

R

REVIEW

Sunday Times



'Wittgenstein's Beetle 3581', 2019, acrylic on canvas

The starting point for Kendell Geers' new exhibition, *In Gozi We Trust*, on now at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, was a joke against him just over a decade ago by the now-defunct art collective Avant Car Guard (ACG). They were notorious for their satirical art-world in-jokes and provocations. One of their works, a photograph from 2007, showed them dancing drunkenly on the grave of 20th century SA landscape artist JH Pierneef.

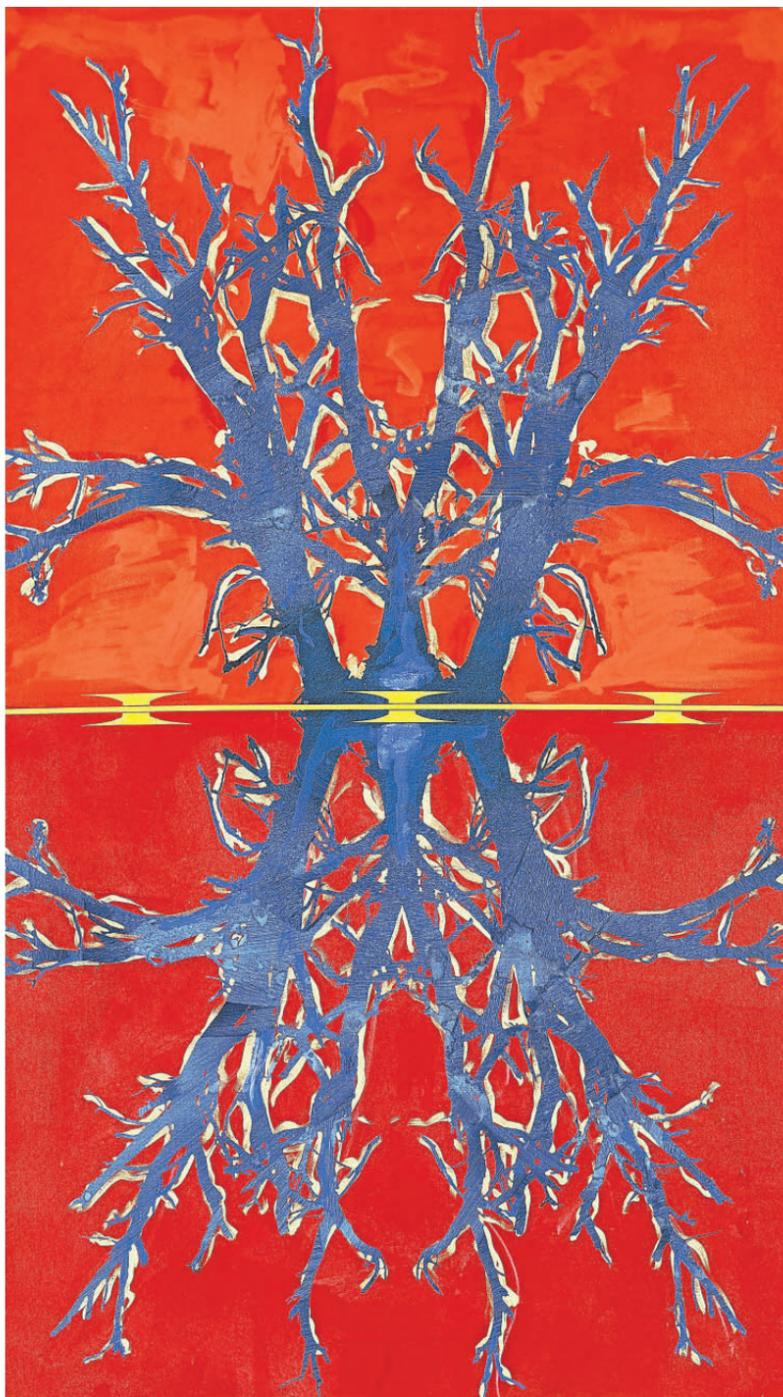
They later produced a similar work, but this time sniping at a living artist: Geers. (They made works poking fun at other living artists, not least William Kentridge, Roger Ballen and Robin Rhode; no-one was safe.) The Geers work, titled *Die Verlore Kind*, included pictures of the members of the collective pretending to bury him and dancing on his grave. They had a tombstone engraved with JHP "Kendell" Geers: 1967-1998.

Geers explains that his given name is Jacobus Hermanus Pieter, and the pranksters had picked up on the fact that Geers shares Pierneef's initials. The tombstone included the real year of his birth (Geers famously changed it to May 1968 as part of a conceptual work at the Venice Biennale in 1993) and dates his death as 1998, when he left South Africa for Belgium, where he still lives.

