

Western imperialism in Africa explored

■ Young visual artist award winner talks about swan songs and future visions in his work

MICHAEL MacGarry, a Johannesburg-based artist, is the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist for Visual Art. His *Endgame* exhibition will be on show at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, after which it will travel the rest of the country, including Port Elizabeth. This outspoken 31-year-old's sculpture, video and photography offer a wry meditation on the ongoing ramifications of Western imperialism within the African continent.

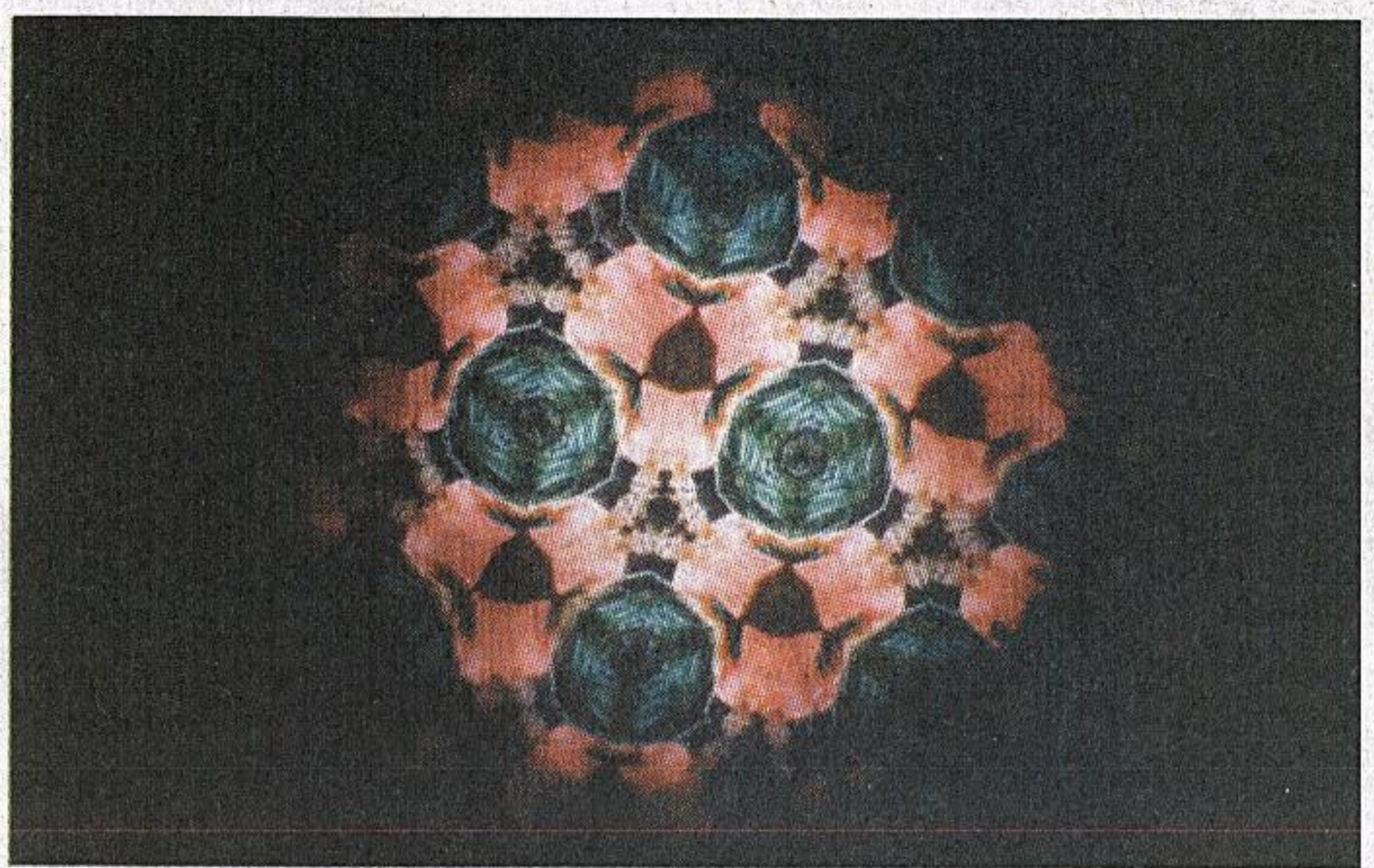
What inspired *Endgame*?
MM: Despite my continued research into the socio-economic and political implications of oil extraction on the African continent the *Endgame* exhibition for the Standard Bank Young Artist Award has in many ways much more to do with my 2004 solo exhibition – *Or Until the World Improves*.

