

Payne's bearable lightness

EXHIBITION *Illuminated Manuscripts*

Artist
Malcolm Payne

Venue
The Goodman Gallery Johannesburg

Reviewed by
Joyce Ozyski

MALCOLM Payne's pictures, produced on computer and printed on cotton rag paper, are vivid, rich with delicious colour and full of movement. They are immaculately put together. The images glow with the kind of warmth produced by studio lights: unchanging, reassuring and unnaturally cheerful. They call to mind the photographs of the American fashion photographer David La Chapelle. These pictures or scripts, made by computer, not by hand (*manus* is Latin for hand) are well illuminated.

The title of the exhibition, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, puns on other levels as well. The decorative borders of medieval manuscripts were called illuminations. To illuminate, in contemporary usage, can mean to make comprehensible — we throw light on a subject. Payne is illuminating and befuddling. He uses a private bank of imagery drawn from his own readings, in philosophy and religion, and creates pictures that are illuminating, in the sense that they comment on our world, but also obscure and puzzling.

The Christian church used symbols understood by all who were part of its culture. Today artists prefer to be esoteric and obscure; it gives

them an illusion of intellectual grandeur. Payne, being an individualistic man of his times, has his own private symbolic language. The plastic dolls, toy monkeys and fluffy dogs are not difficult to relate to. Pop art has made such imagery easily intelligible. The pop aspect is economically and tellingly used to evoke a sugary sweet Disney world and its menace. Conceptual art is often boring, trivia dressed up as philosophy. The visual arts have taken the leftovers of the one discipline among the humanities that has long been in decline.

Art was never meant to make profound statements; words do that much better. Science has overtaken all disciplines over the last three centuries as the most fertile and fascinating method of understanding the world. So when I notice that Payne has put a page of text in the middle of a work called *Fright*, I don't take too much notice. Nor do I take fright. In fact, because its title is *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* I can't help wondering if it's a joke — it seems so emblematically philosophical. The book hangs brightly in the centre of the image, surrounded by broken eggshells and suggesting a homely puzzle that could be applied to art: "What comes first, the chicken or the egg?"

One point in the text seems incontrovertible. "The picture represents what it represents, independently of its truth or falsehood, through the form of the representation." Obvious really, but in philosophy everything can be argued, which is what makes it such a bore compared with science, which has speeded ahead and truly illuminated our world.

I look *Tractatus* up on the Internet and find that a section of it is there, that it is by Wittgen-

stein. Payne's work, for me, has associations with the endearing vulgarity of Hindu art and the fluorescent colours of pictures painted on black velvet. This is the appeal of camp taste, which is central to post-modernist and conceptual art.

Payne has done some rivetingly lovely things with space. The overall spatial organisation is a cone, with forms flying towards a central focal point. I associate this with the way Superman flies backwards and forwards among the skyscrapers, or the way a "boom" or "bang" balloon fractures the orderly perspective of the comic strip. If there is some highfalutin' philosophising going on here, it flies right past my eager eyes.

There are such strong aesthetic values that puzzling over the "big" questions is too boring. Payne is a moralist, and he is offended at the desecration of ideals. He doesn't lash out, just shows up hypocrisy and the way in which the world is permeated with violence and disease. There is an angry mockery of man's behaviour and his ideals in the extravagantly scrolly writing of the words joy and charity.

The Buddha is smiling a little, corrupt and cynical. Comic book skulls are everywhere, sometimes human, sometimes animal, counterpointing the mindless doll faces. Aids ribbons, tumbling dice and gollywogs tell us about humanity flailing about in a morass. It's gloomy in a way, but his touch is light and pop art takes the sting out of the worst of horrors. There is great skill and polish in this mostly cool parody and elegant satire.

Only *Tusk* is a bit feverish. It's about ivory poaching, one of those green issues that gets

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to people more than any other, especially if they shy away from the "political". The mess is picked up and transformed into a carnival mirror or kaleidoscope, with bilateral forms, some in sets and imaged like Siamese twins. Imagery is morphed as if seen through a moving hand microscope or distorting lens. The picture space is very lively, with a rococo movement through many planes. Payne deploys the

whole armoury of pre-modernist art: figuration, illusionism, light and shade to model three dimensionality and symbolism. There is a narrative, even if it's obscure and decidedly not linear.

These were all the big no-nos of abstract expressionism. Some artists destroyed themselves in a purist desire to purge them from art. Looking at the way art has bounced around in desperation since those days, often moving into suffocating narcissism or exhibitionism, the mild social criticism of conceptual and pop art presents a more grounded view.