In the late 1980s and '90s, Geers made a name for himself as a kind of art-world punk provocateur and was not (and is still not) afraid of attacking the art establishment. At that same 1993 biennale, for example, he urinated on a replica of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, a urinal the artist declared an artwork and exhibited in a gallery in one of the earliest and most famous acts of art world iconoclasm.

FEAR & SELF-LOATHING IN JOBURG

Kendell Geers explores the idea that being addicted to danger is part of a South African identity, writes Graham Wood



'Daemon Est Deus Inversus 9807', 2019, acrylic on canvas. Pictures: Courtesy Goodman Gallery

Nevertheless ACG's work, says Geers, "really pissed me off". What he objected to most was "the idea that I left South Africa, so therefore I was ex-South African. I get irritated because there's a certain generation that refers to ex-South Africans," he says, and points out the "implicit xenophobia in that terminology".

"You've been excommunicated. You've been exiled. You're not one of us anymore ... you become illegitimate."

Pierneef's (now very expensive) modernist representations of pristine, unpeopled South African landscapes are often interpreted as representing a political vision that legitimated the right of Afrikaner nationalists to the land, and which bolster an identity based on a connection to the soil.

By severing his connection to the land, ACG seemed to be suggesting, Geers was re-joining a line of Afrikaner nationalists, invalidating his anti-apartheid activism in the '80s and '90s, and possibly his right to speak about South Africa now with any real legitimacy at all.

Geers hasn't exhibited in South Africa since 2012, and for this exhibition he decided to explore exactly what it is that makes us South African (or not).

The interrogation of identity is familiar territory for Geers, who has used his own identity as "a form of protest" as he puts it, in various ways throughout his career, from changing his birthday to symbolically giving birth to himself as a work of art, to the dark self-loathing in his famous "readymade" 1995 work, *Self Portrait*: the broken neck of a Heineken bottle, with the label reading "Imported from Holland: The Original Quality".

"A broken bottle is useless, and also in many ways, part of my identity as this Afrikaans kid who grows up and discovers his family is racist and becomes part of the anti-apartheid movement ... The uselessness of one's identity. How do you make sense of that?"

On this exhibition there's version of that work cast in gold, dating back to 2010, titled *Mined*, transforming the original work and wrapping it in another layer of meaning and value. It was originally on sale for R1m, in a Damien Hirst-ish taunt to the art market.)

Exhibiting in South Africa after quite a long spell, Geers found himself having to try to make sense of his identity all over again. As an anarchist, Geers has never been keen on the idea of stable identities, but with his

South African-ness under question, especially the way it seemed to invoke the idea of authenticity as conferring the right to speak, he had a starting point for a fresh interrogation.

"I thought, you know what ... let me think about Pierneef and the acacia trees," he says. "Let me think about this question of being Afrikaans, this idea of land rights, this idea of heritage."

How does one belong in a country like South Africa? The answer, especially in Johannesburg, he found, was danger: the high walls and electric fences and alarms.

"What then becomes interesting about South African identity is that we become addicted to the danger," he says.

"We need the danger to survive. We need to feel under threat. We need ... the burglar bars and the razor mesh and the electric

fence to feel happy. And we only trust the danger."

The title of the exhibition recalls the ubiquitous signs of his childhood, still common: Danger, Gevaar, Ingozi. But as always, punning on God, Jozi, and the computer virus Gozi.

But he also asks, how do we console ourselves? At least for the art-buying public, the answer is often to hang landscape art on the walls. "That essentially is the starting point for this exhibition," he says.

So, the newest paintings on the show reprise the beautifully ambiguous patterns and motifs he creates with razorwire



'Saint John's Pendulum V', 2010-2018, Bronze and chain

and combine them with Pierneef's famous images of the acacia trees. He creates a contradiction, or a double meaning, like his famously punning word-art that inverts and subverts its own apparent meanings. He knits these new works into a web of references to both African and South African art and culture more generally, and to his own vast body of work and its own invented traditions.

Geers has that fierce, anarchic, slightly bonkers intelligence that has made it possible for him to have invented a personal mythology of sorts – a system of symbols and signs that he uses over and over again and which refer to each other in a constellation around him, swallowing up traditions and spitting them out as cultural critique (take a close look at those African masks).

Those familiar with his work will recognise the bullet holes and images of explosions that become flowers (beauty and violence), the police batons that become crucifixes (state and church), references to anarchy and alchemy: you could go on endlessly teasing out the references.

But ultimately, you're left with Geers taking his own stung ego as a starting point and deliberately subsuming something he's been identified with – Pierneef – into his postmodern punk mythology, and giving it back as almost its opposite. The authenticity of his voice couldn't matter less.

"That's exactly why I'm doing it – to hold on to that right to speak, to challenge, to be contradictory," he says. "I don't have to be simplified; I can be a contradiction."

In Gozi We Trust is on at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg until January 25