

Introduction

by Stefan Hundt

I only got to know Adriaan van Zyl some two years ago. At the time Amanda Botha had approached me with a proposal to look at series of paintings on the Tygerberg Hospital that Adriaan had produced. This series entitled *Hospitaal tyd* (Hospital Time) had been shown at the Association for Visual Arts in Cape Town the year before. I regrettably had missed the exhibition. On first sight the series of painting held a type of enigmatic magnetism and alerted me to the fact that I had overlooked a significant exhibition and knew nothing of this highly competent artist.

Amanda Botha proposed that an exhibition of this series of works would be appropriate in the Sanlam Gallery as the Tygerberg Hospital was located just down the road and was familiar to many of the citizens in the area. She rightly judged that the exhibition of the series at the Association for Visual Arts, had elicited little critical response and was perhaps in the wrong place at the time. The exhibition of this series in Bellville near the hospital would hopefully arouse more interest in a context and with an audience familiar with the subject.

As discussions with Adriaan regarding the exhibition progressed and the concept of the exhibition expanded to include works from earlier themes he had pursued - travelling in Namibia and to the Copper mines in the Northern Cape. The exhibition would then have been an overview of Adriaan's work over the last twenty years and would have provided the viewer with the opportunity to assess a significant portion of his oeuvre.

After a number of postponements the exhibition was planned for the earlier part of 2006. Adriaan was still going to complete additional works for the *Hospitaal tyd* series to augment the exhibition. This was not to be. By this time Adriaan no longer felt in the mental or physical condition to continue to work on the exhibition. The illness he had fought for so long, in silent optimism was beginning to gain the upper hand. A few months later, Amanda Botha and I visited Adriaan to discuss arrangements for an exhibition in 2007 that inevitably would be a posthumous overview of his work. Adriaan van Zyl passed away in Stellenbosch on 27 September 2006 as silently and quietly as I had got to know him.

Adriaan had enjoyed a brief career as a painter. I came to realise the richness of that career once Amanda Botha and I commenced compiling the exhibition. It was only then, while working through a substantial collection of slides documenting his works over the years,

that the extent of his oeuvre was revealed to me. Adriaan had in his career occupied himself with all the major painting genres still life, portraiture and landscape of which the landscape occupied him most of all.

In this catalogue Marlene van Niekerk in her essay on Adriaan's paintings provides a psychological interpretation across the extent of his oeuvre of landscapes resulting from his travels to the Skeleton Coast in Namibia and up to the copper mines of the Northern Cape, light houses in Europe and along the coast of South Africa, still lifes focussing on the desolate graves and graveyards located around the arid parts of South Africa; and finally the series *Hospitaaltyd* with the austere and eerie imagery of hospital interiors and equipment.

Lize van Robbroek in her essay on the *Hospitaaltyd* series, 'brings an art historical perspective to bear, revitalising Adriaan's painting in the context of present day wholesale rejection of the relevance of realism. Van Robbroek restores one's confidence in the ability of painting such as Adriaan's to transcend the petty ideology of contemporary art criticism's demand for political correctness and social activist import, and provide the viewer with possible interpretation that enrich the experience art and life.

Amanda Botha in her essay in this catalogue presents an appreciation of Adriaan's paintings as metaphorical conduits of memory threading their way through towards wholeness and integrity of being.

All the contributors to the catalogue focussed on the greater part of Adriaan's oeuvre, consisting of the various series, such as lighthouses, the travelogue through Namibia and the Northern Cape, the series of images of graves and *Hospitaaltyd*. Two aspects of Adriaan's oeuvre deserves more consideration.

Although not celebrated as portraitist the few portraits that could be located, show Adriaan to have been a superb portraitist. Unfortunately no acknowledged self-portrait by the artist exists. Yet a small painting of a man looking out of the picture what seems to be the legs of a simple school easel with the intense stare of the eyes so characteristic of artists' self-portraits painted in front a mirror seems to be just that. In this catalogue the painting is referred to as a self-portrait as the likeness of face and posture correspond closely to Adriaan's own features. Further portraits of family and friends show Adriaan as a painter intimately familiar with his subject's psyche while at the same not being dictated to by the demands for verisimilitude The choice of colour and paint application is carefully considered to add meaning to the relationship between artist and subject.

Adriaan's paintings of bathers in a Turkish bath on the upper end of Long street in Cape Town and of bathers in Paris constitute a special part of his oeuvre. In these painting figures emerge on the painting surface, ethereal, almost ghostlike at times. It is as if one is transported into an entirely different world. A comparison with Ingres well known *Bather of Valpinçon* (Louvre, Paris) with its orientalising head scarf is not out place. The neoclassicism so typical of Ingres in techniques and subject is echoed in Adriaan's restrained painting of male and female bathers against a Moroccan style mosaic wall. These paintings resonate with a subdued yet intense atmosphere of languid desire, conveyed by the soft focused painted naked skin against the hard edge of wall tiles.

The Long Street Baths paintings exhibit a much cooler atmosphere. Here the images reflect the utilitarian construction of these baths with their white and green age stained tiles. No oriental motifs to move the eye and the mind to a different world. The images are to a degree clinical. The persons attending these baths are distant and the viewer is set up as a detached spectator- observing coolly what unfolds visually in each stroke of the brush, delineation of form and untouched canvas.

In certain respects the series of bathers paintings forms a direct contrast with the last series of Adriaan's paintings, *Hospitaaltyd*. Where the *Bathers Series* focussed one's eye and mind on the body of the persons depicted, the images in *Hospitaaltyd* moves the eye and mind onto oneself. One is no longer the detached viewer but both viewer and implied subject here. In both the *Bathers series* and *Hospitaaltyd* Adriaan transcended the parochial and mundane of realistic painting and imbued these images through his vision with profound meaning relevant to anyone who has experienced desire and is aware of their own mortality.

This catalogue serves as a homage to a talented painter whose life was cut short too soon. Deeply aware of his own mortality and slow progress towards death Adriaan van Zyl has left a legacy of painting which has at its heart the human condition, as reflected through the physical structures we erect to house, protect, exploit and to heal us. In this respect he is an artist in South Africa which is deserving of more recognition and celebration.

Although this catalogue is not an overview of Adriaan's entire oeuvre, it will hopefully inspire future writers to delve into the depth of a very fecund source of imagery and artistry.
