

Norman Catherine and the Art of Terror

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Abstract

This essay was originally commissioned by Linda Givon of the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. The first movement - "Escape and Resolution" - served as the preface for the first major retrospective on the artist, published by the Goodman Gallery in 2000 and was simply titled "Norman Catherine". The foreword was by David Bowie who in addition to being a pop icon is also an art collector and critic. The main text is by Hazel Friedman. My essay, including the opening movement, is published here for the first time in full. Its purpose is to trace Catherine's journey over a period spanning thirty years to locate the key dimension of laughter and assess the nature of its artistic expression and formal resolution. The second movement - "States of Emergency" - situates the work within a South African context. The third movement re-evaluates the tendency of locating the artist - and South African art in general - within a framing colonial/apartheid legacy. Through the critical prism of Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, the third movement - "Energy and Form" - asks that we assess Catherine's work within the primal conflict between Apollo and Dionysus. The final movement - "City Deep" - returns Catherine to the secular domain and examines his output in relation to a post-apartheid, inner city, and trans-national domain. At once "primitive and futuristic", Catherine's art, through the distinctiveness of its style, foregrounds laughter *and* terror as the Janus-faced signature of our time.

Escape and Resolution

Norman Catherine's visual repertory, spanning thirty years and counting, is startling and darkly comic. "Black humour" is the epithet commonly applied to the dominant strain in his work. While the epithet harbours a degree of precision it remains a catch-all term, a portmanteau, that deserves further

consideration. Thomas Mann in his novel *Doctor Faustus* provides an in-road to Catherine's comic and dystopian vision. Therein Mann describes the character and drive of Leverkuhn, the composer and central figure of *Faustus*:

Generally speaking, he was more inclined to laughter and pranks than to metaphysical conversation. His sense of the comic, his fondness for it, his proneness to laughter, yes, to laughing till he cried, I have already spoken of, and I have given but a false ... picture of him if the reader has not seen this kind of abandon as an element in his nature. Of humour I would not speak; the word sounds for my ear too moderate, too good-natured to fit him. His love of laughter was more like an escape, a resolution, slightly orgiastic in its nature, of life's manifold sternness; a product of extraordinary gifts, but to me never quite likable or healthy.¹

Those who know Norman Catherine may question the overall relevance of Mann's description to an understanding of the artist's character. Yet, as we will see, a canny link exists. Like Leverkuhn, Catherine shirks metaphysical conversation. In speaking with the artist one finds little in the way of explanation. Catherine provides few pithy one-liners, no considered treatise. His summations are provisional, evasive, abruptly clipped and telegraphic, invariably couched with mirth, a cryptic chuckle. Like Memo the elephant, the central figure in the graphic novel written and illustrated by Allan Cameron and Catherine, the artist is dogged by a faulty memory. "I haven't gone into

depth with any subject", he says. "I was terrible at school. I couldn't remember or learn anything. I'd read a page and I didn't know what it meant. Maybe my mind was just distracted". Unschooled in the rigours of thought, sceptical of influences, content with a makeshift suturing of notions, Catherine's first instinct is to play. Between the man and his art one finds a curious discrepancy. The bulk of Catherine's art has a harshness, a starkness, which has no obvious counterpoint in their maker. Given the wry guffaws, which contain each scanty accounting, Catherine is content to leave the sphere of interpretation to others. What seems clear to me is that the artist is neither dark nor vengeful, yet the visions that have emerged are often thus.

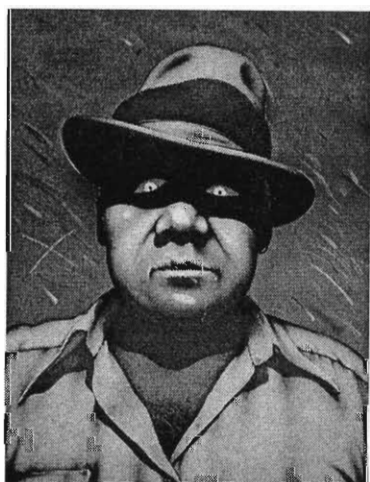


Figure 1

Consider the innumerable gashed, howling, serrated mouths in so many of Catherine's works. The expressions are often acid, the figures caught in a rictus of demonic pleasure. The technique is strikingly hard-edged, cut-out. What galvanizes the work is a laughter that veers from the mildly comic to the absurd to an affect hauntingly predatory. Catherine's comic vision has many distinctive moods. In their most strident moments his art is marked by an elemental and orgiastic abandon. His is a laughter paroxysmal, stern, corrosive in its impact. And if Catherine's laughter, like that of Leverkühn, is "never quite

likable or healthy", then it is the prerogative of the writer and viewer to ascertain the root of the disturbance. Is Catherine's art merely misanthropic? Wilfully bitter? Or is there a cogency, which fuels its perverse expression?

My assumption is as follows: For Norman Catherine laughter is not only a form of comic relief, the mere fall-out of a sick joke. Rather, it is a mechanism of resistance and survival, an antidote to gravity. Laughter in all its grotesquerie is an energy that inoculates the world, shatters pomp and renders ugliness palatable. Laughter transports, distances, shifts, and makes strange. In much of Catherine's art laughter functions as a form of aggression and overkill. The starkness of its visualization shifts as easily to a grimace, a bearing of teeth - a defence. Laughter, then, is Catherine's escape and his resolution. Given the extremity of so many of the artist's visions; the bloody reverie, the hysteria, the overdrive, the lurid clashes of colour, the manic gestures, the absolute refusal to soften the impact; all this and more pushes Catherine's work to a less than palatable edge. Therein lies the intractable and steely autograph of the artist.

If laughter in all its contortions is the distinctive register of Catherine's art, the source of its energy, it finds its graphic counterpoint in the obsessive and monomaniacal distinctiveness of the many forms it tears through and transforms. Laughter is the electrified force field that galvanizes the works and defines their style. Consider the observation of the American critic John Howell in a 1986 review in *Art forum*:

Whether directly summoned or involuntarily invoked, the angry laughter of *Ecce Homo* haunts the graphics and mixed-media works of South African artist, Norman Catherine like a raucous poltergeist raised by the spectre of social chaos.²

For Howell it is laughter that sets the artist's work apart from "an intellectual stance against injustice and racism, and an emotional frisson of vicarious horror at an impending apocalypse". This distinction is illuminating and crucial. Here Catherine's art - namely *National Suicide*, *House Arrest*, *State of Emergency* and *Intensive Care* - is seen to possess a force that thrives beyond dogma and emotion, the mainstays of resistance in the mid '80s in South Africa. It is laughter, "whether directly summoned or invoked", that is the redemptive and transforming faculty. It is fortuitous and apt that Thomas Mann should model the character of Leverkühn on the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and that John Howell should so precisely locate a Nietzschean laughter - that of *Ecce Homo* - at the heart of Catherine's art. You can only kill the spirit of gravity through laughter, Nietzsche declared. This is Catherine's intuition; the *raison d'être* of his art. Without this saving faculty Catherine would never have become one of South Africa's most important artists.

