

## CULT HABITS

## Abstract rules, OK!

Judging by a number of fine art exhibitions running in Cape Town, abstraction is not just another distraction, writes **Sean O'Toole**

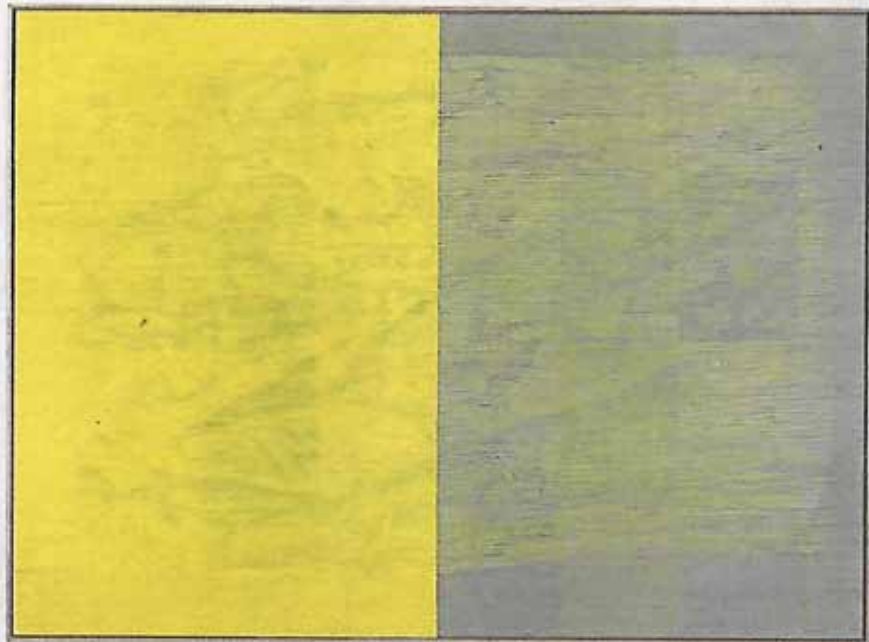
IT SEEMS unimaginable that there was once a reputation risk attached to exhibiting abstract paintings in Cape Town.

In 1956 76-year-old Edward Roworth, a former director of the SA National Gallery, published a tirade in the Cape Argus against the "cult of abstract art".

The view of this dour impressionist, one of whose paintings succumbed to the fire lit by University of Cape Town students in February, was exemplary of the times. Much has changed in six decades, as is evident by what's on view in Cape Town right now.

At Whatiftheworld Gallery Maja Marx is showing 14 paintings, all oil on Belgian linen, each composed of repetitive horizontal lines. Ostensibly abstract, Marx's quietly impressive works at her show Glare are, in fact, subtle depictions of folded cloth, paper and cardboard.

For Gerda Scheepers, who is showing at Blank Projects, fabric is both subject and material. Her exhibition Sitcom is composed of two whimsical abstract murals, sculptures that read like theatre



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props and wall-mounted assemblage pieces that gesture towards the idea of painting.

The human subject is a constant. A pink silhouette of a naked woman is spread out over a table-like surface. A painted-on white T-shirt pinned to a wall features teeny boobies.

Abstraction is no longer simply about non-figurative mark-making, but extends to recomposing the idea of painting entirely.

Like Scheepers, Nigerian painter Victor Ehikhamenor, whose work appears on Ebony's first show devoted to abstraction, has found profit in removing the stretchers that give paintings their stiff geometrical form. The outcome is painting that wants to be sculpture.

Rather than present one artist, Ebony presents a broad survey of current trends in abstraction.



RECOMPOSING IDEAS: Clockwise from top: Maja Marx, 'Glare'; Gerda Scheepers, 'Sitcom (Normal Living)'; 'The Cartographer of Memories' by Victor Ehikhamenor

Abstracted focuses on eight men, five of them locals.

The oldest piece is an untitled 2010 painting by Zander Blom, who a decade ago danced on JH Pierneef's grave as a prelude to a successful career as an abstract painter. But for Blom's work, in which he wrestles with his influences (Francis Bacon and Piet Mondrian), and Rory Emmett's close-up canvas study of a faceted sapphire, all the works

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at Ebony are non-figurative.

The standout pieces are by Hugh Byrne and Lars Fishedick, a German architect now living in Cape Town. Both artists use architecture as inspiration, although each expresses its stimulus differently: in sculptural forms that bristle with their own disciplined visual energy.

On evidence, Roworth's cult has spawned many sects, each marked by its own persuasions.