

Visual art

A stream of madness and a lick of paint

Wayne Barker's retrospective recalls a wild child who 'inscribed something rich and mysterious' on empty landscapes

Matthew Krouse

It seems oddly appropriate in the context of Wayne Barker's art to begin introducing his exhibition *Super Boring* with a religious reference, albeit a reference taken from the writing of a religiously reverent artist (not God), namely the surrealist Luis Buñuel.

In his autobiography, *My Last Breath*, first published in 1982, he quotes a passage in Solomon's Book of Wisdom. It's a piece of writing

that does the rounds in pretty much the same way as other now-kitschy reflections – like *Desiderata* – on the nature of human experience and how we should live our lives.

This piece of writing is put in the mouths of an "unpious" people, some say the Epicureans, and it talks about the fact that "your work in time shall be forgotten and no man shall have remembrance of our works".

And it rounds off with the words, "Let us crown ourselves with roses, before they are withered; let us

meadow escape our tint."

How I know this description of Epicureanism (and I've had an argument with someone about whether Epicureanism really does mean hedonism or a balanced enjoyment of simple pleasures) is through the deceased director and Market Theatre founder, Barney Simon, who would show this passage around, from his rather tasty copy of *Buñuel*, to the young people who congregated around him. He left it aptly described the hedonism of our Eighties generation.

Barker was one of those – he met Barney though his partner of the time, the actress Megan Kruksal. In Charl Biligant and Brenda Atkinson's 2000 monograph, published by the Chalkham Press, we are told also that

Barker made some contribution to the "oppositional" Theatre of the Eighties: he did some collaborative work with Chris Pretorius (of Cape Town's Glass Theatre) at Berea's Black Sun and made some sets for the movie *Shat Down* that I worked on. In that same year (1986) he had his first showing on the "operational wall" of the Market Theatre.

He had already earned his reputation as one who had resisted military conscription in his own unique way, earning a dismissal by "acting mad".

The revolutionary fervour of the Eighties is something that, thankfully, we won't have to live through again. Certainly there was a set of white kids producing what Karl Marx would disparagingly call the "beneficial revolution".

He has, over the years, made something "super" out of Pieterse's "boring". As we are told elsewhere in the catalogue, published by Smac Gallery, he has inscribed something mysterious and rich about our collective experience on to Pieterse's empty landscapes.

In his more recent work he has inscribed something of himself on to the bodies of his subjects – South African superheroes like Nelson Mandela, Jackson Hlongwane and Miriam Makoabe.

As a white male artist he has also taken the radical radical and audacious step of inscribing something of himself on to the bodies of black women photographed in a studio setting. These combinations gesture towards

Barker's major obsessions and themes: changing history and the erotic.

With these he has constructed his own mythology. Many people who know his work know also that he courts controversy by making up impromptu performances in public spaces.

In one he reacted to an art show in Nantes that excoriated Africa by painting himself with chocolate mosaic and getting his girlfriend of the time to lick it off him.

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Njani says: "Forged at the heart of the Judeo-Christian religion, scandal is a chase and hypocritical veil which we cast over anything we do not want to see or hear. Christ himself made no bones about it, telling his disciples not to seek it out."

Njani does not give a reference for Christ's words but he does do Barker the great favour of giving him this supposedly Christ-like quality.

This is an edited version of a speech made by Matthew Krouse at the launch of *Super Boring*, which runs at the Standard Bank Gallery, Harrison Street, Johannesburg, until April 6. Tel: 011 631 1866. www.standardbank.co.za

Simon Njani

When I met Wayne Barker for the first time almost 30 years ago, he was one of the angry kids on the South African art scene. I was working on an issue of the magazine I was editing, *Revue Noire*. Editing that issue, which was dedicated to South Africa, was not an easy task. The 1994 democratic elections had yet to take place and the country was struggling with a recent history that would take more than a Truth and Reconciliation Act to overcome.

It was the first time our editorial team was forced to pay attention to race. Our freedom was limited by the will to give equal treatment to everyone. Historically, many white South African artists attended art schools, and there were no-overs to attend schools outside of the country. As for black artists, the story was different. We had to take that into consideration. All of a sudden, we were confronted with – what WEB Dubois called in the beginning of the 20th century – "the question of colour". Until then nothing was important but the artist's work. Now everything else became important.

