

Art

The only thing to really make art about is art, says Zander Blom

Abstract artist Zander Blom's exhibition at Stevenson Gallery in Joburg is a powerful assertion of the importance of art as a driver of cultural change

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BY GRAHAM WOOD



Untitled by Zander Blom.

Image: Supplied

You could say that making abstract art in SA at the moment is a perverse choice. There have certainly been times in Zander Blom's career when he has thought so. In fact, at least part of his choice to engage with abstraction when he began his career as an artist a decade and a half ago was negation.

As a young artist, convinced that he loved art and wanted nothing more than to be an artist, he felt trapped by the pressures on contemporary artists to "say something of importance". He also felt that the responsibilities towards his subject in representative art — whether a person, landscape or object — were debilitating. And he couldn't see anything interesting in the alternative: taking his own subjectivity as a topic. And so, he says: "The only thing you can make art about then is art."

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On the one hand, he was seduced by the stuff of art: the shades and gradients and textures he saw in photographs, for instance. “I don’t have as much interest in human beings as I’d like to,” he admits. Art for him became first and foremost not about having something to say, and more about finding “a language or ... multiple languages”.

On the other hand, he had the nagging sense that making art about art was “just boring and lame”. In times like ours, isn’t that simply a cop-out? Besides, all the ideals that drove abstraction in the 20th century seemed to have been discredited and debased. The figurative art he produced seemed to reach back to his childhood, when his choices of subjects – dinosaurs and monsters – seemed innocent and free.

When you look back, he seems always to have been escaping either the tyranny of representation or the tyranny of abstraction. In fact, he was right in the middle of one of his abandonments – creating works and a manifesto of sorts he called *Garage-ism* dealing with a kind of aesthetic of abandonment and retrieval itself – when he stumbled onto a technique that sent him right back into the arms of abstraction with renewed faith, and a new kind of maturity.

His latest solo exhibition, now on at Stevenson in Joburg – *Monochrome Paintings* – is his 10th with the gallery and this time, he says, he comes back to abstraction “without guilt or shame, and without the need to criticise it”.

In the past, part of his frustration has been his sense that his engagement with abstract art demanded a degree of inbuilt critique, or at least a sense of knowingness – even cynicism – that now “seems like a very youthful position”.

“I’ve realised you don’t really need a reason to engage with abstraction,” he says. “You don’t have to justify your desire to engage with abstraction by having some kind of theoretical story”. It’s more simply tied to a desire “to make paintings that feel innovative”.

“I figured out a way to create depth and texture, but without resorting to impasto,” he explains. In his earlier work, he frequently piled on oils or painted on the backs of canvases “to make something that was visceral or undeniable”.



Untitled by Zander Blom.

Image: Supplied



Studio view with works in progress for Paintings and Posters, 2011

Image: Zander Blom

Since his early 20s, though, he'd wanted to find a way to create the sense of depth and substance on a flat surface. His idea was almost to "nullify" his own presence as the artist. He didn't want to intrude on the artwork — like a brooding, expressive figure à la Jackson Pollock — but rather to exist "like an old artist in the background"

He played around with various tools, techniques and applications — using spatulas and bits of cut-up rubber and silicon, baking implements and the like to apply the paint and discover new effects. He devised a range of "gradients, ripples, smears, textures", delighted by the sense that through a simple technical innovation he was able to "visualise something that we wouldn't have been able to visualise" even a few years ago

"I can't really figure out what to say about them other than they're abstract, but they're figurative! suggestive," he says. The works on the exhibition appear somehow organic. Where chance marks do seem to resemble something figurative — he points out a banana, a seal's head, a dog's leg, a nose — he's let some of them be (although he admits to changing others when they were too literal-looking)

"With this work, what's really interesting is whatever figurative elements emerge, they're never quite on the thing, so you never feel trapped"

Each work is a provisional "solution", as he expresses it, to an infinite set of compositional possibilities. "It's almost like every painting is its own moment in time because you're never going to be able to recreate the thing, no matter how hard you try," says Blom

There is nothing of the sense of a final statement about them. As such, each work is filled with a sense of possibility: of more works and more expression

Looked at like this, it becomes clear that these works — Blom's new guilt-free attitude — marks a new tone in abstraction's re-entry into the conversation about contemporary South African art. His realisation that you don't need an excuse to engage with abstract art is as true as ever: its history is indeed a century-long story of abstraction reinventing itself in various places and at various times

The whole enterprise of abstraction though does involve a particular relationship between the individual and the social realm: the collective aspects of politics and identity. Abstract art, by its nature, resists collective consensus; it asserts the individual. Not just the individual consciousness of the artist – that snapshot “moment in time” Blom alludes to – but also a certain awareness of the lone viewpoint of the viewer. Am I seeing what everyone else is seeing in this work? Is my response purely personal? Does it have any relevance outside of my own associations?

That, in a polarised and fragmented social and political context – but one that simultaneously demands social consensus – is paradoxically where Blom’s latest foray into abstraction might find special relevance. The individual, isolated, inward-looking moment represented in these works embodies the very tensions between the individual and social that drives cultural change.



Zander Blom's current exhibition at Stevenson Gallery.

Image: Supplied

In his Mellon Lectures in 2003, the American critic Kirk Varnedoe, one of the greatest and most eloquent proponents of abstract art and its ongoing importance, compares the isolated consciousness inherent in the abstract artwork to the sand in an oyster. In asserting our differences, abstract art does not admit defeat or merely articulate defiance. It acknowledges the necessity of communication, negotiation and engagement. It’s not a nihilistic shrug that our differences are insurmountable, but rather the very cause and motivation for interacting and bridging them – always provisionally, never perfectible.

As much as a youthful Zander Blom might have worried about the lameness of making art about art, it’s actually a powerful assertion of the importance of art as a driver of cultural change: not as the mere expression or illustration of the weighty issue of the day. That’s why Blom’s renewed engagement with abstraction is vital and exciting and timely: because it’s regenerative, because there’s more if it, because it carries on.