

heartbreaker

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One of my earliest recollections is that of driving with my father, as the sun was coming up, across the Golden Gate Bridge. We were going to Marine Shipyard, where my father worked as a pipe fitter, to watch the launching of a ship. It was on my birthday in the fall of 1943. I was four... Freed from its stays, the logs rolling, the ship slid off its cradle with an ever increasing motion. It was a moment of tremendous anxiety as the oiler *en route* rattled, swayed, tipped, and bounced into the sea, half submerged, to then raise and lift itself and find its balance. Not only had the tanker collected itself, but the witnessing crowd collected itself as the ship went through a transformation from an enormous obdurate weight to a buoyant structure, free, afloat, and adrift. My awe and wonder of that moment remained. All the raw material that I needed is contained in the reserve of this memory which has become a recurring dream. (Serra 1994: 183 – 184)

¹ The Church Street bombing was an attack by the Umkhonto we Sizwe on May 20, 1983, the military wing of the African National Congress, in the South African capital Pretoria, killing 19 and wounding more than 200. The bombing was one of the largest attacks engaged in by the ANC during its armed struggle against apartheid. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Street_bombing (Accessed 24 March 2010)
* BBC article. Available: http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthistday/hi/dates/stories/may/20/newsid_4326000/4326975.stm [accessed 24 March 2010]

² State of Emergency. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa_under_apartheid#State_of_Emergency [accessed 24 March 2010]

(opposite page)

Heartbreaker
2008
Demolition hammer, motion sensor, electronic components, cabling, galvanized and painted mild steel, stainless steel, aluminium, brass, rubber.
149 x 112 x 70 cm

sandbanks bordering the highway, black children were playing soccer. Cows lazily went their way grazing amongst the plastic bags that got caught in the razor wire between and on top of kilometres of concrete fencing. Beyond the fencing the haphazard construction of shanty dwellings as far as the eye could see were reflecting the setting sun from their corrugated roofs, while the backdrop of Table Mountain was disappearing in the distance. Boney M's 'Mary's Boy Child' was playing on the Merc's cassette player.

Writing this down in turn reminded me of a passage in Robert Kaplan's book *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy*:

I recalled a vision propounded to me by Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, head of the Peace and Conflict Studies Programme at the University of Toronto: Think of a stretch limo in the potholed streets of New York City, where homeless beggars live. Inside the limo are the air-conditioned post-industrial regions of North America, Europe, the emerging Pacific Rim, and a few other isolated places, with their trade summitry and computer-information highways. Outside is the rest of mankind, going in a completely different direction. (Kaplan 1996: 10)

Another childhood influence on the development of my iconography was the much-anticipated annual outing with my father and brother to the Rand Show in Johannesburg. Eating toffee apples and 'spookasem' (candy floss) whilst marvelling at livestock from places as far afield as Klerksdorp, Ventersdorp and Sannieshof, we caught glimpses of the latest technological innovations from Europe. As we went we collected as many related information brochures and branded stickers as possible. *Miele* washing machines with transparent side panels (in order to see the water jets in action); *Unimog* off-road vehicles climbing over cleverly designed obstacle courses; fake leather recliners that could vibrate and massage your back when watching *Dallas*. Apart from the European pavilions, the Chamber of Mines imitation underground mine was a must-see (although I could never manage to win the big prize by picking up the newly poured gold nugget with one hand). The highlight for my brother and myself was the South African Defence Force exhibition. Always the biggest and most impressive it was displayed outside on the grass with camouflaged netting stretched between available Thorn and Jacaranda trees. Underneath the netting, simulated operation rooms as well as real rocket launchers, tanks and armoured carriers were parked. Smiling young men in uniform



³ Paper delivered by Kendell Geers entitled *Much ado about nothing, the secret history of Fuck* (bc issue 7, 2009) as part of the Dada South? Symposium, February 18 – 19, Rust-en-Vreugd. An event organised as part of the Dada South? exhibition at the South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 12 December 2009 – 28 February 2010

⁴ Cape Town City Hall, 14 March – 14 May 2010. Available: <http://www.spiercontemporary.co.za/> [accessed 6 August 2010]

⁵ Prof. Jansen made headlines when in his inaugural speech of the 13th Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State (UFS) he proposed that as a sign of reconciliation all charges against the 'Reitz four' (four young white men that racially humiliated five black workers in 2007) should be dropped. Available: <http://historymatters.co.za/2009/11/03/jansens-inaugural-speech/> [accessed 27 March 2010]

were around to lift you into the back of vehicles or to explain how many rounds of ammunition a particular machine gun could fire.

