

GUT LEVEL RESPONSE

Subverting history painting

TIME AND AGAIN. A retrospective exhibition of paintings, installations and films by Penny Siopis. Curated by Ernestine White at Iziko National Gallery until March 23. LUCINDA JOLLY reviews.

"MATTER enables life. It also complicates life", says Achille Mbembe, philosopher and political scientist. Just as they litter various fields from commerce to IT, buzz words are also common in the art world. "Haptic" had its day and so did "mark-making" – said with great reverence – although it's still pretty popular.

Currently trending is the term "to interrogate". Subject matter and medium are now interrogated. Visions of a single naked light bulb, psychopathic men in cheap suits and windowless rooms come to mind. Materiality is another. It's reference is to matter or substance. The idea of materiality carries the overarching sense of Siopis's *Time And Again*. It's a word not only frequently mentioned in the texts and the book by the same name as the exhibition, it is fully realised in the manifestation of the paintings and installations. In the context of this show, materiality refers to paint as the subject matter, rather than paint as the vehicle supporting the subject matter which was the dominant approach in historical paintings.

As Gerrit Olivier, editor of Siopis's book informs us, the title *Time and Again* is two-part. It suggests both a return of the artist's work to the "public domain" and the "recurring concerns" in the artist's work. These range from personal experience to the larger political context of SA from the 80's onwards and also the process of decay through ageing.

An exhibition of this stature, complexity, impact and size which contains examples spanning many rooms needs an Ariadne thread to navigate it. Curator Ernestine White, together with the artist, have provided the thread in the grouping of works which are less concerned with chronology and more with themes around history, sexuality, race, memory, estrangement and violence.

Titles such as *The Choreography of Medium and Chance* (the title for the fluid ink and glue paintings) *The Poetics of Vulnerability* (the Shame paintings), *Giving Form to the Unspeakable* (*Pinky Pinky*, a Tokoloshe type creature) provide clues to the contents of the rooms.

Various texts also assist in explaining how the works came into being. These are useful. But for all its cerebral qualities Siopis's works show and the evidence of rigorous research in political, social and academic thinking they also function viscerally. This viscosity enables the viewer to bypass the intellectual



SYMBOLIC: Charmed Lives.

PICTURES: Mario Todeschini

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premises and receive them through a primary feeling or gut level response.

Granted, the scholarly contexts greatly enrich the various bodies of work. Not being strictly chronological one can experience the exhibition at any point and move in any direction. However, in order to achieve a roughly cohesive sense of the show and Siopis's development as an artist, it may be useful to start with the 1980's cake paintings. Here the first "interrogation" of the medium as subject matter took hold of the artist.

The genesis of this particular form of materiality was born not through the conventional layering of paint via brush or even palette knife, but through the unlikely instruments of toothed cake icing nozzles. The icing syringes are displayed in a cabinet and appear more like cold steel gynaecological instruments than domestic tools.

They are in contrast to the soft primordial blobs of achingly pink pigment that have passed through them which are also displayed. Interestingly these paintings generate strong, polarised responses from "what is the fuss they are just cakes" to "they should be banned" because of their blatant sexual sensuality.

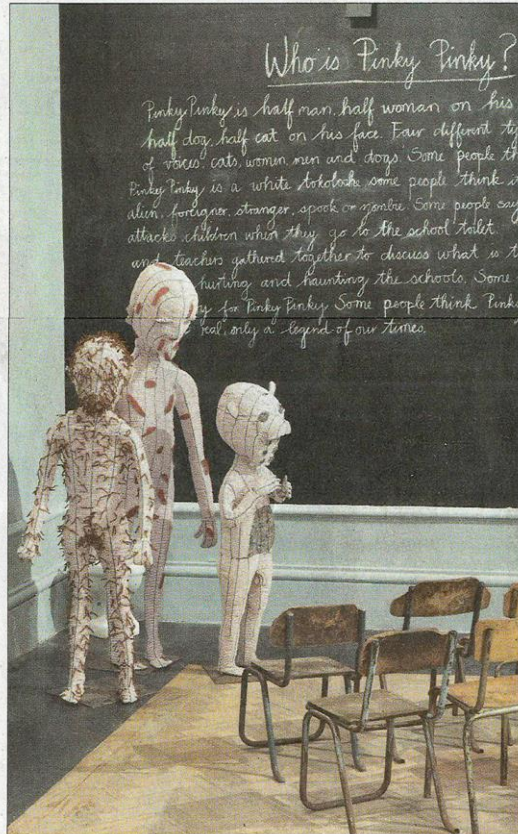
The crust like surfaces of the cake paintings peak in density in the more complex surfaces and structure of *Melancholia* and *Still life with Watermelon*. Surfaces here are so dense that at times they are close to submitting to gravitational pull. Colour moves from the pretty sugared almond pinks and whites of cakes to a sharp iridescence associated with artificial food colorants. Cochineal red, viper green and a poisonous looking blue were once found on household shelves and used to colour children's homemade milkshakes and cake icing.

Submerged in the surfaces the colours take on a sugary powderiness. Siopis questions, explores and subverts the "genre of history painting (which) was seen as the highest achievement of the European art historical tradition".

The history paintings, for example *Melancholia* and *Still life with Watermelon*, continue the sweetness of the cake paintings. But whereas the cake paintings imply a constructed form of female sexuality and the various faces of feminism, the cloying sweetness and abundance in these paintings suggests the darker side of glut.

It's an abundance whose excess cannot nourish those who consume it, nor those who are denied it. Functioning as allegories this was a popular trend by activist artists of the time of apartheid to avoid being fingered as outright agitators.

Few artists risked blatant finger pointing. Of course most knew what the allegories alluded to. And then there's a sea change which marks the later and current works such as *Ash*, *The Hungry*, the *Note* series and *Blow up*, where a different kind of materiality emerges. It's as if the original form of dense materiality has reached critical mass becoming psychically unsustainable. What we see on these canvases could be

CLUES: Works such as *Pinky Pinky* weave together Ariadne's thread.

regarded as the liberated "juices" that lie under the sealed crust of the earlier works. It's as if the old surfaces have been lanced, peeled and ruptured. Released, there is an enigmatic flood of swirling rich plasmic spills and splashes of ink and water and glue which toss the viewer around in the canvas's force field.

Territory is unclear. Siopis courts chance and risk, placing her creative daemon in their unstable hands. Her fascination with formlessness or "the pre-linguistic, pre-intellectual moment of creative energy" charges these works.

When you are saturated by the intensity of the paintings and the clutter of the installations take a break and look at the more ephemeral aspects – the celluloid of the moving images that make up her videos. These are among the highlights of the exhibition. In particular a transcribed conversation with

William Kentridge he praised these videos by admitting that he was envious that he hadn't used the same approach. One, titled *Obscure White Messenger* concerns Verwoerd's assassinator the rather tragic figure of Dimitri Tasfendas. The title references what Nelson Mandela called him on hearing of the assassination.

The other, *The Master is Drowning* focuses on assassin David Pratt. Siopis once again works with chance and its quality of the unexpected possibility in using unseen job lots of old movies which she digitised and assembled as montages and cut-and-paste images.

The video pieces are proof that fiction often discloses the "truth" of a situation, rather than if actual documentation was used.

Make this exhibition a beginning of the year must see.

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