

# The state of the nation in brush strokes

LLOYD POLLACK analyses the intricacies of an artist who uses blatant and underlying imagery to express her idea of the 'new democracy'

**D**EBORAH Poynton's *The Last Resort* is a composition of breadth and majesty conceived in a classical grand manner. The towering figures abruptly juxtaposed with the raking downward view of the distant beach emit elusive echoes of old master versions of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* and *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*.

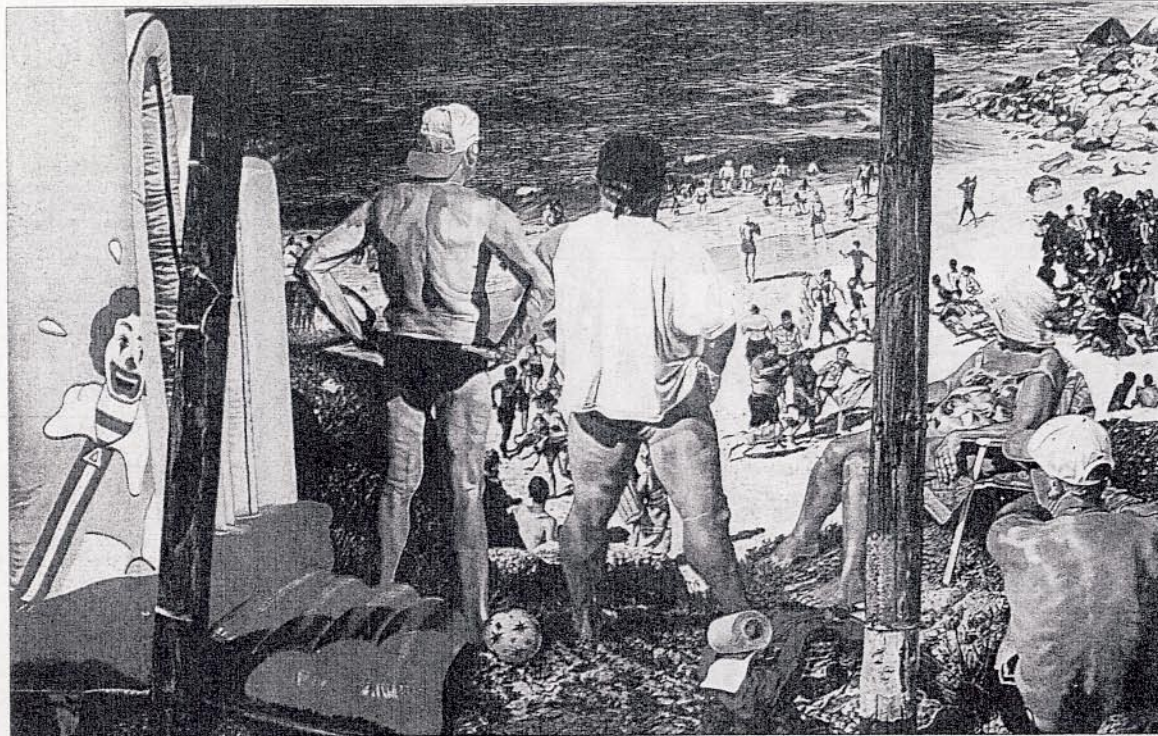
Although the artist's pictorial architecture is rooted in the past, her microscopically scrupulous realism seems of the minute. A surging mass of detail is rendered with sharp-focus exactitude over the entire space of the huge painting and the effect is mesmerising.

Human sight can never achieve such precision, and this glut of nitty-gritty minutiae executed with hair-raising accuracy gives the work a hallucinatory fascination.

Although Poynton's realism occasionally recalls Lucian Freud, Stanley Spencer and Eric Fischl, the artist is in many ways a genetic freak, a weird throwback to the dark ages. She resuscitates artistic practices which have been neglected for centuries.

The sight of devices obsolescent as the *Great Bed of Ware* embedded within Poynton's aggressively contemporary style, lends a paradoxical flavour to her work. There is a glaring disparity between her paintings' appearance and their intellectual reality. The text may be legible, but the sub-text remains buried and as infuriatingly inscrutable as a conundrum or brainteaser.

At first glance we interpret *The Last Resort* as a purely naturalistic tour de force. The painting seems to simply record the appearance of Clifton Beach at the height of the season. To take the painting at face value however, is mistaken, for Poynton's "realism" is the product of an eccentric turn of mind. Her intellectual oddities stem from her intensely religious upbringing and passionate love of Netherlandish 16th century and 17th century art. Basically what she paints are moralities buttressed by an encyclopedic scaffolding



**SYMBOLIST:** 'The Last Resort', above, is one of Deborah Poynton's works on display at Michael Stevenson Fine Art in Green Point, Cape Town, until September 11.

of symbols derived from early Flemish and Dutch traditions. Her work is thus a bizarre hybrid, a melange of modern and medieval.

