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Bitter Sweet: Art for revenge's sake

Some objects are steeped in emotion that is so powerful that onlookers can sense the soul of the object's creator. In the popular book series Harry Potter the feeling is called "horcrux", in everyday life we call it great art. It may seem strange to compare the fictional lore of Harry Potter and Jessica Webster's paintings but the comparison effectively encapsulates the way in which the artist has infused her work with parts of herself and her experience.

July 07, 2015 at 02:04 am



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It may seem strange to compare the fictional lore of Harry Potter and Jessica Webster's paintings but the comparison effectively encapsulates the way in which the artist has infused her work with parts of herself and her experience.

Her new solo exhibition, Murderer, which opened at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg last week, merges painting and film to explore the dark interface between the performative function of narrative and the (dis)order of perception, according to the gallery's press release..

The starting point for each canvas is a digitally printed still from Kim Jee Woon's South Korean action thriller, A Bittersweet Life (2005). Each still is then washed with layers of oil paint and wax using scenes from stock image websites, newspapers and the artist's camera. The process results

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Webster says: "The narrative [of A Bittersweet Life] plays out through a well-known sequence of events: the misbegotten hero undergoes creative levels of torture by his enemies and seeks retribution and revenge. To me, this story lies close to the collective consciousness of South African society."

As a survivor of an attack that left her wheelchair bound, it's only natural that Webster's work, regardless of the subject matter, resonates with anger and a desire for some form of accountability. But this accountability is layered and blurry so it is up to the viewer to interpret the raised wax "subtitles" on the pieces for meaning. One reads "You bastard" on a giant canvas of nasturtiums. Another bears the words "They're worse than we are" over a room of nameless faces.

"Painting fascinates because it lies close to the purpose and meaning [of things], yet the purpose (in the most general way) remains crucially veiled," she says.

Art sometimes has little purpose beyond brightening a living room wall or projecting some narcissistic view, so it is a moving experience to come across work with so much emotional impact.

- Murderer is at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg until August 13

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