



Important enough to fight for..

Words, Ric Bower.

Fighting at private views is generally discouraged, and this is in spite of there being sound precedent for it. Vladimir Tatlin had a fracas with his rival Kazimir Malevich at 0.10, the first suprematist exhibition held in Petrograd in December 1915. I like to imagine it was over some tiny conceptual nuance or an aesthetic jot, that he cared so deeply for the honour of his practice he was prepared to draw blood to uphold it.

Paul and I were at the opening of *Life Less Ordinary, Performance and Display in South African Art*. The exhibition is beautifully strung between Turner House, Ffotogallery's home in Penarth, and an airy Victorian shop space in the Morgan Arcade in the centre of Cardiff. On display is the work of a dozen contemporary South African artists, wrestling with their identities.

The contemporary work is shown against the backdrop of the romantic portraits and bucolic tableaux of Alfred Duggan-Cronin made through the 1920s and 30s. His photographs have a naïve, charm but, knowing what we do about the events that were to soon unfold in the 20th century, it is hard to enjoy them innocently or to take them at face value. However gently Duggan-Cronin was to wield his camera, at that time and in that place it was an instrument of colonialist power, not the liberating, expressive tool it is to the contemporary artists in this show.

We were examining, beer in hand, the work of Araminta de Clermont. Her series *Body of Knowledge* depicts self-tattooed South African gang members: men who have had to adjust from being powerful figures inside the prison walls to being powerless outcasts when they are released. Paul believed her work to be of merit, I disagreed.

In but a moment he was stripped to the waist, fists raised, long hair flowing from the drafts of hot air emanating from huddled culturati. My knuckles were raw from having made contact with his thick skull more than once. "How could a series of portraits that offended every aesthetic sensibility I possessed be worthy of attention?" I exclaimed as I cracked him across the cheek. Then with a blow to the gut I demonstrated conclusively that her, "wildly varying viewpoints and her ill-disciplined framing showed a lack of visual literacy and very little empathy for the format". But still he would not give up. My elbow landed hard on his exposed and sweaty ribcage, proving beyond any shadow of doubt that, "her subject direction was hapless and flaccid".

I may have been winning the fight but I knew that I was wrong; (I would never of course admit this to Paul).

The truth is I had forgotten why it was that at an early age we gave up on our dreams of being a pop star, a brain surgeon or the Lord Chief Justice of BP and we decided instead to become an *artist*, working exclusively in the medium of pipe cleaners; knowing that in so doing we were consigning ourselves to a lifetime of grinding poverty and/or failed relationships. I had forgotten the great leveling power of the camera which allows anybody to just pick it up and write their own story in great strokes of clarifying light. Somewhere along the way, in my quest for triple distilled, doctrinally pure aestheticism, I had forgotten all these things.

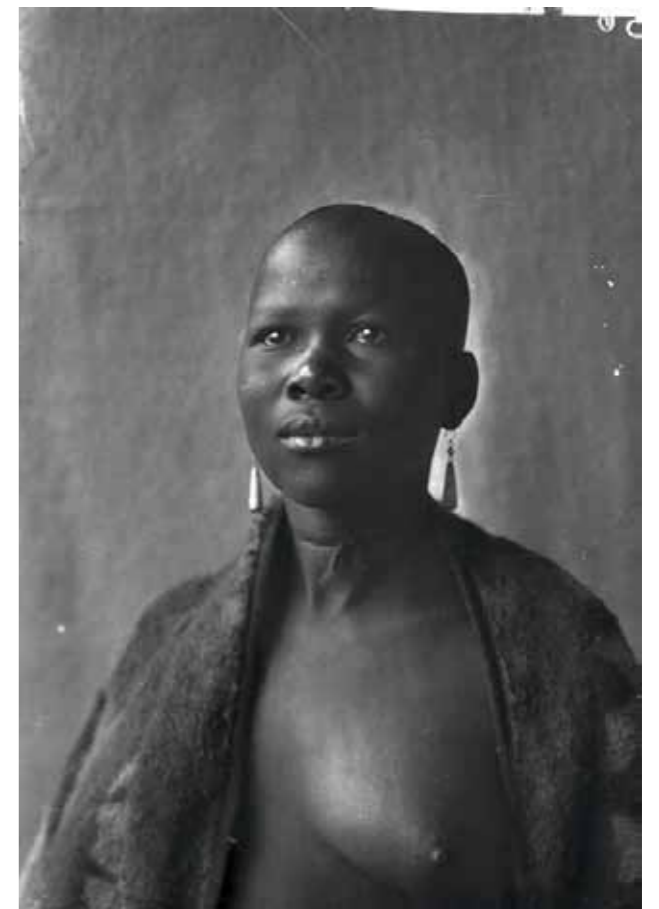
It was her story that reminded me. De Clermont hadn't come to South Africa as part of some enlightened lefty pilgrimage, or as step two in a five step plan to educate the world into the extent of her own brilliance. She had come because it is the >

cheapest place in the world to detox. As part of her rehabilitation she had taken up photography. The notoriously camera-shy underclass she depicts had long eluded well-nourished, socially adjusted, testosterone-fueled, male photo-journalists, but they recognised in de Clermont someone who, like them, was irrevocably marked.

The work therefore is not convenient or neatly packaged for our consumption. Instead it is raw and throbbing, like an untreated wound, difficult to look at but impossible to ignore. The pocked and stained concrete backdrops echo the markings on their bodies, like a ten year old Cy Twombly had set to on the negatives with a biro. The subject direction is awkward, but then, that's how it was, I am not supposed to like it.

Malevitch and Tatlin, like the artists in this excellent show, have understood what we, sunk deep in a pusillanimous torpor, may well have forgotten. A brave new society demands a brave new art and it will always be important enough to fight over. - **b**

Life Less Ordinary, Performance and Display in South African Art is showing at Ffotogallery, Turner House, Penarth and Morgan Arcade Cardiff until June 19th.
(Thanks to Michael Evans-Howells for the Cy Twombly quip)



 *Basuto Woman at Ramaphephe, Basutoland 1926;*
Alfred Duggan-Cronin



Moerser, a scrap metal collector, spends his days with other 'strollers' in the middle of a traffic roundabout in an industrial area of Cape Town. According to prison lore, a tattooed insect, especially on the face or nose, indicates a dangerous person, something Moerser tearfully denied he was during this shoot.

 *Body of Knowledge: Araminta de Clermont, 2008*



Ali is a blankets neatly rolled up. The crowns on his shoulders identify him as once having been a high ranking figure in the 28's.

 *Body of Knowledge: Araminta de Clermont, 2008*