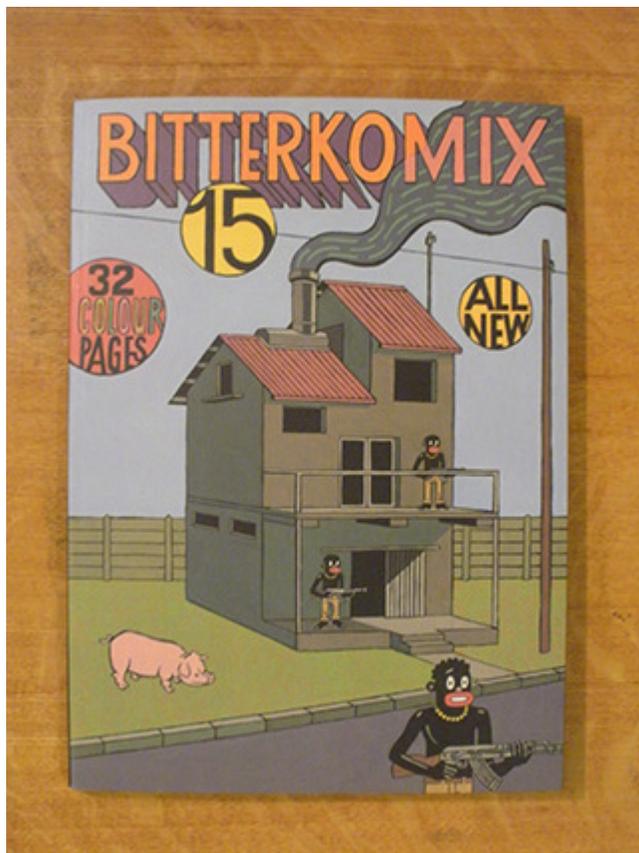


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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Without Mercy: The Bitter Comix of Anton Kannemeyer

by [Jillian Steinhauer](#) on [August 4, 2012](#)



Cover of Bitterkomix 15 (click to enlarge; this and other Bitterkomix photo by author for Hyperallergic)

In 1986, South Africa was still eight years away from the end of apartheid, and though opposition to the racist ruling system had been mounting for decades, the government continued to suppress rebels and dissidents. Yet that same year, the exiled Afrikaner writer and artist Breyten Breytenbach, a vocal critic of apartheid, returned to South Africa to accept a literary award. It was his first visit to his homeland after being granted early release from a nine-year sentence there on charges of terrorism.

As Lawrence Weschler recounts in a 1993 *New Yorker* profile, Breytenbach delivered a fiercely critical political speech at the award ceremony and then traveled to the University of Stellenbosch, known as the “Afrikaner Oxford,” to give another impassioned address: “Here I am in the capital of Afrikanerdom, where they make the Afrikaners dumb,” he said. “At the most important moment in our history, our establishment has delivered forth an entirely depoliticized generation.”

Soon after, an Afrikaner student named [Anton Kannemeyer](#) would enroll at Stellenbosch to study fine arts. He would end up with two bachelors and a master's degree from the Afrikaner Oxford, staying on to lecture, and he would, in a sense, prove Breytenbach wrong.

Kannemeyer and a good friend, Conrad Botes, were politicized, and while in school they began channeling that consciousness into comics. In 1989, they published a strip mocking a macho Afrikaner character from a popular war magazine and, three years later, founded their own underground comics journal, [Bitterkomix](#).

That first strip, published in an anti-establishment Afrikaner literary journal, set the tone for much of what was to come: scathing satires of the Afrikaner society in which Kannemeyer and Botes grew up.

“Bitterkomix is a repository for an entire culture’s detritus ... It is the South African subconscious.”

Using the pseudonyms Joe Dog (Kannemeyer) and Konradski (Botes) — and sometimes joined by Kannemeyer’s brother, Mark (pseudonym Lorcan White) — the duo launched a full-scale attack on the glorified culture of their youth. They took as their targets everything from characters in Afrikaner

children’s books and historically celebrated Afrikaner narratives to Anton and Mark’s father, J.C. Kannemeyer, a prominent figure in the Afrikaans literary establishment.

