

LINGER / VERTOEF exhibition by Andries Gouws, 22 May 2018

Opening delivery by Janet Solomon

Good evening,

“The artist chooses his object as much as he is chosen by it. Art, in a sense, is a revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world. Consequently, its only aim is to give another form to a reality that it is nevertheless forced to preserve as the source of its emotion.”

These are the words of French author Albert Camus

I believe Gouws is deeply engaged in this “revolt against the fleeting”, maybe less so the unfinished. This is his artistic adventure. Gouws is absorbed with the problem of what it means to look. Looking and painting is meditative for him. And real looking takes time and engagement. Real looking is relational.

Donald Winnicott, an English Pediatrician and psychoanalyst who was especially influential in the field of object-relations during the last century, showed us what we all know apperceptively; that the self is first made real through looking, through the lingering parental gaze. This is how we first get to know who we are. We are made manifest to ourselves in the faces we see responding to us. We are formed by being looked at. Looking is fundamental to who we think we are and how we make sense of our world.

There is nothing casual in what Gouws chooses to look at. With clear-sighted earnestness he labours in prosaic, utilitarian corners where the stuff of his expressive world is found – under stairways, on top of cupboards, in utility rooms. Here serviceable white goods and geysers, boxes, object d’art, skulls and books are kept. Ubiquitous, and therefore anonymous - the standard stuff of middle class existence. All are containers of sorts. Like all receptacles whose use is keeping or containing, they are feminine symbols, which can refer to the unconscious and to the maternal body and of human life itself.

If one lays any store by an artist’s statement, and I always believe they are breadcrumbs to somewhere, Gouws gives us adjectives used by others to describe the feelings evoked by these collections of mundane objects in overlooked mundane spaces. Words like ‘uncanny’, ‘awkward’, ‘desolate’.

‘Uncanny’ is another way of expressing a sense of the conundrum of the strangely familiar: Are these paintings eerie, strange, obdurate, difficult? Do they seem to hold some mysterious quality? Look at these scenes, mostly they are of the truly banal,

and yet they resist abandonment, they resist negation. They keep us with them. To Gouws the mood of his paintings suggests something “between the meditative and a sense of failure, perhaps abjection”. Is Gouws saying that his ideals of mastery over the real involve a form of self-divestiture? Is there really some kind of fear of meaning? I see no hopelessness, so by abjection is he referring to forms of humbleness? In the whole of the Parisian Cité des arts, where he painted these works during a residency, Gouws chooses the laundry for our analysis and reflection. Possibly he’s making a pun with his title. In English to linger is stay awhile, to remain longer than is necessary. In French *linge* is laundry.

Are his works unsettling? For me only in as much as sitting in someone else’s still warm seat can be – they carry the mark of someone having just left. They feel like evacuation scenes. There is surprise in discovering the humble remains, the telltale remnants of life, lived spaces, used things. A cheery apple red towel with its disheveled pile assures you there’s someone else’s DNA all over it, inscribed in the very scumbles across its surface.

Art critic John Berger stresses that the main task of painting has been “to contradict a law which governs the visible: to make what is not present ‘seen’.”

As much as Gouws is asking you to linger, he is also asking, “What lingers?”

Trying to get to grips with this, my mind kept taking me back to a magical moment in my youth spent lingering in the plantation of arcades of the Great Mosque of Corduba. I was alone in that mystical interior. The longer I remained the more aware I was of being just below the surface. Literally. There was a tidemark defining the height of the average shoulder that had rubbed against the marble, granite and jasper of its recycled Roman columns. This was sweat of past centuries. This exuded alterity of individuals, accumulated and laid down over time, is the tidemark, the symbolic glaze of a passing humanity.

For me this is what lingers in Gouws’s work. It is everywhere infused. “The real thing is the thing that is not there”. Absence, like a zero, requires marking, to be signified. Phenomenologically speaking, absence does not exist except as potential presence. The “here-ness”, the “presence” is of those who have just left. This sense of presence in Gouws’s work recognises the self as a being-among-beings, and acknowledges the relevance of others’ experiences to the self, as a being.

Thank you Andries for the gift of Linger/ Verdoef, and to all, please tarry a while and consider what is important about this work.

