

Art can slit the throat of discourse

Recently retired from Michaelis School of Fine Art, where he is a professor emeritus, Malcolm Payne is a key figure in this country's experimental and conceptual practice. Coming to prominence in the early 1970s, Payne has distinguished himself as a sculptor, painter, printmaker and video artist. Seated in his Kalk Bay studio, surrounded by a suite of new beard paintings, Payne considers the early influence of Walter Battiss, Marcel Duchamp and man about town Jeff Mpakati on his life and work. Dismissive of the way struggle art collaged stock images of violence, he also ventures a thought on how artistic practice can refashion the way we think and speak about art.





SEAN O'TOOLE: You were born in Pretoria. What influence would you say growing up in the capital city had on your decisions to become an artist?

MALCOLM PAYNE: Walter Battiss.

SO: So you attended Pretoria Boys High?

MP: Yes, but before that my mother took me to Pretoria Art Centre. Battiss used to run it and I used to do kiddies classes. I was five. When I went to Pretoria Boys High, there were two very good practicing artists, Larry Scully, who used to paint, and Battiss. Battiss was a teacher of mine throughout school and a friend thereafter till he died. Outside of the school itself there was strong artistic environment: Preller and Pierneef, highly respected South African artists, whatever one might think of them now, lived and worked in Pretoria. My second mentor at the time, after Battiss, was Jeff Mpakati, a poet writer, arts facilitator and man about town who lived Mamelodi. We met on Church Square. Jeff and I often

shared lunch standing up on that hallowed segregated centre of Afrikaner supremacy that disallowed blacks comfortable seating – it was a time of the “blankes alleen” benches. Jeff – a tall, thin, stylish man – introduced me to jazz by taking me to Star Music on the fringes of Marabastad, west of the city centre, where we listened to the American greats, Art Blakey, Oscar Petersen, Charles Mingus, and blues artists like Champion Jack Dupree, and Monk in our Florsheim shoes and imported mapantsula trousers. Jeff's normality was inspiring. He gave me a real education at 19 years of age, a counter to the Beatles and Rolling Stones.

SO: Can you talk about studying at Pretoria Tech? It is quite an intriguing school, Robert Hodgins taught there.

MP: That was before me. I'm pleased he wasn't there in my time, that average to mediocre pot-boiler. The school offered two streams, graphic art, as they called it, and fine art. I initially did graphic design but then I got hooked on painting. I decided,

why go and work for somebody rather than work for myself, so I changed to fine art majoring in painting and printmaking.

SO: Who were your lecturers?

MP: The main person was Günter van der Reis. He was German-speaking, ex-Michaelis; he used to visit Documenta and translate catalogues for us. Günter was also very connected with a magazine called *Das Kunstwerk*. We had a lot of input from him, through his deep interest in what was going on in other parts of the world. At the same time we had the United States Information Service that could, in defiance of the segregation laws, bring together people of different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds, through music, poetry and art. It opened my eyes to the importance of cross-cultural engagement.

SO: How did Battiss figure during this period?

MP: Battiss was a very important character



in our town, so too the mad poets, like Walter Saunders. They were doing Allan Kaprow inspired performances and happenings, and were all nuts. It was a very lively, free-spirited kind of Pretoria – as opposed to this sort of sense that it was the seat of government and full of nonsense. In matric I became an usher at the Breytenbach Theatre, which put on incredible productions. I also ushered at City Hall, for the symphony concerts, to get free tickets. My sense of my childhood was that it was very rich culturally.

SO: Picking up on that word childhood, I read that you made your breakthrough work, *Swing* (1971), while you were still a student at Tech?

MP: No, the year after I graduated. The work evolved out of a conversation with a friend of mine, Andrew Todd. We had studio space with Wopko Jensma where I said to Andrew, 'I'm going to weld up all the swings in Pretoria.' I believed in an absurdist political act, looking at political actions through the absurd and creating levels of

confusion that people wouldn't necessarily easily understand. That was the idea, but it was too much trouble to do. I visited Walter and told him about my idea to make *Swing*, also that nobody could tell me if it's any good. He didn't know what I was talking about; he said, just do it, make the work. So I made it and took it to Durban for the Art South Africa Today exhibition. It fell apart during the transportation. When we were putting it up on the exhibition, I had to re-weld it; I blew the electrical supply box in Durban City Hall.

SO: The work was awarded first prize. Success at an early age: it reminds me of a passage from an essay by F Scott Fitzgerald...

MP: Fitzgerald? He is one of my favourite writers.