At roughly the same time that Howell's observation appeared in *Art Forum*, Dr Raymund van Niekerk, then director of the South African National Gallery, noted: "Catherine works from a smile to a shudder". Here the laugh implicit in the smile is pared down to a grimace. Van Niekerk continues:

When [Catherine] refers to the Old Testament (an eye for an eye), one may react with pleasure to the visual jokes, but one knows that unforgiving and brutal gods have set up snares in which revenge will determine all the bloody and dismembering action. When an artist possessed of such wit contemplates the hell that grows out of a society of puritanical and messily sentimental racists, he will run through the most stunning discords in his search for summations. His colour rips across expectations and camouflages violence; let

yourself be seduced by the brilliance and flash and you'll be even more shocked in the end by Catherine's logic of horror.³

We are being summoned to look beyond the limit of our fears and prejudices, to see in the work of Norman Catherine a rare bid to transform and transcend the dictates of secular dogma and emotion. Both Howell and van Niekerk situate Catherine's art within a historically specific arena, and yet the intimations of a darker archaic conflict are also in evidence. Van Niekerk alerts us to Catherine's orgiastic nature, the workings of "unforgiving and brutal gods". Howell in turn speaks of Catherine's "shamanistic effort to capture something of the Horrible depicted in the thing itself". His mixed media works and collaged graphics are "totems of congealed evil spirits, animistic traps for boogies as well as raw expressions of fear and fury that allows no catharsis". Stricken, paroxysmal, Catherine's art is seen as caught in an abyss of mediate-ness. The redemptive force is latent. There is no release.

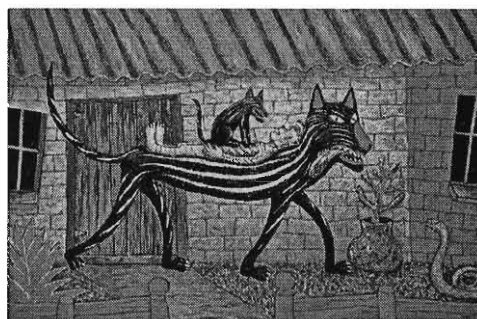


Figure 2

Howell and Van Niekerk's interpretations are critical. We are being drawn into an orbit that begs a more supple and complex interpretive language. To grasp the perversity of life in South Africa under apartheid, to access the horrible depicted in the thing itself, Catherine must tap forces that are not immediately penetrable through reason. He must further distort the fabric of the lived world; create

monstrous and strange hybrids, creatures whose origins rest clearly in the perception of an existing world but whose final shapes are imaginary. For Howell and Van Niekerk there is a sorcery at work in Catherine's art; a concern with foregrounding endangered and contaminated spaces. The artist, though evasive, concurs:

Though some people would say my work belongs to the occult, which I don't have an interest in other than it interests me, because it exists, I don't think I'd be trapped in that. I'm a rubbish bin, a wizard with all these remedies and potions. I enjoy things that I don't really know the meaning of.⁴

Catherine may hedge his bets, yet his remains an intuitive and deeply personal response to the "spectre of social chaos".

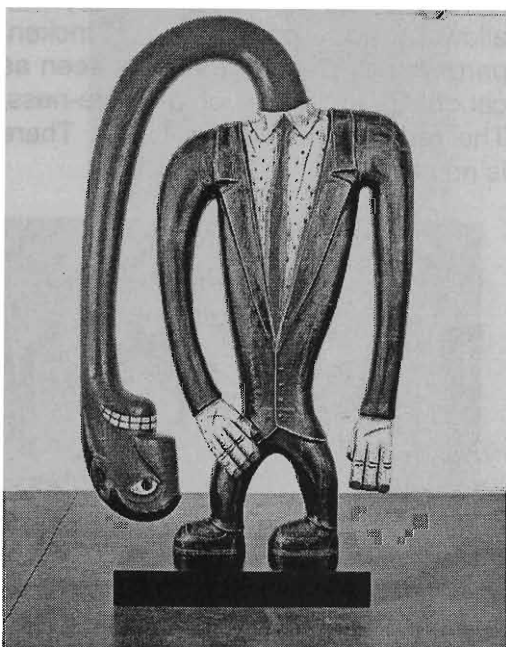


Figure 3

In *The Wretched of the Earth* the Martiniquan psychiatrist and FLN activist, Franz Fanon, makes a telling observation which supports the interpretations of Howell and Van Niekerk and accounts for Catherine's method and inspiration: "It is in the zone of occult instability that the

people dwell and the revolution comes from". The transformation of a society demands a faculty unthinkable, an artistic expression fuelled neither by intellectual justification or an emotional frisson. This is Catherine's great gift. As Van Niekerk and Howell have noted, the affect and intimations shot through Catherine's art are primal and secular. For the artist, the crudity and sophistication of the work stems from "the mixture of the primitive and the futuristic". The job of this investigation, then, is to grasp this temporal warp. Where do we place Catherine? How do we grasp the synthesis and rupture at work in his art? "There's an angst in my work that will never go away", says Catherine. "It was there before I knew anything about politics, really". This disclaimer is instructive. For Catherine an interpretable outrage, intellectually or emotionally justified, invariably exhausts itself; at best an artwork must confound and exorcise the illness it chooses to expose. A limited and targeted outrage may be meritorious, however the drive of art cannot, finally, reside there. Hence the "raucous poltergeist", the saving demonic laughter, the "zone of occult instability"; Catherine's signal of art's excess and ultimate transgression of the secular dictates of its time.