When I heard of an artist who deliberately confronted those boundaries to call their bluff, I could not help but ask who that person was. In the political correctness of a healing nation, who would dare address the absolute taboo? It was in 1992. His name was Wayne Barker. He became the black sheep of the system, because he entered an art contest as a black artist. Had he lost, the question would have been forgotten. But he won. And by doing so, he unveiled the unsaid within South African politics. He revealed the absurdity of a country that would pretend that its people had equal opportunity and at the

same time would favour those who suffered from the iniquities of the apartheid regime. Much of the hatred and reflection this act provoked was based on the fear that a carefully built strategy was taking the wrong direction. Wayne Barker became scandalous. What I am interested in is to analyse the very nature of this status.

It takes time to become an artist, to master the skill of a business which nothing is planned, in which success and failure cannot be predicted. Hence the very question: For whom are we making art? Wayne Barker is certainly a true artist, in the classic sense, because he decided to work for himself, regardless of current fashion.

He chose to walk naked in the middle of the blind alleys of art, establishing no barriers between his work and himself, and there is nothing to wish of the French critic Pierre Restany who, in 1969, complained about what had become in Europe. I am tempted to use the term "avant-garde" in the same sense that Restany did.

"The idea of the work we have assumed, of attaining a self-definition of the avant-garde, implies a basic popular art: it solely a phenomenon of language. Language, man's expression of thought, is living matter. There are moments when the oscillatory movement of art become blocked. Art seems to have lost the internal elements of its own contradiction. It seems to have separated itself from life."

For better or worse, Wayne Barker has decided never to surrender to the force of morality, good taste, gentry or social codes. That's what makes him who he is.

Simon Njani is an independent art critic, curator and editor. This is an edited version of his essay for the catalogue *Super Boring*, published by Smac Gallery

In the wake of a passage of rites

Matthew Partridge

Contemporary South African art is full of mythological beasts with a long and increasingly involved and complicated history. One of those preannounced beasts is undeniably the mythological character of Wayne Barker. Yet labels and categories are awkward things – for one they tend to be radically reductive and often dismissive, with mythological status being as much a burden as it is a veneration.

So often Barker has been referred to as the "bad boy" or "lone sheep" of South African art, with his own gallery, Baylon Sandri, describing him as "rebellious, belligerent, agitative and confrontational". But this oversight, which can be attributed to Barker's quintessentially "anti disposition", fails to address the sensitivity of his production in terms of the significance of his historical relevance.

Barker's retrospective exhibition, *Super Boring*, which debuted at the Smac Gallery in Stellenbosch last year and opened at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg last week, charts a mammoth career that spans more than two decades, beginning in the late 1980s during the era of resistant art.

Since those early days, the agenda of contemporary South African art has

nevertheless shifted. But the direction of this shift still today goes unrecognised. The shadow of our tarnished history continues to present a burden of literalism – a preoccupation with the past that limits the scope of addressing where we are now and what lies beyond.

Though Barker's work is historically situated, it manages to avoid this trap. Rather, what is presented is a type of visual diary of Barker's self-described "rights of passage" through such a traumatic history. Attesting to this is the two-part installation, *Memory/Erosure*, in the main foyer on the bottom floor of the gallery, which consists of a certificate of discharge dated 1985. Barker, once a competent footballer by his own admission, was rendered unfit for military service because of his penchant for marching like Charlie Chaplin, an act he maintained for two weeks.

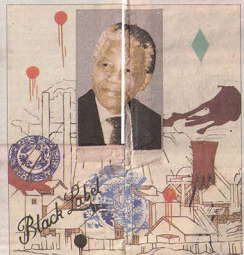
The other component of this is a sculptural multimedia installation that consists of a modified washing-line draped with sheets of fabric. As the washing line spins, two projections from either side of the darkened room beam images on to the makeshift screen, which is perforated by cut out shapes of skulls. On the right, archival footage of SADF

soldiers carrying out the brutalities of the apartheid state is interspersed with the notorious "good neighbourhoods" speech by HF Verwoerd. In juxtaposition, serene oceanic scenes taken from Robben Island beam from the projection on the other side, creating an ambivalent expression of the triumph of the human spirit.

The final and perhaps most striking element of this work is the mural

of Bob Dylan's *Kneeling on Hazare's Door*, which encapsulates the tumultuous conditions of change South Africa has experienced.

Walking up the stairs of the gallery one is then struck by the sheer enormity and range of Barker's work. In the centre atrium hang four monumental canvases that on closer inspection are in fact beaded. Working with local crafters, Barker has managed to trans-



Above: Chic clique: Miriam Makoabe, 2010, mixed media and neon tubing. Right: Black Label, 1995, found object and oil on canvas



Above: Golden Girl, 2009, strung glass beads