

ASHA ZERO

say for me

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cover: detail of **zansi nib** 2008 acrylic on board 80 x 70cm



Better left unsaid

Antoinette du Plessis

AN INTRODUCTION TO *say for me*

I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers that I have read, all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved; all the cities that I have visited, all my ancestors . . . Perhaps I would have liked to be my father, who wrote and had the decency of not publishing. Nothing, nothing, my friend; what I have told you: I am not sure of anything, I know nothing . . . Can you imagine that I not even know the date of my death?

Attributed to Jorge Luis Borges

The paintings of Asha Zero – his real name, one amongst many – are not what they seem. In a subversive, almost illicit way, Asha employs painting to challenge the ways in which awareness is smashed and grabbed in the fiercely self-effacing visual environment of our time. This printed catalogue renders invisible the most significant piece of information about *say for me*: the painterly, real quality of the works. Their material substance.

They are not collages, photomontages, derelict billboards or yesterday's posters. They are paintings.

Most viewers do a double take when they realize this, as the aspect of careful, premeditated, laborious hand painting makes an essential difference to the way the work is perceived. In our post-post-modern age of utter information overload, visual and textual, instant recognition has become a feature of almost everything, including art. This is the interface within which Asha operates.

With pokerfaced intent, he embezzles the multi-faceted language of collage to comment on exactly that: deception as a modern mode of visual communication. And he goes further: he simulates scars, torn edges, scratches and erasures, the inevitable wear and tear of images on walls and in consciousness, thereby incorporating time, the mysterious dimension, into his work.

Having grabbed collage as his visual language, Asha creates, intentionally, a particular ancestry for his work, as most

artists do. He exploits the historical roots as well as the futuristic appeal of collage, reputed to have originated in 1912 when Picasso created *Still life with a cane chair*, an image as challenging as it was foreboding to traditional painting. Colour reduced to near monochrome, it combined elements from the commercial world – oilcloth printed to resemble a cane seat and newspaper fragments – with oil paint to depict objects from several broken angles simultaneously.

The introduction of collage as a radical painting practice marked a decisive moment in Picasso and Braque's cubist period. Fuelled by dissatisfaction with stale painting conventions and a desire to express with immediacy the turbulence of their age, they shaped collage into a visual system of exceptional resilience. It was of course no coincidence that their working out of this fractured, multifaceted visual language happened together with the popularisation in Europe of Einstein's theory of relativity, first formulated in 1905, which demonstrated the previously unimaginable notion that time and space were relative concepts – perceived only in relation to the perceiver, never in objective neutrality, and Freud's ideas of psychopathology and neurosis, published in *The interpretation of dreams* in 1900, which hypothesized the human mind as a complex energy system, constantly interacting with its immediate socio-cultural environment as much as ancient unconscious instincts. In all respects, the twentieth century shattered concepts of unity and stability; pictorial unity had to go too.

The durability of collage as a language and as a method is not difficult to explain: it is inexhaustibly flexible, immediate and available, it mixes media old and new with impunity and it merges aspects of highly sophisticated as well as unpretentious visual environments. It appears everywhere in the commercial sphere. Its inherent irreverence, its vehemence and multiplicity gives its appearance in a fine art context a look that remains avant garde and political, like an angry scream. It is the dialogue of fragmentation, of ferment, of ingenuity and dissent, though astoundingly, it can as easily become the language of sentimentality and nostalgia.

Central to Asha Zero's artistic ancestry are the photocollages of legendary Berlin Dadaist, Hannah Höch, an early, almost



Pablo Picasso 1881-1973

Still life with a cane chair 1912 mixed media

Musee Picasso Paris France

© DACS / Giraudon / The Bridgeman art library

say for me fragile police 2008 acrylic on board 100 x 120cm



visionary critic of male domination and of military, industrial and colonial supremacy. With references to mass culture similar to those of Picasso, but more concerned with socio-political subversion, in the hands of Höch and her companion Raoul Hausmann, cubist collage morphed into the dissatisfaction of Dadaist photomontage. Their work was seminal to Dada, the anti-art, anti-establishment 'movement' (some prefer to call it 'spirit') aimed at exposing the catastrophically aggressive hegemonic order of mid-century Europe.