SO: Fitzgerald wrote: "The man who arrives young believes that he exercises his will because his star is shining. The man who only asserts himself at 30 has a balanced

idea of what will-power and fate have each contributed, the one who gets there at 40 is liable to put the emphasis on will alone." How did you deal with early success? I ask because I often detect a veiled sense of creative exhaustion amongst some of today's bright young things.

MP: I was very successful when I started out. I was a second year art student when I won the New Signatures, and a recent graduate when I won Art South Africa Today. Walter and Günter both told me, 'Art is a life-long activity. You've got to plan it over your entire life.' I've tried to stagger and to enjoy as much as possible what I do, and ignore as much as possible the second tier activities in the art world. Like, do you really need to have an exhibition or not? And if you do, then where do you show? I think youngsters today expect instant success. I think that because they see so much success out there they think that it's achievable and they don't really understand that it's a combination of both – willpower and fate – that it's fucking hard work.



SO: Getting back to *Swing*, it elicited mixed reactions. Walter Battiss said at the time, “it shows up the uncertainty of the age, this big thing we call anguish” (*Natal Mercury*, August 9, 1971). Marxist critics have inferred an explicitly political context; they relate the work to the policing of petty apartheid, particularly in parks and recreational areas. My question here is perhaps more general than specific. With attention comes chatter – some might prefer to call it criticism. Have you ever paid much attention to critical writing about art?

MP: I like reading criticism, but most of the art criticism I find interesting goes a little bit beyond criticism, it’s a bit more analytical. It’s more about trying to get into the head of the producer. These writers don’t tend to distance themselves; they tend to become a valuable part of the process of that second tier of the development of the work. The first person I read that did this was Clement Greenberg, and later on I saw it happen a bit in the writing of others like Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss. Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Baudelaire read early on also intrigue, although generally I find art critical writing... well, it’s for a particular market. There are very few art critics that write pure art criticism for the sheer joy of it. I think Greenberg possibly was one of those kinds of mavericks that decided he was going to do it and damn everybody else. And he was severely criticised for it and he was brutalised by his best student, Krauss. But somehow there’s still something there

because he writes for the artist, in a sense. Locally, I’d single out Ivor Powell. I have a lot of respect for him, as an art historian and as someone who has a deep affection for the business and making of art. He liked artists. I don’t know whether Sue Williamson has the same feeling about other artists and the business of making art. I think her priorities lie elsewhere probably because art is a bit complicated for her to get her head around. Esmé Berman was very good to me when I was a young student; she helped me get bursaries to go overseas. In general, though critics are bottom feeders like art peddlers. A painter I admired at art school, R.B. Kitaj, supposedly committed suicide after his wife’s suicide, prompted by scathing critical reviews of his retrospective at the Tate in London. That’s extreme. I guess real art criticism occurs between artists, but more specifically in the act of making it solo in the studio.

SO: <i>Swing</i> seems to have acquired a mythology of its own. Reportedly it’s been lost, is that true?

MP: Well, factually, after Durban it was in my parents’ garden. My father was mowing the lawn one day and the lawnmower drove into the swing and crashed the whole thing apart. I was angry at the time but also thought it was quite funny as it was just too much trouble to keep dismantling this thing. Many years ago I was offered an opportunity to have it remade for a university collection.

SO: A very Duchampian outcome.

MP: Well, yes. Maybe one day.

SO: To what extent was Duchamp an influence during this early period?

MP: Duchamp was a powerful influence. As art students we were fascinated by his stuff. The thinking behind <I>Swing</I> was reasonably influenced by his notion of a readymade aided, or transfigured – or disfigured in the case of <I>Swing</i> – as was my follow-up series on identity, also from the early 1970s. If I think about what I was trying to do then, it involved a lot of irony. The debate was if you were going to be a political activist, do you take the route of the early 1970s, of Gavin Jantjes or Paul Stopforth – Robert Rauschenberg clones – and make work like Rauschenberg with guns, knobkerries and police helmets, which is so obvious. Or do you try and undermine the status quo in a way that deals with the mind as opposed to a stock taking of images of violence that you then mingle together in collage, a signature template which, to me, is banal, boring and stupid. I argued strongly against the appropriation of form in my MFA, basically stating that form contains significant content. When appropriated and applied in other contexts it results in pastiche. Frederic Jameson, extending Husserl’s model of formal sedimentation, suggests form is a “socio-symbolic message”. He says, “when such forms are re-appropriated and refashioned in quite

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did a search around 1972, the year you went to study at St Martins School of Art. Richard Hamilton made his etching, <I>Picasso’s Meninas</I> and Gilbert & George – also Saint Martins graduates – produced a series of boozy photographic multiples.

