

Dodd, A. PAUL EMMANUEL PERFECTS THE FINE ART OF TURNING ODDNESS INTO TRANSCENDENCE in *The Sunday Independent*, *The Sunday Independent*, Johannesburg, March 2003

"It's completely demented. It doesn't make any logical or logistical sense at all," says artist Paul Emmanuel, describing his intriguingly obsessive mark-making technique.

In an age of no-sweat installations and been-there-recorded-that video art, the commitment and effort behind Emmanuel's printmaking are mind-boggling. Unlike his earlier copperplate etchings, which were small and intimate, his recent works are large in scale, yet the marks that result in the total impression are immaculately intricate and fine – a kind of neurotic, but pristine pointillism.

His current show *Air on the Skin* at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, takes the title of the work that won him the prestigious Schumann-Sasol WAM wax art competition last year. The exhibition displays the prize winning work together with a newly commissioned work by Sasol.

Also on show are his series of intimate, exquisitely detailed original etchings and lithographs as well as a installation of page-proofs from his soon-to-be released artist's book, *Cathexis*. Suspended at the entrance to the gallery are four translucent organza sheets imprinted with the words 'a layered place', 'the land remembers', 'life within life', and 'open to reveal'.

The show begins with an image from the *Sleep Series* of copperplate mezzotint and dry point etchings (1999 – 2000), titled *Anointment: holy water being poured over the head of a new born baby*.

The image is illuminated in a delicate radiant light that catches the tips of the child's eyelashes and creates a luminosity that is almost halo-like. Substances merge in the intensity of this small moment in a way that invites questioning of the relationship between water and light.

This Catholic fascination with shape shifting and transubstantiation – a dreamlike relationship between earth, air and water – is something that carries through Emmanuel's work up until the present.

With distant thoughts of Michelangelo slaving beneath the Sistine Chapel ceiling, I imagine him, alone in his Johannesburg studio at 3am, scratching away at a massive surface in an impassioned trance, driven by some remote intimation of the whole. And there's something about this image that thrills me.

Such concentrated effort, intricate care and dedication to the perfect realisation of an idea seem like an anachronism in this smash-and-grab age of fast food, fast ideas and easy digital returns. Anachronism is where it's at for Emmanuel – and not just in terms of technique. His content also reflects a pursuit of all that is remote, obscure and difficult. In his hands these subjects become beautiful and beguiling.

"I'm very attracted to the scratching," Emmanuel says. "You start off with a black surface and then scratch in the highlights. The void is there – but bringing up the drawing from nothingness to something is the thing I'm subconsciously attracted to. That action of building up the tones. The light comes up slowly, and then builds up until you are left with this shimmering image.

"Hardly anybody does it anymore because it's so ridiculously time-consuming, but you get these soft, velvety, deep, rich blacks that are so infinite. The tones you get are so soft you can almost hear them. I was attracted to the oldness, the remote, the antiquated, the archaic.

"The way that I make marks, the obsessiveness, lent itself to the old way of printing, like working on an etching plate, scratching directly onto a solid metal surface with a dry point needle. I use an old dart."

When one meets Emmanuel, his work makes a particular kind of sense. His physical presence tells its own story. He's delicate and agile in frame like Puck from a *Midsummer Night's Dream* and he speaks in an unusually androgynous voice. Although there is a unique power in his impish presence, it is hard to believe it was recognised for what it was while he was growing up on the East Rand of Johannesburg in the 1970's and 1980s.

Although he does call himself a gay artist, the way in which his identity manifests itself is subtle and oblique. But one feels it is the willed obscurity of his subject choices, haunting Karoo landscapes that speak of absence and loss, objects of desire like the antique phone of *Phone Sense* (1998) that seems to refuse to ring – and the body as a map of experience.

"I don't make works about being gay. My work is the result of my life history."

And there are stories to be read between the frames. Take for example his award winning *Air on the Skin*, a vast psychological landscape that stretches across six panels. One can feel traces and echoes of it in other works on show. *Airstrip* (2002) features an empty winding road and with a few random items of washing hanging on the roadside power lines.

The clothes are flapping in the wind, coming loose and flying away into the wilderness. Then there is *Vault of Breath* (2000), another strange, metaphysical landscape that stretches across five panels. What is water could also be waves of sand rippling across a vast desert.

"*Vault of Breath* started from a dream I had a few years ago. The dream was like a film clip," Emmanuel says. "I saw this recorder or flute spinning on a line in the wind in a nondescript sort of landscape. Around the same time, I took a trip through the Karoo to Hogsback with an old friend of mine and on the way I took photographs of the Gariep Dam, which is a man-made dam in the most hauntingly beautiful area.

"The friend I was with, Alain Renaut, is a paleontologist at Wits and he filled me in on the ancient history of the area."

This history, as written by Renault, appears imprinted on the artist's skin in the installation of page proofs taken from *Cathexis*, which features pieces by 12 writers, all either friends or colleagues of the artist. "Cathexis is a word I fell in love with," Emmanuel says. "It is a psychoanalytical term that deals with transference."

"The ancient Greeks believed if you held on to an object for long enough, or rubbed against an object for long enough, there was a degree of energy that transferred between you and that object and I liked that idea. In a sense, that is how my life and career have unfolded."

Renault's text has been blind embossed onto Emmanuel's skin. It reads: "This place is characterised by layers ... As you drive through this land you pass a record of our own past, safe, sad, familiar; but around the next bend in the road you find a shockingly dislocated lake; out of place and odd."

Yes, out of place and odd. But Emmanuel's images bring a beautiful strength to that feeling of oddness.