Höch's photocollages typically mix fragments and signifiers into all but random combinations, and by this very lack of meaning provoke disquieting visual connections.

Like Höch, Asha often includes magazine-derived images of women in his work, thereby commenting, or omitting to comment on, idealization/objectification – appalling absurdity – of women in the media. His unceremonious treatment of body parts demonstrates just how pornographic commercial visual culture actually is, how bereft of discernment, without casting a moral comment on its production nor its consumption.

His references to Hannah Höch and Dada as a way of protest or non-protest in a dehumanising social environment puts his work in line with that of contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu's collaged

works, lifted to cult-status by Saatchi of London. Mutu's work deals directly and scorchingly with colonialism and misogyny. She superimposes cut-out body parts from popular and pornographic magazines on pages from medical textbooks, no less objectifying, no less debasing. The results are painfully evocative, so horrible and so beautiful one cannot look away.

In contrast to Mutu's collages, Asha's work has the added dimension of real paint, lovingly, obsessively applied in time-consuming processes, bestowing the respect and dignity of concentrated labour on the wounds and pockmarks of time. His painting process begins with a carefully planned composition, drawn onto board. Some areas are masked, hand-painted over, and allowed to dry. The masks are carefully removed to expose raised edges of acrylic paint. He repeats this process several times to produce built-up layers of paint. Various texturing effects like cut marks, paint splatter and smudging are applied to simulate the distinct, physical qualities of torn paper.

The surfaces of Asha's paintings consist entirely of acrylic paint on board, simulating the 'de-collaged' traces of torn-away posters on city walls, evoking time in the lingua franca of paint.



Hannah Höch 1889-1978
Da-Dandy 1919 collage
 Private collection Giraudon /
 The Bridgeman art library

Wangechi Mutu
Ectopic pregnancy 2004
 glitter, ink, collage on found medical illustration paper
saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/wangechi_mutu.htm





das 2008 acrylic on board 60 x 45cm

Asha Zero – the very name connotes cancellation – intentionally cancels out the viewer’s response to his graffiti-inspired collages through the subtle revelation that these works are actually meticulously rendered acrylic paintings. Coming to age in an era of cancellations, Asha Zero was in his teens when apartheid was cancelled out, and he watched as the value structure of his school’s Christian national education system crumbled. While Aids was cancelling out immune systems on a global scale, the Soviet Union and East Germany were also cancelled. And amid fears that computer-based systems and great amounts of data would be cancelled out, the new millennium was ushered in. Twenty-one months later, 9/11 cancelled out New York’s tallest structures.

Art history also provided Asha Zero with plenty of examples – modernism and post-modernism are replete with acts of cancellation. One of the bench marks was Jean Tinguely’s 1960 *Homage to New York*, described as ‘a huge construction whose sole purpose [was] to destroy itself in one glorious act of mechanical suicide.’¹¹ At Documenta IX in 1992, Joseph Kosuth cancelled out two corridors of 18th and 19th century sculpture in Kassel’s Neue Galerie by covering them with drop-cloths printed with philosophic quotations. Kosuth then rendered the quotations incomprehensible by cancelling out selected words. Among the most influential of artistic acts of cancellation, however, was Robert Rauschenberg’s erasing of a de Kooning drawing in 1953. At a time when an artist’s unique style was synonymous with his or her ‘inner’ personality, this act – regardless of Rauschenberg’s intent – was a symbolic cancellation of the identity of one of modernism’s seminal figures. Asha Zero – who has cancelled out his own identity – evokes Rauschenberg’s erased de Kooning, albeit unintentionally, in the title of his 2005 painting, *erase the heart of the question*. But what makes Rauschenberg’s gesture particularly relevant to this discussion is that it has been characterized as the ‘simultaneous unmaking of one work and the creation of another.’¹² Asha Zero achieves the same result, but very unlike Rauschenberg, does it through illusionism.