States Of Emergency

The dark emancipatory laughter said to characterize the bulk of Catherine's art was never the automatic and natural font of the artist's expression. Rather, it was a faculty discovered, a reckoning honed. To understand the journey of the artist it is necessary that we return to the bleak days of oppression under apartheid and consider the utterly humourless technique the artist first adopted in his earliest airbrushes. Prior to these works Catherine's art owed much to the amorphous and abstract landscapes of Klee and Miro. In addition, there was Catherine's pursuit of innocence in his collaboration with the South African artist, Walter Battiss, the fantasist and

inventor of Fook Island. According to Battiss, Fook - a Chinese word for good luck - was invented to banish harshness, sadness and bigotry. An imaginary roving island, Fook existed off the shore of Africa, replete with its own oddly anarchic monarchy, alphabet, currency, cuisine, passports, postage stamps, much of which was designed by Catherine. For Battiss, Fook was a concept

[B]ased on a certain selfishness - you need time, you need to be alone to do something - and then a selflessness in which you give to others - and it is this combination that makes you complete.⁵

An idealized consensual sphere of self-realization, at once radical and frivolous, Fook was beset with controversy from its inception. Was Battiss' invention a privileged escapist exercise? Or was it, according to Catherine, "a fake reality where ideas could flourish"? In retrospect the latter has proven to be the case. Irrespective of its monarchic structure, with Battiss as King Ferd 111, Catherine as Norman King Norman, and Linda Givon - Catherine's agent - as Queen Asteroa, inter alia, the concern of Fook was liberation. However, given the dark years that spawned Fook, the project was doomed for reasons that will become increasingly apparent. Walter Battiss was a visionary in a society, which condemned invention and innocence. Two decades later Fook - and related cultural phenomena such as the Mother City Queer Project - is being revived with all its madcap grandeur and celebration of play. However, what is of crucial importance here is not so much Fook Island but Catherine's parallel invention, Fourth World, created after Battiss' death. For Catherine, the pursuit of innocence was all well and good, but it could never survive without his adjacent island of cannibals. Every document of civilization is also a document of

barbarism, the German critic Walter Benjamin bracingly reminds us. This dictum serves well as a summation of Catherine's understanding of the paradoxical existence of Fook in the bleak years of apartheid. His Fourth World of cannibals qualifies Battiss' attempt to banish harshness, sadness and bigotry. If less hopeful, if darkly comic and dystopian, it remains an honest account of what it meant to live under apartheid.

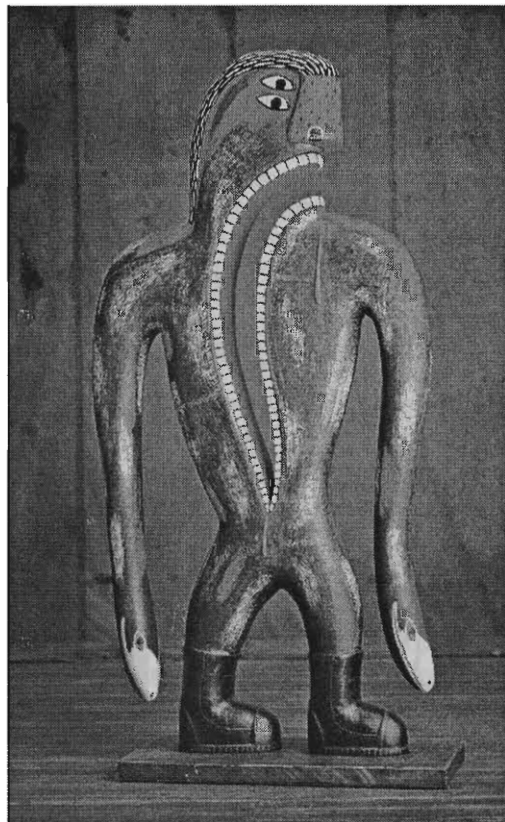


Figure 4

The novelist and cultural analyst, J.M. Coetzee, sums up South Africa's brutal legacy and its cultural consequences:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness

and deformity. I make this observation with due deliberation, and in the fullest awareness that it applies to myself and my own writing as much as to anyone else. South African literature is a literature in bondage, as it reveals in even its highest moments, shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation. It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison.

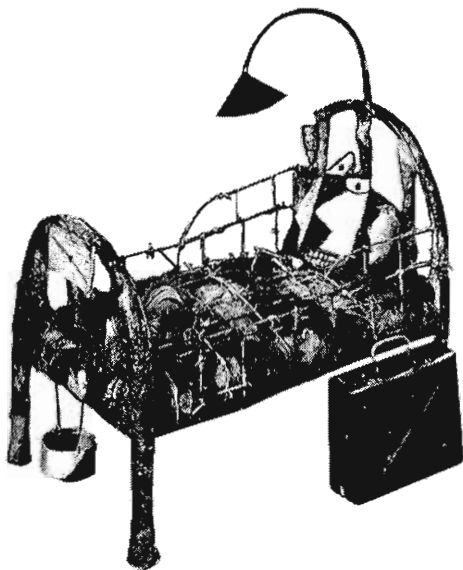


Figure 5

These words are not only applicable to South African literature, but to cultural endeavour as a whole. It is for reasons such as those outlined by Coetzee that Fook, with its yearnings for liberation and its acute sense of homelessness and displacement – evinced in the invention of a neighbouring island – would finally be crushed. Nothing seemingly pure and innocent could possibly survive within an aberrant society, and Catherine intuitively knew this. Hence, his island of cannibals. Hence the realization and final refusal

to abandon that “deformed and stunted inner life” that was, and continues to remain, the mainstay of South African expression. The vast and complex human world that lies beyond the freak show of South Africa's body politic could only be accessed by embracing the beast within and without. And it is for this reason that this investigation has elected to forego a detailed examination of Catherine's earliest work and begin with the airbrushes, the artist's first critical attempt to come to terms with South Africa's struggle and confront its demons.

For many artists, Catherine included, art in South Africa in the '70s was perceived as a weapon of struggle. The airbrush works are exemplars of a militant didacticism, which the artist equates with early Russian posters. They are “aggressive single statements; blatant, upfront depictions of a state of mind”, says Catherine. However, while the artist may dismiss these works, elect to see them as “too clinical, too clean and resolved”, they harbour a power that deserves further consideration. Progressively rugged in technique, Catherine's airbrushes mark a critical watershed. Without an active understanding of the limit of their technique and intent Catherine could not have broken through to the more crude, aggressive, and dynamic dystopian visions which have come to characterize his signature. “I started scratching more on the surface, using pencil crayons”, Catherine says of his airbrushes. “I tended to miss the kind of primitiveness you'd find in African, Mexican, folk or aboriginal art”. This realization is vital to an understanding of Catherine's art as it evolves. We see the deficiency of aggressive single statements and, more profoundly, the realization that art is not the weapon of struggle, but that struggle is the weapon of art. Those initial scratchings on the surface are the projections of a realization that something horrendous is amiss; that a meticulously airbrushed vision of the

real world, the yearning for transparency and verisimilitude, mark a limit and an evasion. Catherine, like Coetzee, recognizes the damage intrinsic to a split psyche. The world is veiled, much is hidden. Hence Catherine's increased engagement with the surreal, with strange and monstrous hybrids whose vaunted aim is to manifest the censored and unthinkable.



