

Another surreal serving from the creator of the 'Pap Pietà'

Michelangelo's work proves an enduring inspiration to a local sculptor, writes Tymon Smith



SPLINTERED VERSION: Wim Botha with 'Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)' Picture: WALDO SWIEGERS

IN 2000, sculptor Wim Botha went to Rome to study Michelangelo's *Pietà*. For more than 500 years, artists, believers and tourists have stood in the St Peter's Basilica looking in awe at what has become one of the most iconic sculptures in history.

Michelangelo himself was so proud of it that it's the only sculpture he ever signed. His depiction of Mary holding the body of Christ has been reproduced and referenced in millions of images, entering the popular consciousness, and is instantly recognisable.

In South Africa, perhaps the most famous image that recalls the *Pietà* is Sam Nzima's photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubo carrying the body of Hector Pieterse during the student demonstrations in Soweto in 1976.

Botha's studies of the *Pietà* led to his production of a mirror version of the sculpture made of mealie meal in 2004. *Mieliepap Pietà* became one of his signature pieces and set the pattern for a

body of work that created new meanings out of the production of recognisable forms from classic sculpture in new materials.

Since winning the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 2005, Botha has become one of the most distinctive, acclaimed and recognised sculptors of his generation.

When turning his attention to another famous sculpture — *Laocoön and his Sons* — with the intention of producing a similar form-versus-material version as he had with the *Pietà*, Botha began to feel "uncertain about taking something and just rendering it in a different medium to alter its medium".

"It felt like an approach that had a dead end at the end of that line and didn't open up possibilities," he tells me at the Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg, where his new untitled show is on display.

The *Laocoön* did materialise thanks to his discovery of the possibilities offered by carving it out of polystyrene and casting it in

bronze. The work is not a replica of the original but an abstraction, painted in black and presenting a dark, visceral reaction to the original. It's currently on tour in the US as part of a show that features Dante's *Divine Comedy* reinterpreted by African artists.

While the *Laocoön* sculpture is an abstraction, it still bears more of a recognisable resemblance to its source material than Botha's latest interpretation of the *Pietà*.

Botha is not an artist you see too much in public at art scene gatherings, but he makes the time to do the uncomfortable work of talking about his art at his openings.

On the day we meet, he looks a little like he's emerged from somewhere deep underground, blinking in the glare of the lights as the work he has spent eight months alone with is prepared for public consumption.

The show consists of three elements: *More's the pity*, a series of 119 oil on canvas and ink on paper sketches, and two sculptures; *Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)*, a polystyrene bronze casting of a violently splintered version of Michelangelo's original; and *Untitled (line drawing)*, a wooden construction of angular lines that traces elements of the *Pietà*'s geometry.

Although he dealt with the sculpture in *Mieliepap Pietà*, Botha says he "never had a sense that I was done with it. It's too original an image and it appears too many times in life around us — the work itself but especially images that resemble it".

What's most noticeable about this work is its focus on paintings and drawings which take the image of the *Pietà* from recognisable reproduction through to abstractions of fleshy pink and crimson, providing a cinematic, almost flip-book journey through the intense process Botha underwent in his studio.

He acknowledges: "It started off with a few oil paintings as preparatory sketches for the bronze — just trying to put onto canvas more or less what the mental image was, which is really just the silhouette.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Botha's 'Mieliepap Pietà' Picture: FREDLIN ADRIAAN

Then each new mark, each oil painting, left a desire for something else... Once I started adding the colour it generated its own momentum and I would prefer doing this to anything else.

"During that period I would neglect everything else just to continue the next drawing."

As he finished one drawing he would pin it to the wall, then move onto the ceiling, creating a space in which he was immersed in the drawings and began to feel the series had become "like a film where you see the ending first and then you flip back. You have knowledge of something that the characters don't have knowledge of and you can see the tension building up.

"With some of these it really felt like that, especially the ones where the Madonna is alone and there's this crimson appearing and you know what's coming."

The space of this exhibition is markedly different from Botha's recent installations, which, he says, "were much more about creating new universes — different spaces with different logic in which things could happen that can't happen in our world".

It's conceptually less rigidly governed than some of his other installations, but that's fine with Botha, who is happy to admit that "this is a purely indulgent immersion. I'm not trying to get to the bottom of the *Pietà* at all and I'm not interrogating it.

"It's just a process I started and I had to get through... I learnt an unbelievable amount through just letting go and trusting the process and really, for the first time in my life, I'm liking the works that I'm making."

● Botha's exhibition is on at the Stevenson, Johannesburg, until September 25