

## Zeitgeist

“Art is the lie that makes us realise truth” Pablo Picasso famously said on occasion.

The problem with these types of often quoted one-liners are that they share a little wisdom and leave a lot of frustration. What word or action preceded this thought, what came after, what made him say it and to whom did he speak? Context. That is what is missing.

What he actually said is: “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.”

Perhaps the need for some sort of intellectual setting is personal; perhaps most people are happy to have only these few words to work with, to gain insight from. Out of context it does in fact become something that we can make our own; interpret it regardless of the narrators initial intent and take from it what we please.

One-liners tend to present themselves in oracular fashion whenever they please. Sometimes the timing makes sense; other times it does not.

For instance: a few years ago I walked into an art gallery and was confronted by an image so familiar, yet so unexpected that it literally stopped me in my tracks. A black and white photograph by the artist Jan Verboom showed a signpost on a barren land. “Verneukpan, Kenhardt, rave” it pointed in two directions. The rave was held on Verneukpan. As a child I drove with my family past this desolate evidence of human intervention every time we went to our farm. It represented everything I wanted to escape from (or so I thought). Yet, in that moment in the gallery I was confronted with the work of an artist who saw the beauty of the desolation, the beauty of the unexpected. With his image he made me realise how precious that familiar world was. No amount of word would ever have convinced me, but a piece of art did.

More recently and in a completely different context the quote suddenly came to mind again. I was reading a review of the results of the latest Christie's and Sotheby's Impressionist and Modern Art New York autumn sales. “As will happen in the aftermath of any severe crisis in which all certainties are called into question, approaches to art have changed. A trend that began to be perceptible before the autumn of 2008 came out forcefully both at Christie's and Sotheby's. Expressiveness, color contrast and extreme structural simplicity are the three criteria that now determine success no matter which school or period is considered” Souren Melikian wrote in the New York Times on November 7<sup>th</sup>.

He maintained that the buyers showed “a complete indifference to delicate nuances [...] and subtle mood achieved through atmospheric effects”. Could the art we buy indicate a sort shift or zeitgeist or new “truth” that would be hard to put in words yet, I kept wondering.

Looking at the pieces that achieved record prices there seem to be a strong suggestion that we currently want things that are simple, clear and colourful. Are we just a little “subtled” out? Has the harshness of the economic downturn elicited a response that suggests that we want it black and white, not in shades of gray?

Perhaps it is merely part of the cycle of life. In a recent interview journalist Eben Venter asked South African filmmaker Ariane Besson her golden rules for creative success. “A film or painting or book has to appear to have been created without effort, as if you have made it along the way, using your left hand” was her rule number one. Effortless, brilliant and fast – the way Hossein Bolt runs.

But, as we all know, to make it look as if it is easy to do something takes thousands of hours of practice and hard work. It is always difficult and time consuming to do something well. We just don't want to know about it right now; we don't want to see the hard work.

What do I mean? Think of Eduard Munch's *The Scream* or Brahms' First Symphony. It took Brahms 14 years to complete and one can almost feel that. The whole work is filled with the effort and angst of the creative process. During a rehearsal conductor Michael Blomstedt suggested to the members of the San Francisco Symphony to “think of flowers straining to break through concrete”. Brahms concrete

flowering is brilliant, but not what we want right now.

#### Local market

It would be an interesting but rather obtuse and self-serving to look for this same trend in the South African art market right now, I presume. It is often easier to spot a trend after the fact.

And in any case, the local art market has had enough of its own ups and downs and sidelong glances to warrant an investigation.

Art market insiders has long predicted the rise of a group of artist that has been lagging behind the blue chip Sterns, Pierneefs and Maggies. And this year it happened. Many artist records were set by what Strauss & Co in their Chairman's report called the "overshadowed artists". These include people like Frans Oerder, Wolf Kibel, Dorothy Kay, May Hillhouse and Eduardo Vila. This year also saw huge jumps in prices paid for works of art by artists like Alexis Preller, Maud Sumner, Frieda Lock, Eric Laubser and Christo Coetzee (to name but a few).

Christo Coetzee has been a market stalwart for a long time. His work hardly ever "bombed out", but it never fetched great prices either. The R20 000 to R30 000 estimates usually acting as spot-on predictions for what the market can bare. Until this year, that is.

In May 2009 a work from the mid 1980's (with a bullish estimate of R 90 000 – R 120 000) fetched R201 600. Just a few months later the work *Still life with fruit banjo and a birdcage* dating from 1954 sold for £64 800 (R794 412,08 at today's exchange rate).

Another meteoric prices rise was for the work of Frieda Lock. Lock, always admired by her peers and in academic circles, was never a market favorite. Yet, in 2009 she set two artist records on two consecutive Strauss & Co sales. In March one of her paintings achieved R668 400 and in September *Kitchen interior with red carpet* fetched R1 002 600.

One of the other surprises of the year was the record price for a work by Eric Laubscher. In February a work with an estimate of R200 000 to R300 000 fetched R1 120 000, almost four times the pre-sale estimate.

So, if nothing else, our market seem to have a mind of its own and South African art seem to be far from flat and flaccid. And that's for sure.