



# MICHAEL MACGARRY

by Cara Snyman



Master Mbeki Verwoerd



L'Etranger

Just after the first Joburg Art Fair earlier this year, I came across an article where a journalist expressed delight at the fact that there was more than 'tribal masks' at the expo.

While obviously ill-informed of contemporary practice on the continent, the statement was also telling of the centrality of the mask as an 'authentic' African art form.

Michael MacGarry, in his solo exhibition *When enough people start saying the same thing*, creates or reinterprets the mask and fetish object, to consider broader political issues in Africa.

Up to quite recently MacGarry's sole artistic output concerned the documentation of unrealised works on his website [alltheorynopractice.com](http://alltheorynopractice.com) and the conceptual underpinnings show in this body of work.

The meticulously crafted props and stills for MacGarry's unrealised film projects that make up this exhibition are effectively by-products of another project, undermining too the status of the art object and playing a border game of 'true/story' (to quote the title from an earlier MacGarry body of work).

And while MacGarry's photographic works and guns made of replica or deactivated parts, might seem to verge on the documentary, the intention is not to sustain any illusion of the real. If there be any doubt, MacGarry actively destroys the illusion himself.

The photograph *The Master*, features what might seem like a real soldier with a mask against thick foliage, ala Guy Tillim, maybe? No, the image is revealed as fraud. MacGarry states in the accompanying text:

This photograph features three works I made this year - the wooden mask of Hu Jintao (President of China); the 'Ghillie suit' and the AK-47 assault rifle.

The Hu Jintao mask was carved from an existing Okuyi mask I bought at a market in Johannesburg for R 400.00.

The 'Ghillie suit' I bought online from a U.S. military supplier in Utah for R 780.00 - this is a standard issue tactical marksman suit issued to all infantry snipers and spotters within the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps.

The AK-47 was made from a plastic toy I bought for R 75.00 - which I then aged with sandpaper and carved the wooden elements from pine timber, gluing them to the plastic gun with epoxy. The

person in the photograph is my girlfriend's parents' gardener. His name is Main Road Ncube and I paid him R 100.00 for a three-hour shoot.'

In *The Father (Reversal of Fortune)*, MacGarry, after a similar disclosure, tells us that, 'The suit, coloured shirt and red neck tie I bought the same day this photograph was taken at a Woolworths store, with all three items coming to R 1150.00. I have subsequently worn the same outfit to a wedding. Minus the mask.'

In one fell swoop MacGarry kills the illusion of the real, the mystery of art making and meaning, whilst exposing power relations and the centrality of commerce in the production of art and war alike - all with a wry sense of humour.

The title, *When enough people start saying the same thing*, refers to the point where fascist and democratic regimes are toppled by the will of the people, and much of this exhibition concerns power overt and hidden and the grotesque abuses there of, with past colonial power finding incarnation in current economic imperialism.

The sculpture *Young Liars* concerns revolutionary leaders in Africa who turn to oppress the very people they liberated. With ivory inlays and made from 'alien' wood, the phallic shapes recall rocket ships, handmade plinths or spears and feature odd protrusions alluding to a diseased body.

A bit closer to home, Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki from the *Champagne Socialists* series sits next to H.F. Verwoerd from the *TippEx Politics* series. Both are towering mounds of industrial foam that speaks of corrupted power and simultaneously, impotence - just another set of politicians that sold their people down the river.

Masking and unmasking, MacGarry creates a complex web of meaning, that is made accessible through his detailed writings on each work. The work is sophisticated in thought and execution, and as a recent finalist of the MTN New Contemporaries, MacGarry might well be the future leader in the field that the competition sought.

See this exhibition at Art Extra in Craighall Park until 16 August.



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