Figure 6

In an attempt to grasp the oppressive world in which Catherine lived and sought to express, consider the opening words to Elsa Joubert's short story, *Back Yard*: "I live on the periphery of an existence which I don't understand". These words capture the ignorance, isolation and fear, which marked the white South African experience in the early '70s. In those dark years communication across the colour bar was guarded and tentative. Joubert:

There are superficial points of contact, a few words to the petrol-pump attendant, good morning to the man who delivers the milk. And there is the Black woman who works in my house.⁷

The systematic separation of people according to colour, the vigilant maintenance of a fraught divide, was a familiar mode of operation. What distinguishes Joubert's story is the subtle and corrosive manner in which knowledge and impotence converge in an awakening consciousness. From the beleaguered vantage point of her home Joubert's narrator looks upon her back yard, a silent witness to the ghostly movements of those connected to the "Black woman", the cipher for a relay of maids, the itinerant and ominous nature of black labour. This ghosting that is black experience in white South Africa harbours a nascent threat:

There's a network running through town, invisible lines joining one back yard to another, joining suburbs, and joining the suburbs to the Black locations. Like a spider web - invisible until the light catches it, or dust collects on it, or smoke coats it with soot - these lines of communication only become visible in a time of crisis.⁸

Joubert's words, written prior to the Soweto riots in 1976, possess a prescient force. They reveal a growing feeling of unrest, which no passionate and humane South African could avoid. Catherine's art shares this haunted realization of impending crisis. Like Joubert, he is aware that there are two stories of South African experience: the official story, which, dominating the media, sought to keep boundaries intact; the unofficial story which gnawed away at every politically sanctified division. With The Soweto riots came the decisive upheaval that shifted the status quo. However many years would pass before white domination would finally be overcome. "We will make the townships ungovernable" went the memorable saying. Tyranny and fear would escalate. With the institution of the barbarous States of Emergency in the mid '80s fear would become glaringly manifest. The country would slip into

recession, violence and repression. "White South Africa had locked itself away behind high walls", noted the Weekly Mail journalist Irwin Manoim.

Outside, Black South Africa was in rebellion, with a cross-country wave of strikes, boycotts and clashes with police that became bloodier each week. The recession, whose end the experts had confidently predicted, refused to go away. The value of the rand had fallen by half. Housing prices had fallen by twenty per cent. Giant international corporations were pulling out. Dinner table talk was about emigration.⁹



Figure 7

Like so many, caught in the fraught shiftings of alliance, Catherine experiences South Africa as a prison which, in 1986, he sought to escape by going to America. At that point, when John Howell encounters his work at Area X Gallery in New York, Catherine's life and art exists at what he calls "the edge between hope and despair". Though challenged and inspired by the endeavours of artists such as Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, Catherine knows, however, that he has forsaken his barbarous birthplace for the new Babylon. This sense is vividly captured in *Endangered Species*, an acrylic and gouache on board. A startled head appears at the edge of the frame. With it we witness a predatory theatre. The coupled figures are either sado-masochistically enslaved or divorced

from each other, the one narcissistically projecting it's own menace, the other, snake in hand, locked to an absent focus. The four-legged beasts are caught in a dance of sex and aggression. These are the eerie nocturnal mutants of Catherine's Felliniesque New York, flamboyant, grotesque; their psyches and their sex like knives.

In a rare document penned on Catherine's return to South Africa we read:

Living in New York for the past year has influenced the approach to my work. The frantic cosmopolitan life with an overabundance of art and glamour seems to have given my work renewed vitality. New York is a place of extremes and diversifications. It is almost surreal in contrasts. The excess of freedom has become decadent, the harsh realities of existing there make it also frightening. With 50,000 artists in New York there is no time to have a laid-back attitude to your work otherwise you won't make it, or if you do for a short while, you are soon forgotten if you don't keep moving with the times. If your art doesn't demand attention it is passed by. If it isn't unique in a strong way there is no way to survive financially as a fulltime artist.¹⁰

Here we find the glimmers of a method, which will come to define Catherine's major work, that is, the necessity for extremes in art in order to command attention and, thereby, survive as an artist. However, though inspired by the drives in cosmopolitan art, Catherine realizes that his true font exists back home. The harshness of life in America, its decadent freedom, has its barbarous counterpart, South Africa. Catherine realizes that he cannot shirk the labour that awaits him; that he cannot renounce his place of birth. Freedom is not the issue. What matters, then, is how to move beyond both exultation and despair? How to artistically express a psychic entrapment without succumbing to

dogma or emotion? For Catherine the answer lies, in part, in the honing of some other method or technique. Reflecting back on the influences which determine his mixed-media works and collaged graphics, Catherine notes;

My ideas have become bolder in content and application. There is more variety and freedom in the material I am working with, combining drawings on paper, wood, metal, found objects and paintings on canvas, etc, into single works with intense colour.¹¹

Catherine attributes this shift to his brief exile. And yet, as we examine the airbrushes which precede Catherine's flight, we will discover that the damage was done prior to his departure; that, in fact, the source for his relentless experimentation lay first and foremost in the will to come to grips with his damaged society.

My assumption is as follows: Catherine is inspired by a twofold upheaval, political and aesthetic. As this investigation unfolds we will discover that Catherine's allegiance lies with Dionysus rather than with Apollo; with art forms committed to an anarchic and boundless energy rather than with forms marked by the boundary lines of convention, constraint, oppression. In the aforementioned document we learn that for Catherine it is ultimately the mystery or secret subconscious meanings which a work of art might still contain that matters. Aggressive single statements, though politically laudable, are artistically deficient, and thus failed psychic representations. And yet, despite Catherine's dismissal of his airbrush works, what makes them so compelling is the fact that the crisis that will usher forth his greatest work is already implicit in them. For, indeed, it is precisely the fact that they are cloying and suffocating in their finish that makes them so instructive. Therein form appeals to volume, to

fullness, the resolution of depth and perspective - and Apollonian classicism - that is, every trait which will subsequently be challenged in the major work that follows.