*The Last Resort* portrays capitalist excess. The canvas is monopolised by a spanking new commercial merchandise — a bar-coded beach ball, a roll of toilet paper, beach bags, baseball caps and, most crucial of all, an arched templar structure emblazoned with the McDonald's logo and clown.

These objects occur because they possess the symbolic resonance essential to the "history painting". The

17th century was the golden age of the hoary old history painting, and one would have imagined that by 2004 it would be the stuff of dinosaurs, yet it is exactly this prototype that Poynton excavates and revives. The essence of this genre is that it addresses universal matters of the high consequence, and often relays public pronouncements about the nation's welfare.

*The Last Resort* broadcasts just such a bulletin on the state of contemporary South Africa. The surfeit of merchandise evokes the greed and acquisitiveness of our consumer society,

while details like the disused mooring poles that loom so prominently in the foreground, intimate that we have lost our bearings and are placing our faith in the false gods of materialism and globalism.

The painting is a cautionary image, and Poynton phrases her remonstrance in antique emblematic parlance for *The Last Resort* is a contemporary reworking of two 17th century moralising genres — the Vanitas, which proclaims the worthlessness of earthly possessions and achievements, and the Allegory of the senses

which warns mankind against hedonistic self-indulgence.

The inflatable McDonald's edifice, half temple, half triumphal arch, operates as a reminder of death, for it has to be blown up like the bubbles in the most venerable of traditional Memento Mori's, the image of a boy blowing bubbles. Like the soap bubble, a mere prick will burst this Lilo structure, and this explains why it serves as a reminder of transience and mortality. The beach ball and toilet paper (which also invokes smell) allude to touch; the McDonald's logo to taste; the cell-



phone to hearing and the dark glasses to sight. Within the ethical framework of a vanitas, such references to the senses insist that material gratifications can sap the national character of its strength and vigour.

**A** passionate love of country runs throughout Poynton's work. Perhaps this is because, for so many years, it was all that remained of her past, the sole reality she still loved and to which she could cling. An adopted child, Poynton was brought up in Durban by a devout family of committed political activists.

At two she lost her adoptive father, and at nine, mother and daughter emigrated to Britain where Poynton was placed in boarding school. Five years later her mother died, and Poynton was removed to yet another continent, America, by her missionary god parents. At nineteen, she persuaded them to allow her to fulfill her dream of coming home to a country where she no longer had any relatives or friends.

Despite her traumatic history of rupture, dislocation and loss, Poynton is devoid of self-pity. She is neither a tragedy queen, nor a brisk, no-nonsense lady in brogues. When I met her, I was confronted by an absurdly young and impish looking gamine dressed like the eternal student. Although her conversation is intense and rat-tat-tat, her eyes twinkle and glint behind her granny glasses while laughter continually interrupts her words. Is this

twinkly urchin in the duffel coat mere protective covering like the forest of symbols Poynton deploys in her art?

Certainly the meaning of *Traditions* remains hidden. The iconography of this scene of a busy street market derives from Nativities and Resurrections which the artist conflates in order to question the possibility of national regeneration.

The crowd is a microcosm of our demographic make-up but, at this market, there is no merchandise.

The people are penned into a space too small to contain them, and their immobility serves as a metaphor for paralysis of the will.

The symbols of Nativity (the hay of the manger, the cows standing in for the ox and the ass) and Easter (baby chicks and Christ's sarcophagus) presage spiritual rebirth but the remaining symbolical apparatus is less optimistic. This includes emblems of Vanity (mirror, balloons, mannequins' head), Truth (a near naked woman invisible to the crowd), Folly (an Indian lady who doubles as jester and fool and carries the traditional scepter), and two of the fates, Atropos, (a doek-clad crone holding the knife that severs the thread of life), and Lachesis, (a wrinkled artist in a pink T-shirt with the rods used to measure the thread of life).

This scenario is enacted beneath an incomplete flyover which stops in mid-air and leads nowhere. This structure replaces the smashed pagan buildings which occur in Renaissance versions of Christ's birth.

*Golden Acre* is set on the freeway bisecting Adderley Street where we glimpse seven ghostly figures at the crossroads during a partial electricity failure. The ominous cloudscape assumes apocalyptic suggestions of the Great Flood, while the suspended pedestrian tunnel smacks of the gang-plank to Noah's ark.

Although the Christmas lights which include our national symbol, the Springbok and the candle of Christian faith, hint at a new order, the outcome is uncertain for the figures embodying the seven ages of man include no child. Such is Poynton's prognosis for the "new democracy".