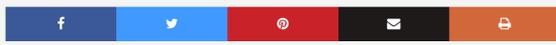




LIFESTYLE

Artist explores the push-pull nature of relationships in eyebrow-raising erotic artworks

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BY PEARL BOSHOMANE



In 'The Beginning', artist Philipp Pieroth, the figures are getting closer to each other - creating intimacy - but they're not there yet.

Image: Supplied

German artist Philipp Pieroth's nudes are really about how people need each other, writes Pearl Boshomane

In an essay for the Guardian, "What Beyoncé Taught Me", novelist Zadie Smith muses about the lessons writers can learn from dance. But dance can be related to so much more than writing - it can also relate to art and real life.

In his series "Dasein: Exemption and Connection", German artist Philipp Pieroth, above, summons the spirit of dance in his gorgeous and erotic art works.

His work - like dance - has movement to it, or at least gives the illusion of movement. Although not intentional, this represents the dynamic and changing nature of his subject matter - relationships.

"I suppose it is like a dance," says Pieroth when I bring this up. "Sometimes the one is leading [and] sometimes the other one is leading."

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One of the works in the series is *The Couple*. It features two figures with connected limbs, dripping paint surrounding them.

Although it initially wasn't the intention, *The Couple* is a follow-up to *The Beginning*, which shows a couple seemingly in the throes of passion.

About *The Beginning*, Pieroth says: "You can see they are on their way to linking up, or getting closer to each other. They are creating intimacy, but they're not there yet. They're opening up. People say they're having sex but that's not what I had in my mind [when I painted it]."

He points to *The Couple* and says: "This is the stage after that. They're way further. They grew together already, they're building a unit, but the connection is a bit awkward. Look at the way he has his arm - he seems to be a bit uneasy in this position.

"And she's looking outside of the frame that they're in. Maybe there's something else out there that she's more attracted to."

The figures are painted against a horizon that splits the image in half. Pieroth says the horizon means the painting can be flipped around and still make sense: there is no "right" way to hang it. This, he says, is how relationships are in real life.

"You can talk to the guy and he would tell you his view on things: why she is like that, how she's distant and how he doesn't know how to get close to her. Then you'd flip it around and talk to her and she'd say, 'Ugh, that guy annoys me all the time. He doesn't understand me.' There are two people and two different perspectives on things ... There's never just one truth.

"I like to think of relationships in general as a dialectic process. These are only snapshots. Things change all the time. Maybe they're in a much better space now. Maybe they've separated. You never know."

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This dance isn't only about romantic relationships, however. In *Three Is a Party* - which features three linked figures and a fourth, disconnected one - he explores the intellectual connection between people, perhaps friendship.

Although the connected figures have an intensity to their connection, it's the fourth figure who is more at peace with themselves because they are free of the pressures that come with social interaction.

Says Pieroth: "These figures are struggling. They have company but they also have the disadvantage of the struggle [that comes with it]. I can relate to that a lot. Even with social life, sometimes you want to be part of it but ... there's so much energy flowing and you have to process all that.

"Sometimes you want to take a break ... and not do anything social."

One of Pieroth's most striking works is also the starkest. *Temptation*, which features a shapely, mostly naked female figure with thorns coming out of her breasts, is erotic but not sexy.

"It speaks to temptation in general, because if you touch the breast you might get hurt.

"Temptation's a tricky thing," he says. "The apple that she's reaching for with her tongue, that is the apple from the Bible but it's also Apple the company. This stands for a society of consumption. We're always tempted by consumption. We're always eager to get the new thing, the more expensive thing, but none of it is real."

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Another one of his works is *Lost in a Good Space*, featuring two dark figures having an emotional tug-of-war against a vibrant background.

"I used all these colours and strokes to give it a floating energy. The energy is in the background," he says.

"You can see that they are really trying to get away from each other, but they can't. It's not a good connection that they have and they both know it and it's hard to get away from each other.

"But they shouldn't be afraid of disconnecting because this surrounding they're in is pretty nice. It's colourful, it's vibrant. Sometimes people are scared of letting go. Everybody's too scared of being alone. But there is a beautiful world out there, so just let go."

Relationships - be they romantic or otherwise - are often the best muse in art and the many forms it takes.

"In general my work is about how people interact and connect; how they link up. How they need each other. Nobody wants to be solitary. But then all kinds of connections and relationships are tricky as well.

"It's not that easy so we find [ourselves in] very toxic relationships. There's an interdependency that's not good for you. Both people know it but they can't let go ... Everywhere I look I see that. We can be the most loving people on earth but also do the most fucked-up shit to each other."

• Pieroth is part of a group exhibition, 'Open Studio', at Johannesburg's August House, opening on March 26.



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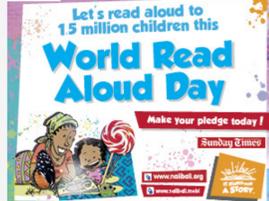
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