Consider *Silent Message*, *Tailored Disguise*, *Man Made*, and *Memorial*. Therein we find the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, even the skin of the figures, are sealed, bandaged, camouflaged. We see a florid oxygen mask; suction stoppered by a horn. A figure gazing impotently through bandaged goggles. A striped cloth draped about the head of a figure amputated, halved, jammed onto a fence post. A languidly perched figure with a mottled arm outstretched, a *muti* bag - suggestive of a scrotum - in hand. Through these cryptic, static, marmoreal visions Catherine shuts down the very form he is compelled to make. Here Apollo is rendered senseless; contracted back to a dumb and abstract fullness. The Lights are on, but nobody's home. Though elegant and beautiful the figures are stunted, deactivated. If these figures continue to haunt one, then it is because they are the monstrous embodiment of a life-negating ascetic ideal. A political reading, situating these works in the '70s, reaffirms their monstrousness. Here we find the abject body at once pure and contaminated, brutally other and eerily familiar. Black or white, it is difficult to tell, since we are in the disturbingly inverted and blurred realm so brilliantly analysed and memorably summed up by Franz Fanon: black skins white masks, white skins black masks.

These early airbrushed figures intuit a brutal oppression that impacts both on those who have power and those who do not. Their hideous beauty serves as a psychic projection of the workings of systematic brutalization. It is not surprising, then, that Catherine should balk before that which he has rightly intuited and conjured and, like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, should cry *the horror, the horror*. Here the apartheid regime and the colonial

legacy that informs it is manifested in all its sordidness. Here the world depicted is less than fully human. The unnatural preoccupation with power, those elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation, are given full vent. Deadening in their finish, Catherine's earliest airbrushes offer no remission. It is all too easy to dismiss these works as the bleak and surreal projections of an isolated mind. Catherine has tapped a nerve. As the airbrush works unfold the grotesquerie that contains a twofold force, political and aesthetic, becomes increasingly garish and inconsolable.

In the airbrushes that follow, such as *Unidentified*, *There's a Storm on the Bosses Farm*, *Walls Without Clouds*, *Last Letters from the Wilderness I*, *Last Letters from the Wilderness II*, and *National Anthem*, two distinctive advances are made. It is here that we find that Catherine's airbrushes have been scratched and flecked with crayon. The heads, no longer mute and sealed, are more expressive and militant. The figure as object mutinies against its own closure; the Apollonian whole ruptures. These are the specifically blatant, upfront and aggressive works which intimate the spirit if not the form of the works to come. For Catherine the pressure is on. Here there is no static, distanced, marmoreal depiction of horror. The suppurating psychic lesions will out. Unlike the earlier tempered and ominous airbrushes, these are lurid, brash, and noisy. The figures, loud, insomniacal, are engulfed by night. An electrified force field cuts through each. We are in the intensified sphere of wakefulness; a paranoid and psychotic vigilance. Here, as in Catherine's finest works, consciousness meets fright, lucidity becomes a glare. The abrasive hand of the artist, visible everywhere, announces a refusal to be enthralled by the object. The spectacle must be further mutilated, become manic, crazed.

In his earlier airbrushes Catherine deadens and, in doing so, exposes the life-negating asceticism of Apollo, the classical tyrant. In his later airbrushes and the mixed-media works that follow Catherine galvanizes and institutes the driving force of his major works, Dionysus, the libertine and vandal. The cloned heads in *National Anthem* capture a herd dogma wracked with conflict. The luminous eyes in *There's a Storm on the Boss's Farm* (Fig. 1) emanate from a night, which engulfs the fraught figure, while the mask-like shadow that cuts the face suggests fear, confusion, and terror. The black figure in *Last Letters from the Wilderness I*, is crushed by a blood red sky, the man's ears and eyes deafened and blinded by a pressure that bursts from within, impacts from without, thus capturing the intolerability of the lived world. The figure in *Last Letters from the Wilderness II*, engorged, wracked with hysterical bonhomie, speaks of a monstrous imposing power. The respective pressures, which define the figures, are manifestations of those who rule and those who don't. Both, however, are oppressed. In contrast to the earlier airbrushes, these works are psychologically potent. Coursing through each of these haunted and haunting apparitions is a grimace, a shriek, a howl, a leer. They are the beginnings of Catherine's distinctive method of assault and resistance; the surest proof of why the artist could not exile himself from a country whose traumas he continues to decode.



Figure 8

Energy And Form

In this third movement we will consider the drives, principally aesthetic and somatic, which inform Catherine's distinctive signature; that is, the relationship between art and nature, style and the attendant spirit, which informs the style. Catherine's breakthrough, as we have seen, occurred in the mid '80s. At the root of this breakthrough, as John Howell and Dr Raymund van Niekerk noted, lies a refusal to succumb to the received dogma of resistance. Catherine's art is never glibly triumphal. Voluntarily or involuntarily, he elects the more difficult task of accessing "the Horrible depicted in the thing itself". Darkly comic, Catherine's vision is never fatalistic. His work cuts through resignation and affirmation, allowing no escape from the entrapment he must embrace. And yet the work is curiously liberating; paradoxically because it is "never quite likable or healthy". *State of Emergency* is a case in point. Therein Catherine uses a favoured image and trope to heighten his transgressive logic of horror; the cat, embodiment of a nocturnal stealth. Watch them screech and leap en masse. They devour all in their ravenous wake. No boundaries hold them in check. A root anarchic disturbance persists.

Camille Paglia provides an instructive description of the cat, which also serves well as a description of the enigmatic and schizophrenic force, which defines Catherine's major work:

Cats are poseurs. The cat's sophisticated personae are masks of an advanced theatricality Cat's have secret thoughts, a divided consciousness.... [The cat] is the serpent in the garden, bumping and grinding with malice aforethought. The cat's ambivalent duality is dramatised in erratic mood-swings, abrupt leaps from torpor to mania, by which it checks our presumption; Come no closer. I can never be known.¹²

An equivalent compelling force defines Catherine's art. The cat is the artist's sign for the unrelenting and cryptic. A cursory glance will show that they are everywhere in Catherine's visual repertory. Watch them preen, leer, glare menacingly. It is not surprising that the cat was the favoured familiar in ancient Egyptian culture which, as we will discover, is Catherine's greatest font and inspiration. Catherine is an Egyptian, subject to the same advanced theatricality and ambivalence accorded his favoured trope. Consider a curious image of the artist in an issue of ADA devoted to his work. We see Catherine standing in the garden of his home in Hartbeespoort, in the rural outskirts north of Johannesburg. In his right hand he holds a black cat. Study the eyes of the cat and those of the artist. You will see that they are strikingly similar in expression; possessed, absent. Both animal and man are present, yet elsewhere. About the artist's mouth there is an electrified force field; a laugh, a smile, a shudder.

