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Disconcerting Securities: Carla Busuttill's 'choice.click.bait.'

Carla Busuttill

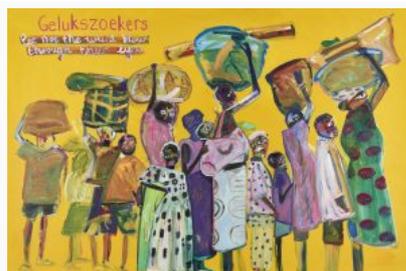
By Nicola Kritzinger

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Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg
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I left Carla Busuttill's exhibition 'choice.click.bait.' at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg reeling with questions that had been swimming below the surface for some time: Who is protecting us? Who are we being protected from? Have we steadily nurtured our own demise through the ever-increasing financial disparities we reinforce as the middle classes?

Carla Busuttill's grotesque paintings have a dark sense of humour. The subject matter is serious, private security, systemic violence, but she engages it in a playful, questioning way, crossing media from almost abstract paintings to collaborations with artists Chris Saunders and Gary Charles in video and photography. Two of Busuttill's works are mounted on wallpaper – evocative of Ai Weiwei's 2015 retrospective at the Royal Academy in London. Busuttill's wallpaper is a pattern made from photos of her figures; echoing their contrasted, ambiguous status through the use of mirror image set on flat colour backgrounds of bright blue, or green. She masks and conceals, but the psychological demons are apparent, threatening to emerge from the surface.



Carla Busuttill *Gelukszoekers*, 2015. Oil on canvas

A room of the exhibition has been set up with your typical wooden guard hut found in beautiful old Johannesburg suburbia, with a promotional video playing, mounted on a wallpapered space. The fictional Mosquito Security Company represents middle class terror. It plays into fear by asking in a loud voice, 'Are you scared? Do you have nice things?' It confirms the worst, 'Look around. You're surrounded by danger.' There is an absurdity that comes forth, emphasized by the dramatized videos of people wearing painted masks, doing seemingly

quodidian things, denying any sense of identity. It's a bit like the Instagram account

[@kanyedoingthings](#) where it seems an average portrayal of Kanye West purportedly doing 'normal' 'everyday' things, for example 'Kanye doing push ups.' But the deeper you delve, the funnier it becomes, because the absurdity of trying to exhibit Kanye's life as mundane or normal becomes apparent. This preposterous supposition of an average life is emphasized by what one knows of it. Equivalently, through a Trellidor-slam-type advert, Busuttill engages with the ridiculous nature of security for the wealthy. She depicts the ouroboros of wealth inequality, constantly reinforced by capitalism and its inevitable consequences where the 'haves' fear the 'have-nots' that they so desperately need to maintain their own wealth. The real threat here is the financial inequality created and supported by colonial ideals that pervade in society. This makes her art both funny, and terribly uncomfortable to view because she draws attention to the viewer's own role in the narrative.

In a large painting titled *Gelukszoekers*, a group of roughly painted, brightly garbed figures are portrayed on a flat yellow background. There is a naïveté to the work, some figures are mere scribbles, or thick layers of paint: adding, erasing, marking. The painterliness obscures identity, denies individuation, and renders the subjects 'everyman'. This seems particularly poignant because [every one in 122 humans is a refugee](#). Her brushstrokes on the clothing, so dense and energetic, play stark contrast to the darkened, almost featureless insinuated faces of the people. The figures carry belongings on their heads. They call to mind foreigners seeking a better life by walking across borders, representing people isolated as the root of crime and misfortune globally by xenophobic prejudice.

A female child is foregrounded, posed like one of the women in Picasso's *Desmoiselles D'Avignon*. This young girl makes eye contact with the viewer. This returning gaze, a deeply disconcerting, direct engagement between subject and viewer, inverts the power dynamic between the observed and the observer. The title conjures colonial issues that South Africans still struggle to negotiate. Who belongs, who does not, and who decides this? In a society proselytizing a western mode of thought it becomes apparent that ideals of freedom belong to an ever-shrinking group of people.



Carla Busuttill *Choice Click Bait*, 2015. Oil on canvas

In another large painting, *Choice Click Bait*, Busuttill draws no line between the perpetrator and the victim. There is a lineup of people on their knees being held at gun-point by uniformed men. On the left side of the work she has written a free-association poem that highlights the absurdity of the situation: 'choice click bait, squashed cheap squeaky toys, choices carried like a weight, developing social filters, rooting in the rubble, cracks are showing, the world is yours.' There is no telling who the 'bad guy' is. It echoes current political threats, movements like Isis, or Anonymous – polar opposites politically, but equally faceless and innumerable; with an acute dislocation from geographic specificity. It's a reminder of the infinite power and depth of the internet and connectivity. Emphasizing the bizarre, this painting has been hung on her wallpaper, creating a dichotomy between the serious and the inane, how the overwhelming amount of information on the internet desensitizes us, or exposes us to things we would never have otherwise experienced. A video of a beheading next to an advertising banner calling us to enlarge our genitalia. It's a juxtaposition of the absurd existential extremes within which we operate daily.

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