When in 2000, Asha Zero set out to make a Duchampian gesture by creating a painting that would fool the viewer into thinking it was a collage, he turned to illusionism. In so doing, he rather unintentionally stepped squarely into the tradition of trompe l’oeil. Trompe l’oeil (to fool the eye) refers to a work of art so realistic, the viewer is deceived into believing the art is actually that which it represents. Considered to have originated in 5th century BCE Greece, trompe l’oeil has been described as ‘both witty and serious ...[and] a game artists play with spectators to raise questions about the nature of art and perception.’¹³ One of its basic operatives – key to understanding the oeuvre of Asha Zero – is that trompe l’oeil necessarily involves deception followed by

revelation. Ironically, if the trompe l’oeil artist is too proficient, the revelation may never occur. There are those, for example, who never discover that Asha Zero’s ‘collages’ are actually paintings. He tells of an acquaintance who condescendingly inquired of a friend if Asha Zero was still making ‘those collages’. “They are paintings,” the friend replied. The conversation persisted until the friend finally succeeded in explaining that all the components in Asha Zero’s works are actually painted.⁴

For Asha Zero – unlike the self-proclaimed trompe l’oeil painters whose websites are scattered throughout the internet – trompe l’oeil is not an end unto itself, but rather a device he uses to achieve more philosophical ends. He embraces illusionism to reverse the very nature of collage, which according to the noted critic, Calvin Tomkins, enabled artists ‘to incorporate reality into art without imitating it.’ Tomkins explains that, ‘For the modern artist who rejected illusionism, who wanted his creations to be ‘real’ objects instead of imitations of the real, it was a marvellous tool.’¹⁵ Conversely the paintings of Asha Zero seem ‘to incorporate reality without imitating it’, when in effect they are intentional imitations of reality. More than anything else, the significance of the paintings of Asha Zero is their ability to effect this ironic reversal.

A discussion of this association with trompe l’oeil has yet to find its way into the fascinating body of literature that has been building up around Asha Zero. The young critics and writers who follow his work prefer a new rhetoric – describing his paintings not as trompe l’oeil, but rather as ‘facsimiles’, ‘interactive, trans-media processes’, and ‘documents of an information age that is numbed by the schizophrenic sensory experience of city life.’¹⁶ Focusing on his imagery as a metaphor for the ‘semi-communication’ of the new millennium, the current discussion of Asha Zero’s work explores his choice of fragmented material as reflective of both the way we communicate and our increasing ineptitude to engage one another. And indeed Asha Zero points out that ‘the whole feel’ of his work is ‘a product of the PC, cell phone text and camera, [and] flash animation ‘culture’, (if we can call it that)’⁷ The layered scraps of banal images he intentionally selects to form his paintings are analogous to the layers of virtual scraps with which we construct our day-to-day lives.

Historically, the possibilities of collage were expanded by Robert Rauschenberg who aggressively pushed its boundaries. For Rauschenberg, collage was ‘another means to reproduce the non-order that characterized the life he saw around him.’¹⁸ Half a century later Asha Zero creates faux collages in response to the impersonal and anonymous world created by the ‘pseudo-order’ of the information-based technological-society that he sees around him.



frik 2008 acrylic on board 80 x 70cm

This response is not limited to only the faux collages. An important aspect of Asha Zero's oeuvre is also the cancellation of his own name. Described as 'an artist of shifting identity,'⁹ Asha's Zero's real name remains unknown. More than merely a pseudonym or nom de plume, 'Asha Zero' is an alter-ego, which is not unusual within the history of art. What is unusual is that, unlike the alter-egos of Duchamp and Max Ernst, there is no known identity to which we can connect up Asha Zero. Even Shane de Lange who has written extensively on Asha Zero says that he has known the artist for years and still doesn't know his true identity.¹⁰ A further comment on our techno-society, this posture of anonymity evokes the alter-egos, aliases, and 'nick-names' of spammers and scammers and the virtual identities that define internet 'culture'. It is also suggestive of the 'tags' used in graffiti, yet another important influence for Asha Zero. Shane de Lange poetically explains how the anonymity of this work is a metaphor for the nature of today's urban life-style:

