

Psychological havoc

Ina van Zyl

The interview took place in spring 1996. I had just been made the director of De Ateliers. We were sitting in my room with tutors Didier Vermeiren and Toon Verhoef. Ina van Zyl, 24 years old, from Ceres in South Africa, had brought in a portfolio of charcoal drawings.

Silently, she laid the drawings on the floor next to one another, in precise order. They formed a comic strip, one that had previously been published in the magazine *Bitterkomix*. She spoke in brief, sculpted sentences. No, she did not want to draw any more comics. She wanted to paint.

*Bitterkomix* is the South African equivalent of American underground strips like *Zap Comix* and *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*. It was founded in 1992 by Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes, two students at the university of Stellenbosch near Cape Town, where Van Zyl had also studied art. Having grown up under apartheid, they presented in their comics a bitter image of an Afrikanerdom that was torn apart by guilt and the abuse of power, showing a strong preference for subjects such as existential angst, social criticism and sexual perversion. For the first time after the end of apartheid in 1991, a young generation was openly speaking out about the moral upheaval caused by racial politics.

Ina van Zyl had made her first comic strip at the invitation of *Bitterkomix*, *Die Besoek* (1992). She was not interested in comics. She did not think the cartoons in the newspapers were funny. Adventure comics like *Tintin* were too boyish for her. Through Kannemeyer, Van Zyl had become acquainted with the work of Robert Crumb and graphic novels. *Die Besoek* (The Visit) tells how an apparently pleasant visit from a friend suddenly turns into a blazing argument, after which the shy protagonist surrenders to a grotesque attack of gluttony.

The protagonist in nearly all of Van Zyl's strips is a young white woman experiencing her coming of age as she attempts to fathom the world around her and encounters the rigid hierarchy of the different sections of the community. Recurring themes are a preoccupation with rules and prohibitions ('ek krap graag in my neus, ek mag dit nie doen nie' – 'I like scratching inside my nose. I'm not allowed to do that.'), a paranoid awareness of always doing the wrong thing, and a desolate loneliness. The *strokies* (Afrikaans for 'comic strips') are like concentrated one-acters, in which only what is absolutely essential is said. The moments of silence (pictures without text) are more important than the dialogues. This quietness reinforces the feelings of impotence and incomprehension that dominate the relationships between the characters.

In *Rosie is nuut* (1994), published in *Bitterkomix* nr. 4, the daughter of the family shows an interest in the new black maid, Rosie. She starts a conversation with Rosie, asking her about the meaning of her original name, Nonceba, but Rosie reacts defensively. The strip is a subtle reminder that during apartheid only Afrikaans and English were recognised as official languages and that black staff were denied even the right to their own names. In the micro-universe of the household, the *swartvrou*, or black woman, emerges as the one who intimidates and excludes the *witkind*, the white child. The only glimpse that the white girl sees of that other world, a world she does not know, comes in the form of the pineapple peelings that Rosie has secretly hidden away in the sink cupboard – she uses fermenting fruit to make alcohol illegally.

In nearly all the strips we see how a small detail – a word, a name, an object – can weigh heavily, representing a huge problem. The lack of familiarity with the world of 'the Other' sometimes leads to tragicomic misunderstandings, as in *Dinsdag 24 april 1984*, in which a *swartman* with an erect penis calls out 'Nine?', and the girl does not realise that he is actually suggesting that they 'naaien' (fuck).

The dramatic contrasts and the almost claustrophobic framing of the drawings is also a feature of Van Zyl's paintings. Her transition to painting did not happen automatically. The first paintings that were created in her studio in Amsterdam were packed with people and full of words. It was as if the artist still wanted to tell stories, but now with paint on canvas. This all changed when Van Zyl discovered the power of the close-up. In her paintings, she zooms in close on images that arouse her interest (all art begins with focused interest) and which are meaningful for her personally.

