawings etc that appear in your photographs are also placed loose and unframed in the gallery space.

ZB: Yes, some of these works have been framed and isolated so one is able to view them as important pieces, but I also wanted to show some of them in a way that was more in touch with the method of their production and the purpose they have as props in the narrative that is communicated by the photographs.

The book and a big part of the exhibition comprise photographs that were taken in my home. Apart from communicating the exploration into modernism, which is effectively the underlying theme of this body of work, with it I wanted the photographs to be considered completed works, rather than snaps of my home, or what I was making. Basically, with the layout of the exhibition I wanted to treat some things as museum pieces, and others as props or debris.

MS: In one of your works one of the base units from which you construct the image is a swastika: what is your thinking behind this choice?

ZB: In the context of my show the swastika is the same as a dolphin or a target: it's a shape that I find quite beautiful, one I have used as the basis to explore different compositions. I use it in spite of its connotations of 'evil' and 'death', which I'm still sensitive to, but I'm trying to rid these shapes of their moral content and use them for their visual qualities in constructing formalist compositions.

I am not interested in making works that deal with violence, or that rely solely on shock value.

MS: The catalogue raisonné that forms part of this show is an interesting document. Could you tell me about it?

ZB: The book is designed to mimic the type of catalogue raisonné which one associates with an accomplished modernist artist from Europe or North America. The kind of

publication that it mimics has been my main source of reference to the art history subjects I was exploring, so I wanted the works I produced to be viewed within a similar frame. Another aspect of it is that I wanted to mimic the colour plate reproductions which these kinds of books feature, and elevate the documentation of artworks or artist studios to works of art. Thus instead of having a book that features photographs of my work, I made a book where the photographs of my works are effectively the works. The remnants from installations in my home, or paintings and drawings are things that I also consider artworks, but in a way where they function more as props in a narrative which the book and photographs convey.

The book features a concise introduction to my practice, then 74 photographic works which were produced over a period of four years, and then follows with explanatory text on individual pieces. It is produced in a limited edition of 300, and is to be understood as an editioned artwork, rather than a catalogue of work. All the photographs featured in the book exist as one-off large-scale photographic works.

MAIL & GUARDIAN

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By Miles Keylock

Albert Camus tells us: “A man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.” The quote recalls the wilful revisionism in the new media art of Zander Blom. In his solo exhibition *The Drain of Progress* the 26 year old upstart presents a set of one-off photographs, drawings, paintings and prints that pay homage to the utopian ideals of twentieth century Western avant-gardism. In our age of “progressive” post-modernity however, it’s a love story that’s doomed from the start. Blom knows this. But like a Casanova desperately seeking out the giddy flux of first love or a junkie trying to relive the thrill of that first kick, Blom persists, using art history as a blunt scalpel to cut through the passive violence, isolation, anxiety and chaos at the heart of contemporary society.

The show which first ran at the Rooke Gallery in Jo’burg late last year was recognized by international art magazine *Frieze* as one of the most internationally significant solo exhibitions of 2007, chosen as one of the Top 5 Art exhibitions in Johannesburg 2007 by *The Sunday Independent* and featured on the cover of *Art South Africa Magazine*. It’s easy to see why. While most artists from Blom’s generation are content to revel in modernism’s failed miracles, Blom actually interrogates them, using sharp, sexy, yet sophisticated strategies to create a new language best described as neo-retro pop conceptualism. Art critic and curator Robert Storr once wrote that the story of modern art has either been one of “boundless progress” or “infinite regress”, depending on which end of the telescope you look through. Zander Blom choose to look through both ends.

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