“Bitterkomix is a repository for an entire culture’s detritus,” wrote Richard Poplak in the Johannesburg [Globe and Mail](#) in 2008. “It’s where four centuries of Afrikaner history have been spat up for examination. ... It is the South African subconscious.”

The magazine, which came out sporadically at first and then steadied to a yearly offering, generated considerable controversy because of its explicit sexuality and political and cultural blasphemy. Despite — or perhaps because of — this infamy, it soon gained a national following.

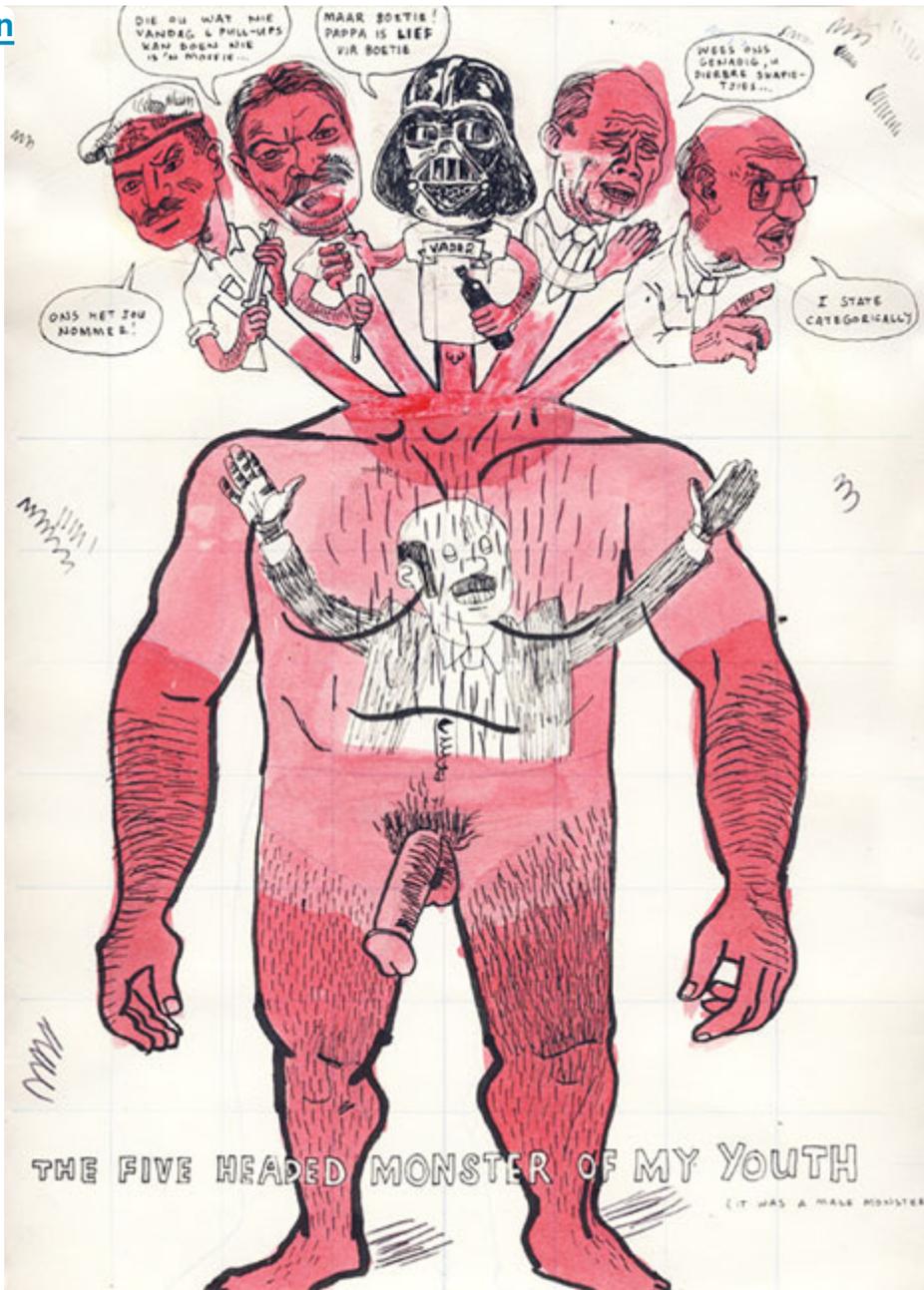
But the work of Kannemeyer and Botes, especially in the first ten or so years of *Bitterkomix*, was expressly personal, and in that certain sense, it also proved Breytenbach right: excessive self-interest implies a lack of political involvement — concern for one’s own world rather than the larger one.