If Catherine is an Egyptian, as I have provocatively stated, then how so? The clue lies in the first pictorial records of monsters in Egypt, circa 3000 B.C. It is there that we find the cat to be the favoured familiar; there where the first bizarre and monstrous

composites of man and animal come into being. In *Fabulous Beasts and Demons*, Heinz Mode defines the monster as

a new shape resulting from a combination ... of characteristic components or properties of different kinds of living things or natural objects. It is therefore characteristic of the monster that it does not occur in nature, but belongs solely to the realm of the human imagination, and also that its shape forms an organic entity, a new type capable of life in art and in the imagination.¹³

A review of Catherine's work will show that it is populated with strange hybrids and composites. If we are "less than human" as J.M. Coetzee has stated, if monstrosity is the very foundation of South African experience, then it is not surprising that Catherine should forego a limited and deceptively transparent realist aesthetic for one richly populated with bizarre and monstrous variations. However, Catherine's debt to ancient Egyptian art resides not only in the inspired adaptation of its mythological content. More importantly, his debt lies in an adaptation of the very technique of ancient Egyptian art. But before pursuing this matter it is important to note that though Egyptian art is a key influence, Catherine's repertory does not amount to an equivalent integrated mythology. Rather, his is an inspired and degraded bestiary; a secular late-modern art of profanation and de-sanctification.

Catherine's art is not glyptic, carved or engraved, yet it shares with ancient Egyptian art a concern for line rather than volume; the incised edge; a flatness of relief and a hardness of surface. Like that of ancient Egypt, Catherine's art is scopic; it turns on the cult of the eye. For, as Paglia notes, it is the eye that divines edges and institutes an aesthetic based on reduction, simplification, condensation. Again, a cursory glance will reveal that in much of Catherine's art the eye is

shown full face, flounder like. As in Egyptian art, the eye is licensed. The eye circumscribes, contains, mediates; it is the object and that which defines the object. In the works that make up Catherine's principle contribution the figures are always wide-awake, alert. They glare with a vivid self-possession. Every aspect of the composition is wired. Eyes, mouths, gestures, each cell of colour, is animated and the multiple elements that converge in a work are vivid, jagged, sheer. His is the art of the tough surface, the manipulated relief. There are no blurred edges, no fudging, and no gentle inscription of the viewer into the picture plane. Consider *Hi-Fidelity*. Here we find a seeming depth and perspective; yet a warp persists. The jagged cacti in the foreground are cut out, devoid of substance. Each and every inclusion is electrified; the singer's foot, the cat, every tool of sound. The shadows of the singers are flecked with substance; the whole caught in a spectral demonic glow. The colours are pumped and hard; the shading of the red figure is merely a fall-out of the art of chiaroscuro because, finally, depth and perspective are both perverted. That which is substance and that which is not remains in question. There is no trick of perspective that has not been tampered with. In the sculptural twin to this work, also titled *Hi-Fidelity*, the figures are once again cutout, sheer. They seem to have stepped from the wall. One thinks of the hallucinatory fullness of animated film - the edge between line and volume.

Catherine's style is forced and unnatural; emblematic of what the poet and artist William Blake called "the hard and wiry line of rectitude". The content, strikingly ritualistic, is suggestive of pagan spectacle, a pagan pictorialism. A kinship exists between Catherine's repertory and decadent art which Paglia defines as a "late-phase art ... accomplished but anxious. Composition is crowded or overwrought; colour is lurid".

Ascendant is a "theatrical perversity". Compelling, grotesque, "late-phase art defiles high classic form with Mother Nature's sex and violence. Dionysus, bound down by Apollo, always escapes and returns with a vengeance." ¹⁴

Synthetic, yet mortal and mutant, Catherine's art owes much to de Sade, via Hobbes; that is, a belief that aggression comes from nature. This is vividly depicted in *Red Rubber Man* (Fig. 8). In a Rousseauesque forest stripped of its benign placidity we witness the brutal symbiosis and parasitism of man and nature. A strange anthropomorphized succulent is gashed at its sides, its stems lopped and bandaged. Mutilated yet alive, riddled with those knowing flounder like eyes, the monstrous succulent yields its bloody sap to the *Red Rubber Man*. The sap travels from a metal funnel placed on the crown of the succulent. The funnel is duplicated by a bandaged and mutilated hand; the sap filtering from the one to the other. The red of the sap matches the colour of the Red Rubber Man. Here nature is the font that feeds man's vengeance. There is no life without cruelty, and nature with its multiple visionary eyes knows this. The *Red Rubber Man* is the one carrying the axe, but who is the real victim? Here nature feeds and generates violence and dependency. Though mutilated and bandaged like its seeming oppressor, nature remains the host. Nature's wounds will always heal, its bloody stumps transform into jagged weapons.

In the light of works such as the mockingly titled *Hi-fidelity* and *Red Rubber Man*, it is insufficient to read Catherine's art solely within the context of South Africa's political struggle. As J.M. Coetzee correctly noted, the deformed and stunted relations between human beings, and those between human beings and nature, have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life which cannot be solely accounted for through what is

"loosely called apartheid". The influences that fuel Catherine's visual repertory predate and exceed the going imperatives of a society struggling to liberate itself. In sum, Catherine's art is also, and as importantly, a vital late-modern synthesis of an ancient pagan dialectic once oppressed in Greece and celebrated in Egypt; that of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. As we have already seen, Apollo is challenged in Catherine's earlier airbrushes. What gains precedence and becomes the prime mover in Catherine's art is Dionysus who, according to Paglia, is "the trickster, the improviser, the god of demonic energy and plural identity whose cult is ecstatic; the trance-like, schizoid, and shamanistic self." This compelling description also finds the perceptions of John Howell and Dr Raymund van Niekerk. However, it is important to note here that Apollo may be challenged, even negated, but Apollo can never be wholly abandoned, for the precise reason that in the visual arts form is inescapable. As Camille Paglia pithily notes: "Fixation is at the heart of art, fixation as stasis and fixation as obsession". Catherine may choose line over volume, yet irrespective of the choice, form persists. Therein lies the paradox. The raucous demonic poltergeist may course through Catherine's art, yet still we remain with the intractable fact of form.

"My work is approached like a see saw", Catherine notes.

