

HALF ART: Gifted young artists explore blackness

THE impulse that drives this column is to relate works of art, and specifically visual arts exhibitions, to current affairs. Regular readers will know that there is often more current affairs than there is art; this is all well and good if the columnist is up to date on the matter at hand.

Sometimes, however, news events and “developing stories” make this impossible.

Last week I wrote about the nationwide student protests, only to find that — hour by hour, on Friday and over the weekend — my opinions changed with each new update on #FeesMustFall and related campaigns. This week I decided instead to start with the art and let the politics play out as they may.

Thus I found myself at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, where American artist Hank Willis Thomas has curated the show *Young, Gifted and Black*. Taking his cue from Nina Simone’s anthemic expression of what (from a South African perspective) could be called Black Consciousness, Thomas has brought together the work of about 20 artists to address “our moment”, looking back at “their moment” — that is, the civil rights movement, with which Simone’s voice became prominently associated.

The obvious point to make is that the show does not assert that to be young, gifted and black is the cause or consequence of a single, simplified identity. “Black-ness” is expressed here in transnational, transhistorical and indeed transracial terms. The artists represented are from North America, Europe and Africa. Their perspectives, one feels, cannot be conflated merely by dint of their shared self-identification as black.

Some artists invoke the iconography of the past; Omar Victor Diop’s photographs are self-portraits in which he impersonates significant historical figures in the fight against slavery, such as Frederick Douglass and Omar ibn Said, while Titus Kaphar’s works in tar and oil depict the anonymity of once-famous but now-forgotten slaves such as Hercules, George Washington’s chef. Other pieces have more than a hint of the futuristic, such as Jacolby Satterwhite’s video installation *Reifying Desire 6* and Yashua Klos’s print collage *When the Meteor Crashed*.

For an artist such as Bethany Collins, a useful concept in exploring “biracial” identity is the contronym: a word with two opposite meanings. Her *Vital, 1968* is a diptych

that points to conflicting definitions — “vital” can be both “destroying life, fatal, deadly” and “necessary or essential to life”. Capetonian Jody Paulsen also navigates the terrain of “mixed race” in his felt collage I’ve Got Potential; among various fragments of textual cliché we read about “Cape Coloured ambition” and “How to be black”.

A selection from Zoe Buckman’s Every Curve series entails another set of citations from popular culture: misogynistic lyrics from 1990s rap and hip-hop artists such as The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur are embroidered on vintage lingerie. The effect of this verbal violence writ large on intimate, vulnerable items of clothing is chilling.

If these allusions are one manifestation of postmodernism and “blackness”, another occurs in Kiluanji Kia Henda’s Poderosa, which deconstructs the notion of “African tradition”. Poderosa, a transvestite, posed for a photo in which s/he and Henda contrived a pastiche outfit to imitate one of the Mumuila people of southern Angola. This image was subsequently copied by a Brazilian-Angolan artist in a painting billed as a portrayal of a “traditional African woman”.

“Blackness” may be a construct, but it is a potent one — for better and worse. It intersects with other constructs which have a material basis, such as “class”. Gerald Machona hints at one aspect of this intersectionality in Keep Calm and Untie the Noose I and II, in which a suited figure seems to be hanged, or to hang himself, by a necktie made of old R2 notes.

But the more common connection in SA is not between blackness and wealth but between blackness and poverty. Simone’s song has to be revised to accommodate an additional refrain among protesting students: when it comes to accessing higher education and associated opportunities, to be young, gifted and black is not enough if you are poor.

- *Young, Gifted and Black at the Goodman Gallery Johannesburg, 163 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parkwood, until November 11.*