

Here's what I think of your labels...

Khan uses her work to explore the prejudices she experiences as an artist

It is not often that an artist presents an unfavourable critique of her work ethos as an artwork.

Yet this is what Sharlene Khan has done in this exhibition in a piece titled *Thought Leader* (2008), which shows an excerpt from a searing attack on Khan's aesthetic.

Is this an act of foolishness or the behaviour of a confident artist who has taken possession of the words that demean her, stripping them of their power and flogging them as art?

Either way, she has unjustifiably conferred significance to the musings of an art critic immortalising them.

Writers, especially those of us whose ponderings share the life-span of a newspaper, would love nothing more than to see our critiques preserved and packaged as art. In this way Khan almost encourages art critics to take careless and thoughtless swipes at her art in the hope that we too might find our discourse hanging in a gallery.

Thought Leader is sandwiched between two artworks that meditate on the core classifications assigned to Khan.

One is entitled *Westernised. Educated. Bitch* (2008), summing up the informal (pejorative) labels used to describe her, and the other is an institutionalised description of her, listing her racial, ethnic and gender qualities.

These two types of classifications suggest that the critique of Khan is rooted in a societal and

What I look like, what I feel
artist Sharlene Khan
review by Mary Corrigan

institutionalised form of prejudice.

The inference is that the white-dominated art community and her own ethnic community view her engagement with a contemporary art practice as a betrayal of her cultural heritage, of who she is meant to be.

Khan has, therefore, through her expression "stepped out of line" – black women aren't expected to be "Westernised" or "educated" or rebellious as the bitch designation suggests. Attacks on her work are the measures employed by the powers that be to keep her in line, or so her art implies.

Khan has long held the view that the South African art world is dominated by white women whom she sees as perpetuating systems of exclusion as set by white-male patriarchy.

Not too surprisingly, her views have not drawn favourable responses from the establishment and Khan has found herself in the firing line. This is overtly explored in *Anybody but Sharlene* (2008), which draws on the iconography of persecution.

Khan isn't the only artist who has explicitly rallied against the female-dominated art intelligentsia.

The artist Tracey Rose also took a swipe at this elite, white-

dominated faction in her exhibition *The Plantation Lullaby*, earlier this year.

Khan's grievances should therefore not be readily dismissed. But because she keeps the focus on her "victimhood" rather than exposing the duplicity of the system, her audience's attention is diverted from the nature of the establishment that she wrestles with.

What has become abundantly clear from this exhibition is that the racial polemic that has preoccupied her writing has filtered into her art, colouring her engagement with the politics of visuals. Reflecting the mode of essentialist thought that drives any discourse on racism, the bulk of the artworks follow a formula which sees binary opposites juxtaposed.

Each artwork consists of two photographs that depict contrary situations. For example, *Mother* (2008) shows a pregnant woman dressed in old-fashioned garb, suggesting a traditional concept of motherhood, while the opposing photograph shows a modern woman pulling the head off a doll.

The majority of these artworks do not engage with race but rather with gender, ethnicity and religion. In other words, all the popular motifs of the post-colonial, post-liberation era.

The photographs are meant to look contrived and constructed and they do. In *Modern. Urban. Western. Bitch.* (2008) Khan looks as though she is starring in a pantomime with pigtails and a

long, garish dress that denotes tradition in a very overt manner. Khan pokes fun at stereotypes, showing how ludicrous they are.

There is a sense that the archetypes she presents aren't just products of a society but that the individuals who assume elements of these archetypes are complicit participants.

This is highlighted in *Abused* (2008), which juxtaposes a woman applying make-up and a battered woman crying over a sink. Though the photographs could be "before" and "after" shots in some kind of twisted makeover, there is a sense that the protagonist could just as easily choose not to be a victim.

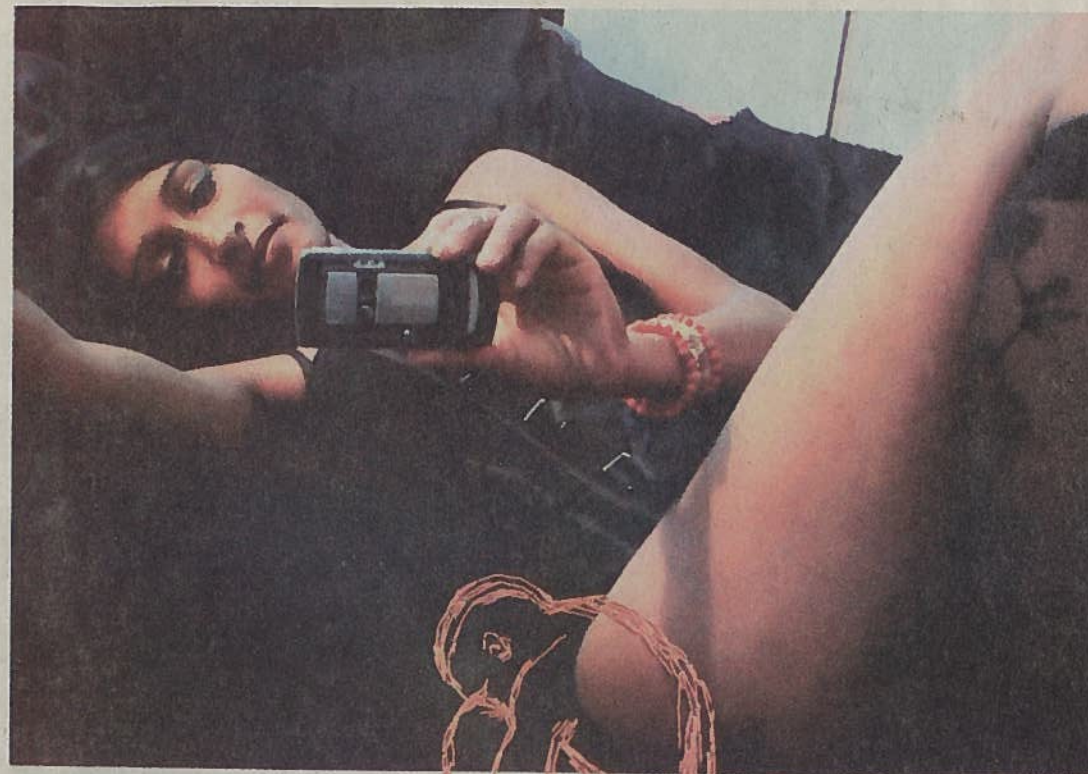
The opposing archetypes that Khan presents are also interchangeable in that Khan herself can assume the appearance of both stereotypes.

There is a certain poeticism to *Vulnerable*; the two opposing photographs share common ground, showing that the emotion they express can be manifested in a different way.

This opens up a rich dialogue centered on the female subject. Though her *Doing It for Daddy* is also a triumph, many of the artworks at this exhibition are disappointing.

They simply feel too one-dimensional. Perhaps that is the price one pays for presenting a tableaux of cardboard-cut-out personas.

□ *What I look like, What I feel* is showing at Gallery Momo in Johannesburg until September 29



Poetic juxtaposition: *Vulnerable* (2008) is one of the more successful works on the exhibition. The two opposing photographs have common ground, showing that the emotion they express can be shown in a different way