MP: Correct. “Gilbey’s makes us drunk.” I remember when they sullied themselves in their singing sculpture piece underneath the Arches and sang the song.

SO: What was St. Martins like?

MP: I did a seminar on Andy Warhol and why he was such a brilliant colourist. I made a selection of Warhol’s works, which I presented upside down. The staff hated me for this because it was a school that still paid lip service to the heart of modernism. My friends at college were from Czech Republic, Turkey and Nigeria; we didn’t really make friends with any of the British students because they were all in awe of Caro, Tucker and King, and were all browbeaten kind of people. We were into fun, the whole glam rock scene, for instance, and making interesting stuff, like video – we were aware that there was a conceptual shift happening. I had the option to stay on for a second year, but I got a job offer from the Johannesburg

College of Art. I asked Walter for his advice – we had just made a trip to Stonehenge together – and he, the druid said, ‘Go teach, go give your knowledge to people, you can always come back to London.’ So, I moved to Joburg, to Bez. Valley – the pits, factory land, a terrible place.

SO: You returned to South Africa around the period Battiss was formulating Fook Island. Were you ever involved?

MP: No, not at all. I didn’t want to be involved in other people’s work. Well, there was the chance to be named as one of the Fook people, but I had a different relationship with Walter. Fook was Walter’s fantasy – he was just fantasising. He loved the Islands. He was a bit jealous of Preller, I think, who discovered the Islands before he did, so rumour has it. It was fun though.

SO: Battiss is a recurring figure in your early biography. Would you describe him as a mentor?

MP: Walter mentored me, but he couldn’t answer some of my questions because I also had my own kinds of ambivalence towards his kind of art, or his production



– like the same felt towards Skotnes and his production at the time. As young artists we were swimming upstream against our elders. As I got to know Skotnes in later life, I developed a strong respect for his art. I think mentorship can work in other ways. Looking at the work of other artists can also be a form of mentorship: it's a continual reminder of how brilliant other artists have been. I think to be able to continually be engaged with their production is, for me, the true form of mentorship. Take Duchamp. I did a work many years ago entitled *I am Duchamp's Widow* (1983-84), based on *Fresh Widow* (1920) and Man Ray's *Rose Sélavy* (1921) photograph. I believed as art was in mourning for the death of itself and Duchamp was in effect its corpse, I would be his widow in mourning. (*I am Duchamp's Widow* vanished in move from Brixton to my studio in Magaliesberg in 1985.)

SO: Mentors aside, what about your contemporaries? Did you have any interactions with artists like Willem Boshoff and Michael Goldberg during the 1970s?

MP: I taught Willem in his fourth year at JCA. He had learnt the Bible off-by-heart. He was very interesting. He liked sand and marbles. I also knew Michael when he was still here, but I had no particular respect for his work because I thought it was in the same mould as Young and Stopforth half the time – even though I did pose as Biko for Paul's drawing; Paul and I were very good mates at one stage, when I was teaching at Wits. But if you're talking about who I bounced ideas off at the time, Braam Kruger was good to talk to. You could talk serious shit with profound humour and laugh a lot. I was really saddened by his death last year.

SO: Were you exhibiting regularly?

MP: Yes, but I made up my mind many years ago to keep art peddlers in general at a distance, with one exception. Somebody who's taken a genuine interest in my work over the years, who's an art dealer who I have the ultimate respect for, the greatest respect for, is Louis Schachat from Die Kunsamer, who I think has a wonderful eye. He is one of the last of a particular breed. I remember my first work I put on a commercial exhibition was at Gallery 21, Fernand Haenggi's gallery. I was a fourth year art student, and it was a screen print of the first heart transplant patient. He died, so it was done in the form of a headstone. At the opening I saw a red sticker next to it. I thought, 'Fantastic! I've sold an artwork!' At the end of the show I said, 'Where's my money?' (It was priced at R10.) They said, 'No, we just put up a sticker there just to make it look like the show is selling, we didn't really sell it.' I thought, 'Fuck, this is outrageous.'



SO: You were part of Ricky Burnett's *Tributaries* (1985) exhibition. What did you show?

MP: I thought I'd make a rhino because we were exporting local art. So I thought I'd send them a bit of wildlife. My work was entitled *Proto Rhino* (1984). It was formally significant as it led to a new body of stacked relief works like *Gorilla* (1985). *Tributaries* was an incredible exhibition, visionary too.

