

URBAN GREEN FILE

INSPIRATION: JANUARY 2003

Peel back time: painting these walls red and more.

It all started one Saturday morning last August, when I noticed abseilers in red overalls hanging precariously from red ropes on red walls, painting the town...well, red. Just like that.

It continued with what seemed like one of *those* press releases that come along from time to time: some young brain, with a bright idea, wanting to change the face of the city. Big portrait, big names, big deal...I must admit I had my doubts about the Art City project. Not because I did not believe in the idea, but because Johannesburg has so consistently failed to get things right for such a long time. But that was then, this is now. If you have not been to Art City, you have missed the boat.

What started with perhaps less fanfare than expected, and instead with more real work, has fundamentally changed the way I look at my city. Before, it was the street-level, chaotic, jumbled, colourful buzz of it all that held my attention. My eye scanned for detail and revelled in juxtaposition. Now I see vistas again, canyons of streets leading my eye onto focal points. I look for distant walls, I look above the pavement canopies, in search of colour and signs of life.

For those who do not have the privilege of being able to go to downtown in Johannesburg, or who have forgotten the heart of this place, let me explain. The Art City project is a part-sponsored, part-commercial and advertising intervention in Johannesburg, which uses large-scale billboard technology to showcase selected artworks in the public spaces of the city. Part agitprop, part sublime, part collision, part design: the collection is growing. There is hardly a viewpoint in the city where some part of the project can not be seen.

We have been down the path of monster billboards, from the ridiculous Newtown silos defacement to the more sublime and pulsating Ponte beacon project. But Art City is one better. It is the sheer diversity, the surprise, the sometimes clever positioning, and the sheer delight of the beauty of the images, which far transcend the offerings of the mercenary billboarders to this city.

Where advertising is at best monumental and witty, and may elicit a wry smile, Art City gets right under the skin. From charcoal sketched aloes to mosaic 'mielies', from stark black-and-white portrait groups to colourful rural and urban scenes in vivid oils, the city's art has come back into our range of vision. Perhaps fittingly at a time when the public art gallery in Joubert Park is near-empty and fighting for survival and re-thinking its *raison d'être*, art has come home to roost on the streets.

And the city which has suffered our neglect, our disregard, loss of love for its streets and its history, is suddenly telling new stories, whispering to us, passing glances, taking chances. The skyline has a new lustre, with the grand view from Braamfontein across the canyon of railway lines punctured by an array of colourful surfaces. There is the dramatic view, the naïve dance of children across a terracotta earth pasted onto the fortress walls of the Central Johannesburg Police Station. But it's in the crevices, above the backyards, on the side walls, across the blank vertical slices of silent walls between the monotonous rows of windows, that this show really gets going. And it is in the fractured, shattered reflections in old windows, probably blind by now due to vacancy, that the beauty lies. You have to walk the canyons, or, like

we did, shoot the sights like a road movie from a getaway car. The surprise is above you, in the rear view mirror, above, to the front, skew left, sharp right: the city is a wonderfully tight gallery for these huge artworks. Faces, gestures, textures, scenes from here and other places, force their way into my distorted view. Lost is the clutter of the streets, the tomatoes on plastic platters, the traders and hustlers, the shops with cascading displays of cheap imitation clothes: these are now the backdrop, the mute canvas, and the city itself becomes the gallery, or rather the artwork.

Whoever thought this up, had real vision and more importantly, the ability to deliver. What the press release promised, has happened: but the reality is much more exciting. It is the density of the city that makes this intervention really successful. The show is temporary, and the next few weeks would appear to be your last chance to consume this spectacle and be consumed by it. As the saying goes: you snooze, you lose. Get down to Art City and change the way you look at Johannesburg.

Go to: www.jobourg.org.za/artcity etc,

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January 2003