Endgame will feature the museological display of a central prop from the exhibition – a strategy that has characterised my recent work.

It will also feature an adapted version of the vertical black stick installation device that dominated *Or Until the World Improves*.

So in a sense the framing device and conceptual context of *Endgame* are a form of swan song and even a requiem to my past way of working – and hence the title of the show – within which sits the products of my new way of working, namely making quite complicated and dense short films that use and engage with the language of cinema rather than any notion of video art.

Another new work on show – *The Great Man of History Template* – is an example of the formal tenets and non-linear nature of video art. *Endgame* is a hybrid of a new future in film with a cannibalisation and refinement of an



COLOURFUL CREATION . . . One of Michael MacGarry's video installations.

existing conceptual approach.

How do you deconstruct/construct the post-colonial discourse in Africa in your art?

MM: Usually through a binary system that involves fusing disparate oppositional elements into a new, hybrid whole that both reminds the viewer of the original versions but hopefully proposes a contemporary, new logic grounded in tangible research.

Do you think the artist as an activist can make a difference?

MM: No. I don't think art can shift anything, except itself, both in financial terms and in terms of advancing a niche-knowledge base.

Within the design fraternity this is a current issue globally, but in contemporary visual art it is considerably less so. Design as a route to shifting the advanced capitalist socio-economic paradigm is seen as a viable tool in the movement for global change – post the

1970s, an increasingly globalised visual art world, however, has seemingly further established itself in a ghetto of commerce and self-interest. I think locally the legacy of the so-called "Resistance Art" in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s was largely a manifestation of white guilt.