This is a schizophrenic space that Zero relates to in an equally schizophrenic fashion through his use of various guises. He plays with various aliases in an attempt to negate his own identity, choosing anonymity over autonomy. Zero delivers a perspective of a downloaded reality in the midst of a smoldering consumerist society which has a special affinity to the techno-organic space of the city, where the individual merely becomes a cipher in a buzz of cellular automata. Spectacular culture has saturated the globe in a haze of electronic media that brings traditional modernist notions of identity into question.¹¹

This play of guises forms a developing mythology, which like his painting is grounded in 'a pastiche matrix based on erasure and entropy.'¹²

Developing around the early exhibitions, the mythology includes three additional personas who, with Asha Zero, make up two 'collectives' – *Roadkillvisiontoilettries* and *Mobilediscoetcetera*. 'Aliases' of Asha Zero,¹³ they are *Broop Nook*, *Whatsnibble*, and appropriately, *Eraser Clench*. De Lange has called them 'poster-egos',¹⁴ an ironic reference to advertising's ubiquitous poster-boys and poster-girls – the 'im-posters' and egos-in-posters who charge the twenty-first century way-of-life with their own brand of anonymity. Currently more rhetorical than anything else, the Asha Zero mythology of aliases is a work-in-progress that stands as a conceptual component to interface with the more tangible aspects of his painting.

The aliases of Asha Zero read seamlessly among those of anonymous spammers like *Seven muir*, *random Kristoffersen*, *Memphis Yagi*, *Most Exclusive*, *heshel jean-cha*, and *Wladimir flock*. Scores of e-mails arrive daily from them and other spammers on such subjects as *Interesting Item Number: U7727z, %2400casino_bonus*, *Yougotta have this*, and *Re: (no subject)*. In many respects Asha Zero is just as virtual as they are – certainly just as anonymous. Like them, no one knows his true identity. It was cancelled out in 1999 when Asha Zero was born on a skateboard somewhere near the Johannesburg airport. Little wonder that cancellation is at the very crux of the art of Asha Zero.

¹ Calvin Tomkins, *Off the wall, Robert Rauschenberg and the art world of our time* (New York: Penguin, 1983:163)

² San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 'Robert Rauschenberg Erased De Kooning drawing 1953,' *Making sense of Modern Art*, www.sfmoma.org/msoma/artworks/93.html

³ National Gallery of Art (Washington), *Deception and illusion: Five centuries of trompe l'oeil painting*, www.nga.gov/press/2002/exhibitions/deceptions/walltxt.htm

⁴ As related to the author during an interview with the artist, November 23, 2007

⁵ Tomkins (1983:87)

⁶ Shane de Lange, 'Asha Zero,' *SAarts emerging*, (September 14, 2006) www.saartsemerning.org/2006_09_01_archive.html

⁷ Asha Zero, quoted from an e-mail to the author (November 28, 2007)

⁸ Tomkins (1983:87)

⁹ Melvyn Minnaar, 'Exhibition: Collages, proof that small can be smart,' *Tonight, Cape Times*, (November 23, 2006) www.tonight.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=356&fArticleId=3558035

¹⁰ De Lange (September 2006)

¹¹ Shane de Lange, 'Lost in the post,' *Shane de Lange*, <http://nilfunct.blogspot.com/2006/11/lost-in-post.html>

¹² De Lange, 'Oncefamousdeadartists,' *Asha Zero* (Map – South Africa, 2006)

