

Ivor Powell

Graphic Point



THE WONDER of it is that, after 23 years of Bitterkomix and associated publications, Anton Kannemeyer has lost none of his trenchancy or urgency. His work remains as uncompromisingly and salutarily obscene as ever – and every bit as offensive.

In Kannemeyer's world offensiveness is good. It means he's getting his point across.

And the point is: to precisely the extent that he makes his viewer feel uncomfortable and out of sorts, Kannemeyer achieves his purpose. Characteristically, when his stuff works best, he contrives to make you feel on edge, as though you are intruding on or witnessing something you have no business seeing, something from which, in decency, you ought to be averting your eyes. At his best, he makes you feel somehow complicit in an act of psychological violence from which there is no escape.

Pappa in Doubt is a follow-on to the satirical *Pappa in Afrika* (2010), a look at the paradoxes of life in the postcolony.

So we have a pair of drawings titled (with dripping irony) "Fair Maidens from Africa". The images call to mind a fairly well-developed genre of tourist kitsch in which the maidens are shown semi-naked in "traditional attire" – beads and hardly anything else.

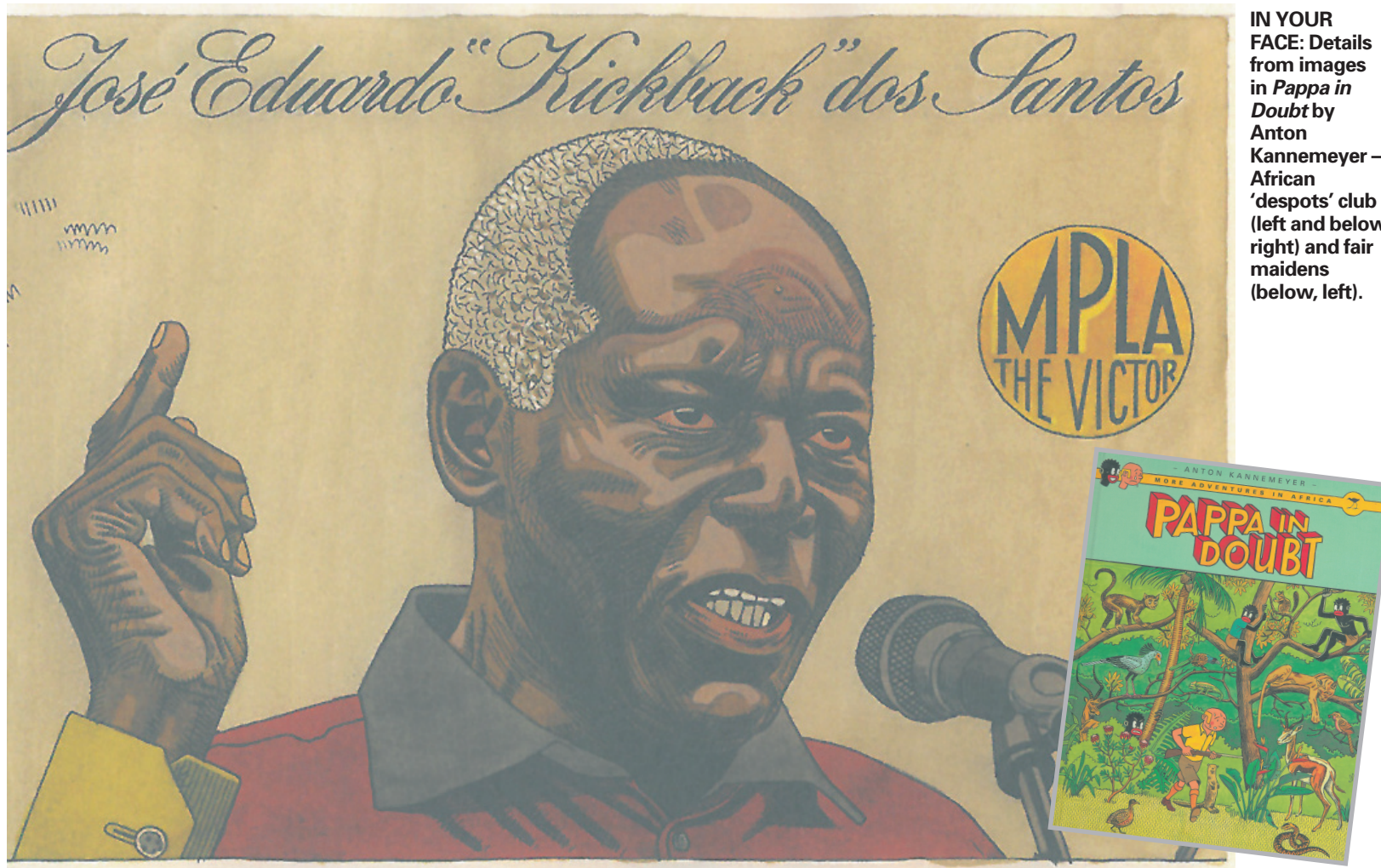
They are presented in celebration of innocence and childlike simplicity, caught up in a timeless bubble, where tradition endlessly repeats itself and the passage of time does not stamp itself in development or change.

