

Dodd, A. ART PIG in SA Art Times, Global Art Information, Johannesburg, November

One of the juicier cultural by-products to emerge out of Damien Hirst's \$198-million Sotheby's auction was a crisp and catty debate between art critic Robert Hughes and writer Germaine Greer. When Hughes took a stand against Hirst, expressing the unpopular view that "art as spectacle loses meaning" Greer went for the jugular, claiming that Hirst's work was beyond Hughes's analytical reach, and that his criticism of Hirst's egomaniacal Bond Street greed fest was quite simply missing the point.

"Hughes doesn't understand a good deal of art – doesn't get Basquiat or Baselitz, for example," wrote Greer in *The Guardian*. "What is being presented as aesthetic sensibility is, in fact, moralism, of a kind that has always been devilled innovative artists". Personally, I think it is Greer who is missing the point. Just because lazy, hollow installations and mass-produced art objects are the flavour of the moment doesn't mean we have to accept them in bent and cowered silence. In an age of the radical dematerialisation of the art object, in which concept tends to be king, I celebrate Hughes's courage in boldly pointing out that the emperor is wearing no clothes. "No wonder so many business big shots go for Hirst: his work is both simple-minded and sensationalist, just the ticket for newbie collectors", he writes. Hughes is the only writer I know of to have pointed out the gross absurdity of Hirst's prices – \$12-million for a dead shark, \$10 000 for a mere photograph of a diamond-encrusted skull – when half the hungry world would be happy to have a bit of old pickled shark fin for supper.

To drive home her point, Greer satirises Hughes's love of Lucian Freud, jeering at the fact of him being impressed by the laboriousness of Freud's work. "Ha ha ha!" jeers Greer from her invisible throne of contemporary derisiveness. But again, I'm with Hughes on this matter of labour. I may well be a child of the 20th century, but personal labour in art often impresses me. Evidence of sweat excites me – even more so of late, for recently I have witnessed two major art prizes (the MTN New Contemporaries and the Sasol Wax Art Award) being awarded to the most chilly, unaffecting installations I have had the displeasure and bewilderment of encountering.

(As for the Sasol Wax Art Awards evening, pass the spittoon, Sheila. I haven't endured a more awful evening since that ostrich farm in the Karoo, New Year's Eve circa 1999. I thought nothing could be more dismal than the table arrangements which agglomerated mirror balls with wooden hearts and cabbages dunked in wax, until the deputy minister of Arts and Culture, Ntombazana Botha opened her mouth. It was all downhill from there.)

But just as I was about to drown in a small flagon of post-modern despair, I set out on the M1 South to experience Paul Emmanuel's current exhibition, *Transitions*, at the Apartheid Museum. A continuation of Emmanuel's lifelong engagement with issues of masculinity, this exhibition is an exploration of "moments of shifting white male identity and liminal spaces". Simultaneously humble and majestic, it entirely restored my faith in art's capacity to awaken and transform. And left me with a desire to proselytise and punt, to encourage every likeable and deserving citizen of this mad republic to haul their asses down south for a dose of real profundity. If it was evidence of hard labour that I was after, I found it there in

Emmanuel's insanely dedicated drawing technique – the exhibition took the artist over four years to research and create. Not that personal effort is my sole criteria in assessing the power of an artwork. But when it is unavoidably, irrevocably evident, it does somehow make a difference.

Transitions comprises a series of five ostensibly 'photographic' sequences of images which, when examined closely, are revealed to be drawings which have been sensitively hand-incised into photographic paper with a blade. You can't help but marvel at the madness of sheer painstaking application. There is something miraculous in the object that stands before you – something magical, sublime and beyond the ordinary. But this superior level of draftsmanship is something I have come to expect from Emmanuel. It was his film, *3SAI A Rite of Passage*, that left me wordless. For he has managed to translate that excruciatingly sensitised essence of his drawings into a whole new medium.

The film documents the head shaving of new recruits at the Third South African Infantry Battalion in Kimberley, one of two national military training camps, which still performs the obligatory hair shaving of new recruits. With its haunting soundtrack, it succeeds in taking the viewer out of flat documentary reality for 12 perfect minutes – and in that time outside of time, the world becomes charged with emotional and symbolic resonances that render even the fleeting expression on a young boy's face quite unforgettably nuanced. You're in a stark mess hall in Kimberley circa 2008, but it might as well be *Death in Venice*.