SO: For much of the 1970s and 1980s you lived in Johannesburg, working as a teacher (at JCA, later Wits), but mostly as a full-time artist. What prompted you to take up a job offer at the University of Bophuthatswana in 1987?

MP: I wanted to look at the other side of South African life. It was fascinating to encounter

the African diaspora. I met remarkable academic exiles from Ghana, Nigeria and other parts of Africa. I know it was part of the apartheid state, but I had an old friend, Abe Mashugane, the first black teacher at Wits in the Fine Art Department; he moved there, also a lot of the old *Drum* crowd. The company was good. During my two years at UNIBO I completed my series of terracotta sculptures, *Mafikeng Heads* (1987-88). In 1989 I moved to Cape Town to work at the University of Cape Town.

SO: The 1980s, in particular, was a fraught period. You are quoted as describing protest art as a futile exercise because you did not believe that art could change society. What was your attitude to making art in this highly charged atmosphere. In 2002 you told Sue Williamson, "I don't take art particularly seriously". Could one have said that during the 1980s?

MP: Yes. Because what do you do? Do you make art? Or do you do something else to try and alter the system? And if you are going to make art, what are you going to do? You know it's a futile exercise, you can't change people's opinions through them looking at something, or experiencing something. But you can if you can tap into something that will make them anxious. How do you then make an artwork that is going to create that anxiety? *Swing*, for me, was an intervention that could cause anxiety. 'Why has this mutated, deformed, become useless?' The pressure of making political art was always there. For me, the idea was how to make the work without falling into the obvious grasp of narrative. On viewing Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) in New York for the first time my suspicions were confirmed, I thought it was one of his weakest paintings. I was looking at the ironies, at the game, I suppose,

whereby I could survive and do what I wanted to do. I found that more fulfilling. But if you read the rest of my statement to Williamson I say, “I like the seriousness of the game”. What that suggests is my engagement with art forces me to recognise a double bind – pleasure and pain at the same time – public responsibility in conflict with strident independence. Art making is a survival option of a sort that frees up the possibility for deep reflection – while in the act of making art – on why this business is so fragile, so open to deflection away from its potential for personal enrichment, a way of living in and out of history that I think even in my more esoteric works reflect on socio-political realities.

As is their want, the conversation begins to drift. At one point Payne offers that theatre – not art – was more successful in its political address during the 1980s. He singles out Mbongeni Ngema’s <I>Asinamali</I> (1986), Athol Fugard’s <I>Boesman and Lena</I> (1969) and Robert Kirby’s satire: “I just found that in literature and theatre there seemed to be a way into engaging the language.” His legendary scorn, restrained at the outset, begins to manifest itself more fully. He describes Bernie Searle’s new work, <I>Black smoke rising</I> (2009), as “truly laughable”. Of the exhibition <i>Dada South?</i> he says, “the South African component is a kind of catch-all” – he describes Neil Goedhals’ appearance as an attempt “to force a wonderful musician who also happened to make art into some kind of guru of avant-garde painting”. Cape Town’s cliquy art scene fares little better: “You’ve got a not so young, paunchy, white middle class avant-garde posturing oh so top-of-their-game that presumes to run the Cape Town art scene. It’s very funny the way they uphold all that is conservative in art.” This prompts a curious question.

SO: What is the true story behind the artwork, <I>Colin Richards - Red - Slim Medium subtitled R. Butt</I> (2003). One version has it that you were pissed off at being labelled a “crypto-conceptual artist” by Colin Richards.

MP: Colin put this exhibition together, <i>Graft</i>, at the National Gallery in 1997. It was a satellite show for the Johannesburg Biennale. Colin asked me to be on the show, which I was very happy to be in, then Okwui Enwezor said no, he wants me to be on his show. So, obviously, I couldn’t be on two exhibitions, so I did

THIS PAGE Swing, 2008, found object
OPPOSITE PAGE Chad Rossouw as Robert Sloon, Cape Town, January 2009
Photo Daniel Naude



