



Abri de Swardt,
Bartholomeu Dias I:
The Sao Cristovoa
anchors, pigment print
on archival cotton rag
paper, 700mm x
500mm, 2009

BORN IN JOHANNESBURG BORN, BUT A resident of sleepy George for most of his life, Abri de Swardt has received Sasol New Signatures and Absa L'Atelier merit awards, as well as the Timo Smuts prize for top Stellenbosch University Fine Arts student. He's just had his first solo show at Blank Projects in Cape Town. Titled *To Walk on Water*, it sees the recent graduate provide an updated take on classic modernist collage and photomontage techniques, putting them into a postcolonial- and performance art-oriented context.

De Swardt is an artist unafraid to express a high theoretical context for his work. "I'm a collagist operating fluidly between lens-based media, performance and installation. The impetus behind my work lies in the deconstruction of regimes of truth, in notions of masculinity, the environment or belief itself, in order to access the real."

Even if we set aside the bandying about of the heady and seductive philosophies of the inexhaustible Frenchmen Jacques Derrida and Jacques Marie Émile Lacan, this is serious stuff. And De Swardt himself sees his art as an ethical project. "Much of my work is built around profoundly ethical strategies for reframing the 'spiritual', employing religious iconography and ritual, among other approaches, as ways of thinking about consumerism, death and transcendence."

A signature pair of photographs from his show at Blank Projects demonstrates both this strong theoretical commitment in his work, focused as it is on issues like colonialism and the construction of masculinity, and the artist's facility for switching between and combining media.

In *Bartholomeu Dias I: The Sao Cristovoa anchors*, the artist, encased in a body-suit of photomontaged images from men's magazines which transform him into a consumerist, yet pagan Neptune-like god of the sea, emerges from a body of water. In his hand is a model galleon, a lampoon *maquette* of the ship which brought the first colonial explorers to the Cape coast.

In its companion piece, *Bartholomeu Dias Tropical: Terra Incognita (Bermuda Triangle)*, the "hero seems lost at sea, in deeper and brighter waters". The same figure emerges here from more tropical waters, and is somehow displaced — the same images of an idealised masculinity sold to us by men's

magazines and used as the material for the colonial god's collaged body, drift away from him on the water, leaving him naked and powerless.

De Swardt is working here in an established modernist tradition, that of the photomontaged image. His use of pictures from men's magazines to build into his costume recalls one of the first pop-art montages from 1956, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, by Richard Hamilton and John McHale. However, De Swardt's update on the photomontage brings together trenchant comment on colonial history and an implied critique of masculinity in the images.

A key element in the artist's approach is seen in a video work in the Blank Projects show, a mash-up of art-historical and Hollywood cinema staples — Sir John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Narcissus*, Jacques-

Louis David's *The Death of Marat*, and Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). Here the ideas of birth, narcissism and maleness are all interrogated.

The collage, or photomontage technique holds a central place in De Swardt's work. First associated in modern art with Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, and later the surrealists, its use in Pop Art from the mid-20th century is perhaps most familiar. While it has a respected fine art lineage, it has also become somewhat overused and popularised, and of course now has many manifestations, in everything from cinema to music to digital image composition. Yet De Swardt uses the technique for similar reasons it was popular with Picasso and Braque — as a means of introducing literal layers of meaning to a work, often in a different medium.

Another intriguing strand in his work is an arduous performance element — more

pronounced in other works rather than in the Blank Projects show. Here, De Swardt brings together a strong commitment to rigorous physical performance, in the vein of the Fluxus-related body of artists of the 1960s and 1970s, and which he documents on film or in photographs, with a more direct engagement with religious iconography and the experience of the spiritual.

In a pair of performances, *refrain:refrain* and *partake:partake*, the artist puts himself through different physical trials related to religious ritual while bedecked in appropriate body collages. In *refrain:refrain*, the artist remained silent and fasted in the performance space every day for a week while preparing materials for the performance of being metaphorically stoned and buried as a Christian martyr. The staging of the performance is documented in the photograph *Saint: myself*.

The companion performance piece, *partake:partake*, has the artist eat bread and drink red wine, again bedecked in a Caravaggio-esque collage, until he vomits, in a literal staging of the Eucharist ritual. This performance is documented in the photograph *Antichrist (self portrait after Caravaggio)* in which the artist's body collage gestures to Caravaggio's *Bacchus*, and the Catholic ritual is subverted through the hedonism and excess to which it is taken.

De Swardt expands on his use of images and processes of the abject in his performance work. "My interest in abjection is both theoretical and aesthetic. In terms of theory, I am intrigued by how, as Julia Kristeva notes, the abject is edged with the sublime. It also has a relation to the process of birth, of separation from the mother.

"Visually I am drawn to the aesthetics of liminality, a threshold state in which extreme conditions outside of normal social constraints and structures can manifest."

As he acknowledges himself, there is a core of idealism to this aesthetic, and a great deal of intellectual and emotional grappling with large ideas. In the end, he is, through an engagement with modern and postmodern idioms, processes and media, trying to express a belief in a kind of transcendental beauty — a sophisticated and satisfyingly ambitious project for a young artist that bodes well for his future success.

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ABRI DE SWARDT

TEXT JAMES SEY PHOTOGRAPHY SHARON DE SWARDT

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