



WILLIE BESTER
WINDSOR, ON

threatening garden of pointed wooden stakes gathered under a wire dome. Fascination with the manipulation of ordinary materials is another shared notion, as exemplified by the work of Steinhilber and Ko. Steinhilber's light tube surprises visitors who initially think that it may have fallen from the gallery's ceiling. After discovering the absence of any fluorescent fixtures, however, their consideration turns to its deliberate angled placement and pulverized middle. A sense of disorientation also infuses Ko's wall and floor sculptures. The textures of the coiled paper suggest that they may have been produced on the wheel while their stretched or sagging appearance reminds us of the effect of gravity on wet clay.

While much of the exhibition's vigor stemmed from the choice of artists and the intelligent selection and installation of their work, it also functioned as a reference, asserting two truly positive aspects of the city's artistic community: its openness and inherently diverse nature. An additional, exciting feature of *5 + 5* was the exposure it gave Pia Calderon and DC native Otho Branson. While both have been at work for decades, this exhibition marks Calderon's debut and Branson's first hometown exhibition. As a portrait, *5 + 5* provided a remarkable snapshot of this city's artistic talent.

—John Gayer

Sailing into the center of South African artist Willie Bester's *Apartheid Laboratory*, I unexpectedly found my attention focused on the presence of a sofa [Art Gallery of Windsor; February 24—June 17, 2007]. This was not the usual black modernist bench accentuated with an exhibition catalog and security chain. This sofa strayed from all current notions of acceptable gallery seating. *Armchair*, 1997, combines carved wooden elements, machine gun armrests, and a see-through Plexiglas seat that reveals a queue of small wooden figures about to be skewered by a giant drill. Its deceptively inviting proportions and suggestion of unusual design quickly give way to a potent representation of the horrific injustices leveled upon non-whites in Bester's homeland during the latter half of the twentieth century. *Armchair's* inherent domesticity/terror duality yields a powerful, thought-provoking object.

Enticing appearances and contradicting meanings inform much of Bester's work. Time and time again, I found myself drawn to his sculptures that suggest participation, or present themselves as alluring oversize toy-like figures or astonishing mechanical constructions, only to hit me with the effects of degrading government policies, brooding hatred or violent historical events. The boy in me was drawn to an exciting and complex mechanical contraption titled *Bantu Education*, 1996-1997, which soon reveals itself to be an oppressive people processor. Inside the system, little wooden figures either fall out through a hole in a school bench or are sent to the washbasin at the foot of a chair on which the word "BOSS" has been carved in large letters. Similarly, the vacuum and dust pan fronting *The Great Trek*, 1996, a structure representing the Afrikaners' 1830s journey to establish a new territory, also suggest a form of cleansing. Collected fragments of material culture reside in a container mounted at the rear of this ox and wagon representation.

Speelman, 1995, which alludes to toy military figures and means "play man" in English and the oversized pull toy *Trojan Horse II*, 1994, both refer to the oppressive threat of violence. The soldier's legs and feet convey the intense ferocity of T-Rex. With nails protruding from its stirrups and a machine gun set on its back, the horse stands as an eerie reminder of an actual surprise attack.

Apartheid Laboratory, the work from which the exhibition's name was borrowed, brings us back to the notion of viewer participation. With its syringes, tweezers, drip tubes, metal troughs, stained apron, and gearing, this crude laboratory has been scaled to let us stand in the researcher's position. In contrast to *Armchair's* thesis of silent participation, this work implies a more active role. Though this visceral depiction literally equates the laboratory with a torturous disposal facility, it effectively communicates the cumulative physical and psychological effects of apartheid policies.

Drawn from a collection jointly owned by Jerome and Ellen Stern of New York and Gilbert and Lila Silverman of Detroit, this exhibition celebrated Black History Month and marked the North American debut for the selection of works on view. While Bester believes he must document his country's past to ensure that it not be forgotten, the work's vitality enables it to resonate in many contexts. Not only does it force viewers to consider the humanity of other races, but here in Windsor it also urges the recollection of local history on both sides of the Canada/U.S.A. border. Though *Apartheid Laboratory* eschews empiricism, it does significantly test viewers, their thoughts, and feelings.

—John Gayer