It is always working with opposites and going up fast or down fast and trying to balance in the middle at the same time. Either it starts out with some kind of logic and turns out to be absurd, or it starts out as an absurd idea and I try to make some logic out of it, without losing the mystery or secret subconscious meanings it might still contain. The act of accidentally creating a mystery or absurdity is more interesting to me than too formulated concept. It allows me more

freedom to produce my own
balance in a chaotic world.¹⁵

What Catherine has recorded here is the age-old conflict between Apollo and Dionysus. Examined closely we see that Catherine's preference in the moment of making is never a governing logic but what he calls the absurd and mysterious. As the French poet Stefan Mallarme declared: "a throw of the dice can never abolish hazard". This is Catherine's key intuition, which, together with a transgressive laughter, mocks every strategy of containment on the part of the artist. Balance is never given, it is discovered piecemeal. In the case of Catherine it is a balance, which can never triumph at the expense of that which exists and cannot be formulated. Thus it is that Catherine's art is never just, kind, or beautiful. Rather, his is an art aggressive and compulsive, arbitrary, harsh, and cruel, defined first and foremost by the energy that fuels its making. "Beauty is an Apollonian freeze-frame", notes Camille Paglia. "[Beauty] halts and condenses the flux and indeterminacy of nature. It allows man to act by enhancing the desirability of what he fears". This, as I have argued, was never Catherine's inclination. His is an art intrinsically repellent, scathing and unnerving; hard, impermeable, intractable; a haunting and monstrosly comic record of the Horrible that exists within the thing itself.

Catherine, finally, is no mere misanthrope who celebrates brutality. Rather the violence of nature and the aberrant psyche, which registers this, is pitted against the classical tropes of art. Ancient Egypt provides the clue to his lean incisions. This key influence, together with a conflict with reason, with the dogma that clings to prescribed transparent forms, results in the rupture, the aggression and overkill that is the hallmark of Catherine's art. Its purpose is not to shock. "If I wanted to be shocking I could be quite bizarre", he says. "I try

to be ordered, maybe I should loosen up a bit". And here the artist laughs. Ultimately Catherine is a fetishist, a serialist, an obsessive dogged by form. Like a stuck record he is unafraid of repeating himself; knowing all the while the differences that undo and shift every repetition, every ritual. In Catherine's degraded and profane art the iconic meets the metamorphic. His is a bestiary of mutants and mutations. His vision, at once "primitive and futuristic", is a prescient depiction of the morphological shift in the human psyche and body. As we embark upon the new millennium Catherine's art emerges as an important cipher of what we are becoming. At the heart of the metropolis, at odds with the societal laws of state and religion, it is mutant nature with its brute force, it is survival of the fittest, that reigns. Therein no one is truly free; there are only new and complex forms of enslavement. Aggression becomes a form of fear; Catherine's loud and gnashing mouths, his vigilant eyes, his bristling heads of fright and jagged carapaces, a form of defence. Terror stalks without and within. There is no escape other than through the actions of the desolate and fractured self. Nothing survives for long; everything transforms. The race is on. That which breaks into Catherine's divided consciousness and defines his visual repertory is defined in advance by the demonism of the senses.

City Deep

The speculations driving this investigation thus far are as follows: Catherine's central concern is with fusing energy and anarchic laughter with form. In the visual arts how else can one capture a state invisible to the eye if not through form? An objective correlative is needed. I've suggested that Catherine's answer lies in Ancient Egypt. It is there - prior to the supercedence of the Greek imperatives of volume, depth, and perspective - that we find the institution of the incised edge, the manipulated relief, so evident in

Catherine's major work. His is a late-modern mutation of Egyptian forms, an art "primitive and futuristic", which reconciles a degraded predilection for monstrous mythic forms with a late twentieth century sensibility. There are of course many contemporary influences; Decadent art, with its overwroughtness, its lurid clashes of distinct colour suggestive of Byzantine mosaic; the lean lines of the moderns; the scrambled depth and jaggedness of cubism; cartoon and animation; the graphic novel with its freakish superheroes and dark visions. There is much that connects Catherine's art to the present day. However the root of the artist's style, I propose, lies in ancient Egyptian art.

We have seen how Catherine reconciles the concerns of art with a commitment to a struggle for liberation. When he perceives struggle as the weapon of art he is most effective; for it is then that the struggle becomes more cryptic, more resilient. His saving laughter - intrinsically amoral, thriving beyond the narrow coordinates of good and evil - is the triumphal faculty that carries the artist beyond the secular dictates of change. History, then, becomes a mutant stage. With the trials of the '70s and '80s seemingly behind us, Catherine's concerns appear to have shifted. In this concluding movement we will consider the transformations in the artist's focus. What are the concerns of the '90s? How has a so-called "new" South Africa impacted on art? Sadly for some, we will see that the consequences of liberation, and how these consequences have impacted on Catherine's art, are far from rosy. There has been no giant leap for humankind. On the contrary, South Africa remains dogged by history. Excavation is the *modus operandi*. A televisual and print news record of the recent past reveals phenomena both familiar and strange: The bodies of murdered activists are being exhumed and reburied; monuments are being built to commemorate the struggle; the trials of the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission perpetually engages one in a drama of atonement and reparation. Amnesty through confession is regarded as the key to healing the wounds, physical and psychic, which remain the fall-out of battle. There are of course historical precedents for the Commission; the moral and logical outcome of any tyranny. However, as the novelist Mike Nicol reminds us, truth is the inescapable current necessity, the balm for those who have been practiced liars. In the *Waiting Country* our legacy is bracingly summed up:

We lie to one another. We lie to accommodate. We lie because we believe it does not matter. We lie because we think that in the face of so many years of misery, a lie that is for the good is not a lie at all. We lie because we have no self-respect. We lie because we are victims. We lie because we cannot imagine ourselves in any other way.¹⁶

Provocation remains the key to a changing society. The reigning moral high ground is defined by the battle on behalf of truth. But what truth? Whose truth? If there is no governing truth there can only be consensus which, after all, is but a fraught and fragile glue. Catherine's art, as we have seen, has never wholly allowed itself to be subsumed in any specific truth. If he elected to capture "the Horrible depicted in the thing itself", it was not to resolve or absolve the horrible. Like his favoured trope, the cat, Catherine has embraced a divided consciousness, a charged ambivalence. More and more the integrity of his decision becomes apparent. Catherine has remained on the margins of dogma; he has produced a visual repertory intrinsically personal and open-ended. His vision of South Africa is perhaps, in part, answered in a 1996 news article by Rian Malan:

Ah, this country. There will never be enough darkness to dispel the light that surrounded us on election day in 1994, but

the lustre is certainly dimming. So yes, we have democracy now, and one of the most progressive constitutions on the planet, promising more woman's rights and gay rights than almost anywhere else, no death penalty and no censorship, but it's all on paper. In reality, South Africa's mostly the same sunny, tragicomic, backward and violent place it's always been. A country of raving homophobes who beat queers to death, and still treat African women as chattel. A country where a vast majority of blacks want the death penalty back, and lynch petty criminals because the police do nothing. A country where 80 per cent of the populace wants an immediate end to the decadent Western nonsense about pornography and abortion, and where racial feeling is at least as vivid as ever. As for the Reconstruction and Development Program, our Marshall Plan, with its glowing promises of free houses for all, free hospitals, millions of jobs and free education, 22 months into Mandela's reign, there is almost nothing to see. Everything has changed, but nothing has changed, save the colour of the fatcats tooling around the cities in their BMWs.¹⁷