While Kannemeyer’s identity as an Afrikaner necessarily gave the work political ramifications, his critique stemmed from the anxieties and trauma he experienced growing up as a member of an exploitative and racist minority ruling caste.

In a place like South Africa, or Israel or Bosnia — countries scarred by ethnic conflicts — the personal necessarily becomes political. One is entrenched in a group, an identity, from birth, so that even remaining passive or neutral constitutes a stance: an Afrikaner who failed to fight apartheid implicitly endorsed it, by virtue of his skin color and privileges. At this point, questions of complicity and guilt creep into the picture — questions that have always haunted Kannemeyer’s work.

A drawing of his from 2008 illustrates this confluence of the personal and political. Titled “Five-headed monster of my youth,” the work depicts a large and hairy naked man with five heads drawn in a rough, thick-lined style. Four of the heads are stained reddish-pink, stern-looking and self-important; these are presumably politicians (a South African viewer could likely identify them), and they say creepy things (“Ons het jou nommer!” says one, which Google translates as, “We have your number!”).

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Anton Kannemeyer, “Five-headed monster of my youth” (2008), black ink and acrylic on paper, 30 x 22.5 cm (this and all other art courtesy Stevenson Gallery)

The middle head, however, wears the black mask of Star Wars’ Darth Vader and a T-shirt emblazoned with the word “vader.” Of course in the movies, Darth Vader turns out to be both Luke Skywalker’s nemesis and his father, a circumstance with which Kannemeyer can clearly relate.

In an added twist, “vader” means “father” in Afrikaans, moving the image beyond a metaphor for Afrikaner patriarchy to personal specificity. As critic Rita Barnard wrote in an essay in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, “the Darth Vader figure in the comics of ‘Joe Dog’ and ‘Lorcan White’ ... is readily unmasked as their biological father.”

This conflation raises questions about the nature of political satire and critique: do they gain or lose value when coming from such a personal place? Does the mixing of the political and the personal confuse the issue, barring the author from seeing the political situation in a broader, more holistic light?

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Underground comix, which broke off from mainstream DC and Marvel superheroes in the late 1960s, eschewed the idea that books combining words and pictures were only for children, instead embracing adults and adult themes like sex, violence and drugs.

“Does the mixing of the political and the personal confuse the issue, barring the author from seeing the political situation in a broader, more holistic light?”

