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Suspicious Mind

Various Artists at Michaelis Galleries

By Anna Stielau
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Suspicious Mind, 2013. Installation View .

In Fabian Saptouw's walkabout of Suspicious Mind, the show he co-curated with Nina Liebenberg at Michaelis Galleries to coincide with the International Neuropsychanalysis Conference, he analogised the exhibition with a scene from the 1995 film Johnny Mnemonic. The title character - played by Keanu Reeves with all his usual emotional dexterity - stands amidst the derelict ruins of his life. His mind - reeling under the weight of [only] 80gigs of data storage - is struggling to maintain its flailing grip on reality. 'What the fuck is going on? What the FUCK is going on?' he asks his cyperpunk companion, '...Listen. You listen to me. You see that city over there? That's where I'm supposed to be. Not down here with the dogs and the garbage and fucking last month's newspaper blowing back and forth. I've had it with them. I've had it with you. I've had it with all this. I want room service! I want a club sandwich! I want cold Mexican beer. I want a ten thousand dollar-a-night hooker! I want my shirt laundered like they do at the Imperial hotel in Tokyo...'

Today 80gigs of memory seems a pittance. And in actuality this figure is a gross insult to human storage capacity. Consider A R Luria's (the renowned Soviet-era psychiatrist) study in Mind of a Mnemonist, which suggested that human memory is literally limitless. In interviews conducted over decades of Luria's acquaintance with a young handicapped man, it was revealed that this man's memory was rooted in a form of synesthesia (turning all cognitive input into vivid visual and auditory 'images'), rendering him effectively incapable of both forgetting and abstract thought. The truth is infinitely stranger than fiction.

Suspicious Mind locates itself somewhere between Johnny Mnemonic and Luria's anonymous 'S', in the vast grey expanse between factual and fictitious understandings of the human mind. Still, perhaps Johnny Mnemonic's 'clusterfuck' of imagery is the most apt metaphor for the show itself. Curating 18 different artists within the relatively small space of the Michaelis gallery is no small task, and this would inevitably result in some areas of peculiar conceptual and physical overlap. Saptouw and Liebenberg's great success here lies in their ability to play up these relationships, not work against them.

Sure, there are moments when this is a more or less successful curatorial strategy. In the screening



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Tshililo (right) and her friends share a one-roomed apartment in Cape Agulhas Esselen Street, Hillbrow
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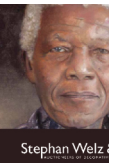
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room *Johnny Mnemonic* is aired alongside classics such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and more modern takes on the same theme, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The sound is ever so slightly too low, so as not - I would imagine - to disrupt readings of the surrounding works. Within that same small space, Nina Liebenberg herself presents a cabinet of wonders of sorts, combining her own work with pathological specimens from the university collection. In 'Hysteria' (2013), Liebenberg paints small sensitive portraits of Sigmund Freud's patients using Bulotta Africana tea, once a treatment for the condition from which the work takes its name.

Her all-female subjects call to mind the notion of romantic science, a term coined by Luria and today championed by Columbia University neurologist and author Dr Oliver Sacks. Romantic science is a marriage between the scientific and the subjective. Its fuel is 'the case study' and the personal account, introducing a human element to otherwise clinical scientific arenas. Liebenberg, in a similar spirit, awards a human face to hysteria, the first mental disorder attributable exclusively to women. Its plethora of symptoms - among them insomnia, nervousness, sexual appetite and 'a tendency to cause trouble' - made it a catchall diagnosis until the 1920s, serving as much to control women as to help them heal. That troubled history is made delicately apparent in these eerie portraits, their stained surfaces always on the verge of vanishing entirely. The films screened on the opposing wall reflect in the glass surface of their display cabinet, making for a juxtaposition of profoundly different faces of mental illnesses.

In the same space in the gallery is the inclusion of a Freudian couch. The classic psychoanalyst cliché seems a little gimmicky, as does the blackboard-paint wall of free association at the entrance to the show. I've seen something similar in countless design expos and although the outcome is always a curious insight into the inner-workings of the audience, it doesn't offer anything particularly significant or original to a reading of the surrounding work. There's always one person trying to show off, one asshole who thinks it's witty TO SWEAR IN ALL CAPS, and a handful of folks taking it terribly seriously.

On the other hand, Kim Gurney's 'The Mother of All Firewalls' (2013) - a visual index of the financial jargon (words like 'austerity' and 'bailout' feature prominently) used in news reports between 2008 and 2012 - is an appealing addition, in that it examines how economic crises are mediated through language. 'The Mother of All Firewalls' operates as a linguistic map, and the map does indeed recur in several other works on the show: it is one of the few loosely unifying taxonomies. Gerhard Marx's 'The Garden At Night' maps the interior anatomy of the human skull in plant material, Sandile Zulu's 'Old Bones, Old Genes' echoes the modular building blocks of encoded DNA and cellular structures, and Ruth Sachs' Chimera (Mme Charcot) is modelled on an engraved coffer on which the wife of the founder of neurology, Madame Charcot, attempted to chart her own visions.

Maps are a nice way of thinking about the mind, really, because they're not just about charting, logging and rendering static. They're also a gateway to the exploration of mutable and unfamiliar terrain, a means to take detours, a way to get lost. Suspicious Mind does indeed lose itself in murky, dark and dangerous depths, and it does so with panache.

[For more information, take a look at the show's growing online archive at www.suspiciousmind.co.za.]

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2013 in Review

Sue Williamson's Diary

FROM SUE WILLIAMSON'S DIARY

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