

NORMAN CATHERINE

From a comfortable vantage point, it's almost too easy to say what the response - and the responsibility of art created inside a brutal, unjust social system such as South Africa's, should be. Certainly we expect an intellectual stance against injustice and racism, and an emotional frisson of vicarious horror at an impending apocalypse. The mocking ghost of George Grosz seems to hover over such situations, and whether directly summoned or involuntarily invoked, the angry laughter of *Ecce Homo* haunts the graphics and mixed media works of South African artist Norman Catherine like a raucous poltergeist raised by the spectre of social chaos. For Catherine, neither a cushioning, distanced surrealism nor blunt, straightforward protest are enough - though elements of both are in his work. Only violently expressive and seriously ironic edges can sharpen a dulled sense of despair felt by any thoughtful member of an entire social order (*Catherine is white*) committing sure, slow suicide.

Appropriately, Catherine's latest collection is a real horror show: the book of Revelation rewritten by George Romero. His subjects include dismembered bodies, spurting blood, maelstroms, and caskets. For materials, he uses "crude" stuff: tin, wood, clay, and plenty of barbed wire. A pall of black color washes most of his scenes, a hellish darkness punctuated by blasts of reddish fire and cruelly gaudy colors. The works' titles announce their targets with flat slogans: "National Suicide", "State of Emergency" and "House Arrest".

Catherine's constructions are on the smallish side, linking them to black Africa's art-object-as-fetish tradition. These mixed-media works and collaged graphics are like totems of congealed evil spirits, animistic traps for boogies as well as raw expressions of fear and fury that allow no catharsis. Compared to Grosz's drawings or Coe's paintings, Catherine's is a shamanistic effort: to capture something of the Horrible depicted in the thing itself. The collage graphic *State of Emergency*, 1986, with its nightmare scene of leaping black cats containing dismembered white bodies, both vividly distills a dreamlike vision of disaster and, with its collaged materials (straw, paper, tin, and barbed wire), physically embodies it. In the wall sculpture *House Arrest*, 1985, a tiny blindfolded human figure inside a casketlike box below a miniature clock rimmed with barbed wire, is both a potent metaphor for the "dead time" imposed by the Kafkaesque penalty as well as an iconic device to contain the bad spirit of such ominous punishment.

The mixed media tableau *Intensive Care*, 1986, features another doll-like human replica, a patient/prisoner wrapped tightly in a bare hospital/jail bed, his eyes distended in a face split into black and white halves; he watches an already bloody circular saw rip toward his crotch through the bed covers while a mouse trap lies near his throat. The graph line on the medical chart at the foot of the bed heads downward. In this condensed image, Catherine sums up the current South African condition into an appropriate and telling metaphor, simple enough to be a direct political statement, grisly enough to create an aura of fetishised terror.

Catherine's more "ordinary" graphics - from similarly horrific images like these, in gouache and acrylic on paper, to ironically jaunty works such as the bas-relief of *United Nations*, 1986, in brightly colored crushed tin cans - are also moving evocations of a contemporary social nightmare. But the fetishisation of the all-out mixed media objects and the viciousness of some images adds an extra dimension of creepy dread to his cataclysmic visions.

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Review by John Howell:

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