Recurring motifs are fruit, toes, faces, food, genitalia. The subjects often have something both attractive yet repulsive about them. Juicy tomatoes are packed in cellophane, gleaming in the white light of a flash (*Trostomaten*, 2005). A doughnut bulges with greasy custard, as if everything that tastes good must also be repulsive (*Berliner Bol*, 2005). Sometimes the choice of a motif can be traced back to the artist's own sentiments. For instance, a sticker bearing the words 'from South Africa' on a packet of supermarket apples symbolises Van Zyl's homesickness for her parents' fruit farm (*Sweet Apples*, 2004). Van Zyl: 'I don't expect the viewer to be aware of that. I'm not asking for sympathy. But self-pity can never entirely be avoided.'

The artist has a particular interest in toes. As a child, she had a scrapbook full of pictures of feet. She once told me that she can read people's personalities from their feet. She threw away her scrapbook when her sister explained to her that not everyone shared or appreciated her fascination. Toes appear in her paintings, in all shapes and sizes: with coquettishly painted nails in elegant slippers (*Cinderella*, 1999), as soft, curving cushions (*Marshmallows*, 2002), as strange, almost alien organisms (*Tweede Teen Achteraanzicht*, 2005).

The paintings are based on careful excerpts of photographs. However, during the painting, the photograph quickly disappears. A precise, realistic depiction is not what the

artist is aiming for. She paints, following the advice of Stéphane Mallarmé, not the things themselves, but the effect they have on her. The paintings derive their expressive power, not from the depiction itself, but from the compactness and the intensity with which it is painted: the heavy, loose texture, the theatrical lighting and evocative shadows, which sometimes seem to glow like smouldering fire, the deep darkness that results from mixing all the colours except black. Painting is a method for fathoming the image in a way that cannot be expressed in words.

The paintings of food, usually small in format, show doughnuts, muffins, ice creams, sausages, cakes. Curiously, the smooth curves of these snacks do not differ much from the bare toes, the girls' breasts and nipples that Van Zyl has painted. The shapeless custard in a doughnut looks suspiciously like female genitalia. Is this food erotic? In French, the word 'erotique' appears for the first time in 1825, in a text that was not about sex but about gastronomy. The author explains that the taste of truffles awakens memories of erotic experiences, for both men and women. Van Zyl's foods can be associated with a sad sort of eroticism, a joyless interaction between the sexes. According to Van Zyl, erotic art often has to do with loneliness.

Just as the toes serve as a *pars pro toto* for someone's personality, Van Zyl's close-ups of vaginas reveal something about the women they belong to, who mainly stay out of the picture. In paintings such as *Meidjie* (2005) and *Amandel* (2006), she zooms in close. No matter how limited the visual information might be, she very effectively suggests what the woman in question might look like or what type of person she might be. Perception and imagination lie close together.

Are these paintings of genitalia shameless? *Labia Minora* (2004) was prompted by a programme on a commercial TV station about the ideal beauty of labia, with explicit images of the kind that are broadcast without batting an eyelid only on Dutch primetime TV. As the

beauty of genitalia is relatively unimportant, worrying about the size of your inner labia must be an incredible luxury. Van Zyl associates shamelessness with a lack of civilisation, with indecent or inappropriate behaviour, which is all too readily seen as freedom of expression.

Shame is, according to Van Zyl, the foundation upon which all of her work rests, and which, at the same time, is hidden away most deeply. In the Netherlands, shame is often viewed as something negative, a sign of weakness, while shamelessness is considered evidence of assertiveness. For Van Zyl, who grew up in South Africa, the situation is very different. In the society she comes from, shame plays an essential role. The shamelessness with which white South Africans humiliated non-whites during apartheid, the Dutch Reformed Church, which drummed into its congregations at the time that they were not permitted to speak freely, the discipline of the boarding school – all of this has contributed to Van Zyl's fundamental feeling of shame, not shame about something specific, but shame in general.

Shame isolates; it separates you from others. Shameless behaviour, on the other hand, occurs in a group context. Shame is uncomfortable, but familiar. Ina Van Zyl knows nothing else. Just as *Bitterkomix* wanted to break through the isolation of shame at the beginning of the 1990s, Ina van Zyl has built her oeuvre on shame. With a single close-up, she is able to expose something of the psychological havoc that was wreaked on South Africa. The resonance of her work is not, however, limited to her homeland. Is it possible to imagine culture without shame?

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