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Self-Portrait or Self-Justifying? The Portraits of Roelof van Wyk

Roelof Petrus van Wyk at Commune.1

By Renee Holleman
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Roelof Petrus van Wyk
'Yolandi ViSSer Fig. 1 from the series 'Young Afrikaner - A Self-Portrait', 2009. C-print .

Roelof van Wyk's show 'Jong Afrikaner: A Self-Portrait' has garnered a surprising amount of attention in recent weeks. On opening in Cape Town it not only made the cover of this month's *Art Times*, but was featured on national television with eNews. The latter is perhaps the more remarkable given the rarity of broadcasting the visual arts in South Africa – it's obvious that the work has struck a nerve.

In its current form at Commune 1, the show comprises a series of head-and-shoulder portraits of 48 'young' white Afrikaans South Africans shot against an empty black background. Grouped in one room are the blondes, while the rest – the brunettes and a few redheads - are elegantly arranged around the rest of the exhibition space. All appear unclothed and unadorned, apparently revealed without pretension before the camera. In its stark formulaic depiction, this collection makes obvious reference to a legacy of ethnographic photography, with its attendant racial and classificatory imperatives. And it is an ironic, if not terribly self-conscious gesture. A white man turns his lens on himself, on white people rather than black people, on middle class people rather than the poor. Not those who are others and othered, but his friends and his acquaintances. There is no Pieter Hugo curiosity nor Roger Ballen deformity here. Framed as a self-portrait, it is an intentional, self-evident reflection of the artist's ideals in the choice of his subjects. This doesn't happen enough and we should certainly be pleased. But for some reason I'm not.

It has something to do with the photographs' remarkable beauty. Despite the documentary intention there is a sensuousness and slickness to the work: the combined result of technique, high production value and the general hip good-lookingness of van Wyk's friends and acquaintances. These 'urbanised, creative, engaged Afrikaners', as the press release describes them, are at face value a notably cool bunch. This is not principally the reason he chose to photograph them, but neither is it coincidental. His interest in this select group is in 'their interesting, often extraordinary lives' which embody a new, complex or alternative Afrikaner identity, presumably similar to the one the artist has fashioned for himself or one that he values in others. But given that none of these defining stories are accessible to the viewer, the emphasis falls largely on the way in which they are portrayed, something which begs further examination.

Traditionally a portrait must represent a 'likeness' of the sitter while simultaneously revealing something



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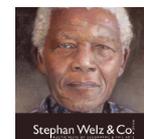
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of their character. Van Wyk has the first bit down in spades, but the second part not so much. There is nothing to suggest who these people are aside from a few tellingly trendy haircuts. What we seem to be confronted with in 'Jong Afrikaner' as an extended profile is 'aliveness'; in other words, similarity. Imaged as this artist's self-representation they suggest a desire for belonging as much as an attempt at differentiation. The essential 'problem' of being an 'Afrikaner' perhaps?

In conversation with the artist I'm curious to find out to what extent his subjects actually identify with the project, and with the term 'Afrikaner' itself. Van Wyk explains that 'all the subjects engage with the term "Afrikaner", they are all in some way "becoming" more or less "Afrikaner". Some don't speak Afrikaans as a mother tongue. Some actually would prefer if it didn't exist, would wish it away or hope it fades away. Others are more "paraat", more wanting to own it and make it a badge of some kind; honour, pride, a shared something that has a name...'. Moreover he is at pains to point out that the work is intended to open up a conversation about the fluid nature of Afrikaner identity, that it is not about absolutes, but rather about asking what an Afrikaner is today, or is becoming. The term 'Afrikaner' with its long and problematic history is undoubtedly contested, and its current resurrection has, I imagine, much to do with the show's popularity. As South Africans with such deeply segregated pasts we are often caught between traditions that we may love or hate, but which are irreversibly of us, and a present that challenges with its messy plurality.

I can say as much that van Wyk's subjects don't for the most part appear as representative of some Afrikaner nationalistic mythology; 'God, Volk en Vaderland'. They look like people I know and some are even faces I'm familiar with. Perhaps this is part of the problem. In another less local, urban, hip, white South African context they may more effectively challenge notions of stereotypical Afrikaner identity, beyond appearing 'as pretty pictures of pretty white people' as an Afrikaans friend of mine commented.

While this beauty may be a welcome respite from the negative associations that many Afrikaans speakers experience, its also hard not to see the simplicity and vulnerability of van Wyk's subjects as romanticised and idolised. There is none of the inevitable exposure that marks historic ethnographic photography – the images are tasteful and chaste. Luminous against their dark surround, these exquisitely captured larger- than-life figures are positively and somewhat disturbingly heroic, even superhuman in their perfection. I also can't help wondering, what about the 'rural' young Afrikaners? The black Afrikaners? And what would those who still harboured traditional ideology, who perhaps strongly identified as Afrikaners, look like? Could you really tell what they believed if they were naked?

I find I'm not overwhelmingly surprised by these images and what the artist is trying to articulate about Afrikanerness. Admittedly there was a time when perhaps I would have been, before I met Cape Town-based Afrikaans speakers (urban, creative and variously engaged), whose friendship consigned my childhood prejudices and pretensions to the past. But the fact remains that there have always been cool, hip, alternative Afrikaners who challenged apartheid notions of identity, and while the images on this exhibition attempt to reveal a new and different set of people grappling with these issues, they also reinforce a stereotype of another kind.

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