

TO art dealer Warren Siebrits, the name of his new exhibition space, Gallerie Metroplex, is a bad pun. It's "gallerie" in the European sense because it's situated between two trendy shopping centres in Rosebank, Johannesburg --- home to the generally well-off, consumer-friendly folk Siebrits refers to in passing as "transplanted Europeans in BMWs".

But it's also "metroplex" as in a hybrid cultural root system; and the name for the nerve centre of the new media revolution in Alvin Toffler's Future Shock. Revolution in a shopping mall. A suitably grand idea.

In reality, though, Gallerie Metroplex presents itself on a far less ostentatious scale. All it really consists of is two display windows housing whatever work Siebrits considers casually subversive enough to place within such an environment.

Yet, at first glance, the debut show seems anything but subversive. In fact, it seems to belong exactly where it is --- in yuppie hell. Well-lit, ethno- chic prints that'd look great in dining rooms across the north. On closer inspection, however, one spots two books accompanying the display, and with them the name of the artist: **Wopko Jensma, the visionary poet and down-and out radical** who shouted the injustices of 1970s and 1980s apartheid with such a vigorous lyricism as seldom seen before.

Described by writer and academic Stephen Grey as "exceptionally great" and by actor Marcel van Heerden as "way, way ahead of his time", Jensma is just as commonly referred to (in mostly hushed and polite tones) as "having lost it" or as "schizophrenic". Loslyf editor, playwright and novelist Ryk Hattingh agrees with both definitions: "In his writing he has such a grip on his schizophrenia --- to the point where ranting becomes art. If he is schizophrenic, his schizophrenia was perfectly in line with the schizophrenia of South Africa in that time. And for that he was actively marginalised." But in fact Jensma summed himself up best by quoting from Big Bill Broonzy: "I feel like hollerin' but the town is too small."

Jensma is one of South Africa's great recluses. His history is vague and people who knew him back then are few. People who know him or have tracked him down now are even fewer. Of Dutch origin, he attended Potchefstroom University for a time. It is believed that while he was there, he was involved in a serious motorbike accident. Eventually he found himself in Johannesburg, making art and publishing dangerous words.

What seems clearer is the history of the works that Siebrits has acquired from a private collection and is displaying in Gallerie Metroplex. They are prints of the original wood-cuts created by Jensma on commission to King Sobhuza of Swaziland. But they are witness to plenty of intrigue, for it is widely believed that while visiting the king's court Jensma fell in love with a Swazi maiden. South Africa 1970; white man, black woman. The law, what about the law? He was run out of the country.

Later, in what was as much a gesture of stinging satire as it was a means of being with the girl, Jensma had himself "reclassified" as black.

The shrill absurdity of this situation found voice in his books of poems combined with artworks published by Ravan Press, Sing for Our Execution (1973); Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number (1974) and I Must Show You My Clippings (1977). Again, he summed up his work by quoting someone else --- this time none other than Saint Augustine: "They love truth when it reveals itself, they hate it when it reveals themselves." Surely the government was mad

and he was sane? He'd shout it until his pen ran dry!

Gradually though, it seems the irony grew too great. "He lost his grip on his schizophrenia like the country was losing its grip on its schizophrenia," says Hattingh, "His writing is the truest manifestation there is of the country's madness at that time."

In 1988, art historian and researcher Elza Miles was involved in putting together an exhibition called *The Neglected Tradition*. On the day of the opening she went to pick Jensma up. By this stage he was living in the Salvation Army hostel downtown and couldn't face the show. By the time Miles had returned from a research project in Paris in 1990, she had lost contact with the artist. The hostel in question burned down in mid-1994.

Contrary to occasional whisperings, Jensma is apparently still alive. While he may have locked himself out of society, a tiny piece of his spirit can still be found in two windows upstairs from the ever-fashionable Picasso's in Rosebank.

Now there's the real *Gallerie Metroplex* pun for you: self-confessed gutter poet displayed in trendy mall, on show to coiffed luvvies clip-clopping their way between a cappuccino and a manicure, glancing aside and thinking how pretty the African art looks in the window.

If it's the subtle style of subversion Siebrits is selling, he's certainly becoming one of the cleverest dealers in town. If it's Jensma he's selling, then spare a thought for the artist --- in his own words this time: "as ice invades me, its indifference/ at times, yes, at times/ i feel for holler/ up from the gutter."