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Deborah Poynton,  
*Surrender*, 2005, oil  
on canvas, 200 x  
600cm

the off-white expanse above her head. Against the tangerine, decorative background of *Shame* an attenuated female figure looks downwards towards the shadowy grey beneath the pulled-up skirt of her dress.

One of the strengths of Mashile's work, including his earlier exploration of circumcision rites, is his ability to engage in social commentary outside of the realm of cliché. His work – never prescriptive, didactic or literal – has the potential to sustain the viewer's attention setting into motion possibilities of interpretation and experience regardless of who is looking at the work.

Yvette Greslé

## DEBORAH POYNTON

MICHAEL STEVENSON | CAPE TOWN

Visually alluring, psychologically complex and sublimely enigmatic, Deborah Poynton's *Safety & Security* is a feat of ironic expression. In a deft balance of contrasts – contemporary figures in classical groupings, realistic detail in a surrealist narrative – the painter plays intellect against emotion in a highly sophisticated portrayal of archetypal states of being. Each of the four 2 x 6-metre triptychs that comprise the show is visually commanding (even in the vast gallery spaces of Michael Stevenson), rich in impeccably realistic detail and packed with meticulously composed human drama. The work compels analysis, yet eludes understanding.

In *Surrender*, a nude male figure lies prone in a gesture of classical pathos among the prosaic accessories of everyday life: an art magazine, a shopping list, a packet of photographs, a box of tissues, an over-turned glass. What circumstance precipitated this dramatic surrender? Has he simply capitulated to the collective tedium of daily existence or, perhaps, a more sinister force? The piece is rich in clues, but defies clear comprehension.

The centre panel of *Betrayal* depicts an agitated cluster of quite ordinary looking people in classically triangular formation

around a nude female figure that is either being raised from, or lowered to, the ground. One woman in the group glances accusingly at a man sitting a distance from the action, slump-shouldered, staring blankly at the viewer. Who is the betrayed? Who is the betrayer? The scene begs more questions than it answers.

The nagging ambiguity of Poynton's narratives serves to arrest the desire for meaning and invites a free-fall into the realm of instinct and emotion. Here, the work's charged drama offers more immediately satisfying conclusions. Quirky perspectives block immersion into the scenes. In *Betrayal*, for example, we look down on the central conflict from an elevated 45-degree angle. The work exudes dynamic emotional energy that charges the atmosphere with a rich cacophony of moans and murmurs, gasps and cries. Unintelligible to the intellect, these forces peel familiar chords at visceral depths.

In his essay published in the show's catalogue, Peter Rech comments that Poynton's paintings are "disturbing in their insistence on being looked at". Indeed, the exquisitely fine detail worked into every millimetre of these dense canvases coerces close examination. But, more disturbingly insistent is the vexing awareness that perhaps there is no way to intellectualise the desperation, fear, rage and confusion that emanates from these stunningly powerful works. The more we look, the less we understand – and the more certainly we realise that life is neither safe nor secure.

Joyce Monson

## WAYNE BARKER

AFRONOVA | JOHANNESBURG

Wayne Barker requires no introduction to South African art enthusiasts – not so Senegalese artist Birame Ndiaye. He takes a critical look at city life and how it affects human values and lifestyles. Ndiaye's work seems to condemn the invasion of high-rise buildings on land that otherwise allowed people to