In this seemingly benign and indulgent gesture, however, there lurks a discourse of the most terrifying historical toxicity. By reducing native Africans to the status of children, the colonisers set themselves up as the responsible adults and to inscribe a version of reality in which it was it was no more and no less than a bounden duty to guide, to lead them into the domain of history, that is to say to "civilise", to save their heathen souls. All this was largely through learning the benefits of hard work, of course, but also through a surrendering of human agency and by (in the colonisers' imagination) accepting the destiny of having Europeans controlling every facet of life for their "improvement".

Indeed, the narrative of Africans – incidentally those same Africans who, in the European Middle Ages, boasted one of the great centres of mathematical learning at Timbuktu – as children, in need of guidance, discipline and the wise intervention of the colonisers, proved the key notion justifying and legitimising the entire colonial project and allowing Europeans to escape responsibility for the rapacity they proceeded to visit upon the colonised.

As this colonial metatext plays out in the "fair maidens" genre, there is – ironically – another, altogether less rarified, subtext. In the colonial and post-colonial version of things, Africans were natural creatures, not fully human in the sense as "Europeans" – and therefore not subject to the same rules of modesty and concealment that became the lot of humans with Eve's disgrace in the garden of Eden. And thus it came about, even in the most repressed times in South Africa's repressive and puritanical history, there was in the postcard genre of the fair maiden and ethnographic photography in general, an unacknowledged subcategory of soft porn available to the youth and manhood of white South Africa.

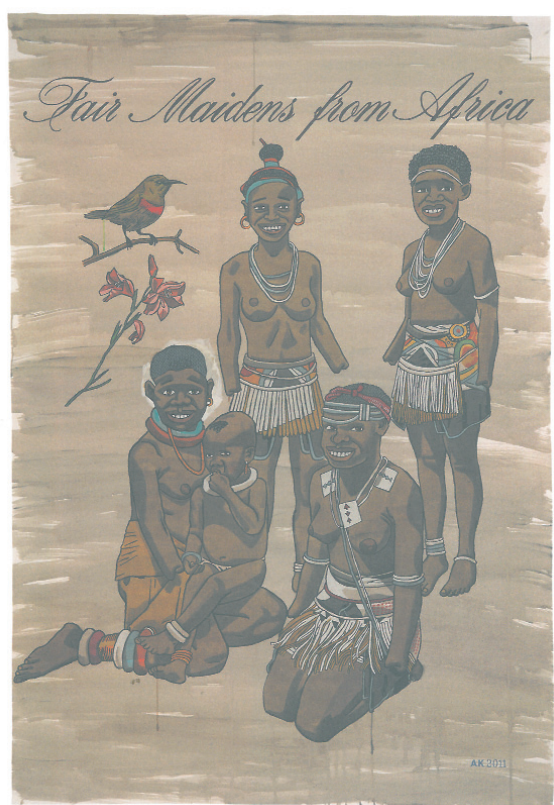
Such considerations, of course, yet further confound the sickening discomfort provoked by



IN YOUR FACE: Details from images in *Pappa in Doubt* by Anton Kannemeyer – African 'despots' club (left and below right) and fair maidens (below, left).

