



Dead Men, New Paintings: Zander Blom's 'New Paintings'

Zander Blom

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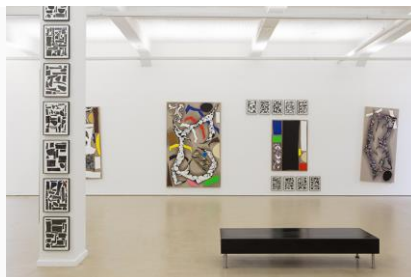
Stevenson, Cape Town

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I am wandering the exhibition space – the pristine white walls with paintings hung *just so*, artfully tilted or set right with a spirit level – when a sudden chill runs down my spine. For a moment my body goes cold, and then the feeling passes. This is how I know there are ghosts afoot.

Using Zander Blom as a mortal vessel, the spirits of Mondrian and Picasso have risen from the grave to haunt the walls of the Stevenson. These unruly poltergeists are playing tug of war. They have fought over the artist's hand, using it to scribble profanities and childish doodles over each other's printed faces.

Blom: you may believe that you are unpacking and engaging with the forms and traditions of abstraction, and the history of Modern Art, but actually I think you might be a spirit medium. You have struggled with these conflicting forces – chaos and order, breadth and depth – for so long (or so your artist statement says), and they have had a tremendous effect on your work. The bizarre outcome here is that it turns out Michael Stevenson simultaneously represents Picasso and Mondrian in 2016.

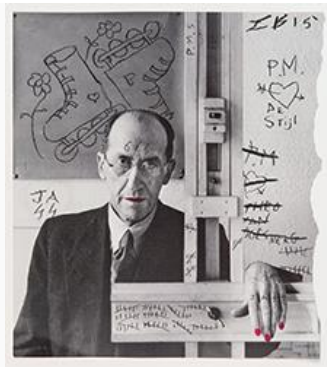


Zander Blom, *New Paintings*. Installation View: Stevenson, Cape Town, 2016.

Certainly, Blom must have written his sprawling artist statement while possessed by the spirits of some Abstract Expressionists with unfinished business. To this day, the project of Modernism remains famously unresolved, and (perhaps spookiest of all) continues to haunt our art history books, primary and tertiary education systems, and galleries.

This seductive incompleteness is also the hold it keeps on the living world – an eternal recurrence in the guise of *postmodern deconstruction or irreverent play*. These are the dangerous incantations which bring it back to life. What will you do with these restless souls, now you have conjured them? Their symbols and their power breeze through the exhibition, scoff at Blom's iterations, his critical form (his *critique of form*). This is not to say that the master narratives of Modernism should never be tampered with, only that masters are as masters do – they threaten to take control, and they have taken control here.

And so, locked in an unending struggle, the two Modernist heavyweights wrestle bitterly over the canvasses, blocks of pure pigment interrupted and distorted by the spiteful, jagged edges of irregular shapes and inconsistent colours – a grudge match taking place inside their shared human host. The paintings look uncomfortable; petulant men sleeping head to toe in a single bed (or grave). Their untreated canvasses seep with the greasy ectoplasm shed in these grisly skirmishes. These are the dead, rotting, reflexive, romantic carcasses of the avant garde, doomed to repeat the same mistakes. No wonder Blom is tired.



Zander Blom, *Modern Painting: Piet Mondrian* [Detail]. 2015-6. Mixed media on paper

The grand battles that play out in the paintings manifest in miniature in the series of drawings and prints that constitute the rest of the exhibition. This is a space for some (self?) reflection and some humour. The cartoonish drawings, scrawled over pages from monographs and Helen Gardner-equivalents and photocopies of serious Mondrian paintings, go some way towards a demystification of the 20th century master narratives. At a second glance though, see the malevolent spirit of Picasso seizing Blom's hand and taunting Mondrian the Stiff (*stop hitting yourself, stop hitting yourself*, etc). While the idea here seems to be to destabilise and delegitimise, the drawings remain stubbornly self-satisfied, smug, still wrought with comfort and confidence. A portrait of Piet has been given make-up and nail polish, mocked and rendered impotent (read: feminised) by Pablo's virility. The spectre of machismo still looms large, has not quite been exorcised from the space, or the artist. The forces inside Zander Blom pull him into a perpetual Post Modern post mortem.

There are moments in this particular series of works where he seems to come back to himself. In one drawing, the title page of *Farewell to Pure Abstraction* has the image of a tombstone scribbled onto it, two hands breaking through the burial mound. In another, an alien stands next to a textbook Mondrian painting, the number 666

written across its forehead. Who has drawn this alien, this grave? I believe it to be Blom himself, grasping the rare moments his governing spirits are at rest. These are the text book doodles of a schoolboy, done covertly as their teachers turn away.

But without the right Medium, a ghost comes back no matter how many times you try to kill it. The ominous, grave-shaped paintings, stripped of their advertised playfulness and spontaneity, look on undisturbed – hanging in the eerie, ringing silence of the largest of Stevenson's rooms.

Sitting on a conveniently placed, meditative bench, the lonely Rothko looks on, and laments.