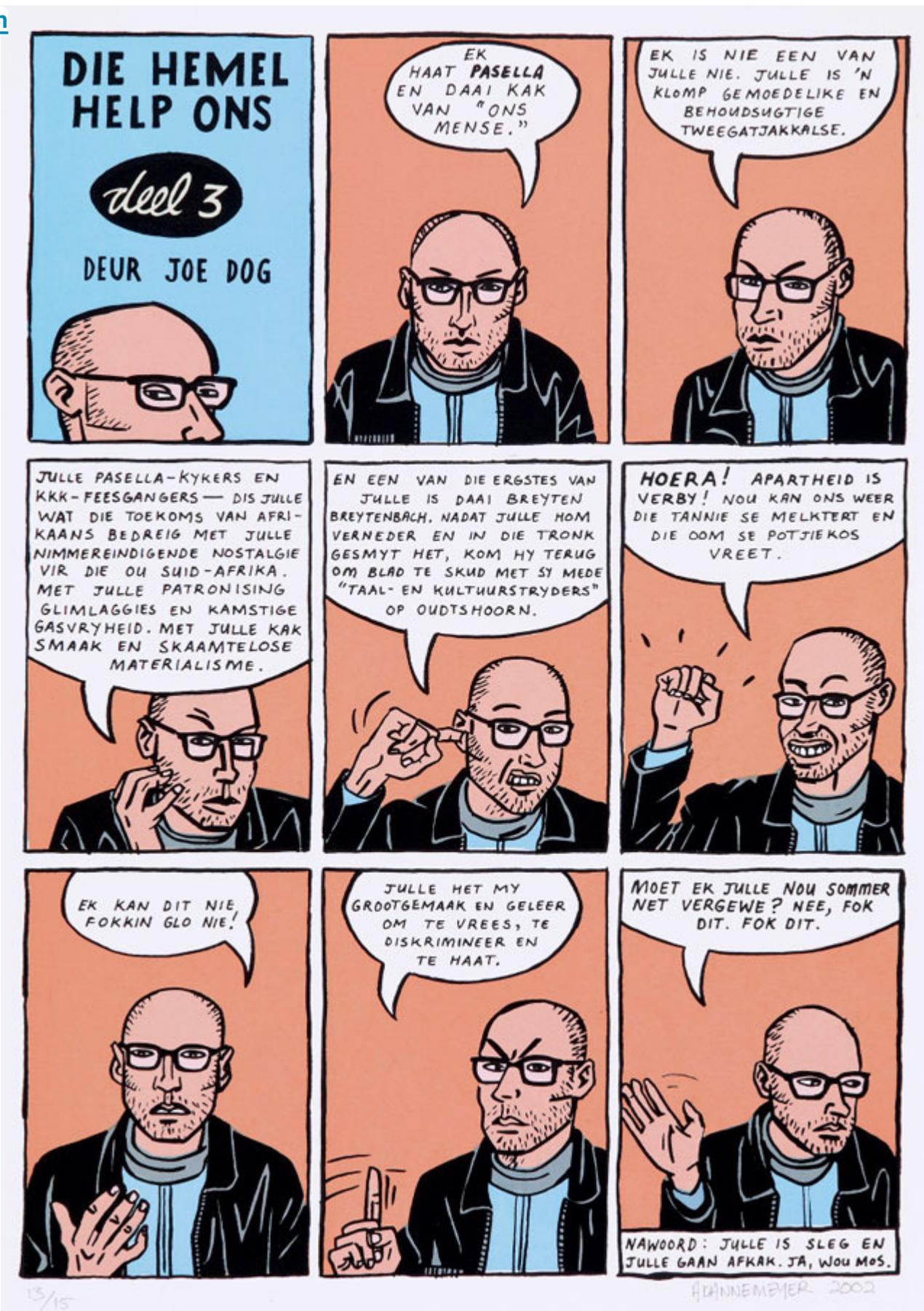
They also turned autobiographical. Pioneers in this subgenre include Justin Green, who in 1972 published *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, an intensely personal comic book about his Catholic upbringing and OCD; Harvey Pekar, who, beginning in 1976, imbued everyday life with the status of art in his *American Splendor* series; and Art Spiegelman, who started toying with comics as a

way to exorcise the demons of his parents’ Holocaust experiences as early as 1972.

Whatever the reason, comix artists had struck gold with autobiography: something about the combination of content and form — the approximation of an illustrated diary, as well as the discomfiting introduction of serious personal issues into a medium previously designated for kids — just worked.

Kannemeyer’s comics grow out of this tradition. Like many of his predecessors, he inserts himself into his strips, using an illustrated alter ego as a framing device. The Joe Dog character (which is not, as the name might imply, a dog, but simply a cartoon version of Kannemeyer) often narrates the story, addressing the reader head-on and breaking the fourth wall, much like Pekar’s and Spiegelman’s avatars do.

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"Die Hemel Help Ons" (2002), silkscreen, 64 x 50.5 cm, ed. of 15

Open Kannemeyer caricatures himself with recognizable traits — bald head, glasses and exaggerated sideburns — and uses his comic self as a kind of talking head to espouse his views. One work called “Die Hemel Help Ons” (“Heaven Help Us,” 2000) consists entirely of Joe Dog against an orange background, speaking directly to the reader, whom he takes to be a stand-in for his fellow Afrikaners.

In each of the nine panels we see Joe Dog with a different facial expression, railing against his people. He concludes: “You raised me and taught me to fear, to discriminate and hate. Do I now just forgive you? No, fuck it. Fuck it.” (All translations are based on Google Translate and consequently are rough.)

