

VISUALLY GRAND, AWE-INSPIRING

Romantics fixated on capturing new world

Mary Corrigall

GIVEN that February is famously the month of romance, it is fitting an exhibition presenting a new generation of "Romantics" is showing at the Barnard gallery.

However, the link between Romanticism and romance is not as straight-forward as it would seem.

Romanticism does not refer to romantic relationships, though when the movement finally wormed its way into French literary circles in the mid-1800s, it liberated poets. It freed them up to express their feelings about their beloveds in ways they had hardly done before.

This had less to do with romanticism encouraging romance, and more to do with its relationship to a seismic break in Western culture from a world view centred on God and religion, to one where humans were at the centre and individual freedom was valorised. As such, people's inner thoughts were valid.

Not surprisingly, Romanticism was initially inspired by the French Revolution in the late 1700s, which imploded not only a feudal system but all power structures impeding the rights of individuals.

This extended to artists: their view of the world was now important. Their imagination could lead people to connect and understand the world in ways religion once did.

Centuries later, the title of Robyn Penn's series, *After the Failure of the Revolution*, at the New Romantics exhibition at Barnard, suggests that perhaps democratic ideals which gave life to art have not been fully realised.

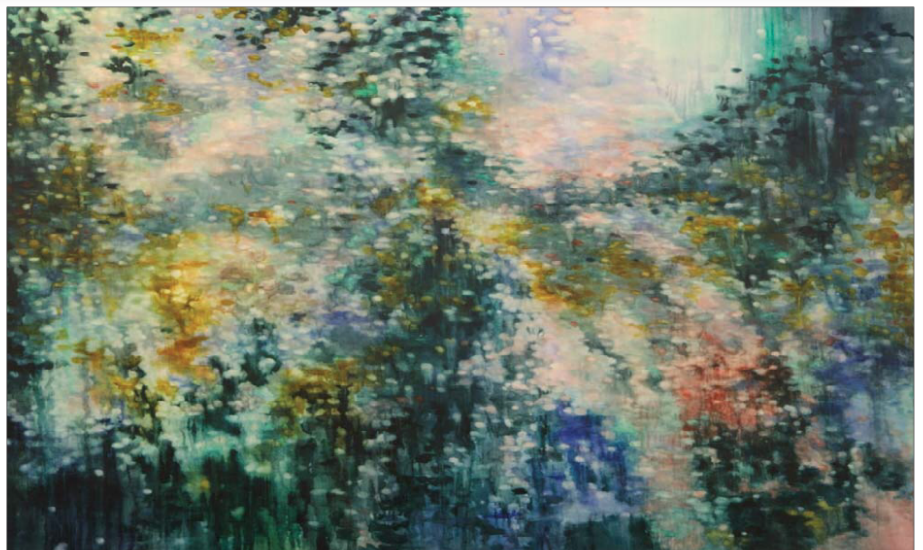
Her painted clouds, one executed in a traditional classical style and the other a deconstructed version, bring freedom to mind, but she suggests it is illusionary.

Romanticism manifested in different guises over the century-long period (from the French revolution to the late 1800s), infiltrating different art forms and countries.

In Germany its proponents were radical; they rejected texts, the idea of the single author, and advanced a form of social utopia where men and women married for love, not status or to advance wealth.

They saw such unions as an equal co-mingling between the sexes, where women took on male characteristics and had equal standing. In a way the female-dominated New Romantics exhibition brings these ideas to fruition.

Largely, as with all cultural



WATER: Alexia Vogel's *River Run II*.

movements, men were at the forefront of advancing Romanticism in different ways. In France, it overturned neoclassicism, impacting not only on the world of letters but on the stage.

The manner in which Romanticism adapted as it spread has made it difficult to define, and the Romantics were always interested in that which could not be defined – a sublime force that could be experienced and felt but never understood.

For some poets, love might have proved a subject worthy of the Romantic touch, but largely nature was more useful. Particularly for painters, as it was visually grand, awe-inspiring, and while science could partially explain the rules that governed it, it was part of a larger phenomenon that could not be grasped, or no longer via religion alone.

The New Romantics exhibition at Barnard presents a collection of works by artists that fit this ambitious label. They are fixated on capturing the natural world, through a romantic lens which works at accentuating its beauty and grandness, and is obviously channelled through the eye of the artist.

This is particularly the case with Alexia Vogel's *River Run II*, in which the surface of a body of water is turned into this rippling colour field existing on the verge of



UNREAL: Heidi Fourie's *Behold*.

abstraction.

Katherine Spindler turns her seemingly banal subject matter – sheep in a field – into a dreamlike landscape, where they exist as symbols in an unmapped psychic territory.

Mist recurs in a number of works, keeping reality at bay, such as the forest scene Jaco van Schalkwyk captures in *Faraway Exotic*.

This mist leitmotif operates as a veil separating the real world from a romantic fiction, but could also be read as a manifestation of the artists' inner eye – their psychic experience of space, place, existence.

Perhaps they too, like the early

German circle of romantics, are willing a social utopia into existence, where identity, place, politics and rapid urbanity and consumerism are destroying the natural environment.

The century-long history of Romanticism reveals one certainty: it serves a purpose at the threshold of great socio-political change.

Whereas once romantic painters were processing the urbanisation of the natural world as industrialisation changed and regulated social life, a contemporary generation of artists, evincing this "Romantic" style are capturing, embracing, uncertainty wrought by threats to the environment and the rise of virtual reality in the post-industrialisation and information era.

On the art front, they are responding to massive changes too; the post-conceptualist turn in contemporary art has not only seen a renewal in painting but an interest in representing subject matter that escapes reason or logic.

This has allowed artists to embrace their medium, lose themselves in the process of making art, without having to "explain" it and to work more intuitively than before.

● *New Romantics' is at the Barnard Gallery in Newlands until March 7. Corrigall curated the exhibition. visit www.corrigall.org*

For further information log on to <http://www.weathersa.co.za>
Report fires to Fire and Emergency Services on 107 or (021) 489-7700.

City's Forecast

21/23 - Clear skies.
22 - Clear skies.
16/23 - Fog at first, clear skies.
1/38 - Cloudy at first, rain showers, 30%.
1 - Clear skies at first, partly cloudy.
19/29 - Clear skies.
14 - Partly cloudy at first, clear skies.
27 - Clear skies.
1/29 - Clear skies at first, fog.
16/29 - Clear skies.
9/25 - Mist at first, cloudy, clear skies.
Clear skies.
1/18/26 - Clear skies.
37 - Partly cloudy at first, clear skies.
04 - Clear skies.
1/33 - Clear skies at first, partly cloudy.
26 - Clear skies at first, fog.
38 - Partly cloudy at first, clear skies.

Table Bay)

Today	Tomorrow
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SOUTH AFRICAN NAVY HYDROGRAPHIC OFFICE
NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY TRANSCRIPTION ERRORS

Feb 23 Last Quarter: Mar 9
Mar 2 New Moon: Mar 17



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International Airport:

Max: 29.6°C

Wind: south west 32km/h

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