It is 23 years since Anton Kannemeyer and then-sidekick Conrad Botes first scandalised readers with the in-your-face, risqué satire that was the hallmark of 'Bitterkomix', their core publication. Brutal and unflinching in its telling of truth, this graphic art held up a mirror that, although shocking and shameful in what it revealed, remained all too recognisable to South Africans.

This Pappa don't preach



Kannemeyer depicting "fair maidens" – far from some timeless tradition – as caught up, in the most brutal way possible, in the unfolding of African history. Their hands have been chopped off – as by rampaging drug-crazed militias in west Africa, most notoriously in recent times in Sierra Leone – as a tactic of war aimed at debilitating the enemy's supply lines and sowing demoralisation.

The image – the violence that is done through the electric fissure of opposed versions of reality is both sickening and arresting, and



Kannemeyer's audience is left with a sense that such realities demand some kind of response from us as fellow humans that has not yet been forthcoming.

Just when you think you've integrated the jaggedness of your response to Kannemeyer's maidens, you turn the page to an illustration of: "Nsala, of the district of Wala, looking at the severed hand and foot of his five year old daughter, Boali, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company militia".

A lot of what Kannemeyer does is more conventionally

confrontational. In this vein – recalling the brouhaha surrounding artist Brett Murray's *The Spear* – Kannemeyer shows a group of worshipful, middle-aged, white men paying homage to the vision of a giant erect phallus.

In *Pappa in Doubt*, Kannemeyer continues to push offensive stereotype to new levels of offensiveness, much of which cannot be reproduced here.

Balanced against this, however, he has begun to explore portraiture and likeness in his strips and graphics. Along with relatively

careful likenesses of Zuma and various cabinet ministers, there is a series on African "despots" like Angola's Eduardo dos Santos and (the dead) Jonas Savimbi, as well as Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, and Thabo Mbeki (his Aids denialism, for Kannemeyer, gains him membership of the despots' club) where humour and the comedic convention are dispensed with entirely – and the commentator focuses on "telling it like it is".

His stock in trade, however, continues to be Tintin-from-Hell – nothing short of breathtakingly reductive in its stereotyping of Africans: thick-lip, woolly-hair, entirely devoid of any humanising detail. Kannemeyer devotes two pages (24 panels) to a highly idiosyncratic set of definitional excursions of words either derived from or connected to the "K-word".

In one panel he has God calling down from the heavens, addressing a miserable assortment of victims of the often seemingly mindless violence of man upon man – amputees, cripples, corpses and the like, and using extreme language to suggest holy fellatio.

There is, it must be admitted, a temptation to respond to such extreme provocations with a kneejerk rejection – to dismiss Kannemeyer as a cheap sensationalist rather than the serious and philosophical artist I think he is.

This would be to commit the most basic of critical fallacies – to confuse the artist's perspective on reality with what he is uncovering and making plain through his work.

Kannemeyer's alienation of his viewer is calculated to offend against good taste.

There is an argument to be made that in Kannemeyer's world, taste and restraint are nothing more or less than cop-out – excuses to accept things the way they are and fail to acknowledge our own guilt or do anything to make things better.

There will, be no hiding from the uncomfortable truth, nor from the responsibilities the truth lays upon us if Kannemeyer has anything to do with it.

