VIRTUAL-REAL PARADOX

Fixated on artificial art from all abstract angles

Andrzej Urbanski: AB01 1703/620/17 opens at Circa Gallery Cape Town on August 31 and runs until September 24.

MARY CORRIGALL reviews

ANDRZEJ URBANSKI keeps at least 20kg of meat in the fridge of the Salt River home-cum-studio loft he shares with his wife.

"That is what we do. We never forget what happens," says the artist, reflecting on how the cold war shaped his Polish-German identity. Meat was scarce and sold to the highest bidder during those times.

The Urbanksis left Poland for Berlin, Germany, in the late '80s. For the first two years the family lived in an immigration centre.

"I was just a Polak," he recalls.

An awareness of their outsider status compelled his mother to learn German quickly, but more importantly to observe the regulations that pervaded the bureaucratic state Germany was.

Urbanski implies that in her desire to fit in and overcome the prejudice against foreigners, her creative compulsions were eroded.

As an artist Urbanski is sort of remedying the loss. However, via his immaculate hard-edged abstract paintings, which will be exhibited at his upcoming exhibition at Circa Cape Town, he echoes the sense of control, perfection and a seeming compliance to a strict set of rules that marked his early years in Germany.

The only enduring, powerful prescription he has set for himself is to "make something that is 100% man-made but looks 100% machine-made".

This seemingly odd pursuit is a response to and reflection of the contradictions of his life in Cape Town (and elsewhere in the world) where an immersion in virtual, digital worlds is counterbalanced by the valorisation of home-made artisanal products.

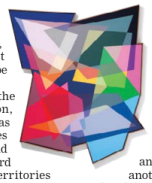
"Your dad can take you to a birch tree and let you feel the bark and the leaves, and show you how when you hit a nail in at a 45-degree angle, you can extract sweet water. Google can't give you that. I want to extract from the screen and put it into the real world," he says.

Urbanski's art encompasses this virtual/real paradox. It appears to be a digital product, mechanised, clean, impersonal and detached from him but tied to his upbringing. Not only as an expression of the order and creativity that relates to his mother but the colour he chooses, which at times recalls an old sofa or the colour of a building. The hard lines define his art, recall architectural design.



CONTROLLED: The Polish-born German artist Andrzej Urbanski in his Salt River studio. He began using spray paint as a graffiti artist but he has left that world far behind him. *Picture: STAN KAPLAN*

Urbanski attributes his interest in the built landscape to his rollerblading days. For 13 years he glided around Berlin, studying the east-west split that had yet to be integrated.



Growing up at the time of transition, which he refers to as the "greyzone" relates to his art. You could say he maps the hard borders between territories and cultures, ethnicities. In Berlin after the fall of the wall, the barriers were broken down via a street culture inspired by hip hop. Rollerblading turned him onto this rising new culture and he became immersed in the world of graffiti.

"I had people from different cultures and parts of Berlin in my crew. We'd take a two-hour train from east to west just to do a 10-minute tag," he recalls.

He prefers to spray his paint rather than use a brush; it eliminates any tell-tale signs that his art is handmade. In the vivid colours he employs and the ways in which they overlap and interact with one another, he continues to break hard lines or at least perhaps meditates on the friction and overlap between them. It's a visual and psychic exercise that might well be rooted in the activities he engaged in Berlin's grey zones – a once colourless urban landscape forged at the intersection between capitalism and communism.

Perhaps it is his clipped German-accented English but he doesn't seem to be nostalgic for that time. He sees no relationship between graffiti and his art – "Graffiti is about marking territory it doesn't belong in galleries."

Spraying paint allows him to produce flat colours, evoking the digital imagery he tries to replicate. His fixation with this "artificial" art might be less of a rejection of it. He might be inspired by technology and in creating the illusion that his art is digitally and mechanically crafted he ironically builds on an old-school tradition in painting – to create the illusions (of reality). His abstraction also brings the minimalists and other high modernist American abstract artists to mind. He admires the art of Rothko and Piet Mondrian, the Dutch artist who evolved the De Stijl aesthetic – hard lines with primary colours.

He was a bit of an outsider at art school in Berlin – the emphasis then was on conceptualism not painting or abstraction, which seemed to come naturally to him.

"Abstraction is more natural than trying to paint something real. I do not want to be abstract in the figurative language of painting."

Urbanski hankered for perfection and control in his art, though he derives some pleasure in detecting errors. The visual games he plays through the complex compositions he creates have become more sophisticated and are echoed in the shaped canvases – which are incidentally also hand-crafted and bespoke, as are the frames.

He is into form and design. This might be hard to reconcile with the way in which Urbanski's hard-edged abstract artworks are biographical – the shifting arrangement of colour blocks signifying various aspects of his identity, territories and places that define him.

At the same time, abstraction denies the personal, is a universal language, that South African artists have been adopting readily as part of a desire to escape the strictures or prescriptions tied to identity and be part of a global contemporary art market. As such Urbanski is no longer out in the cold, he has settled on a vocabulary and aesthetic that chimes with these times though its lines extend back in time.