

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT PREMIUM

CHRIS THURMAN: Hidden in plain sight — creatives explore new meaning in altered states

Artists use the concept of palimpsest, a gesture towards erasure, in Rosebank exhibit

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'Fan and Roses' by Michael Meyersfeld and Stompie Selibe. (SUPPLIED)

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Palimpsest: a gesture towards erasure. The Greek root words from which this beautifully sibilant term is derived explain a process of repeated “scraping clean” — recalling the ancient days when scribes wrote not on paper but on animal skin parchment, which was expensive and had to be reused. It was basically a laborious analogue version of Select All + Delete.

Sometimes, fragments of text survived the cull. They would haunt the page, a ghostly presence adding a layer of prior meaning to whatever new words were added. This gave rise to the artistic and conceptual palimpsest: a surface or object that has been altered but still bears the traces of its earlier self.

The friction between these two notions of palimpsest — loss versus layering, deletion versus accumulation — offers a useful creative spur, and it has yielded fine results in the exhibition Palimpsest (at Lizamore on Keyes in Rosebank until March 7). The primary body of work on display is a collaboration between Michael Meyersfeld and Stompie Selibe, which the catalogue aptly describes as “an encounter between two abstract practices: photographic abstraction and the fluid materiality of paint and watercolour”.

Meyersfeld’s photographs provide “an architecture of form and light” and Selibe’s “painterly interventions” then “destabilise that architecture”. Everyday items and backdrops — a fan, an electric fence — are made alien and arresting, encouraging us to look at the familiar with new eyes.

Perceptions of urban and rural landscapes

Along with his splotches and splashes of paint, Selibe (who is also a musician) adds a further semiotic component through collages of cut-up sheet music. In some of the images, this gives the impression of staccato refrains drifting over the high walls, security spikes and electric fencing that make up a significant part of the suburban South African habitus.

By contrast, Lien Botha's solo palimpsests take us away from the city into rural scenes. Botha is, you might say, in dialogue with herself — and with her forebears, artistic or otherwise. Here the base layers are photographs of landscapes: what poet Karen Press, writing about Botha's work, lists variously as “the ancient geology of African hills”, “long grass”, “soft peaks”, “resilient vegetation” and “modest human structures” embedded in the vast veld.

Interrupting (or imposed on) these vistas are flashes of works by seminal artists, from Italian Renaissance painter Piero di Cosimo to Russian avant-gardist Kazimir Malevich, and from the Spanish romantic Goya to his English contemporaries George Stubbs and John Constable. In her essay on Botha, Press sees these “incongruous juxtapositions” as distinct from the “everyday ephemera” of “marketable memes”; they are, instead, careful negotiations between different narratives of history and of place.

From discarded to distinct

The palimpsest in Nellien Brewer's Flotsam and Jetsam series becomes a cry of protest against the erasure of identity. Citing Martin Luther King Jr's assertion, "I refuse to believe that man is mere flotsam and jetsam on the river of life", Brewer seeks to recognise the individuality and dignity of "the nameless many" who have been "discarded by society".

Far from being detritus, then, the subjects Brewer depicts (recognisable as marine debris, seaweed and other fragments of vegetation) are given significance. Their form, comprising strands of biblical text in multiple South African languages, is digitally printed onto paper embossed with similar shapes: the spectres of other, not-yet-forgotten, oceanic plant life. Those who have suffered most — "a baby abandoned on a rubbish heap", "a rural grandmother raising Aids orphans", "victims of slavery and trafficking" — are not just "small and broken". They are also "unique and beautiful".

A comparable transformation, or transmutation, occurs in Jacki McInnes' depictions of South African landscapes and flora using shreds of decommissioned banknotes. McInnes' choice of material calls us to reflect on the artificial value we place on money, and on how "vast systems of wealth" can be "reduced to waste".

Implicit here is a critique of commodification, conspicuous consumption, exploitation and inequality. Yet, through her own painstaking labour, placing each shred with a pair of surgical forceps, McInnes builds bright, eye-catching images. Whatever bank notes symbolise, or may be made to symbolise, in these works they are palimpsestically salvaged from their former purpose into an aesthetic one: their browns, reds, greens, blues and oranges become the vivid colours of flowers, trees and mountains.