

In the first room where Oerder's infant is sleeping, the body is also introduced into the landscape in a subtle way, blending into Hugo Naude's landscape, becoming part of the landscape. In a bold expressionist manner Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern introduce the figure as central, capturing a distinct emotional presence. The key work here is Alexis Preller's *The Three Bathers* (1937). Not only do the figures dominate the landscape; the landscape begins to echo the figures, both in form and colour.

In the second room, WH Coetzer, known for his designs for the tapestries in the Voortrekker Monument depicting the hardship of women during the Great Trek, offers a glimpse of a female nude. Two JH Pierneef landscapes are included. Typically void of any figures, these works serve as an illustration of Pierneef's understanding of divine patterns in nature – the patterns human beings (bodies) have to follow in order to achieve an orderly life.

*Women Working in the Fields* (1955-56) by Gerard Sekoto, displayed in the third room, is an important work in the context of this collection: the bodies of workers become the actual landscape. There seems to be no distinction between landscape and the (labouring) human body. Two nude figures, *Blush: Rosea* (2005) by Penny Siopis and Simon Stone's *Girl with Flowers* (1996), both reveal a tactile approach to portraying the body, each in distinctive ways. Postmodern intertextuality, with its desire to fold the gap between past and present, comes into play. Karel Nel's dry pastel on paper, *Encounter with Circular Time* (1994), completes Britz's collection of modernist paintings, inviting the viewer to encounter and to engage on a more cerebral level.

As Van Rensburg points out in his foreword, the word modernism appears to be elusive, especially when referring to modern art. Apart from modernisation as a historical marker (in both the techno-scientific and socio-political spheres), yet another aspect of modernism comes into play in *Birth of the Modernist Body*. As highlighted 40 years ago by Herbert Read, there is one broad economic development of the utmost significance when dealing with modernism in art: "the gradual decline of private patronage due to the severe restrictions imposed on the accumulation of wealth". Although private collectors still purchase art in the open market, they do so through the medium of the art dealer.

The birth of modernism therefore also witnessed the advent of the art dealer. In this respect Graham Britz balances market forces and saleability on the one hand, and an academic appreciation of art on the other; in effect he is curating a relationship between the client and the artworks. *Birth of the Modernist Body* is an eloquent display of this role of the art dealer.

**Johan Myburg is the art critic for *Beeld* newspaper**

## KURT CAMPBELL

WORLDART | CAPE TOWN

When Susan Vogel penned her definitive catalogue of contemporary African art to accompany the exhibition *Africa Explores* (1991), many critics were nonplussed by the inclusion of Extinct art in her ordering of African art into five distinctive categories (the others were Traditional, New functional, Urban and International art). Kurt Campbell's *Fever Sleep* might vindicate Vogel's insertion of this particular strain with the emphatic reappearance of the traditional African headrest.



Kurt Campbell,  
*Judas headrest*,  
2007, archival pigment print,  
50 x 50cm

Vogel is unexpectedly perspicacious in noting the influence of traditional material culture; what she perhaps didn't appreciate is its significance as a tool of subversion.

The practice of sleeping on a headrest is extinct in most contemporary African societies, yet the headrest is not an obsolete sculptural phenomenon – it is present at any tourist market. Campbell's prints archive his recreation of this distinctive aspect of African material culture, the ongoing production of which is motivated by economic imperative, and disinter the pervasive alteration of traditional aesthetics brought about by the colonial encounter. His prints further claim an inherent resistance of these objects to their transformation; these are no longer the mute and powerless tools of subjection, but demonstrably resist their co-option into the contemporary world.

Campbell's headrests differ significantly from their source: the artist shaped the objects in clay and then embedded into these seemingly innocuous sculptures various misshapen nails and coins, the inclusion of which makes them unusable. Instead the hostile objects offer a metaphorical fever sleep, his title recalling the tropical disease (characterised by headaches and exhaustion) that beset so many colonial explorers of the African continent.

After producing and documenting his headrest sculptures, Campbell destroyed them; there is no external or original reference for the printed images. He simply presents them floating on white paper, without any attempt at tying them to a putative ground. The more successful prints exceed the limitations on subject by their vivid, often saturated colouring and imaginative forms, making their veracity as archives of pre-colonial traditions increasingly dubious. Decontextualized from the museum and its catalogues, there is nothing to assert authenticity except the white walls of the gallery space.

The work disrupts the boundaries between the marketplace and the museological institution, questioning the integrity of this division. The art gallery itself operates at a crucial interstice between the two, and Campbell cleverly exploits its claim to eminence without responsibility to context. While many exhibitions of African art have used this to justify the de-politicization of African art, Campbell's exhibition does exactly the opposite. These headrests revel in the impure and inauthentic blend of colonial fantasy and indigenous tradition, and are thus a statement of great political import.

Campbell appropriates these extinct local traditions in order to proclaim a critical aesthetic continuity that politicises the colonial legacies of museum and market. Not motivated by nationalism – as Vogel erroneously assumed – Campbell instead interrogates the postcolonial predicament, demonstrating that traditional material culture remains a subversive tool in the repertoire of the contemporary African artist.

**Tavish McIntosh**