Interestingly, Kannemeyer also draws on another and entirely different area of comics history to shape his artistic identity: Hergé’s Tintin. Sometimes using Tintin as a stand-in for himself, Kannemeyer recasts the character in all sorts of unsettling ways — from an embarrassing encounter with a black bartender in Berlin (“True Love,” 1999) to a disturbing story in which an Afrikaner father sexually abuses his son, a small and innocent Tintin (“Boetie,” 1995).

In an essay from 2007, critic Daniel Marais pinpoints the role that Hergé’s protagonist plays in Kannemeyer’s work: “... Tintin is a white African trapped in his own incriminating skin; a character who cannot escape his colonial past regardless of his personal political convictions.”

Kannemeyer also makes use of Hergé’s famous “clear line” style, which emphasizes strong, clean lines over crosshatching and shading. “I started using [the style] when I made comics of myself at a very young age,” Kannemeyer wrote in an email [interview](#) with writer C.B. Liddell. “At the time (as a young child before I turned 12) Tintin was the only comic I knew, and the style just seemed perfect to open that window back into (especially) my pre-pubescent years.”

“The use of the stereotypical Black has several functions ... one being that I did see all black people (who I didn’t know) at that age as looking the same.”

The result is a kind of twisted tribute to the influential comics artist of his youth, as well as a jarring contrast between a deceptively innocent and readable style and the dark and troubling, often explicitly sexual, content that Kannemeyer explores.

Of course no reading of Hergé and Tintin could avoid the racist illustrations and colonialist messages embedded in a work like [Tintin in the](#)

[Congo](#). Rather than shy away from or gloss over these stereotypes, Kannemeyer draws them out and pushes them nearly to their breaking point.

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“Pappa and the black hands” (2009), ink and acrylic on paper, 29.5 x 20 cm (click to enlarge)

In a work from 2009 titled “Pappa and Black Hands,” a white man sets off into the wilderness to hunt black “natives.” Though the character isn’t exactly Tintin, the allusions are there: Pappa wears a safari outfit reminiscent of Tintin’s in the Congo book; his snubnose mimics Tintin’s; he’s accompanied by a dog that resembles Tintin’s companion Snowy, although it is black rather than the white original; and the black people in the comic are drawn in the manner of Hergé’s stereotypical Congolese — naked, with spiky heads of hair and oversized, cartoonish features, including big, red lips.

Pappa shoots at the first black person he sees. His target seems to reappear unscathed, so he shoots again. This recurs several times, and he becomes increasingly flustered and confused. Finally, after several attempts, he thinks he’s hit his target. He walks over to the spot where he was aiming and discovers, to his delight, a pile of dead black bodies. Since he couldn’t tell the “natives” apart, he had shot many, thinking they were all one. Pappa proceeds to chop off their hands and head home with a sack-full. “All’s well that ends well!” he says.

The brilliance of “Pappa and the Black Hands” is bound up with its horror. Seeing such a cruel tale rendered in such a conventionally innocuous setting as a comic strip makes us question what kinds of messages may be hidden in all the media we consume.

What’s more, Pappa’s inability to distinguish one black person from another is a commentary both on the racist, colonialist mentality and on the author’s own upbringing. “The use of the stereotypical Black has several functions,” Kannemeyer said in the aforementioned interview, “one being that I did see all black people (who I didn’t know) at that age as looking the same.”

And yet, Kannemeyer’s drawing of “the stereotypical black,” here and in much of his work, is highly problematic. Isn’t he reinforcing the demeaning imagery and racist trope that lumps all black people

Opentogether?

The appropriation of such images is offensive — which is undoubtedly the point. Kannemeyer purposefully adopts the disturbing white/Afrikaner point of view in order to force us to confront it ourselves. By depicting the world through these eyes, he implicates us in the colonial and racist mindset.

* * *

In [Country of My Skull](#) (1999), a poetic and charged book recounting her experiences reporting on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, [Antjie Krog](#) writes about the moment when five of apartheid's most notorious Afrikaner killers show up for amnesty hearings.