It is this that makes him, despite the relatively ephemeral medium in which he works, one of the most challenging and important artists working in South Africa today – not to mention one of the sharpest, most insightful and, yes, funniest.

Space where art meets the heat of the street

Michael Morris

Artful



NURTURING artists at the margins is the passion of Woodstock curator Megan Theunissen, whose Space Between (SB) Gallery in Albert Road seeks to showcase up-and-coming talents and stimulate wider interest among art buyers in work that's engaging, challenging and accessible.

The upper-floor gallery, which forms part of Side Street Studios, was established a year ago, but has already achieved a reputation as a space for new work emerging or evolving from the more or less subversive sector of street art and graffiti.

Theunissen describes her ambition as being to "give a central platform to emerging artists and street-related and urban practices, and to underscore the value of urban art".

Street art, the 27-year-old gallerist explains, straddles many divisions, though most artists start out with graffiti, later branching out into other media or forms ranging from illustration to photography and sculpture.

They are, typically, practitioners who have not had opportunities to exhibit, as they often don't match the conventional fine-arts mould, yet whose work "meets international standards of production".

This much is true, she says, of the gallery's end-of-year summer exhibition, co-curated with intern Alexandra Kreuz Goldberg, which runs at the Albert Road gallery until December 19.

Part of Theunissen's mission is to introduce new buyers into an art market that tends to be defined by expensive work in high-end galleries.

Cape Town, she laments, is, in contrast to Joburg, a city whose leisure interests dominate spending patterns.

"I know people who'll spend R2 000 on going out and having fun at the weekend, but are hesitant about spending that kind of money on a work of art," she says.

"But we enjoy training the new buyer. Most of the work we exhibit is accessible and we see our exhibitions as a way to get younger people excited about buying art."

Much of it is also art that reflects young people's interests and their experiences of contemporary urban life.

Theunissen, who grew up in Cape Town and graduated in painting at Michaelis in 2009, is engaged in a master's degree through Unisa, on the theme of human transience.

"Running the gallery and doing my master's at the same time has meant I don't have much time for myself... but I am determined to stick my neck out for artists I care about and the gallery gives them an opportunity to develop their careers."

Theunissen picked out some emerging artists to look out for:

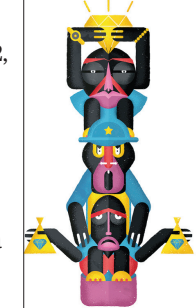
Nardstar is a Cape Town artist

who specialises in graffiti art. Her unique style involves the use of radiant colour schemes and the deconstruction of letters, animals and faces into a harmonious balance of shapes, colours and patterns.



She is not restricted to giving life to plain walls but also experiments with mediums including digital work inks, acrylics and printmaking. She enjoys using art to creatively uplift and add beauty to neglected and overlooked places.

Russell Abrahams, 22, is a freelance illustrator and artist from Cape Town.



After graduating with a diploma in graphic design, he became a full-time illustrator. He makes work that is relevant to the youth of today. Last year he was a Design Indaba Emerging Creative. This year, he was one of the Woolworths x Pharrell Williams T-shirt design winners, took part in five group exhibitions, and was selected for Essie Letterpress's 2016 Artist Almanac calendar.

Alexis Aronson, born in 1985, is a self-taught artist and illustrator in Cape Town.

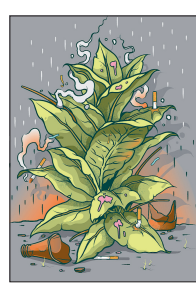


Her subject matter is a collective of "beasts", somewhat human, somewhat animal, sometimes spirit-being. These are the "strange ancestors" (as he likes to call them), who she feels she has met rather than created. Alexis's primary inspiration is drawn from the nature and her love for the natural world.

James White is a 27-year-old emerging artist with a background in graphic design and painting. He produces woodcut installations as an extension of his passion for graphic design. In 2016 he will continue exhibiting and collaborating with new artists.



