

Kendell Geers, *Mined*, 2010. 18 Carat gold, 9.5 x 7.5 x 6 cm

Prodigal Provocateur: Kendell Geers's 'In Gozi We Trust'

Kendell Geers

By Tymon Smith

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Kendell Geers has not shown in his home country since 2012. He's lived in Belgium since 1998. So what or who is responsible for the return of South African art's prodigal enfant terrible to Johannesburg? Should we blame Geers's new exhibition 'In Gozi We Trust' on the rain, Eskom, crime, land expropriation without compensation, the ANC? Or should we just be thankful that one of the country's most conceptually sound, difficult, obstinate cultural anarchist/antichrists has come back to remind us of the glaring abnormalities that plague us in the murk of the post-Rainbow Nation?



Kendell Geers, *Rising Sign 524*, 2012-2018. Bronze, 60 x 25 x 23 cm

Something has roused Geers from his European art world celebrity slumber enough to make the journey back to the danger-loving metropolis he once called home and point out the 'third world disorder,' we've been blindly and blithely waltzing around in with our blinkers on for the two decades since his departure. Perhaps it's Geers's dedication to upsetting proverbial apple carts wherever he may find them, or perhaps it has something to do with his oft commented upon abrasive personality and inflated ego.

You can believe in the Geers who produced daring, radical, conceptually ingenious works while he worked in South Africa during the 1980s and 90s, works that threw shit and other bodily fluids in the faces of the God, Volk, Land assholes who forced their vitriolic bile down the unwilling throat of one of their own. As a working class Afrikaner, Geers took on the hypocrisy of the apartheid system and its enforcers, screamed, 'fuck you I won't do what you tell me,' and pushed their Calvinist, self-righteous faces into the mud of a history replete with countless bloodied hands and

unforgivable sin. You can believe that once he left South Africa he seemingly lost his relevance to local audiences while disappearing into an increasingly jumbled maze of jargon and highfalutin solipsistic navel-gazing that seemed to have little resonance to anyone other than himself. You can also believe

that the seeming disjuncture between Geers's South African and post-South African work is one that has been created by an audience angry at his departure, looking for a way to still hold on to their celebration of him during the bad old days without having to think too hard about the commonalities that link both periods together.

In 2007, Avant Car Guard literally put Geers into an early grave when the insouciant collective – the seeming post-apartheid progeny of the conceptual prickliness and anarchist irreverence that Geers initiated – produced a work that showed them burying their father beneath a tombstone poking fun at his initials “JHP” (Geers was born Jacobus Hermanus Pieters Geers, his initials the same as those of Pierneef), placing his death as 1998 (the year he left South Africa) and an epithet proclaiming him as ‘Die Verlore Kind.’ All fun and conceptually fair game maybe but for Geers, the barb seems to have stung and set him on a long and winding self-reflexive mull, the results of which form the better part of this new body of work.

Kendell Geers, *In Gozi We Trust*. Installation View: Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 2019

The title of the show is immediately, reliably confrontational and controversial. Ngozi – danger, gevaar – that ubiquitous reminder to steer clear of electric fences, power boxes and vicious watchdogs we see all over Johannesburg. And who is Geers to come and tell us from his comfortable Belgian dinner table about danger or for that matter God and God forbid, anything we don't know better than him about Jozi? Who but Geers would dare to invoke the troubled legacy of JH Pierneef – the verkrampte hero of the ‘ah but your land is beautiful’ school of overvalued modernist landscape painting beloved by Steinhoff scoundrel Markus Jooste and the Stellenbosch mafia – to make his point?

And yet behind the cheek of its title, the punk reappropriation of Pierneef, the sometimes pointedly obvious wordplays, the pretty ‘prentjies’ of bloody flowers and barbed wire, the garish Excalibur sculptures of brass batons and that infamous self portrait as a broken Heineken bottle cast in gold – there lies a universal truth that's frustratingly hard to ignore. Kendell Geers is very much alive and well and, while not living in Joburg, is still as concerned as he ever was with using himself as the foremost vehicle for his provocations against those who would wish to bury him.

He's pissed off enough at those who would cast him as a once loyal now irrelevant South African cultural provocateur that he's returned to rebuff them. He's still the cunning jester with more awareness than most of how to use the aesthetic trappings of his medium to stir uneasy provocation and make many of his naysayers still appreciate much of the work on its surface terms (whilst still being infuriated by its sometimes befuddled conceptual framework).

Just as Wittgenstein's beetle-in-a-box hypothesis – referenced here in the title of a series of self-portraits of Geers as a dung beetle – proved that it was impossible for anyone to know anyone else's personal experience of the world in any meaningful way, Geers has shown that only he can speak for

himself. Whether you like what he has to say is irrelevant because as long as he's able to offer an opinion, he will, so sit back, celebrate the often taken for granted freedom that we all enjoy to speak our minds and just let Kendell... be Kendell.

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