

Realism in abstract

There is a scene in David Lynch's film *Lost Highway* in which the camera tracks through a dark passage. What is remarkable about this sequence is that, while one sees nothing, it is blackness itself that becomes palpable.

If I begin with this memory it is because Serge Alain Nitegeka's latest show, *Black Passage*, has triggered it, as it has triggered thoughts of the "middle passage" — the Atlantic slave trade — and, all the more forcefully, the reminder of the artist's core inspiration, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, famous for his black canvas.

Nitegeka's exhibition, comprising wall and sculptural works — and here one wonders if they can be regarded as "fine art", given their greater leanings towards design and architecture — is a blithe, cool, some would say glaringly derivative nod to these two Modernist masters. But, given the loudness of the echo, does this make Nitegeka's exhibition any less compelling? I think not.

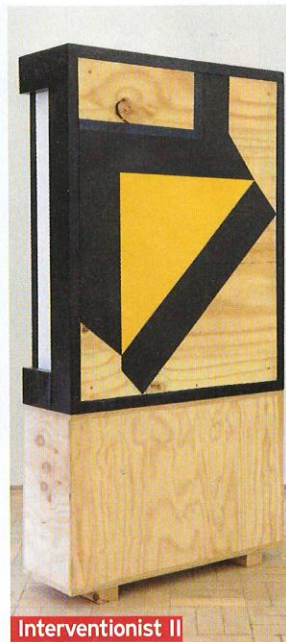
On entering the Stevenson Gallery one is immediately struck by a spatial alteration. All the familiar entry points have been blocked and intercut with angular sheets of beige ply, while new thresholds have been created. In places the faux gallery walls have been cut open to reveal a harder surface beneath. Elsewhere the white cube has been overlaid with diagonal coats of grey and teal. The flooring within the freshly created cavities has, in turn,

been stained with broad diagonal strips of dark varnish.

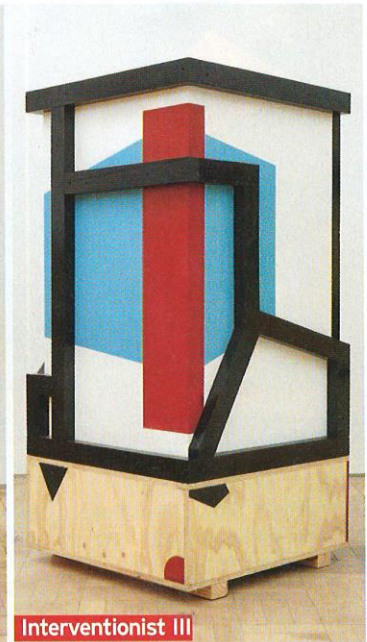
The overall effect is deconstructive, yes, but the intent behind this makeshift theatre is not merely to confound received custom and perception but to generate a novel inquisition. After all, this is the age of the "pop-up", and Nitegeka's decision to transform a bastion of contemporary art into a plaything or theatre for some rudimentary and passing transaction is a direct allusion to the ephemeral nature of business, and the ineluctable quality of abstraction.

For Malevich, abstraction was "a new realism of colour conceived as non-objective creation... a new plastic realism, plastic precisely because the realism of hills, sky and water is missing".

Black Passage starts to operate



Interventionist II



Interventionist III

as a kind of air-gap or secret stain designed to fudge the complacent and false divide of realism and abstraction.

Plasticity is a dominant reg-

ister, as is constructivism. And in my brief chat with the artist it was evident that design — the buzzword of the 21st century — is regarded as an enabling and incorporative word. All, it seems, is reducible to design.

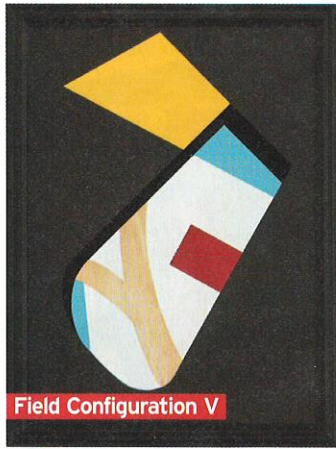
Nitegeka's adoption of the term, however, is never cynical or prurient. Rather, it is the intoxicating pleasure that design yields — be it a colour combination, a geometric form, or the drift from the thing itself into its greater context — which, for the artist, reveals a slipstream or "black passage" between the world of things and their disappearance.

This merger of object and environment is, after all, the way in which we in our increasingly de-individualized lives have come to understand our sense of space as place.

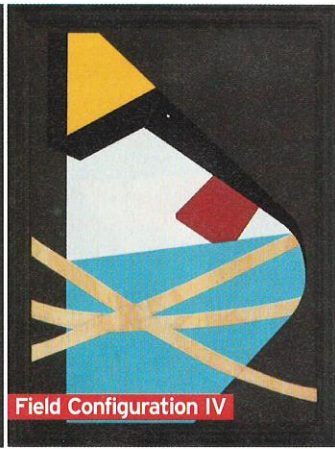
High-end abstractions, Nitegeka's works fuel a larger



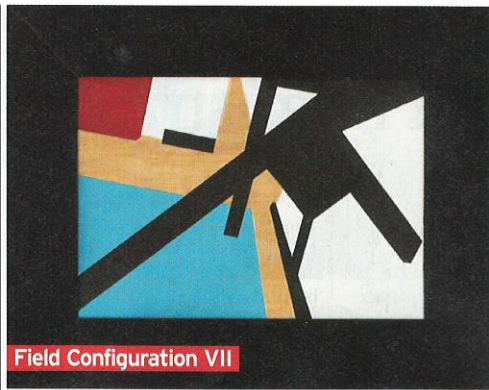
Fragile Cargo XX



Field Configuration V



Field Configuration IV



Field Configuration VII



Field Configuration VI

conceit. The colours are flat, hard-edged; the surfaces intercut with disclosed strips and curls of chipboard and ply, materials that now dominate the artisanal interiors of a designed world.

The effect, or affect, of the works is impassive, insouciant, cool, detached, for these are not artworks that trigger the imagination so much as they compel a return to order and form. That

said, Nitegeka's is not a quasi-fascistic, or, after Malevich, a "suprematist" exercise. For if the artist has punctured the gallery space and drawn a shadow across its sheer surface it is because he has rigged a theatre, framed a set-up, the better to reveal just how makeshift and fragile any fantasy of the fixed and adamant in fact is.

A towering, dark, lean, grey-suited figure, with a white nar-

row-collared shirt and a thin black tie, it would seem that, like his works, Nitegeka has dressed his person in a monochromatic net. However, this mirroring of artwork and artist, while striking, does not permit me

to forget the pressure that underlies the look.

Like the dark diagonals that stain the secret cavities between the faux and real walls of the gallery, there remain, amid the cool shards of teal and grey paint, the blocks and slivers of white, red, yellow, black, a break in the surface of the whole as strong yet brittle as laminated ply and chipboard.

Ashraf Jamal

▣ *Black Passage* is at the Stevenson in Cape Town from October 10 to November 14.