Reconstructing mundane objects into riveting art

Exhibition: KAY HASSAN at SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch until February 15.
MELVYN MINNAAR reviews.

There’s a certain suaveness about the way Kay Hassan thinks and works. It’s a kind of elegance in both concept and execution – which often plays off ironically against both the material of his media (found bits and pieces and reworked junk) and the grittiness of his powerful visual poetry.

The exhibition he calls Fixing Time – a title which conjures up a multitude of signals – comprises various sections. Throughout Hassan’s way of turning the ordinary around and upside-down to create zippy, instant metaphors and narratives is vividly demonstrated.

Attractively, stylishly and precisely installed at this well-spaced gallery, it is a charmer in all its engaging theatricality and crisp exposition of Hassan’s visual thinking. But mostly, it features pictures which are just gorgeous to look at. And think about.

For all his deserved international stature (including winning the DaimlerChrysler award in 2000), Hassan’s art is not well exposed in the Western Cape.

This show is a significant marker in its range, reach and impact. And the accompanying catalogue is a fine, illuminating tribute.

The works installed, range from watercolours, digital photographic prints to large, impressive recycled paper collage “constructions” and space-occupying installations with “found objects”.

The latter includes a “deconstructed” room with a crunchy pile of old clocks, which provides the clearest clue to the metaphorical reach of his chosen title.

Working in, and installing, a contained space is a hallmark of Hassan’s engagement with visitors to his art. It is now more than a decade ago that his Shebeen, virtually a realist “stage-set” incorporating gritty photography, was such a riveting presence at the Johannesburg Biennale.

In his catalogue essay (about the beautifully lyrical photographic series Morning Ritual), Thembinkosi Goniwe summarises his intentions: “Hassan makes his business to undermine any certainty ... that might subordinate the complexity of the subjects he deals with.

“His creative strategy is to explore the interplay of observation and imagination and create a visualising strategy concerned with making art a space where you can imagine and experience reality or fiction differently and comprehensively.”

In other words, like any great poet or storyteller, the engagement and imagination of the audience is vital. To this end he would employ whatever means and a generous, highly-charged bag of tricks with hands-on skills to match.

For example, close-up viewing of the series of large untitled “paper constructions”, reveals astounding jigsaw collages. Oversize pixels of giant, famous-brand billboards are literally reshaped under his agile fingers as torn and cut paper fragments are gelled in place like brush-strokes. Purposely countering two-dimensional flatness, the paper origin is fully respected.

Enigmatic, forceful female characters seem to appear from the debris and outspent layers of commercial propaganda – another spin on the title Fixing Time.

In a series of expressive-stroke watercolours we also encounter their sisters. Mask-like, but also exotically African, they step up as characters in Hassan’s dramas and we wonder what they do and where they’ll lead.

What we do know, is that we cannot keep our eyes off them. And isn’t this what good art should be all about?