Views and (Re)Views

Wayne Barker's 'Super Boring' retrospective

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One would think that an artist who has a glossy (unfortunately incomplete) catalogue published for a major retrospective at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg before reaching the age of fifty, cannot be too bored for words. And yet, while Wayne Barker's resumé is loaded with exhibitions (both locally and overseas) with the more than slightly soiled neon sign *enfant terrible* splattered in the background – from the days when he co-founded FIG (Famous International Gallery) to host exhibitions in downtown Johannesburg flats (1990); through entering the 'establishment' to exhibit at the revered Everard Read Gallery and the first Johannesburg Biennale; to bouts of performances such as the 1997 chocolate mousse incident in France; to a monograph

published by David Krut already a decade ago lauding his antics as 'heroic Barker's artistic career'; to participating in *The Global Dialogue on Art* only last year, always ensuring that the media had plenty to report, just in case the work lacked in content or integrity – he has chosen to title what may turn out to be a show-and-tell, 'Super Boring'.

Alas, Barker is the infant no longer, nor is what he did then to raise the ire of the establishment strange by any of today's standards. And so it has come that of a collection of his works from 1989 to 2010 (of which some works toured the country only last year as *Lands and Lives*) the current configuration can appear in the clinical environment of one of South Africa's citadels of art, deemed fine by the local art world. What is more, what we see in the Standard Bank Gallery had already been seen by our southern-most counterparts when 'Super

1 Wayne Barker, *Sex in the City* (2010). Mixed media and neon tubing, 130 x 150.5 cm.

2 Wayne Barker, *Cuntree* (2010). Mixed media and neon tubing on canvas, 122.5 x 107 cm.

Boring' was exhibited at SMAC (Stellenbosch Modern and Contemporary Art Gallery) last year. And although much has been made about where the title of the show comes from (most notably the 2009 Venice Biennale), I, for one, remain intrigued by the idea that Barker is trying to tell us something about himself. Is he saying that the work is super boring, or is he saying that life is super boring, and are we therefore to presume from this that what is reflected in the works is this super boring life? Or is Barker doing this simply to provoke; is he simply looking for attention? Surely it cannot be that simple. And so it is to be concluded from musings on the title of the exhibition, even before having seen the show, that this might

just be a retrospective worth seeing – even if only to try and figure out what it is that could possibly be so super boring.

Something for which I was rewarded when visiting the gallery ...

In a multi-media space there is a revolving piece of taped-together sheets of paper in a square format from which skull-shapes were cut and upon which moving low-resolution (or simply bad film quality) imagery of South Africa's so-called Border War is projected from two sides. This was most surely the most boring piece on show. There is absolutely nothing here that we have not seen elsewhere in the art world at large, as well as locally. Within the context of the other works this piece

remains the one that the show could have done without. I mean: what is so wonderful about a rickety revolving flimsy 'box', half tattered and repaired with sticky-tape? And to then have referenced the cut-out skull shape together with border war footage is simply bad semiotics. We can read it, yes, but it's not dry, it's not even bitter – it's just plain boring ...

The same cannot be said of most of the other works on display – at least not in the same manner. Because I still think that a lot of the content that Barker includes in his work reeks of boredom; I still suspect that what drives him to make art is that he is so bored with life and with art. In a biographical video (and let us remember that much of our appreciation of Barker's art revolves around his tainted bio) presented at the exhibition, the artist talks about how his consciousness of the South Africa in which he was born and bred is informed by contradiction. The biggest contradiction for me, though, seems to be that someone so super bored with his environment would use that very boredom to create. Or perhaps this is not strange at all, as it must certainly have been what moved many romantics – knowingly or unknowingly – in making art concerned with the ambiguous relationship between wholeness and infinity: in Barker's case the infinite is clearly to be traced through the opulence of boredom.

That Barker is hooked on excess is no secret, as is promised by the 'super' (size-me) in the title of the show. The headline aside, one only has to look at the works – not necessarily always as individual pieces, but also as collectives – to become aware of his preoccupation with waste. If it is not lives that are wasted, then it is the land that is wasted – all always seen against the constant

shifting of South Africa's socio-historical horizons (of which there are many). The artist's palimpsest methodology of layering even the traditional painted surface with various materials, techniques and contents, is another clear indication of how excess is exploited in order to arrive at striking artistic solutions. It is through the unraveling of such layers that the artist offers a field day to those of us with deconstructionist leanings. Because if anything (and even if, at the best of times, being boring), most works remain striking in their aesthetic of constantly attracting the viewer to engage with them.

As such, Barker's talent is not so much as master of deception to trick the viewer into believing that what is actually boring and worthless should be considered as art, as he is an entertainer; and often an entertainer of the one-liner (or even less: the catch-phrase/the headline) at that: again, the show's title looms large ... as do most titles as well as written texts – often in the by now boring medium of neon-tubing – found within the works scattered throughout the exhibition: from *Super Boring* to *Hope* to *Flight*, from *Start* to *Dreaming* to *Heal*, from *Nat en Koud (Wet and Cold)* to *Vaak en Moeg (Sleepy and Tired)*, they all seem familiar – rather than outrageous – catch-phrases which serve as trigger mechanisms for possible further dialogues. And in the event of attempting to trace the endless 'flashing' signifiers with any hope of determining artistic intent, the viewer might just be entertained by its excess.

Lest someone notice that the artist may, in fact, be on a mission to interrupt.