Some years later, as an art student, I backpacked through Europe. I was amazed to see school groups of children no older than five visiting the Tate, Louvre or Prado galleries. They were being told by their teachers why the artist took a particular approach, what mediums they applied and how their work fitted into the lineage of art history. In the presence of those children it dawned on me that my imagination, and generations of other South African children's imaginations, were informed by a completely different set of references. In my own case those references were influenced by a consumer culture from Europe and America that managed to slip through the cultural boycott of South Africa. It became intertwined with the 'militarisation of our imagination', as spoken about by the South African born artist Kendell Geers³, referring to a generation of young, white South African men who were conscripted for military service by the apartheid government.

To this effect the description by Deyan Sudjic (the director of the Design Museum in London) of the design rationale behind the famous Tizio desk-lamp in his book *The Language of Things* resonates:

The combination of black structure with joints marked by red dots is a no doubt entirely deliberate evocation of the same colour combination that was used to highlight the safety catch on the barrel of the Walther PPK automatic pistol. (The all-important initials stand for *Polizeipistole Kriminalmodell*.) The Walther was originally designed in the 1920s for use by the German police force, and was famously well-regarded by Ian Fleming's James Bond. Just behind the trigger guard is a red circle the size of a 5-pence piece. It was painted on the side of the barrel, under the safety catch, and was visible only when the catch was moved to the off position and the gun was ready to fire... The pistol is ostensibly a piece of strictly functional design, but it is also designed to look intimidating. The same colour combination was used by *Volkswagen* for the *Golf* GT models in the 1980s, when body and radiator grille were painted two tones of black, with a narrow red line framing the radiator. (Sudjic 2009: 65 – 6)

Heartbreaker, first exhibited during the *Spier Contemporary 2010* exhibition,⁴ is a case in point:

A shiny demolition hammer elevated on a flashy black trolley, complete with white pin stripes and chrome wheel caps, lures the viewer to engage with it. As the viewer moves towards the sculpture for closer inspection, a motion sensor, used in domestic alarm systems, triggers *Heartbreaker* into action. The noise of the chisel blade,

reminiscent of machine gun fire, beats away into thin air, as the trembling demolition hammer lies strapped down onto red leather cushions. It is a sight of the absurd: repulsive yet exhilarating. Interactive principles gained from my involvement with new media teaching, are applied here. Scale is of great importance as the work relates to human size: the chisel blade is positioned at the artist's own chest height. Facilitated by computer-aided design and manufacturing techniques used in making, for example, riot control vehicles, the workmanship and finishes are meticulous, and aim to emulate and appeal in the same way as objects in designer-lifestyle shops or on motorcar display floors. (van der Schijff in Pather 2010: 214 – 215)

While reading *Knowledge in the Blood*, Jonathan Jansen's⁵ book of his experience as the first black Dean of Education at the historically white University of Pretoria (where I also obtained my undergraduate degree in Fine Art) an unexpected and darkly amusing passage in the book caught my attention. Analogous to Sudjic's description of the design rationale behind the Tizio desk-lamp, while at the same time edging towards a stereotypical analysis of the 'Afrikaner' psyche, it does seem to offer a plausible explanation for the meticulous workmanship and design that has become a feature of my recent work.

... at the front end the assessment criteria indicate students will be judged on the basis of 'ordering and presentation' as well as 'appearance' and 'punctuality.' Here, writ large, is something I found over and over again among my students: an obsession with neatness and order in presentation, the systematic nature of organizing writing, the colourful pens used to illustrate composition, the near obsession with what things look like. This is not a trivial point, for what their socialization in school and society values is how things look from the outside rather than the substance of what is submitted for examination. Order trumps truth; appearance matters more than content; style conquers substance. (Jansen 2009:181)

In reflecting on the possible 'substance' of *Heartbreaker* to myself, the essence of the work is probably most eloquently described in a passage from a local newspaper article entitled 'Om kaal te loop' (To walk naked). Talking about his autobiography, *'n Vurk in die Pad* (*A Fork in the Road*), André P. Brink, the acclaimed writer, revealed:

En ja, erken hy, verstaan is 'n pynlike proses – veral as jy self ook onder die vergrootglas kom. Te midde van die geweld wat oral op die loer gelê het in die klein dorpie van sy jeug; die besef 'van duister magte wat onder die oppervlak beweeg soos spiere onder die vel van



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Heartbreaker (details from sketchbooks)
2008

die alledaagse', moes hy 'n sekere bloeddorstigheid in homself erken. (Brümmer 2009: 8– o) [And yes, he admits, understanding is a painful process – particularly when you yourself are put under the magnifying glass. Amidst the violence which lay watching in the small towns of his youth; the realisation of 'dark forces that move under the surface like muscles under the skin of the everyday', he had to admit a certain bloodlust within himself.]