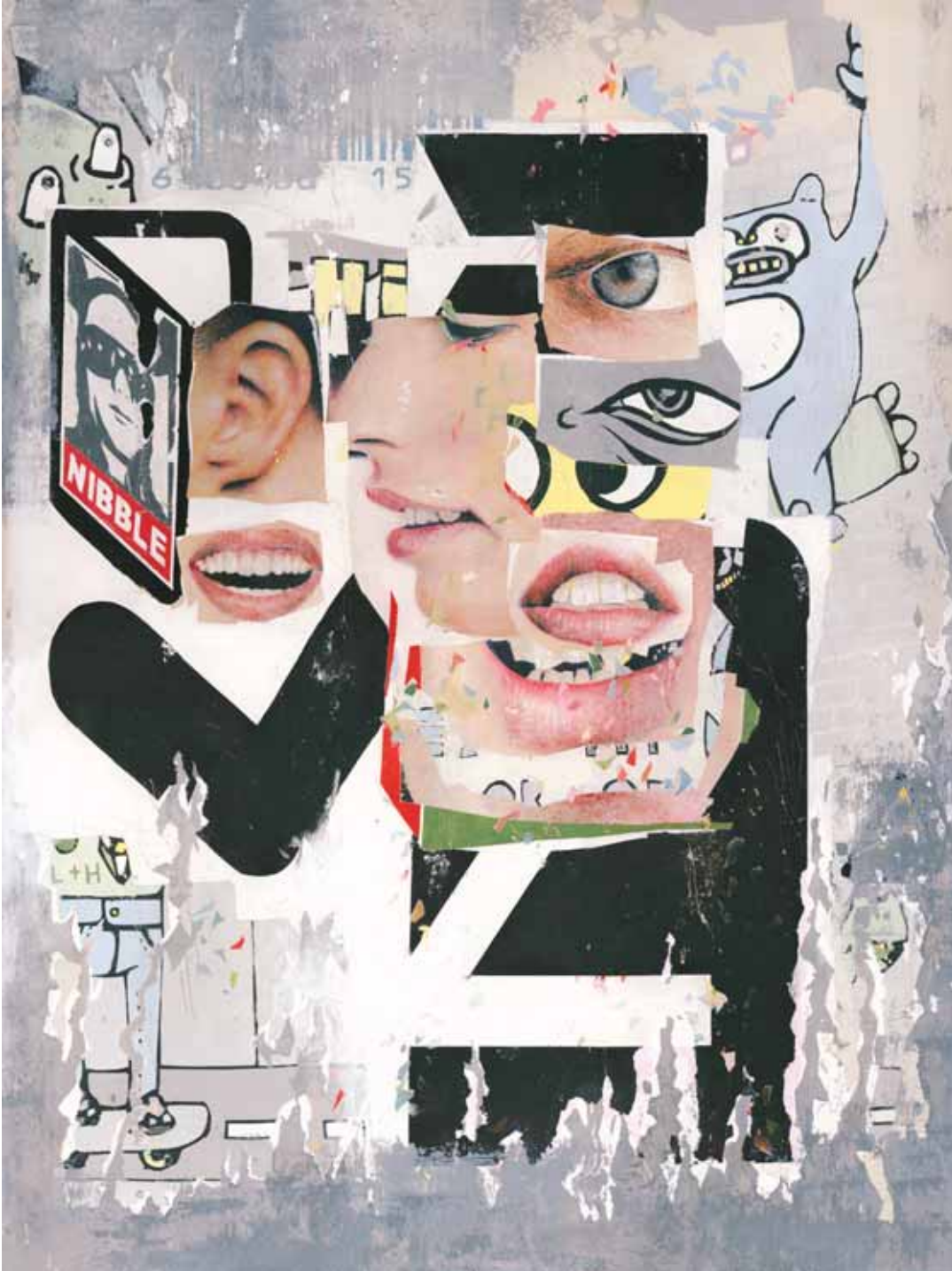
¹³ De Lange, 'Lost in the post'

¹⁴ The term 'poster-egos', appears in the unpublished version of this essay, 'Once famous dead artists' by Shane de Lange. The published version, 'Oncefamousdeadartists' uses 'flattened and pixilated egos' instead of 'poster-egos'. See Shane de Lange, 'Oncefamousdeadartists' and http://www.mapzar.org/artists/asha_zero.asp

