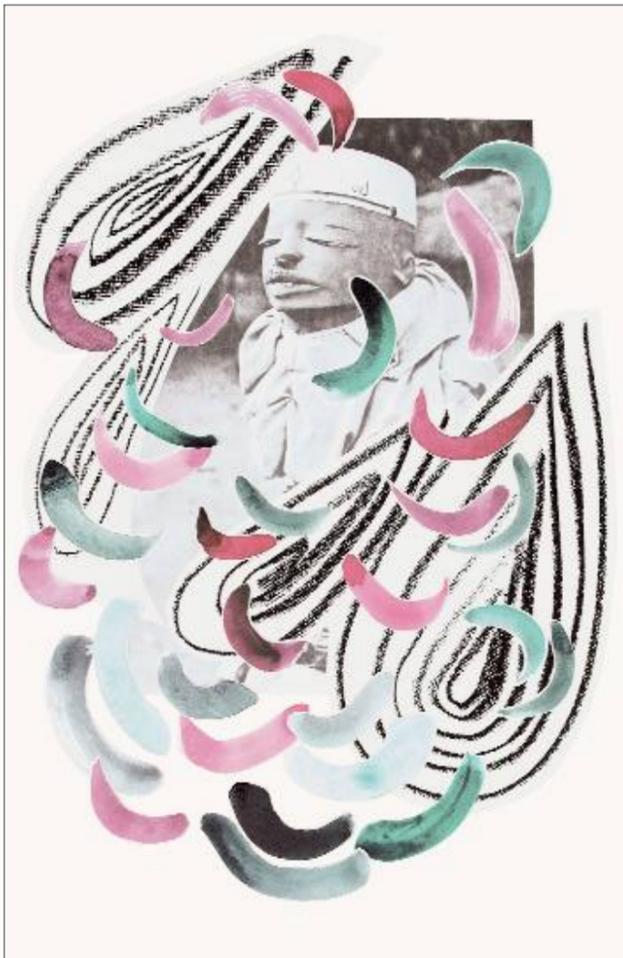
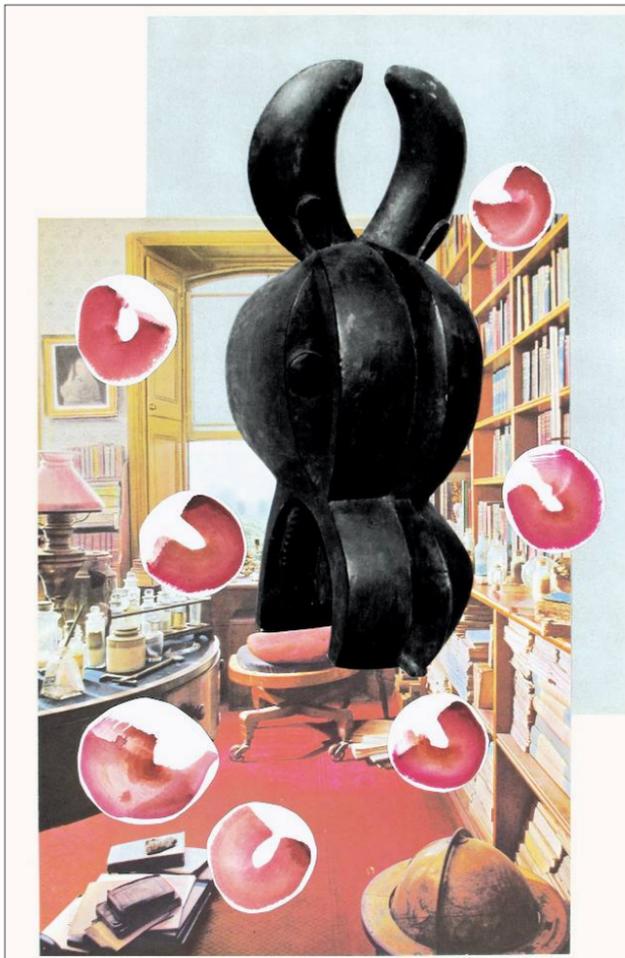


## masks



WOODEN: Titled Redux, a mixed media collage on paper.



DEEP: Darwins Room, another mixed media collage on paper.



BAG LOADS: Larita Engelbrecht's Crybaby.

