



Arts

“(B)lack” questions attitudes towards street traders through ink drawings and embroidered images and the visual play of positive and negative terms that have become definitive of the inner-city. These works aim to raise awareness of how words that are used about ‘others’ can easily perpetuate existing racial and xenophobic stereotypes, which continue to stigmatise an economically struggling sector of society.

StreetNet interviews artist Sharlene Khan on her exhibition, entitled “(B)lack”, that focuses on street traders and inner-city struggles for livelihoods.

StreetNet: The exhibition highlights the meanings that the common terms and the ways we often hear street traders talked about. What was the idea behind your exhibition?

Sharlene: The main premise of the exhibition is an exposition of various words – both positive and negative – that are used in relation to South African city centres and the Johannesburg inner city in particular. These terms have become familiar in urban discourse from describing the physical landscape to the people of inner-cities. With the 2010 World Cup approaching, inner-city initiatives, especially in Johannesburg, have been given an even greater impetus. Ideas of regeneration and rejuvenation of the Joburg city centre have garnered great support but often still ends up targeting our most economically disadvantaged community members. Workers involved in informal trade have been targeted as criminals and nuisances to middle

class purist’s vision of a resurrected Joburg. It is these same purists who deserted the city centre in the 80s and 90s for safer outer lying suburbs and shopping malls, while lower working class South Africans of colour and foreigners have kept the Joburg inner city vibrant. Thus, in search of a Joburg utopia, city councillors, urban developers and businesses tentatively acknowledge the pervasiveness of informal trade and struggle to come to terms with structures that benefit all, without relegating street trade to superficial market structures or squeezing them out of the city centre altogether.

StreetNet: The eight panels in the exhibition describe aspects of life and lived experience of informal traders which suggest the contradictions that are present in the daily struggles to earn a living in city spaces, streets and pavements, as survivalists. In your work, street traders who are all too often described as ‘outsiders, fringe, criminal element’, etc. have pride, dreams and dignity. Your work also refers to the language used by cities on street trading which belies the reality of exclusion, prejudice, duality in policy on the street traders as the urban poor and migrant workers from other countries in Africa. Please can you talk about the message you are trying to communicate on the use of language and the subversion of these terms through exposing the fallacy and prejudice contained in them in the depiction of street traders in the art work.

In the exhibition “(B)lack”, I tried to juxtapose terms used about the inner city and its residents, in order to expose how these terms are not only used to sell inner city regeneration but also to negatively stereotype a group of people that live and work on the streets daily. “(B)lack” is an exhibition of works done predominantly in ink, acrylic and embroidery, which make a visual play with a set of words that are used to define inner-city residents and workers with images of these street traders. Words such as ‘inner-city regeneration’, ‘informal economy’, ‘urban renewal’, ‘high risk areas’, define more than just a location. These words have come to encompass and define people who live and work in these urban metropolitan centres, most specifically Black South Africans and African immigrants. Not only can these terms harm the image of the city centre, but also the images of these already marginalised, peripheral citizens. For each ‘positive’ term used for inner city re-

juvenation, there is an underlying negative stereotypical presumption about the impact of informal trade workers of city plans, perceptions and progress. Such dualisms communicate a position of power for the first term over the negative role assumed by the second term:

- ‘Low-cost rejuvenation/High risk elements’;
- ‘Inner-city/Fringe’;
- ‘Previously disadvantaged/Criminal Element’;
- ‘2010 clean-up/Hide-away’;
- ‘Foreigner/Other’;
- ‘Informal Economy/Nuisance’.

These terms can easily assume a dualistic position thereby continuing the stigmatisation of the Other.

“(B)lack” was exhibited at KZNSA gallery (Durban) in October 2007, at the AVA Gallery (Cape Town) in March 2008 and at the Polokwane Art Museum in March-May 2009.

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