

ALEX SUDHEIM learns the language of duplicity from James Beckett's masterpieces

When erstwhile Pavement frontman Stephen Malkmus sings *Post-Paint Boy* wryly intones: "You're the maker of modern minor masterpieces for the untrained eye", he could easily be referring to conceptual artist James Beckett. For, if you're taking measurements, Beckett's minute masterpieces are minor indeed. And, given his obsession with the notions of concealment, the "for the untrained eye" element of the lyric is also eerily apt.

Yet, as humble in physical dimension as they may be, on an abstract level Beckett's renderings are as potent as anything in the post-paint world. The tiny, trivial objects the artist has deconstructed for his untitled installation

— currently on exhibition at the KZNSA Gallery — might well strike one as quaint and whimsical upon first glance, yet if one allows oneself to become absorbed by the work, there is method to Beckett's madness.

Born in Harare 28 years ago, but raised in Pietermaritzburg, Beckett made his mark on the cultural scene in his teens when he played bass guitar for the industrial noise outfit, Fingerhead. Having studied Fine Arts at the Natal Technikon in

Durban in the late 1990s he won the Emma Smith Prize after which he followed his star to Berlin. He was then accepted to the Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam where his work garnered him the prestigious Prix de Rome for Art and Public Space.

Though this is his first exhibition in his subtropical home for some time, don't expect any nostalgia: at present Beckett is possessed of a deep fascination with the espionage techniques of World War II. To him, these represent the metaphor for hidden meaning and layered purpose: in World War II all manner of quotidian objects (wristwatches, toys, lipstick cases and magnifying glasses) were utilised to smuggle vital information from one front to another. In his installation Beckett investigates the notion that

"nothing is what it seems" — he has taken apart these vintage vehicles of spycraft and, by dismantling them, demonstrated how their perceived purpose can be cleverly exploited to conceal another.

The objects upon the wooden surfaces of Beckett's installation may have once



**Artfully concealed: One of James Beckett's modern minor masterpieces for the untrained eye**

hidden plans for military offensives yet here the pens, eyeglasses and gas-canisters are the refuge for ... twigs. In case that doesn't throw you, each dismembered object on display is captioned by Braille printouts of weather reports in Spanish.

All this can easily be interpreted as yet another poor postmodern pun on the ultimate elusiveness of meaning. Except that in this instance Beckett is articulating truth in a subtle manner. He is saying that in major global conflict situations where ideologies are at stake, duplicity is the only language anyone speaks. A cursory glance at anything from the public relations battle surrounding the United States-led war in Iraq and the impending one in Iran, to the definitional nit-picking and semantic hair-splitting of the Zuma trial, quickly reveals that the real combat is won not by occupying enemy territory but by demonstratively occupying the moral high ground. And how does one accomplish this? By sleight-of-hand; by expert double-speak; by falsely representing something as that which it patently is not.

In his eccentric display Beckett provides an innocent — yet highly eloquent — visual rendering of the concept of deceit. His seemingly playful quasi-museum of trinkets is loaded with an undercurrent as disingenuous as anything any modern prophet of war might muster. And that is where the danger lies.

"untitled" is on show at the KZNSA Gallery until May 16 whereafter it travels to Cape Town and then St Petersburg (Russia); Tallinn (Estonia); Helsinki (Finland) and Amsterdam (Holland)

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### IN BRIEF

#### James Beckett's 'Cut Up' art exhibition opens at KZNSA Gallery tomorrow

OPENING at the KZNSA Gallery in Durban on April 25 and running until May 14 is an untitled exhibition of "Cut Up" by James Beckett.

Beckett studied at the Natal Technikon in Durban from 1995 to 1999. Having won the Emma Smith prize, Beckett left for Berlin where he spent a year. He was then accepted to the Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten and moved to Amsterdam, after which he won the prestigious Prix de Rome for Art and Public Space.

After initially working with installation, sound has increasingly taken an important role in his work. This has been a research-based activity, with output ranging from radio documentaries to mock ethnic bands, as well as museum displays documenting the cultural and physiological effects of noise.

The KZNSA exhibition is a return to physical installation and informed more by the techniques of music-making and text, hence the use of cut-up, a form of text mangling resulting in new meanings beyond the author's intent and control.

The objects and devices used are not tied to an obvious use although they are reminiscent of the 1970s spy culture, a by-product of the Cold War. The descriptions notated in braille are European weather reports; undecipherable chunks of supposed text.

The show is later to travel to Cape Town then Russia (St Petersburg), Estonia (Tallinn) and possibly Finland (Helsinki), ending in the Netherlands (Amsterdam).

The exhibition has received sponsorship of the Mondriaan Foundation, of the Netherlands.