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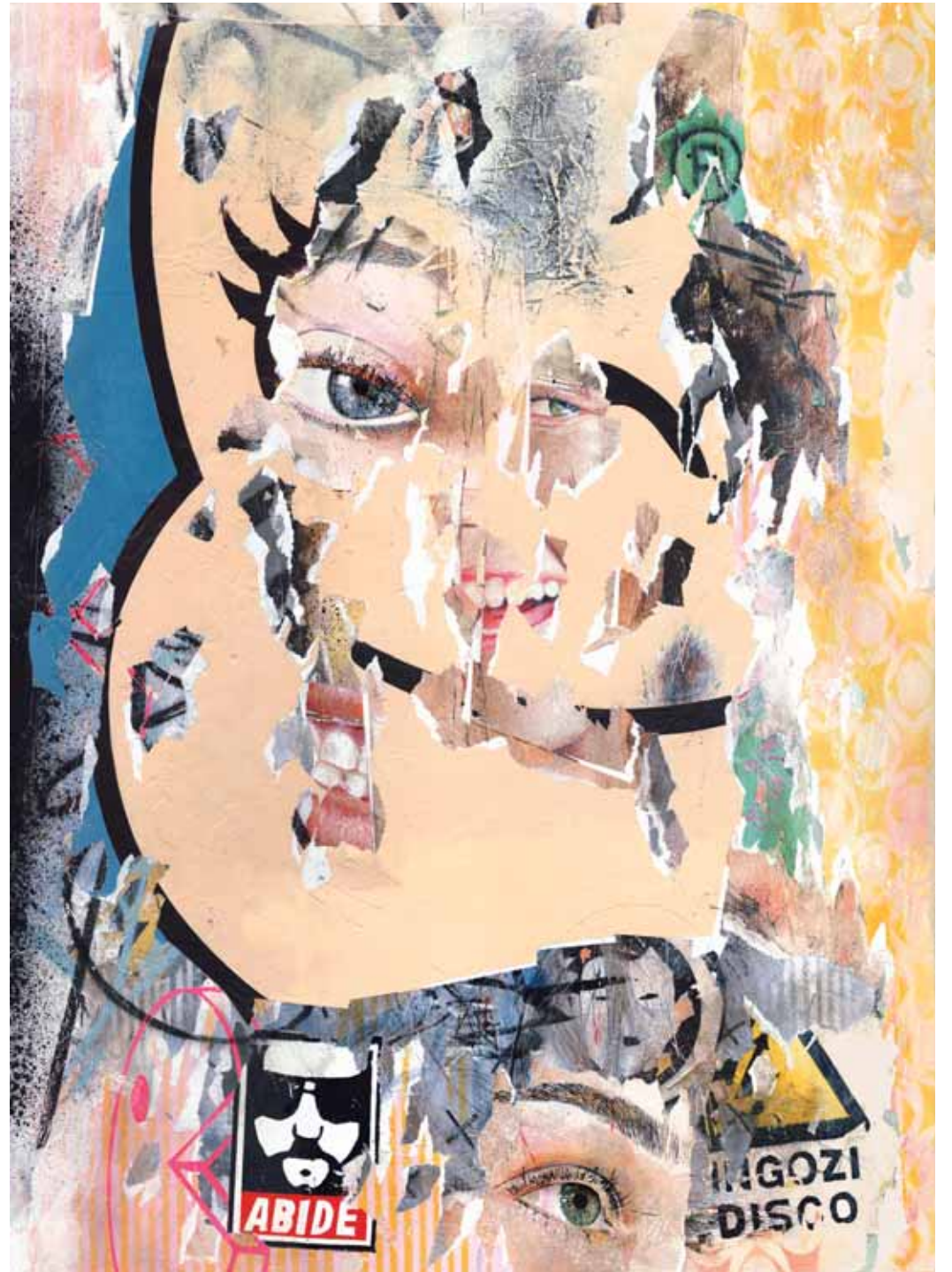


















Asha? Asha who?

Andries Loots

The global market in contemporary art is expanding enormously in every respect: there are more collectors, museums, corporate collections, dealers, galleries, fairs, exhibitions, competitions, websites, blogs, auctions, salons, consultants, you name it, dedicated to the international art trade than ever before.

Functioning successfully in this environment requires sophisticated business and networking skills. For this reason, galleries and dealers are approached by scores of artists requesting representation in the market, but inventive ideas and unusual concepts are few. In a world that values innovation highly, investing resources and time in promoting new artists requires strong commitment. Investor confidence is built gradually through enduring professional relationships and trust, and financial rewards usually come to fruition slowly.