Krog herself is an Afrikaner, and the sight of these horrible men who are so familiar makes her “go cold with recognition. ... Aversion. I want to distance myself,” she writes. “They are nothing to me. I am not one of them.” A few pages later, she recognizes that her efforts are in vain:

What do I do with this? They are as familiar as my brothers, cousins, and school friends. ... From the accents, I can guess where they buy their clothes, where they go on holiday, what car they drive, what music they listen to. What I have in common with them is a culture — and part of that culture over decades hatched the abominations for which they are responsible.

In a sense, it is not these men but a culture that is asking for amnesty.

Throughout his work, Kannemeyer exhibits a similar push-pull tendency with Afrikanerdom (though his crude, cursing and often cruelly ironic tone could hardly be more different). From his very first comics, he railed against the macho, supremacist myths of his upbringing — and yet those very stories formed the content of his work, albeit in a critical way.

Like Krog, he has tried to disavow his roots — in the “Heaven Help Us” strip mentioned earlier, Joe Dog says, “I’m not one of you” — only to be pulled back in a complicated dance with his heritage.

Open [C]riticism is most properly the work of ‘insiders,’ men and women mindful of and committed to the society whose policies or practices they call into question — who care about what happens to it.

The dictum applies to Kannemeyer, too: he’s most qualified to desacralize Afrikaner culture precisely because he is part of it. Kannemeyer’s partner, Conrad Botes, recognized this when he told a writer for *Creative Review*, “The comics are written in Afrikaans, the language of Apartheid, so in a way the criticisms in the comics are an attack from within.”

Of course there’s a kind of cruel irony to this idea, because being born into a society that has imposed and defined itself through racial or ethnic hegemony is a massive moral burden. As such, Kannemeyer (and Botes and Krog and Breytenbach) must grapple with questions of complicity and guilt.

How guilty was the average white person who lived comfortably with apartheid, neither helping nor hindering its progress? What about that person’s child? And if one does feel guilt, how useful is it — can it lead to anything productive?

Kannemeyer’s relationship to apartheid and the level of responsibility he feels is difficult to parse through his art. Much of his project has consisted of rejecting what came before him, which suggests a distancing, the erection of a barrier between his elders and himself.

Rita Barnard, in her essay for the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, suggests that some of the vehemence of Bitterkomix may stem from its creators’ desire to avoid being burdened by historical, colonial guilt:

A fear of such contamination may be an additional reason why the condemnation of the Afrikaner patriarchy in Bitterkomix is so emphatic. At stake in it ... may be an unconscious need to project all guilt for apartheid on to the older generation.

Kannemeyer’s art has evolved over the last six or seven years. He has begun to show more in galleries, and his paintings and prints have become a hybrid of comics, art and illustration — works closer to one-panel political cartoons than comic strips, with a single image and a punch line or visual gag. Naturally this change in medium — from the intimacy of comic books to the bigger, more public gesture of gallery art — has corresponded with a lessening of the confessional tone.

But he does continue to sporadically publish autobiographical comics in *Bitterkomix*, and his characteristic reliance on autobiography and alter ego, even in his fine art, ensures that he doesn’t walk away with his hands clean. Kannemeyer frequently inserts himself in these latter pictures, and when he doesn’t, he often draws an “everyman” stand-in, a character (such as Pappa in “Pappa and the Black Hands”) who actually looks like an abstracted version of Kannemeyer — white, bald, with big, recognizable sideburns.

For the most part, these men are depicted as well-intentioned white liberals still struggling with racism. In the painting “A Black Woman” (2010), for instance, a white man behind a desk conducts a job interview with a black woman. We see her through his eyes — as a Hergé stereotype — while he says, simply and awkwardly, “I see by your résumé that you’re a black woman.”

This questioning of white liberals goes hand-in-hand with Kannemeyer’s questioning of the value of historical guilt. “Guilt!? ... Guilt is petty bourgeois crap!” exclaims one of his characters in a Bitterkomix panel, and indeed, a striking painting from 2010 reiterates this take.

The work, titled “The Liberals,” shows a white couple being assaulted by a group of black men (all of the latter drawn as Hergé caricatures). Two of the culprits pin the wife to the floor, while a third stands above her and unbuckles his pants. She can’t see her husband, whose throat is being slit by another man, but

Open he calls out to him: “Do something, Harold! These **historically disadvantaged** men want to **rape** me!”