Damn Vandal (Shaun Oakley) is a 28-year-old graffiti artist and illustrator who grew up in Durban. He has a degree in Visual Communications, and 12-year background in graffiti.



He describes his style as a fusion of vector illustration and graffiti style and says much of his work represents the urban/street lifestyle "and the world around me".

Weeding out misunderstandings of marijuana use

IT WAS hard not to be moved when IFP MP Dr Mario Oriani-Ambrosini, ill with cancer and wearing a suit too big for his shrunken frame, pleaded in Parliament for the legalisation of dagga for medical purposes.

He disclosed that he had been using dagga: "I was supposed to die many months ago and I am here because I had the courage of taking illegal treatments... here in South Africa in the form of cannabis, marijuana or dagga."

"Otherwise, I would be pumped with morphine and I would not be able to speak to you, Mr President."

He said it was "a crime against humanity" to deprive medical

Vivien Horler

Book Corner



marijuana to people who needed it. But just six months after his plea in Parliament in February last year and in the terminal stages of lung cancer, Ambrosini was dead, apparently as a result of suicide. And the Medical Innovation Bill he tabled is still languishing with the parliamentary portfolio

committee on health. Dagga, marijuana, ganja, bhang, or cannabis sativa and indica, to give it its botanical names, was used by South Africans well before whites settled here in 1652. Sativa means cultivated and dagga is believed to be one of the world's oldest cultivated crops. It has been used medicinally, mystically and for recreation.

Grahamstown-based artist and novelist Hazel Crampton cites the Venidad, a Persian religious text dating back to the seventh century BC, as listing dagga as the most important of 10 000 medicinal plants. It has been used as an anaesthetic, a painkiller, an

aphrodisiac, to treat hypertension, chest problems and glaucoma, an appetite stimulant and for the promotion of "great mental cheerfulness".

In various countries in the 20th century, including South Africa, its use was banned, often because it was lumped in with opiates including heroin, morphine and opium. She provides some interesting facts, such as a World Health Organisation report of November 1971 which said young dagga users "were less likely to show aggressive behaviour than juveniles who preferred alcohol".

She says not all dagga is the same and the weed smoked in

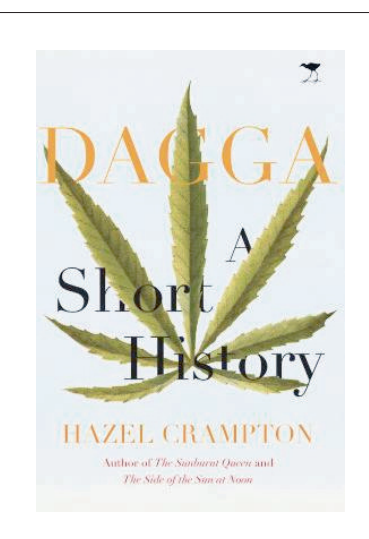
Europe and America is high in levels of cannabidiol or CBD, which blocks feelings of anxiety, while South African dagga is low in CBD levels and therefore can cause much anxiety.

She says by last year the cost of arresting and convicting a single "low-level dagga user" had ballooned to R240 000, money which she argues could be better spent fighting high-priority crimes.

Crampton is not impartial in the debate over dagga – she clearly believes it should be decriminalised, licensed and controlled – but she makes an interesting and often compelling case.

"The story of the demonisation of dagga is – to borrow a phrase from a slightly different context – 'one of shaky science, misjudgments and misunderstandings, media scares, and once-important but now long-dead political agendas,'" writes Crampton. Her book is not intended to be a comprehensive take on dagga, but merely, she says, a conversation piece to provide some background and ignite debate on issues such as licensing, legalisation and taxation.

It is an issue that's not going away – even the African Christian Democratic Party has supported its decriminalisation for medical use.



DAGGA – A SHORT HISTORY
HAZEL CRAMPTON
Jacana