COLLAGED  
PHOTO CUT-OUTS

LARITA ENGELBRECHT reworks old photos of African masks, writes MARY CORRIGALL

"I FEEL repulsed by images of African masks," observes Larita Engelbrecht. The young artist laughs, knowing it to be a most unlikely statement for her to make, given her upcoming solo exhibition at Ebony/Curated Gallery is dominated by this subject. Titled *Met Ander Oë* (With other eyes) the exhibition features a collection of collaged artworks centred on cut-outs of dated photographs of African masks.

In short, she reworks photographs of masks into artworks. It is an unusual pursuit for a rising artist – flogged at curio shops and Greenmarket Square African masks are such clichéd objects. They are also culturally loaded; not only as part of African rituals, but in the way they have come to function as a shorthand for Western perceptions of the continent and its traditions.

Even contemporary art remains haunted by this motif – take the exhibition, *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*, currently showing at the Brooklyn Museum in the US. It is for all these reasons that Engelbrecht is both reticent and attracted to African masks.

The images she reworks are mostly derived from anthropological books on the subject or African art produced around the 50s – a

time when Europeans and Americans were fixated with collecting and interpreting African material culture.

She has been collecting these books for some time. As much as she is drawn to vintage material, she is also keen to interrogate her fixation and be rid of it.

"I'd like to get my interest in African masks out of my system," she says, as she lays the framed collages out in a row at a Woodstock framer.

You have to study the images closely to identify the masks, as Engelbrecht's compositions are surreal and abstract. In *Peek*, an image of a mask is placed in between the railings of a staircase. A mask conceals the face of a person drinking from a coffee cup in *Quaff*.

*Step Up* features a mask attached to a pair of legs positioned near a minimalist building. Engelbrecht recontextualises the images of these masks by isolating them from the original texts where they were interpreted and locates them in different and seemingly unexpected environments. Mostly it is built ones, of contemporary buildings, museums and other modernist structures she has found in fashion and décor magazines.

You could read all sorts of things into these choices; the relationship between modernist architecture and African sculpture could be a good place to start. Or what about weaving African culture into con-

There is lots of meaty stuff here that these simple, yet visually compelling collages evoke

temporary Western ones?

Attached to fashion images and/or white bodies leads you to think about the way African traditions have been appropriated by white people and fashion designers. In other words how the ethnological or anthropological interest in the '50s has infiltrated popular culture. There is lots of meaty stuff here that these simple yet visually compelling collages evoke.

Not unsurprisingly, Engelbrecht works by day as an art theory lecturer and academic. This body of art began after she was teaching a course on modernism and postcolonial studies.

Collaging is the ideal mode for her to test, experiment and play

with history and loaded symbols. In cutting them out of books, which she describes as a "sacrilegious act", she isolates them from history and tries to find new places and spaces for them in such a way that she collapses time and place. A 1950's view of African culture is fused with a fashion sensibility and then reread through the eyes of a young white artist.

A form of distortion does occur in the process – the cut out masks appear huge in scale when placed next to large buildings and structures. In this way Engelbrecht situates the masks in surreal and sometimes abstract landscapes that don't make sense, deny logic.

This is partially because she admires the formal qualities of masks. Her collages are driven mostly by formal considerations – tones, textures, shapes – she says. This perhaps provides her with an escape from all the ideological baggage attached to African masks, all the art theory and even maybe her position as a "white artist working with masks."

As a young artist Engelbrecht is in touch with the rising consciousness around race that has been building at universities. She confronts her white/Afrikaner identity via two collage works made from disused library cards she collected from the Stellenbosch University Library, where she worked as a student. *Soek die verlede* (Search for the past) is one of the book titles she

has singled out for the artwork *Met Ander Oë* (With other eyes), which presents a dense collage of these cards among cut-outs of apartheid politicians turned upside down. 'Searching the past' is a phrase that captures Engelbrecht's artistic drive.

At the same time she appears to be interested in striking a balance between engaging and confronting the political – "I have always been interested in taboos" – while letting it go too. It echoes the friction between her two identities as an artist and academic.

"As an artist you don't always know why you do things," she says.

She has carved out a space in her art that allows her to distance herself from the worlds of theory and maybe even politics.

Drawing provides this vehicle. She describes it as a "meditative autonomous process. I just draw and draw. I think about forms and do what feels right."

She cuts up these drawings and places them in her collages. They often take the shape of half-moons or tear drops.

To borrow from the title of the exhibition; this 'new' set of eyes surveying history that Engelbrecht represents might be mournful that history, attitudes, cannot be altered, changed, no matter how you rework it. – Sponsored text

*Met ander Oë* is at Ebony/Curated Gallery until October 29.