

## Pauline Marcelle: Bend Down Boutique – Joburg Works

*“.....Now on the road to freedom, I was pausing for a moment near Temuco and could hear the voice of the water that had taught me how to sing” [Pablo Neruda]*

“What are you doing, do not take photos and don’t come here and cause trouble for us”, screamed one of the street retailers in that cadence of Pidgin English, popular in the streets of Eko City (Lagos). Pauline is streetwise or rather worldly and gives an impressive taste of her knowledge of the mean streets. I am astonished by her metamorphosis, to see the transformation Pauline goes through as soon she senses her life under peril – she remains calm amidst all the madness of these streets filled with people, buses, taxis, vagrants and immigrants. One can tell she understands what constitute the souls of the street with its street philosophy. She is in central Joburg at the biggest ‘bend down boutique’ in the city.

In the Third World countries local resources have been plundered by international corporations and whole populations have been subject to the violent fluctuations of world markets without the safeguard of Western systems of welfare that might protect them from destitution. For these groups the consumer lifestyles of the rich nations are nothing more than hopeless fantasies. Africa is filled with refugees and asylum seekers, striving to cross the borders to those countries that seem to hold the promise of freedom and prosperity. I accompanied Pauline to the biggest bend down boutique in the centre of Joburg, in Plein Street, between Wanders and King George Streets, where she took the photographs displayed on this show. Traipsing in this part of town can be challenging, pavements are lined with huge steel crates crammed with second hand clothing and manned by tough looking mostly West African man. Here on these busy streets, heaving with masses and cacophony of colours and filled with bargain hunters, is a sense of Tower of Babel with languages ranging from Twi, Wolof, Xhosa, and Yoruba, English, French, Portuguese to Zulu. Whilst some greet us warmly and are willing to be photographed next to their wares, others are hostile toward us particularly when they see a camera. A camera can be intrusive in these pavements where

municipality signages of 'No Hawkers' are flouted, and illegal immigrants are jostling with locals haggling for bargains.

Second hand clothing supports hundreds of thousands of livelihood in developing countries. This trade is more popular in countries with low purchasing power, and for poorer consumers. The clothes are 'affordable' and are sold 'cheaply' in African marketplaces - where the trade has flourished and in the process has killed a vibrant textile and garment industry. The big players in donating the used clothing are rich countries like USA, Germany, Canada, Belgium, Netherlands and Britain. The clothing are donated for free by their owners to charities/NGO's; community groups and in some instances commercial collection banks. From there they get sorted, graded and put into bales ready to be shipped to Africa in containers. On arrival at the ports they are transported inland in trucks and are sold in bales to traders who then retail them in on market places or the streets.

The activity of buying is called 'ukudunusa', meaning to 'bend down' and rummage in Zulu language and these markets are called 'boutiques' to give them some prestige as it not a dignified act to see male and female bend down on the stalls. Some of the brand names to be found in these 'bend down boutiques' include such high street brands as GAP, Burberry; Lacoste; Levi jeans from skinny to bootleg, Topshop dresses; blouses; H&M, Nike, Adidas; Wonder Bra's to no name brands. These second hand clothes are known by different names. In South Africa they are called '*amahewa*' – a bastardised version of 'here you are', an old colonial mentality of "western clothes are superior to African garments. In Ghana where the initial concept of Bend Down Boutique started they are called "*broni wa wo*", literally meaning "a dead white person's clothing".

The rapid expansion in commercial exports of second hand clothing consumption in mainly African countries raise challenging questions about the effects of globalisation and the meaning of the West and the local that

consumers attribute to objects at different points of their journey across global space. There is a saying in Herero language of Namibia, that 'if you wear the clothes of your enemy, the spirit of the enemy is weakened'. Enemy is not the West but the policies of 'structural adjustment' as imposed by the Bretton Wood agencies, reducing poor countries to lower their standard of living through debt repayment.

Pauline Marcelle's work does not actually depict the clothing per se – her work engages photography, painting and installation. She digitally manipulates the photographs of the clothing – painting over image with rich primary colours. Her masterful technique evolves into a process in which the meaning resides, momentarily and transiently. The fragments remain and are invested with new meanings as the context in which they exist transforms. Traumas of disarticulation, fragmentation, fracturing and indeterminacy are central in her work – which are postmodern figures. However, looking at the various critical discussions about postmodernism within her work, it is important to recognise that postmodernity is itself already a discourse that is fractured and fragmentary.

The digitally manipulated print is then reworked by painting over it, filling the deep airy contours with primary colours until final compositional abstract forms have been achieved – this layering of mechanical reproduction and painting, to the point where distinctions between hand and machine are difficult to recover. Pauline adapts these digital images to painterly parameters – “recomposing” them into pictorial form and unity – continually entering into relations, composing relations and “recomposing” relations. The conundrum of the painterly and the photographic characterises her works. Her huge canvases dominate the space they occupy, absorbing the viewer taking you down with the metaphor bending down. Her paintings are complex, floating and plummeting, tangled and piled up in mounds of colourful clothing – but soft as second hand cashmere “I like the new works as they are soft, not aggressive – like the video *Paradogs*”.

The impact of her visit to Ghana in 2006 was so decisive and it inspired Pauline to further explore the initial concept of *Bend Down Boutique*, a series of

paintings that were exhibited in Austria in 2008. In Joburg she has developed a new oeuvre which she represents in this exhibition entitled *Bend Down Boutique: Joburg Works*. The impact of her stay in Joburg can be located in the strength of her work resides in her frequent penetration beneath the languages and shibboleth of South African life – which she describes as “exciting, inspiring, diverse, colourful and vibrant” Pauline Marcelle’s background defies a narrowly defined concept of homeland, nationality and mother tongue. She grew up in New York but was born in Dominica - a Creole speaking island in the Antilles and now lives in Vienna, Austria, the city of Gustav Mahler, Sigmund Freud, Ernst Mach and Gustav Klimt. In contextualizing Pauline’s work - the human process constitutes the social self, social organisation, and shared notions of authority and value. The body surface has been called “the symbolic stage upon which drama of socialization is enacted” – it is a field for representation, which, being concrete, has a lasting semiotic value. It is this role that Pauline plays in her images – they do not only affect the human selves we become, but also the worlds which we are part of. Marcelle’s work is a cohort of consciousness and unconsciousness, single and collective events, mindsets, experiences and streams of consciousness.

She opines: “I like colour, colour is passion, but not to mix it. I give it its own space, I compose with it - it is uncontrived and gives you a sense of freedom” Pauline gives us both – the illusion of space and the fact of surface. In effect, we too are thus positioned – our looking is also correlated with such viewing. These works serve as beacon – taking us back through the tunnel of the past whilst reminding us of the challenges facing Africa and its perilous future.

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