



Outsider stories: On view at the Planet Contemporary Art Site, Ina van Zyl's mark-making bears closer resemblance to the life-drawing tradition than to Judge Dredd comics

Velvet in monochrome

FINE ART: Andrew Putter

THE first time I saw **Ina van Zyl's** work was in *Gif*, the hard-core Afrikaner sex comic produced by Bittercomix and Hond in 1994. Tucked away amid the refreshing vulgarity of bad-boy artists like Joe Dog and Conrad Botes, Van Zyl's two little stories came as a complete surprise. Quiet, questioning, unforgettable — offering very few answers in a contemporary art world that's full of "finished" pieces that vie for first-place as the cleverest comment, the most knowing criticism, the smuggest solution.

For many artists, art is a selfish weapon in the struggle for power. But not for Van Zyl. She

pointedly reminds us that to be alive is to question, and that to question means to admit that we often *don't know*.

So much so that her work almost embarrasses one with its aching real-life concerns and its hard-won, unsophisticated form. Using art's capacity to invest communication with a startlingly dense complexity, she lets us in on her private problems — as a woman, an Afrikaner, an image-maker — without political correctness or any glib answers.

Her best-known works are the graphic stories. Based on the classic comic format (a series of images combined with texts), her very choice of genre embodies the dilemma she faced as an insecure art-undergraduate at Stellenbosch

University: was she a hopelessly sentimental storyteller, an unskilled designer, or a second-rate artist? Where, in short, did she fit?

Registered as a design student, she found herself unable to cut it as maker of the assured slickness that is *de rigueur* in the design world. By third year her work was in an unhappy crisis.

But, luckily for Van Zyl, Bittercomix artist Anton Kannemeyer is on the Stellenbosch art school staff and, recognising an unconventional talent, suggested she try drawing a comic. As an outsider-storyteller, Van Zyl discovered comic-making — the outsider-storytelling genre par excellence. And since then she has gone from strength to strength.

On show at the Planet Contemporary Art Site

is some of Van Zyl's other work — figure drawings she's been making for years, a couple of portraits, and some of the works she submitted for end-of-year exams after changing to Fine Art III.

It's a great opportunity to see her work "in the original" rather than in print. One sees that her comics are executed in mediums not traditional to the genre — like charcoal — and even when she uses pen and ink, the mark-making is closer to the life-drawing class than to Judge Dredd.

And the scale of works comes as a surprise — not huge, but conventionally scaled for traditional life-drawings. Yet the tentative, focused economy so familiar from the comics is all there in rich, velvety monochrome.

In her unflattering and sensual probing, Van Zyl shows us that we are our stories. If we turn away from the blinding acrobatics of the art world, we may discover that art is not something which we just look at, but that we might all make, and share.

Van Zyl's work is on view at the Planet Contemporary Art Site in Cape Town until August 2