

Karen von Veh

**Contemporary Iconoclasm in South Africa
Transgressive images of the Madonna and Christ in response to social politics**

David Morgan (2004:31) describes aesthetic experience as “an ethics of encounter that seems unabashedly mystical. Aesthetic contemplation is a form of transcendence and revelation, a communion with a higher being.” Art therefore, in subsequent aesthetic and philosophical discourses culminating in European modernism, is imbued with a reputation for spirituality, underpinned by notions of both the beautiful and the sublime. This aesthetic doctrine appears to be at the heart of some of the criticism of recent works that parody art historical originals. A work that was produced by “genius” and that is aesthetically beautiful and portrays the idealism of classical perfection, such as the *Pietà* by Michelangelo, would carry this aura of spiritual communion, particularly as its purpose was for religious contemplation. The parody of such idealised images of the Madonna and Christ by certain contemporary South African artists could be seen, therefore, as an attack not only on the image of these iconic figures and on religion in general, but also on the sanctity of the creative urge, artistic genius, historical ideals, tradition and culture. Contemporary “iconoclastic” versions of religious iconography are not images that must be absorbed in “rapt contemplation” but instead must be comprehended rationally with intellectual knowledge of historical prototypes and their meanings, and in response to a current political or social context. They are therefore decidedly “worldly” in purpose and effect.

In this paper I discuss the underlying purposes for Diane Victor’s *Little Deposition Picture* (2002), and Conrad Botes’ *Good Shepherd* (2014). These artists transgressively parody recognisable Christian icons to comment on the ongoing inequalities still rife in post-apartheid South African society. The transformation of society after the apartheid era has been difficult; often beliefs or behavioural practices are so normalised that change is virtually impossible without a catalyst to disrupt complacency and introduce alternative practices and thoughts. I would argue that iconoclasm in art is employed to function as just such a catalyst for the renewal of ideas and attitudes in the work of these artists.