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a video work entitled <I>Abandon Your Culture</I> for the Joburg branch. Colin wrote a fuzzy piece in your magazine about what conceptual art is, or rather why the work on <i>Graft</i> was conceptual – material conceptualism or something. He made carping references to my work and statements and others for reasons I have absolutely no idea. I thought there must be a subtext, as they didn’t fit well with his thesis. He also revealingly rapped Enwezor over the knuckles for what he said of my conceptual work on identity. Could it be so many years on, seven in fact, Colin was still lamenting the fact that he hadn’t received enough attention for <I>Graft</I>? And so he penned – full of contradictions – this fraught eulogy espousing his brand of conceptual art. Andrew Lamprecht invited me onto his Galerie Puta show in 2003, which I accepted: ‘I’ll make an artwork, I’ll do a butt plug for insertion into co-curator Cameron Platter’s arse, and I’ll call the butt

plug Colin Richards etc.’ I went to that porn shop over the road from the Houses of Parliament to find a plug that Cameron could actually cope with – a slim medium. He was instructed to keep it in for one hour, thereafter return the unholy relic to its reliquary and sign, along with witnesses Lamprecht and Ed Young, a statement to confirm the ritual transformation of the butt plug into <i>Colin Richards</i>. Quite romantic I thought.

Art can slit the throat of discourse. It’s not about what you say, it’s about what you do, about what you make – your product, whatever its form, that disrupts its course. And that’s the point, so I thought that I’d put my money where my mouth is and answer him by slitting his discursive throat, not with text but with the power of an image, perhaps something Tony Godfrey would appreciate.

SO: A rebuttal.

MP: That’s what Tracy Murinik suggested.

SO: I was reading Robert Storr’s 2002 book on Gerhard Richter recently. One of the things Richter’s been accused of is eclecticism, not only in his painting, but also because he’s worked in so many other media – photography, installation and so on. In recent years you’ve shown both



video pieces and hyper-pop prints. You are currently working on acrylic painting of beards. Of the many media you’ve worked with – print, sculpture, video, painting – which is the one you have found you had the least facility in?

MP: I am not sure being accused of being eclectic is as bad as it is at times made out to be – certainly not in Richter’s case, or may I say mine. But to answer your question, video perhaps, although I have made films since I was in art school – I was deeply into moviemaking. While making art fulltime in the 1980s, I used to make money by making giant toothbrushes and waterproof bars of soap in resin, special effects for the commercials industry. Although I made video works in London as a student in 1972, and used TV monitors in early 1970s installations, the lure of desktop editing and prosumer digital cameras in the early 1990s put the medium within the grasp of many artists wishing to experiment outside of the picture plane. That’s when I joined in. The medium allowed artists not only in South Africa to add a broader political thrust to their production. I’ll also tell you where I do think I have facility, and that is in the more traditional visual arts.

SO: If I think of your recent works on paper, also when I look at these new paintings surrounding us, what surprises me – but is

also self-evident in your earlier work – is the fact that you are a very keen colourist.

MP: Colour remains an abiding area of interest, besides for the moment the iconography of the beard. The things that have always interested me are colour and complexity. How complex can you make an image? Not to say that a Malevich is not a complicated image, it was deeply complex in its period. It’s deeply complicated to make just a black square.

SO: That sort of reduction and the responses it can evoke reminds of your thoughts around the anxiety art can evoke in audiences. More flippantly, though, you must see the humour in the following scenario: ‘Where’s Malcolm?’ ‘Oh, he’s in Kalk Bay – painting.’

MP: When dear Wayne Barker came here for the first time about ten years ago, he said ‘Well, Malky, all washed up in Kalk Bay?’ But, now that I’m retired from teaching – not that I haven’t always done exactly what I’ve wanted to do – I’m more relaxed about limiting my focus for the next five years or so. I’ve always limited my focus for bursts of work. Have I been eclectic? I guess so having survived postmodernism. But for now I am locked into the grand tradition of painting. It’s so contemporary, some say.



SO: What particularly interests you in beards?

MP: I started many years ago; I had always wanted to scribble hair like Michelangelo or Leonardo. These paintings read as confections of bum-holes, vaginal entries, men’s beards and all kinds of other persuasions that repulse or draw you in. I see them as vibrating points of entry and exit, primordially oral and anal. The series, entitled <I>Pogonology</I>, meditates late modernism’s legacy, feminist picture theory and scatological humour, and in the later works a kind of beard porn, or beard eroticism – merkinish.

SO: And the process?

MP: I start by flooding the whole canvas with a single colour, and then continue adding successive layers. I leave a trace of this history on the edges. It is in the laying down of the final beard motif that the chance driven component in the painting enters. The hair-like strokes articulate the form of the beard – there’s a slightly Zen approach to this; you’ve got precisely one chance to make the mark. There’s no such thing as painting over, not in Kalk Bay anyway.

This is an edited version of an interview conducted at the artist’s studio in Kalk Bay, January 18, 2010.