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LIFESTYLE

Art

Artist Philipp Pieroth examines the darker side of Barbados in 'Paradise'

German artist Philipp Pieroth contrasts the tourist world of Barbados with the island's dark history of slavery in his crushingly beautiful paintings



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'In Safety' by Philipp Pieroth. Image: Supplied

There is a woman in Somalia
The sun gives her no mercy
The same sky we lay under
Burns her to the bone

These lyrics from the Sade song Pearls come to mind when Philipp Pieroth explains the symbolism behind the beach umbrellas in his series of paintings titled Shade (I - VI).

"We seek out the sun and then find shelter under the umbrellas, but for slaves working in the fields, the sun was their worst enemy," he says.

Tall, decked out in a white T-shirt, light blue sweatpants and the cleanest Nikes on Earth, Pieroth looks summery and laid back, fitting in with the theme (at least on the surface) of his exhibition Paradise.

The art works also fit in seamlessly with their surroundings, In Toto Gallery in Johannesburg, an eclectic yet considered penthouse that doubles as an art gallery.

"Paradise is like a metaphor for this idea of a beautiful place like the Caribbean - although it could also be Cape Town," he says. "It's the idea of a perfect place where everybody is happy and it's like a fairy tale - and the fake notion of it."



Artist Philipp Pieroth. Image: Sebastiao Mosamo

The art works are social commentary, mainly about how this so-called paradise (the Caribbean in particular) isn't necessarily that for its natives, and the ways in which the chains of slavery continue to shackle the slaves' descendants.

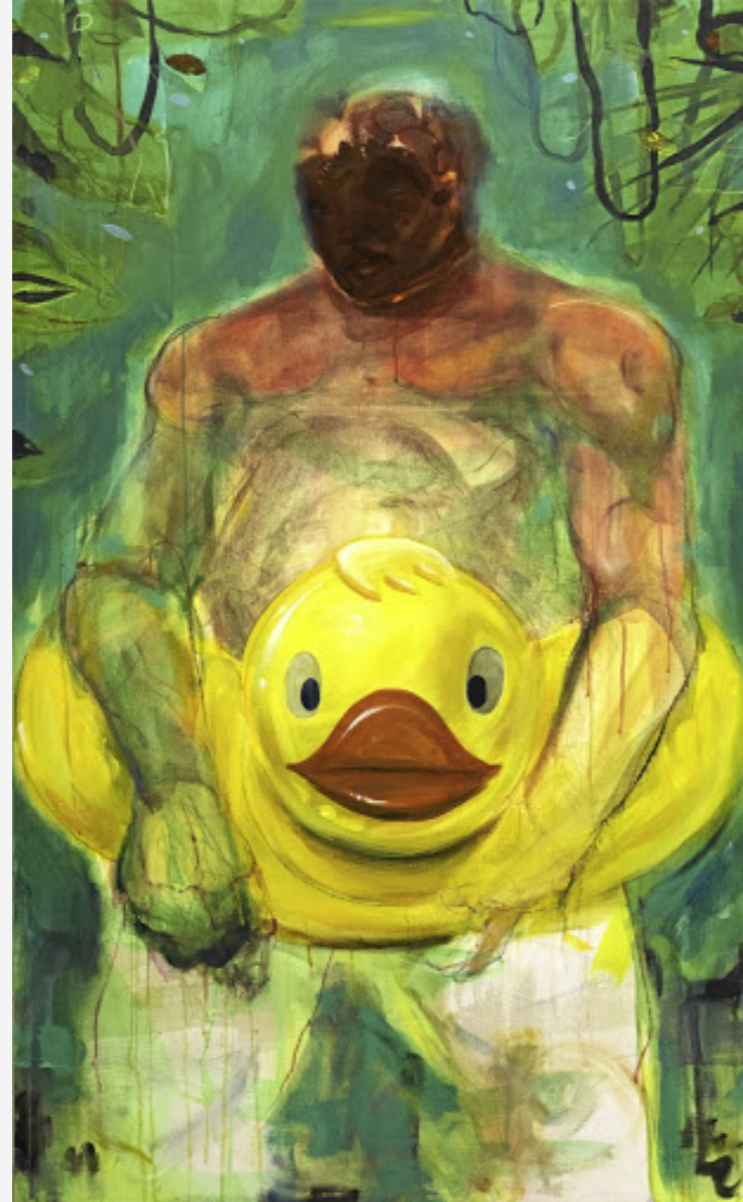
Pieroth has thrown in little clues and given some works double meanings: remove the mouthpiece, and the painting of a man snorkelling looks like a dead body floating in the water (Under the Surface); a black man chilling on the beach gives off tropical holiday vibes - until you see the sugarcane jutting out of the sand, a reminder of the island's brutal history of slavery (In Safety); a woman on a flamingo float seems to be holding on for dear life rather than relaxing in the water (Pink - Rescue).

Pieroth sees what the wealthy tourists (painted as half-naked and crab-coloured on the beach) represent as grotesque while also being aware of his own privilege as a white man from Europe. For instance, he considered putting the man in In Safety in chains, but "thought that would be too obvious and I'm not sure I have the right to do that as a white man".

Describing the subject matter in Paradise as "delicate", he says: "I've lived in Africa for a few years, so I can understand the whole conversation about race. When you're in Europe you don't understand these things. I only really started to understand the aftermath of the slave trade when I came to Africa. [Growing up] I was aware about it because [] learnt about it at school, but it was always something that felt so far away."

But slavery and its legacy isn't the only topic Paradise explores. Bringing it to the present, Pieroth also references the European migrant crisis, most obviously in the paintings Pink - Rescue and Banana Boat, which depicts four male figures riding a banana in the ocean. The banana, Pieroth says, could be a reference to "the sexualisation of the black body". To me, it references black people being compared to monkeys.

Banana Boat also looks like a group of friends riding a jet ski. "They're having fun but there's also a darkness about them, in a way. It's subtle. It's also about how many African people died in the ocean."



'Duckface' by Philipp Pieroth. Image: Supplied

Duckface explores the same issue, but it also holds another meaning. Pieroth says: "There's a little bit of a pop-culture reference with the duck and the shiny-ness of it. It represents the Instagram lifestyle and the poses. A lot of these people go to these places and they just take selfies for Instagram, hashtag this and that. They really consume these places and don't get something out of it that's of value, I feel. Back in the day travelling was a way to find out about the world and to learn, but a lot of people don't do that anymore."

One of the most striking works in the exhibition is Carlotta, depicting the Cuban woman who started a slave rebellion in the 1800s. She's on the beach, posing in the style of a Sports Illustrated swimsuit model, wielding a machete, blood dripping from her chest, down her underwear. Her pose is sexual, yes, but the painting is anything but sexy.

It's difficult to ignore just how crushingly beautiful Pieroth's latest works are. In fact, some are even breathtaking. But when the hidden meanings behind them are revealed, it adds another layer of beauty to them. It's poetry, painted.

• Philipp Pieroth's 'Paradise' is at the In Toto Gallery (Birdhaven, Johannesburg) until January 31. The artist will host a walkabout at the gallery on Saturday January 26 at 11am.

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