



INA VAN ZYL

ART ON PAPER | JOHANNESBURG

left Ina van Zyl, *On fire*, 2002, watercolour on paper, 25 x 18cm

centre Ina van Zyl, *Ice-cream*, 2003, watercolour on paper, 40 x 40cm

right Ina van Zyl, *Ice-cream accident*, 2003, watercolour on paper, 40 x 40cm

Ina van Zyl's first local solo, *Besoek*, possesses an unavoidable element of blatant sensuality, almost contradictory among the crisp charcoal drawings and harsh watercolours. This sensuality also challenges the ideological – both stated and unstated – concerns of the show. A selection of work at the foot of the gallery stairs offers a focus on appurtenances of female vanity, with iconic largeness to balance their physical size.

Born in South Africa in 1971, van Zyl emigrated to the Netherlands in 1996, where she is successfully established. With her drawing skills, versatility in different media, affiliation to Pop's aesthetic and intelligent discursive approach to feminism, van Zyl is both playful and serious in teasing apart contemporary women's values.

Iconoclasm has been an understated element of van Zyl's visual language since her first contribution to *Bitterkomix* in 1993. Billed, like this early work, as dealing with the visit of a fashionable girl to her unglamorous cousin in a nightmarish setting, the works on *Besoek* have loose narrative associations. The shoes – be they slingbacks, stilettos or sandals – and the bags,

THE WOMEN AROUND WHICH VAN ZYL CONSTRUCTS AND TEASES OUT HER DISCOURSE ARE LARGELY ABSENT

sunglasses and ice creams, are at once still life elements, comments on social pretensions, and beautiful exercises in technique. Zoomed in to frightening proportions, the give and take between their bubblegum-harsh colours, which bleed into one another, as well as van Zyl's sound drawing skills and intelligent use of proportion and size, give this exhibition an itchy lopsidedness. This imbalance is not about the quality of the work, though, it is about the ideological values these jarringly playful images confront.

Brenda Schmahmann, in her recent book *Through the Looking Glass*, comments on a poignant acculturation of the female body and its adornments in contemporary local handling. With reference to the work of Pam Melliari, she identifies an interrogation of the ideal through "her imperative to show desirousness rather than desirability" Schmahmann says this is linked to challenging a Western tradition of representing female bodies "as simply objects of male desire"

In van Zyl's works of high-heeled shoes, sunglasses, lipstick and smeared mascara depict elements designed to beautify the female form. They are, however, considered in a context removed from male arousal or approval. Her series *Listening I, II and III*, emulate this point. Figures in watercolour just shy of being overworked, they have wide smeared mouths, eyes that seem wet in the watercolour. They speak of soppy sentimentality without necessarily being soppy or sentimental, and offer a sympathetic insight into women, their emotions and their needs.

Unlike the rubric Schmahmann casts around women artists using the body as central subject, the bodies of the women around which van Zyl constructs and teases out her discourse are largely absent or implied. It is through elements colouring their external identity that this tension is manifest. Van Zyl's series of crisp portraits in charcoal on paper are also far from traditional portraits. Idealised and stereotypically South African, these polished, elegant women are not graced with names, which consolidates their typecasting in the name of style, gesture and ideology. The abstract titles apportioned to them are about idealism, which again falls into those feminist and feminine values, shaped and moulded by a male-dominated society.

Van Zyl boldly probes her medium. Her colours bleed into palimpsests and veils, hairy textures and ruptured bursts. While maintaining a level of poignancy and sensitivity, the works are not precious, nor are they precise. She finds her forms through the medium she uses and contributes to a feminist discourse with images that are both refreshingly and surprisingly light.

■ **Robyn Sassen**

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