Malan's 1996 article displays an acid pessimism which is all the more ascendant today. One may question the tone, but the force of the provocation is indisputable. Catherine's art, similarly, traffics in this pessimism. However, therein, his art is a corrective, a continued "search for balance in a chaotic world". Today dinner table talk is still emigration; except that now it's not only the "whites" who are doing the talking. In certain bizarre instances dead relatives are being exhumed and reburied abroad; such is the degree of renunciation. The whites who remain are still "a tiny, fearful minority", says Malan. This fear has increased exponentially and has come to include all race groups. Paranoia is rife, the

latest fears are gangsterism and crime. The walls built to protect the fearful are not being knocked down; on the contrary, surveillance is on the increase. Car companies have incorporated theft in their insurance schemes. Today everyone expects to get ripped off. Guns are the order of the day. Expect to get mugged; the recommendation: lock your valuables in the boot and always carry a disposable 50 rand in cash. South Africa is "a nation that fell off the back of a truck", goes the bittersweet phrase. Car theft, money laundering, white collar fraud, are common practice. Ethics? What ethics? The lie remains rife. And if this is so, as Nicol notes, then it is because there is no self-respect, because we are victims ... because we cannot imagine ourselves in any other way.

Catherine's art is a charged cipher of this – once latent, now glaring - unrest. As Dr Raymund van Niekerk prophetically noted in his examination of Catherine's art in the mid '80s, "revenge will determine all the bloody and dismembering action". Every attempt at reconciliation has its dark and vengeful counterpart. When talking about an archaic conflict between Apollo and Dionysus we are also talking about South Africa today. Apollo is the despotic moral force which defines every bid for order, constraint. Dionysus is the improviser, the practiced sophist who unmasks each and every will to order. Given the can of worms that is the vengeful product of liberation, it is not surprising that Dionysus should remain the principle drive in Catherine's art. His concerns are the inner-city psychosis caused by escalating violence, the burgeoning underworld of gangsterism and crime, the spread of corporate corruption and subterfuge. This urban rot is not, however, restricted to South Africa; it is an international pathology. And yet, by way of a response to a seemingly insurmountable and bleak prognosis, Catherine champions a stringent affirmation. "There must be some positiveness", he says.

Even if there is this dark side underlying the work, maybe it's prettified a little, trying to look for some beauty within that horror, or disguising it. A work must have its own life and magic no matter what it means. A certain aura. A personality which is my personality.¹⁸

Catherine's touch as a consequence has become lighter, but only deceptively so. Increasingly, the traumatic has been displaced by the carnivalesque. Play, Catherine's governing drive, has become more and more unconstrained. If the fate of South Africa still hangs in the balance, then what is needed is not the bile of an ironist, but the wit of a darkly comic vision. Hence the deceptive lightness of touch, the "prettification and disguise". Like all mutant forms, Catherine's art has adapted with the times, assumed what Charles Darwin termed a "cryptic colouration". At no point has Catherine forsaken his driving amoral instinct for play and laughter. Anxiety and crisis remains; a creature discomfort compressed yet still vivid, surfacing in a flash to haunt and unnerve every moderated interpretation. Sharp contrasts still persist; vivid delineations of line and brilliant colour, graphic depictions of amputation, a bloodied and scarred reverie.

Yet why so much laughter? why so much pain? And why the persistence of these ghastly extremes? As Rian Malan has noted in 1996:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is perhaps, in part, a smokescreen; a spectacle ... designed for another purpose entirely: to distract blacks from the shortcomings of the ANC in government, [to] remind them of the enemy defeated and make them grateful for their salvation. And grateful they are: approval ratings in the eighties.¹⁹

In response, Catherine's art – then and now – could not ethically be

the handmaiden of a received moral truth. Rather, it chose to "disguise" itself, seem palatable and enabling, while it fulfilled its involuntary law: the inoculation of a society through the furtherance of horror, as pastiche; through laughter, seemingly consensual. Consider the grotesque and humourous figures in Catherine's *Fanagalo Store* and its companion piece *Juju Bazaar*. With names like *Back Chat*, *Big Brother*, *Deep Throat*, *Wolfman*, *Mamba Man*, *Schizoid*, *I Spy*, *Negotiator*, *Smoke Head*, *Pinky Pinky*, *Head Hunter*, and *Charmer*, the figures, crammed rack upon rack, read like the denizens of a netherworld, the morbid apparitions of a mental curio store. Fanagalo is a patois, a hybrid of Zulu and English, developed on the mines so white bosses could order black workers about. Inverted, Fanagalo becomes an argot of resistance, a scrambled code of the outlaw. In this inverted world, Fanagalo is no longer a language of subjugation and enslavement but an insidious and cryptic language of the mimic and dissimulator. Set in the context of the store, the locus of exchange, Catherine's curios, or curiosities, are designed not as soft exotic options but as nightmares that visit the consumer. Prettified, disguised, they have the last laugh.

Fanagalo Store was exhibited at the Delfina Gallery in London as part of a show entitled Africa 95. It is fitting that its present owner should be one of history's stellar interrogators of identity, the artist and singer David Bowie. A complicity exists between Catherine's mutant adventure and that of Bowie's. Both artists know the necessity of transformation, the possibilities that lie behind the constant modification and reinvention of one's persona. "I don't follow any movement whatsoever", Catherine declares.

There might be combinations of influences, but I'm really not trying to keep up with a particular way of thinking. I try

to assess my own confusions.²⁰

In conclusion, it is necessary to insist that Catherine's art is never merely a vehicle for commentary; my own included. Rather, commentary is a fundamentally involuntary seam, a matter of the psyche and the spirit as it impacts in the instant of invention. As Catherine's art has evolved, we have seen that the attendant horror also persists. The quirky surreal inmates of his *Fanagalo Store* and *Juju Bazaar* and their big brothers, Catherine's new large scale fibreglass figures, *Eye Witness*, *City Deep* and others, remain the raucous fall-out of an unstaunched crisis. Life sucks, they seem to say. Enjoy yourself. But when grotesquerie is aestheticized and rendered palatable, is this not merely a saccharine symptom of a deeper, unresolved, transnational terror?

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