“The Liberals” (2010), acrylic on canvas, 130 x 200 cm

This brutally absurd scene points to the failure of historical awareness and guilt: the woman knows and feels bad about the past, but that does nothing to help her in the present. In fact, her historical guilt might even become a way of excusing the crimes being committed.

What’s more, this moment of crisis also implicates the viewer, who is manipulated by the artist into assuming the point of view of the white characters, seeing only Sambo-like stereotypes of black men. Kannemeyer seems to be saying that racism is so deeply embedded in the white South African psyche that it can spring up even in those who claim to be free of it.

Kannemeyer isn’t alone in his dismissal of white guilt as a scapegoat. Breytenbach renounced it — Walzer quotes him as saying, “Guilt and all...[the] breast-beating sentimentalism engendered by guilt — these are out” — and at one point in her book Krog talks to a clinical psychologist who expresses a related idea: “Guilt is such a useless thing ... Guilt immobilizes you. ‘I am guilty — so what can I do?’” But the message of “The Liberals” is bleak nearly to the point of nihilism: if awareness and good intentions aren’t enough, what possibly could be?

Such quasi-hopelessness can creep in when looking at Kannemeyer’s work: there is a lot of criticism to be had, but not much of it seems constructive. Barnard comments on the sort of limbo space inhabited by Bitterkomix, which applies to Kannemeyer’s fine art as well:

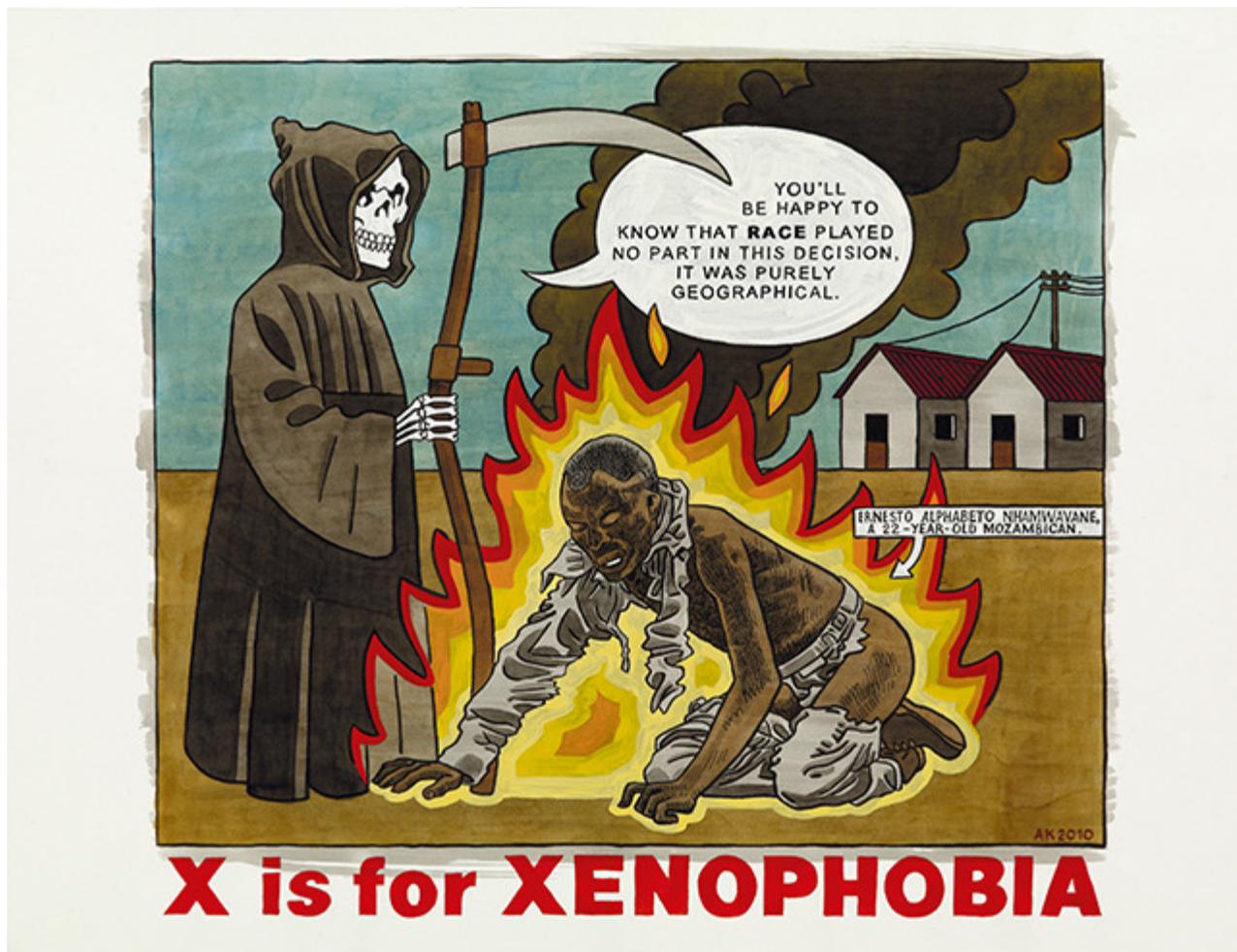
Perched at this fulcrum between the old and the new, between the retrograde and the progressive, these graphic stories do inhabit and create a space beyond apartheid: but we must understand that ‘beyond’ in the way Homi Bhabha does at the beginning of *Locations of Culture*, as “neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past,” but rather a condition of “disorientation, a disturbance of direction.”