From this perspective, Asha Zero's commitment to his career as a full-time artist is beyond doubt. He has sound art training, paints obsessively and has a unique artistic voice reverberating with historical references and echoes of Africa. He experiments with technique ceaselessly yet maintains his stylistic integrity. He also has a super cool street persona and an insistence on anonymity which adds to the allure of his work, in line with that of other street fighters like Banksy.

Asha's work has slowly made its way into collections in Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and the Netherlands. His distinctive artistic idiom, professional maturity and growing local and international recognition places him on the road to artworld success.



ASHA ZERO resumé

Qualifications

1997 National Diploma (Fine Art) Technikon Pretoria, now Tshwane University of Technology (TUT).
Majors: Drawing, Printmaking, Photography

Experience

1997 Assistant, *Purple and green*, curated by Abrie Fourie, Pretoria Art Museum

2003 Assistant, Willem Boshoff's (*B*)*reachings* project, Museum Africa, Johannesburg
Assistant, OUTLET art space/project room, TUT

Exhibitions

2004 *Winner in Hawaii*, OUTLET, TUT

2005 *Pet names in reverse*, 26 A Gallery, New Muckleneuk, Pretoria

Group Exhibitions

2004 *Far and wide*, curated by Gordon Froud, ABSA Towers, Johannesburg

2005 *The specialist* included in Top 100 entries, Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Council Arts Award
Resonance, VOIR gallery, Brooklyn, Pretoria
OUTLET at Aardklop, curated by Abrie Fourie, Snowflake Building, Potchefstroom

2006 *Beeldspraak 2006*, curated by Gordon Froud and Chris Diedericks, University of Johannesburg Gallery
New Suburbia, curated by Love and Hate, Platform on 18th, Rietondale, Pretoria
Asha Zero + Shane de Lange, The A Gallery, Graskop Hotel, Graskop
SA arts emerging group show, The Bag Factory, Johannesburg
The inevitable, curated by Love and Hate, Moja Modern, Parktown, Johannesburg
The collage show, curated by Michael Taylor, Whatiftheworld, Woodstock, Cape Town

2007 *Twogether*, 34Long Fine Art, Cape Town
Ingozi Disco, collaboration with Shane de Lange, CAPE O7 Fringe, VEGA Brand Communications School, Greenpoint, Cape Town (www.ingozidisco.co.za)
FACE, 34 Long, Cape Town
REVEAL, 34 Long, Cape Town
AWAY, MAP ZAR, Richmond, Northern Cape
REAL IS ME 08, Art fair, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Projects

2000 – 2002 *Cyberbaseline*, self published punk style zine, curated by Sjaka Septembir

2004 *Roadkillvisiontoilettries* collaboration with Marlon Griffith (from Trinidad), in *You can't play mas and fraid powder* at the Bag Factory, Fordsburg, Johannesburg
CAMP ZERO : the great indoors, OUTLET project room, TUT
Winner in Hawaii : Part 2, intervention by Ruth Sacks

2006 *A5:social.logical.art-intrigue*, publication by Love and Hate featuring Asha Zero graphic work
Who Am I's OUTLET, TUT

2007 *Mini Decoy*, Blank projects, Bo-Kaap, Cape Town
The Walls, curated by Love and Hate, including *Ingozi Disco* printed canvas, *Canned Applause* records, Melville, Johannesburg

Press

2004 'Zero defies definition: artist plays with issues of identity and reality'
Pretoria News, 26 October

2005 'Three artists and some heat' *Pretoria News*, 24 November

2006 'Dié drie skilder met die moed van hul oortuiging' *Beeld*, 29 November
'Die wêreld deur die oë van Asha Zero' *Beeld*, *Beeldspraak* insert in *Plus* section, 14 February
'Bubbling under: Up-and-coming South African artists' *Contempo* 1:21, April/May
Asha Zero, MAP ZAR booklet
Shane de Lange, Asha Zero feature: www.saartsemerging.org
Melvyn Minnaar, 'Small can be smart', *Cape Times*, 23 November

2007 Shane de Lange, 'Lost in the post. Asha Zero', *A look away* 4, first quarter
'Asha Zero assorted bystander (# 1)' *Habitat* 199:80, May/June 2007

Collections

Sanlam Art Collection

Private collections, UK, Europe and South Africa



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FINE ART

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