



James Beckett  
Gas Cannister  
mixed media



James Beckett  
Panda  
mixed media



James Beckett  
Polish  
mixed media



James Beckett  
Truck  
mixed media

## James Beckett at the KZNSA

by Dean Henning

James Beckett, Durban's prodigal son, has returned with his latest travelling show, 'an untitled exhibition of cut-up'.

Beckett employs a 'cut-up' methodology in his approach to this work. Traditionally, cut-up involves literally splicing texts and reconfiguring them as a method of creating new, innovative and often surprising phrases. This method has a long history, from Tristan Tzara through William Burroughs to David Bowie. Beckett employs this method not within one textual source, but across a number of domains, splicing spaces, objects, texts and contexts.

The exhibition itself is striking in its museum-like formality and containment, comprising, as it does, 14 meticulously placed canvas-covered display boards. Each board is self-contained, with carefully placed objects on display, complete with titles or descriptions. What disrupts this clarity and conciseness is the fact that the descriptions are all presented in Braille, indecipherable to the majority of viewers. The objects themselves, whilst connected formally, are only common to each other through their sense of age. Large hearing aid devices sit alongside ancient boot polish cans, which are in turn positioned next to children's toy trucks and porcelain animals from some long-forgotten knick-knack shelf.

Additionally, each object reveals a hidden space - the space occupied by the hearing aid battery is replaced by a precisely cut section of twig; half of a pack of cards is replaced by a half pack of timber, and so on. All of these revealed spaces are immediately reminiscent of 'negative space' exercises that any art student in training endures. Here, however, it is revealed by Beckett as a real, organic element of each object.

The exposure of this negative space forms one of the additional cut-up juxtapositions in Beckett's realisation of the work. The practice of 'steganography' - concealing messages inside everyday objects - whilst usually confined to the world of espionage has been changed into the hidden aspect of negative spaces revealed for those who hadn't previously considered them.

This multitude of contexts, references and concepts culminates in what Beckett succinctly describes as 'a museum of concealed twigs for the blind'.

Notions of formality, clarity and explanation of a museum installation are juxtaposed with the hidden - secret messages, interior spaces and the 'hidden' meaning of Braille. These notions are combined to create an intriguing tableau where the viewer constructs their own interpretation of the work's meaning.

The show moves from Durban to Cape Town and then on to St. Petersburg, Tallin (Estonia), Helsinki, and finally to Amsterdam.

*Dean Henning is a Durban-based sound artist and electronic musician. He has worked on numerous collaborations with his partner Rike Sitas at the Durban Art Gallery's Red Eye art events and was one of the KZNSA's YAP artists in 2004.*

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