

MAKING ART THAT WORKS

GREG Streak is a visual artist from Durban who has exhibited works alongside acclaimed names such as William Kentridge and Penny Siopis here and abroad.

He was the first South African to be accepted at the prestigious Rijks Academy for Visual Arts, a post-graduate contemporary art institution in Amsterdam.

Streak is also a disillusioned white male, uncomfortable with his place in post-apartheid South Africa. And he is probably not the only white male in the country who feels this way.

Unable to bear the frustration of this existential crisis, many whites opt to leave the country. Those who choose to stay often embark on business initiatives, looking for guaranteed success with a black partner.

But what do white artists in South Africa do? How do they grapple with their white identity? There are a few examples that warrant attention.

Theatre director Brett Bailey ignores his white suburban roots, which could be seen as a statement in itself, and produces plays that explore traditional African cultures.

With an all-black cast, Bailey's colourful and often controversial works are usually at odds with the Westernised values in contemporary Africa.

Greig Coetzee, a playwright and actor, addresses the issues of white identity head-on by taking wry jabs at his own inherited white identity, as in his work, *White Men With Weapons*.

South Africa's contemporary dance arena has created a much-needed platform for black choreographers and dancers.

There has been a marked decline, however, in expressions by white dancers, particularly white males.

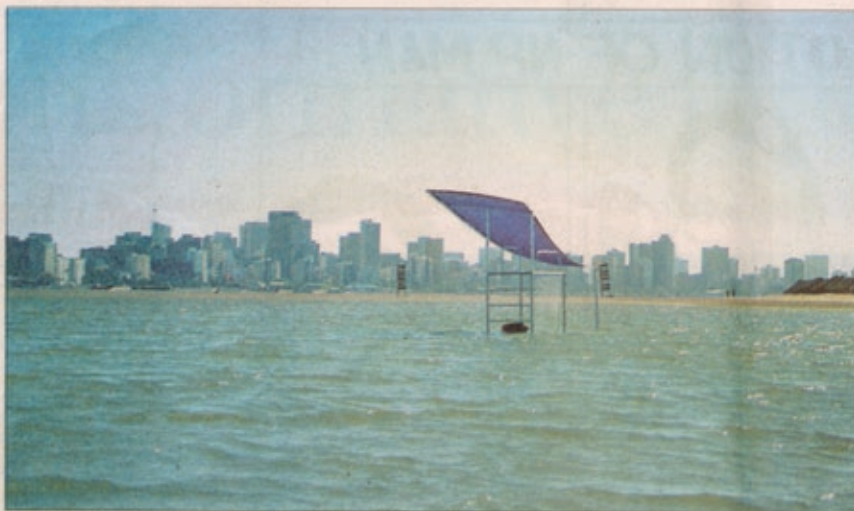
White choreographers, more so than their black counterparts — with the exceptions of Gregory Maqoma, Boyzie Cekwana and Portia Mashigo — have followed the guiding premise of contemporary dance: to challenge preconceived ideas inherent in all contemporary practised human cultures.

Choreographers like Robyn Orlin, Jeannette Ginslow and Liane Loots confront questions as broad as "what is dance?" and "what is theatre?" to the more personal explorations of "who am I?" "what does it mean to be male or female?" and "what does it mean to be a South African today?"

There are highly-respected white visual artists living and working in this country who have managed to combine impeccable skill and topical choice of subject matter to produce powerful expressions of identity.

Claudette Schreuders is a young,

Greg Streak leads a team of visual artists out of the confines of the gallery into a Durban township, writes **ZINGI MKEFA**



UNDERWORLD:

Sofia Garcievieyra's jungle gym at the Gozololo Shelter, right, and as a post-apocalyptic statement in the photograph, above, taken for exhibition in the Franchise gallery space.



white, Afrikaans-speaking sculptor. She creates carved and painted wooden figures of passive-aggressive children with domestic workers to cast an acerbic look at white, suburban existence.

Stephen Cohen's often anarchic aesthetic walks the tightrope between insightful artistic expression and shock-value performance art as he explores his Jewish, South African male identity.

Streak is taking on the challenge in collaboration with five other international and local artists and is doing something he considers more practical.

