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HALF ART

CHRIS THURMAN: Treasure to be found in exploration of shifting psyche

Mikhael Subotzky's WYE diagnoses the white South African who feels "exhausted" by the burden of history

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South Africa's news cycle has reached a point where the white South African male could easily believe that he is off the hook. He is evidently not of the same demographic as Bathabile Dlamini, the centre of the social grants crisis. Ditto Faith Muthambi, around whom numerous scandals swirl – and who rivals Dlamini in ministerial incompetence, arrogance and (all the evidence suggests) corruption.

Parliament's cross-party stance against this pair is damning, as is the ire of the Constitutional Court. It seems a growing number of people in the ANC alliance are using such controversies as opportunities to fight proxy wars against Jacob Zuma and his cabal. The EFF, of course, can be relied on to go hammer and tongs against Zuma Inc.

As for the president's newly-discovered zest for the destruction of white monopoly capital: the effectiveness of this campaign is proportional to the credibility of its mouthpieces (Manyi, Mgxitama et al). While the Ruperts, ABSA and the mining houses may be fat with "dirty money", the Guptas are such brazen state capturers they almost seem to make apartheid cronyism a modest affair.

But be warned, white man: you can't wash your hands of history. Not when that history is still with us in the present. Land ownership is a raced problem. Participation in the economy is a raced problem. The transformation of higher education is a raced problem. The dominance of English, the cultural hegemony of whiteness ... oh, and then there's BEE fronting. Like the ruse concocted by Cash Paymaster Services with Dlamini's blessing.

As Julius Malema and Mbuyiseni Ndlozi have made clear, their antagonism towards Zuma and his faction in the ANC should not be comforting to white South Africans who largely benefit from a status quo to which members of the EFF are sworn enemies. Likewise, Fallists and black feminists (not of the ANC Women's League variety, but actual black feminists) take disdain for the Zumas and Dlaminis and Muthambis of this world as a given in their quest to dismantle the structures of white patriarchy.

While this painful and protracted process is underway, white men have some work to do. There is the outward-looking task: learning and listening, speaking cautiously as allies, and using the resources placed at our disposal by unearned privilege to positive material or civic effect. And there is the inward-looking task: reflecting, without narcissism or navel-gazing, on our necessarily compromised position.

Mikhael Subotzky's *WYE*, a three-channel film installation at the Goodman Gallery Johannesburg (until 1st April), is a wonderfully rich and complex response to this latter imperative. Visitors find themselves stepping onto a darkened "beach", replete with deckchairs on a sand-covered floor. The scene is set for an exploration of the littoral zone where land and sea meet, standing figuratively for a psyche that is perennially indecisive and non-committal: it is "in-between".

One could turn the overlapping narratives that Subotzky and his impressively large creative team present to us – both simultaneously and sequentially across the three screens – into a linear plot, connecting a fictionalised nineteenth-century British colonial (James T. Lethbridge) and a twenty-first century white South African (Craig Hare) who emigrates to Australia and who becomes the subject of a futuristic "psycho-anthropological" study.

To do this, however, is to reduce the vivid sense Subotzky creates that these three stories are happening at the same time. Lethbridge is a would-be diviner, scurrying frantically with his dowsing stick across the beaches of the Eastern Cape; Hare is a would-be recluse who scours the same terrain with a metal-detector. Lethbridge pens letters to his fellow pseudo-scientists in London; Hare types an email to his sister in Australia. Lethbridge imagines that he has a profound encounter with a “native”; Hare meets an enigmatic *strandloper*.

What Subotzky exposes – or diagnoses – is common enough: the white South African who feels “exhausted” by the burden of history, who wants to retreat from his obligations to racial others and is sufficiently attuned to socio-political dynamics to feel guilty about this desire, but who ultimately ignores or rejects facts that make him feel uncomfortable. This is not in itself a new insight, but Subotzky is an expert audio-visual storyteller and *WYE* is a riveting, perplexing investigation of “whiteness at sea”.