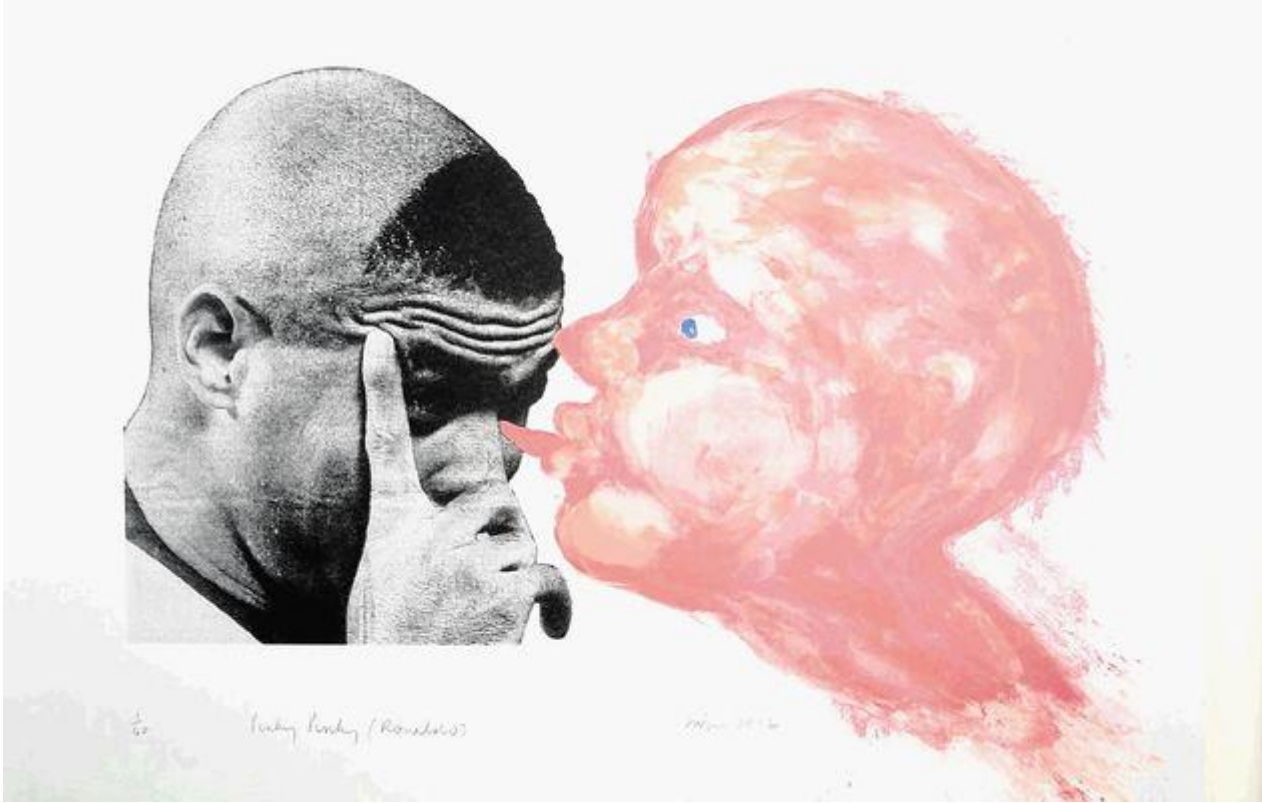


Paste Master: The discourse of disorder

Graham Wood | 12 May, 2015 00:07



ENTROPY: Works like 'Pinky, Pinky' embody artist Penny Siopis's 'complex ideas so effectively that the viewer's response is visceral'

An alarm goes off repeatedly as you walk around Time and Again, Penny Siopis's retrospective exhibition now on at the Wits Art Museum.

Sensors detect when anyone crosses the red tape in front of the works, alerting the security guards, who are kept busy asking gallery visitors to keep behind it.

It seems visitors feel compelled to draw closer and closer to the works until their faces are right up against the canvases.

The exhibition opened in Johannesburg last month after a run at Iziko, in Cape Town.

A beautifully produced and weighty monograph, published by Wits University Press, coincides with the exhibition. The volume is filled with reproductions of Siopis's incredible body of work spanning 35 years so far, along with essays and interviews. It leaves one in no doubt of Siopis's stature in contemporary art.

More than that, the importance of her work can be gauged by attending the exhibition. On the day I went, WAM was buzzing. People want to see Siopis's work in person. It's interesting to see how similar concerns and ideas manifest themselves in such different ways in her work through media as widely different as

installations of found objects, the deep, sculptural impasto of her paintings, film works, collages, photographs and, again, in her more recent works in glue and ink. But its physical presence counts.

Siopis is by no means anti-intellectual. She is an academic as well as an artist; a thinker as well as a practitioner. Rather, her intellectual responses to history and its representations and misrepresentations never detract from her works' aesthetic appeal, and her complexity never comes at the expense of clarity, which keeps what could be a very highbrow affair accessible without oversimplifying its concerns.

Somehow, through her deep interest in materiality and the power of objects, she has the rare ability to communicate those ideas on many levels, giving the essay writers plenty to say, but also embodying her complex ideas so effectively that the viewer's response is visceral.

The creepiness of the 'Pinky Pinky' works makes you shudder. The cake works, made by piping oil paint onto the canvas to create sexually charged works of confectionery, both attract and revolt the viewer.

Films of works on the body make you wince. And the objects she uses in her installations - things belonging to her mother or grandmother, or found - are strangely magnetic. Over and over again the ways in which the personal is political becomes almost tangible.

Some of Siopis's central thematic concerns seem to have particular resonance right now. The famous *Patience on a Monument: A History Painting* from 1988, for one, interrogates the colonialist imagery of the past with subversive force that goes way beyond the recent debates.

Try not to cross the red line when you go, though I can't help thinking that somewhere in the back of her mind Siopis would be pleased every time another neat border is breached, and the excess, overflow and disorder of her works finds new expression.

Penny Siopis: Time and Again is on at the Wits Art Museum, Braamfontein, until July 20.

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