In 2000, Streak set up an arts initiative called PULSE, with the primary aim of facilitating communication and collaboration between artists living and working in Third World countries such

as Indonesia, India, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Mali.

The works in "Open Circuit", the initiative's first exhibition, explored issues of inclusivity and exclusivity and post-apartheid identity, among others.

The latest from PULSE, called HIV(E), is on display at contributing artist Jena McCarthy's gallery, Franchise, in Milpark, Johannesburg.

HIV(E) is Streak's answer to the self-imposed question: How can I, as a white male artist living in South Africa, make a difference to Gozololo, a centre for Aids orphans in KwaMashu,

outside Durban?

For Streak, that difference had to go well beyond what he considers ineffectual artistic contributions of other community development initiatives like painting colourful murals on walls.

Streak harnessed the talents of a small team of local and international artists including South Africans Jena McCarthy, Paul Edmunds and José Ferreira; Argentinian Sofia Garcievieyra and Ade Darmawan from Indonesia.

For a month the team worked at the Gozololo centre on a variety of projects to improve the lives of the children and caregivers.

McCarthy got her hands dirty planting crops that would provide the children with the nourishment needed to replenish the minerals missing from their diet.

Streak expanded on her efforts by building a plastic compost bin that

processes organic waste. Once processed, the compost is retrieved through a flap opening at the bottom of the bin, enabling gardeners to use it to fertilise their crops.

Edmunds used ordinary heat-shielding fabric, a popular choice for constructing suburban carports, to give residents respite from the often unbearable temperatures of Durban's summers.

Ferreira collaborated with women from the community who specialise in making oversized bags from offcuts of plastic shopping bags.

The bags are hung against a wall like a shoe rack to store the children's toys. Should the caregivers want to sit on the makeshift veranda to watch the children at play, Ferreira also designed a simple sheet of metal that folds out from the wall as a comfortable chair.

To enhance recreational activities, Garcievieyra designed a jungle gym with a sandbox and added one of Edmunds' sun shields to protect the children against the harsh rays.

Darmawan complemented this structure with an unusual outdoor swing that can hold up to five children at once.

Streak and his collaborators share an abhorrence for art that is self-indulgent and ineffectual in a country as complex and problem-ridden as South Africa.

They wanted to create work that was equally functional and aesthetically suited to a traditional gallery space.

So they took the same pieces that were created to serve a specific function at Gozololo and reworked them to suit McCarthy's contemporary art gallery.

McCarthy's garden was converted into a virtual series of black and white photographs documenting, collage-style, the process of constructing the garden.

Streak's compost bin took the form of an installation art work that, simply put, demonstrated how the contraption works.

It also reinforced the idea of a natural cycle in which humans plant organic food and recycle the residual waste to eventually put back into the soil.

Probably the most abstract of all pieces is Edmunds' sun shield.

It was fascinating to witness how the materials were transformed by the changed context.

The result: vertical blue sheets of



ART OF PROCESS: Jena McCarthy's black and white photographs, left, detail the process of building a garden, above, at the Gozololo centre for Aids orphans in KwaMashu, outside Durban.

gauze-like material attached from the floor to the ceiling.

I wouldn't necessarily buy them, but the children who attended the opening of the exhibition enjoyed running around and hiding behind them.

And the best part was that nobody yelled, "Don't touch that, it's art. Get away from there!"

Ferreira did much the same as Edmunds. He took his oversized plastic storage bags and metal chair and attached them to a wall.

Walking through the centre of the gallery one always had to dodge Darmawan's swings.

In the gallery they took the form of a three-seat swing that faced a one-seat swing. An interesting conversation between the two groups of virtual swingers was suggested.

A most fascinating statement, and almost saddening, was Garcievieyra's

recontextualised jungle gym.

She removed it from the shelter's premises and dumped it in the middle of the ocean and took a photograph of it.

What used to be a jolly construction for children at play suddenly became an image that evoked post-apocalyptic visions of a drowned world.

What made it more disturbing was the deceptively serene context the picture was taken in: a sunny day at the beach with a blue sky and a calm sea.

Streak and his collaborators hope their project will show that it is possible to create work that challenges an artist's personal growth and curiosity while at the same time adding something positive to the social environment.

The HIV(E) exhibition is on display at the Franchise Art Gallery until April 28.

For more information, call (011) 482-7995.