



Happy Dhame



Images RETOUCHEES – Happy Dhlame

Images Retouchees is a probing concept that illustrates well Happy Dhlame's fascination with the seemingly unremarkable façades of our everyday surroundings.

Dhlame focuses on urban architecture as his primary subject matter. His use of multimedia is compelling. Technically, each image in the series can best be described as a photographic montage. What begins as a digital photograph of an abandoned building, a construction site, a vandalised sign post is essentially deconstructed through Dhlame's manipulation of the image in Photoshop. Dhlame's perception of found façades indulges in an obvious disconnection from the notion of photography as a medium of authenticity. Ordinary spaces that often go unremarked in our daily environments take on a gravity in Dhlame's images. He achieves this by positing a moment or a space beyond the photographic freezing of a visually observable scene.

Through the application of Photoshop actions such as erasing, superimposing, clone stamping and the blending of natural light and saturated colour, the original composition and supposed aesthetic eventually gives way to a

coated canvas of meaning, meaning that is borne out of an intricate process of adding and reducing, constructing to deconstruct. In *Yelling Shock* for instance, Dhlame's digital photograph of a shattered window is reworked using layers to duplicate the pieces of broken glass within the frame. What ought to be a transparent material demands closer inspection. In *No Parking*, architecture is duplicated, reflections are highlighted and disjunctive compositions give way to binary yet whole narratives.

In *Images Retouchees* there is always a constant inside/out binary that serves as a point of departure. Consider the task of construction. The general understanding is that a builder will begin with a foundation. Brick by brick, the builder translates architectural concept to physical reality, at which point the end product alters its surrounding environment. In Dhlame's photographs, the end product alters meaning with regard to the scene captured. This analogy is present in the image *Downtown Jozi* into which Dhlame has inserted a scene from the Gautrain construction site in Rosebank, Johannesburg. What was originally an advertising billboard situated above the site has been replaced with one of his most recognisable canvas montages. The original work, a canvas montage of the same name, has been superimposed onto the billboard, the colour saturated

in sharp contrast to the dry, dusty scene of demolished concrete and protruding steel below. In reality, this incomplete eyesore is bordered from public view. In photographing it – only to interrogate the initial composition – Dhleme has rendered this space transparent, exposing its skeletal form. Playing with the language of branding and signage, Dhleme intervenes with the notion of aesthetic as an external preoccupation.

His installation work entitled *Violently Happy* is telling in this respect. Here he explores the antagonistic relationship between the natural and the man-made or synthetic. Entropy is a theme that several contemporary artists before him have been concerned with. Elementary research (see, for example, <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu>) on this concept will lead one to the following definition: entropy is explained as a process whereby “nature tends from order to disorder in isolated systems.” This definition comes closest to describing the metaphor that informs the very process employed by Dhleme in creating his installation works.

There is little doubt that Dhleme’s work is influenced by the deconstructionist philosophy of artists such as Gordon Matta-Clarke, whose work was a series of highly conceptual

architectural interventions. In the 1970s, Matta-Clarke’s focus was on abandoned buildings and warehouses which he would transform by carving through several floors, splitting into two whole structures to expose the strata of matter from the electrical wiring and brick layout to the very core, the foundation. In exposing the very act of building, Matta-Clarke’s method involved a highly artistic perception that proved controversial among the high priests of architecture. (Matta-Clarke was himself a trained architect.) Matta-Clarke’s brand of conceptualism has influenced a whole generation of young contemporary artists.

The most significant similarity in Dhleme and Matta-Clarke’s thinking is that both artists employ a technique that rejects, in varying degrees, an aesthetic outcome. The scale of Dhleme’s installation and the intricacy of creating it may leave the viewer feeling somewhat bewildered. Dhleme begins with the process of applying layer upon layer of raw materials such as newsprint paper, cardboard, wooden planks and foam. Splashes of coloured paint and wiring are then applied to this pseudo-surface because, unlike Matta-Clarke’s works, Dhleme’s installations are not real structures or buildings. However, it is important to note that Matta-Clarke’s intense public interventions

– his deconstruction of abandoned sites discovered within his everyday urban surroundings – were later considered precursors of street installations, and then of installations as we view them in galleries today.

Dhlame offers us an entry point, a door through which we access the narrative of his work. Nevertheless, as a viewer, I find that I need to take a step back and begin by looking at what the cuttings and peeling material of his façades represent.

Man constructs synthetic shells, buildings that serve as concrete armours to shelter us from the seemingly morbid growth that is nature. The wayward aesthetic of nature has no place in the urban environments we inhabit and so as a matter of survival we try to intervene with its inevitable course. Dhlame's deconstruction of his subject matter in both his photography and installation suggests that he is specifically concerned with scratching away at the very coverings (layers, shelter and skin) that hinder the transparency of society as a whole. *Images Retouchees* does not, however, have anarchy as its sole reference point. That would pose a danger to Dhlame's artistic intentions. For instance, if we had to consider simply the scale of Dhlame's installation piece we might be tempted to talk

only about the 'white elephant in the room', that is we might only dwell on what we see as a colourful structure that stands before us. Instead, I believe the artist quite urgently invites the viewer to step inside the artwork as one might dare to enter a precarious construction site, a space that seemingly has no obvious function. Dhlame's work urges us to question the importance we place on exteriors and to explore what happens when the coverings that hide our world disintergrate beyond our control, to reveal the true nature of self and humanity.

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Image: (page 3) YELLING SHOCK
Medium: Giclée on perspex
Dimensions: 37cm x 50cm

Image: (detail, page 10 & 11) NO PARKING
Medium: Giclée on perspex
Dimensions: 37cm x 50cm

Image: (page 14) DOWN TOWN JOZI
Medium: Giclée on perspex
Dimensions: 37cm x 50cm

Image: (page 12) Work in progress
Image: (page 13) VIOLENTLY HAPPY, 2008
Medium: Paper, wall paper glue, paint
Dimensions: 400cm x 400cm

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- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
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