

Wisteria's uneasy whiteness

Flower-themed paintings by Jessica Webster explore self-critical ideas of an identity assumed and then lost through trauma and change, writes Michael Morris

JESSICA Webster's exhibition of paintings at the Goodman Gallery in Woodstock is, part playfully, titled *Wisteria*. The most obvious and deliberate association with which is the lilac-flowered vine common to many suburban gardens, cascading over trellises, walls or gates.

For the artist, it also "resonates phonically" with hysteria, a symptom Freud "ascribed to a generalised condition of European women, and which led him to his seminal theory of the unconscious".

Finally, Webster writes, *Wisteria* is a "linguistic play on the sense of

'wistfulness' – a reference to the possible nostalgia for an identity which I construe as lost or absent".

There's a distinct sense of unease in the merging of these ideas, and with good reason.

On the bald facts, the personal context of her work is jolting: Webster, born on the East Rand in 1981, and raised on the mines of the Free State and in Benoni, was left paralysed from the waist down after being shot in the stomach on the evening of August 15, 2006.

She had stepped outside the family's holiday cottage at Leisure Bay,



KwaZulu-Natal, to have a cigarette when she saw figures running out from behind a flower bed and

heard shots going off. One of them felled her. One of the attackers, later jailed, was the son of the

family's gardener, and someone she had known for about 10 years. That night he had "fingered" her



Wisteria is at once enchanting, yet unmistakably unsettling – just as the artist surely intends.



bullet wound, and threatened to rape and kill her.

The lasting repercussion, for want of a better word, lies in the vigour of Webster's engaging with her experience, as an artist and a thinker, compelling her viewers to grapple



Jessica Webster was left paralysed after being shot in 2006.

with their own contested ways of seeing and being.

As the exhibition notes explain it: "Wisteria continues the thread of critical selfengagement that characterised Webster's previous solo show, *Murderer* (2015), with her own complicity in the greater macrocosm of violence in South Africa. The painted surface raises a question of where this violence comes from – she asks: "Is violence being done to these precious and sanctified spaces of the white female, or is violence an inherent part of how these spaces exclude others?"

In "a brief note on the personal aspect of this work", Webster writes: "This exploration is not based in my lived experience as a white woman. My own status as 'disabled', requiring 'access', thrusts me to the outside of this florescent place, looking into that world of lithe potency and anxious performativity that I once inhabited. Now I sit quietly, peering through the trellises."

Her vision was "abstracted, reduced and often disfigured, burdened with the weight of a new body that sees and hovers between life and pain. This vision through the greenery can be revealing and obstructive. But there is a way in which the works attempt to regain a delicacy and a softness against the static shock of my paralysis. Beauty. I stumble ahead awkwardly, my brush stumbles the surface, a movement that enacts the darkly complex spaces we inhabit, while it contains the universal wish for succour from those never fully-present glimpses of grace."

For Webster, according to the exhibition notes, "stereotypes assigned to the white woman as both delicate victim and threatening provocateur have resulted in the containment of such figures to walled-in, protected settings throughout history, such as the safe South African suburban garden".

"Working with an awareness of the politicised South African garden space, Webster references the formal qualities of surface and composition specific to Claude Monet and Jean-Édouard Vuillard's garden images through which she explores the reproduction of the 'white woman' as painterly surface".

In the paintings on the show, "she begins with found photographs that capture generic South African suburban scenes, such as pools and lawns, and paints similar imagery over them using oil paint and wax – so that painting and photograph often seem to flow into each other. Applied very

thickly in areas while scraped away in others, the painted imagery becomes abstract, pointing to the highly constructed nature of the white woman stereotype".

For Webster, "this stereotype can be seen as either the cause or effect of a threat."

Webster, who is in the process of completing a PhD in the Philosophy of Painting at the University of the Witwatersrand, told Weekend Argus this week the 2006 attack and its after-effects "have deeply affected my practice as a painter".

She isolated two distinct aspects of this; the disability arising from the attack "demands a certain kind of engagement with the work", but "the attack itself opened the door to the incongruity of shock".

"I am very interested in producing compositions in which the objects or things painted do not fit, but create a certain moment in looking

because of their disjuncture.

“This is not quite surrealism – it is not aimed at creating juxtapositions which ‘knowingly’ cause strange narratives. Rather, the long hours in my studio seem to provoke sudden anxious ideas, which seem disconnected, somehow broken in regards to a stream of painterly thought. These are ‘bad’ ideas that I purposefully draw from, and it often ruins my work.



“But I think what I’m trying to do is capture that night of abnormality, of pure shock, and to try to integrate it as my own. As noted, I tend to ruin otherwise good paintings, but then, some works are able to withstand this broken element that has been introduced: a clashing colour, a senseless gesture, a supplementary figure leering through the layers.”

The works, then, demonstrated “what I think is a central characteristic of my painting: that they are often beautiful, but just past

the moment of the first look, can be disconcerting”.

Wisteria, Webster’s second solo exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Sir Lowry Road, Woodstock, runs until May 24.

 Write a comment...



Listen



Page View



Share



Saved



More



Upvote



Downvote