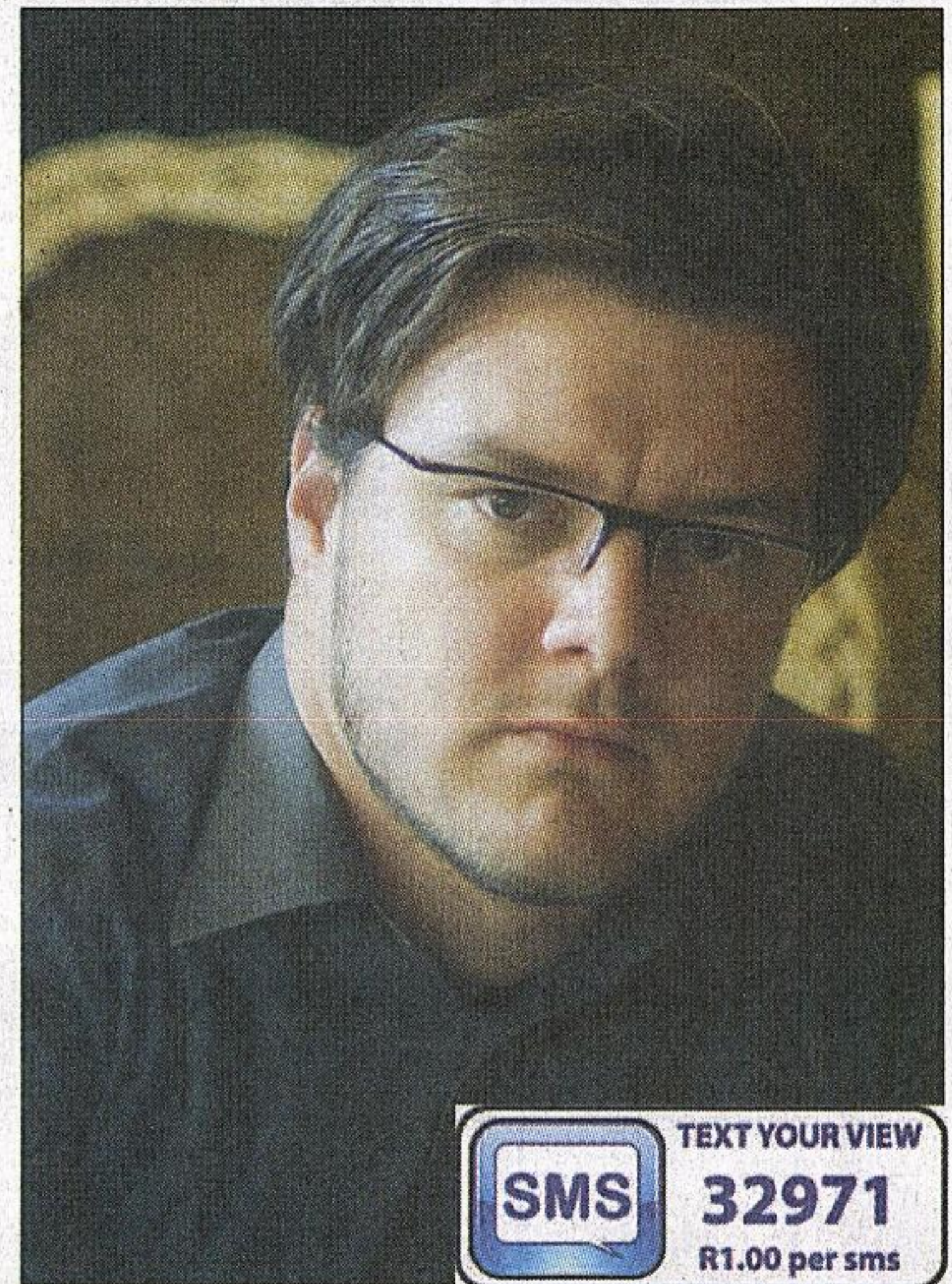
Would you call yourself a visual terrorist?

MM: No. I would not call myself that. My work is laboured, researched and quite the opposite of this description. The term "terrorism" indicates an ultimatum, wish fulfillment or ideological ambition – my work is too abstract and idiosyncratic to demand anything like that.

Fabricating some "history" in your art versus initiating present dialogues?

MM: My work investigates the ongoing ramifications of Western imperialism within the African continent.

As a broad thematic qualification of my working practice, the above statement is useful in its vagueness – it alludes to sustained post-colonial deconstruction of neo-colonial and imperial products and practices while hinting at investigations into the associated



Michael MacGarry is the winner of the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist for Visual Art and will be displaying his work at the upcoming National Arts Festival in Grahamstown.

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discourses on globalisation.

In terms of the demonstration of subject, I am preoccupied with seemingly failed utopias and obsolete technologies. My concern is neither to redeem nor vilify specific past events but to alter them for review through fictional narratives and temporal comparisons.

Any notable artistic influences?

MM: Other than Renaissance figures like Rembrandt or Durer – no, not really. I am more influenced by non-fiction literature, film-making and philosophy.

What other "careers" do you explore or do you still want to explore?

MM: In terms of other careers – I also

work as a graphic designer, as a copywriter, as a freelance writer. I've written a book on South African graphic design and I co-publish a music magazine called *The Pavement Special*.

In terms of careers still to be explored, I intend to expand on the several short films I've made to date and develop a feature film. To do this, I'm part of a Johannesburg-based film collective called Albatross Films.

□ *Endgame* will be exhibited at the Monument Gallery in Grahamstown from June 20 till July 15. Visit MacGarry's website www.alltheorynopractice.com