Open true enough, but arguably this is the space always inhabited by the critic, or at least by the satirist: he doesn't say how things should be but, rather, ridicules them as they are in an effort to open our eyes a little wider. Judging Kannemeyer's work by any other standard — in other words, expecting him to see past the present and predict an unknown and unknowable future — is unfair.

One way in which we can evaluate his art is to witness the evolution of its content and tone. Much of the anguish and bitterness of the early days has faded, replaced by a more detached, though still invested, approach. As Joe Dog has turned into the white everyman and confessional comics have given way to politically minded cartoons and paintings, Kannemeyer has become more of a third-person observer than a memoirist.

“The power and integrity of his confessions have in a strange way purified and absolved him,” writes Andy Mason in an essay in [The Big Bad Bitterkomix Handbook](#) (2006), “and the vilification to which he has been subjected in the past no longer seems to touch him.”

This emotional shift has been accompanied by a shift in content. Though Kannemeyer still engages with Afrikaner culture, his work is increasingly focused on race relations and racism as broader issues. He extends his critiques to black as well as white South Africans, to the corruption and ineptitude of the South African government and to other parts of the continent, commenting on conflicts in Rwanda, Uganda, and elsewhere.



“X is for Xenophobia” (2010), black ink and acrylic on paper, 50 x 65 cm

A series of prints titled *The Alphabet of Democracy*, which mimics a children's alphabet with each letter

Openstanding for a word or phrase, evidences Kannemeyer’s new scope: “M is for Mugabe,” “X is for Xenophobia” and “S is for Stompie” (Stompie Seipei, a black teenager murdered by the thugs in Winnie Mandela’s football club–cum–vigilante gang in 1988.) The series is as frightening, funny and effective as any of his best work.

This past June Kannemeyer treaded even newer territory, exhibiting at Johannesburg’s Stevenson Gallery a group of works under the title [Paintings and Prints for Doctors and Dentists](#). As the name suggests, the show is full of artwork more tame and home-appropriate than ever before. It focuses on portraiture and landscapes, two genres he isn’t exactly known for, and the work — particularly a series of intricate drawings of the Swartberg Pass — is surprisingly earnest.



“Swartbergpas” (2012), pen and ink on paper, 21 x 29.5 cm

But his sarcasm and brutal wit poke through, especially in the self-portraits. And though Kannemeyer seems to have freed himself from the stranglehold of Afrikaner culture, one work assures us that he’s far from complacent.

In [the drawing](#), Kannemeyer lies on a therapist’s couch relating a dream (or a nightmare): “... Then I wake up, the cheering has stopped, I have three kids, and I work in a cubicle.” His right arm gesticulates as he speaks, while clutched under his left arm is a copy of *Bitterkomix*.

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