

## THREE KINDS OF DARING

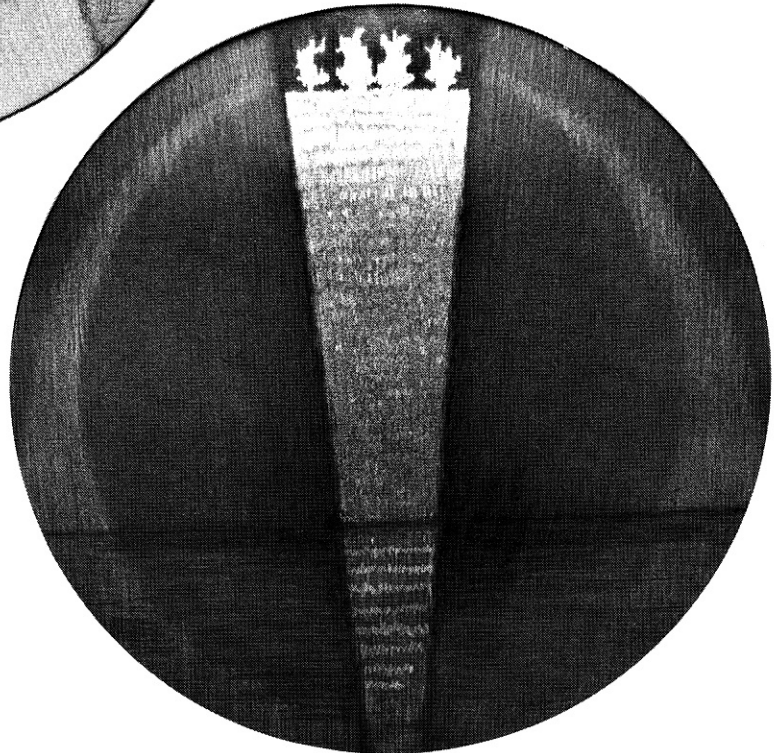
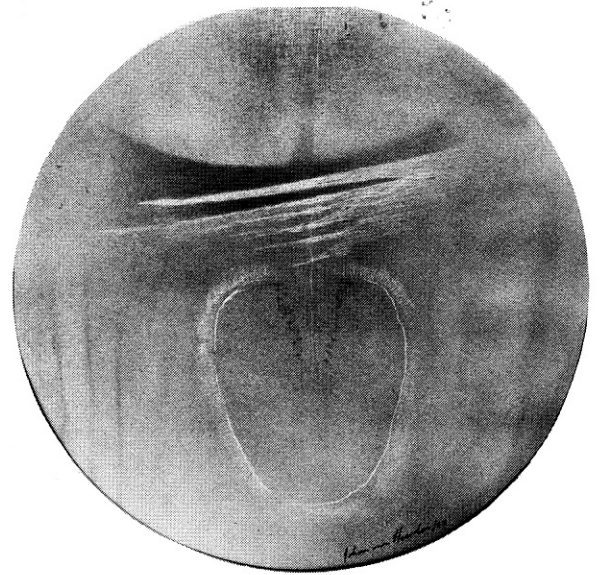
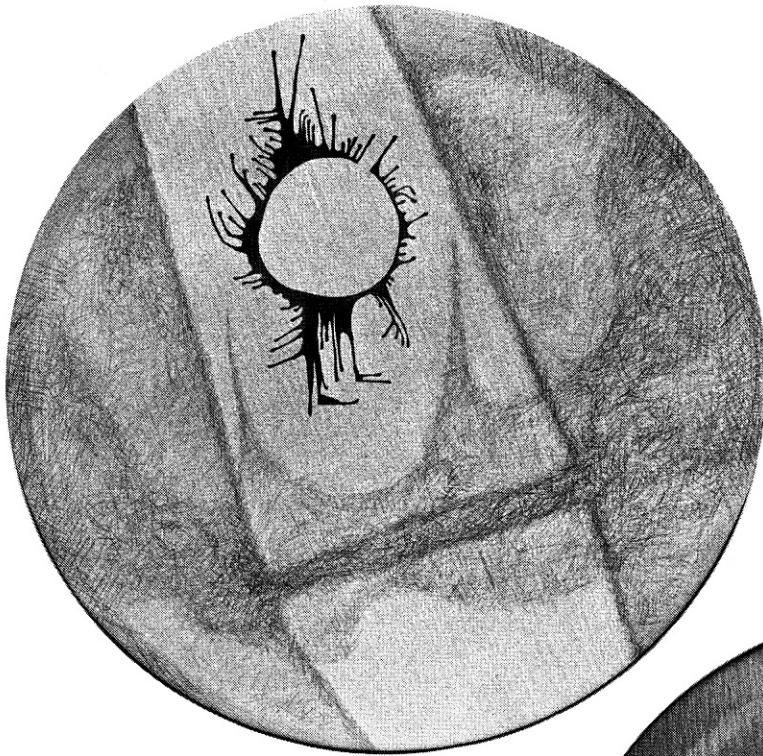
by Lionel Abrahams

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In at least three ways Johan van Heerden is an artist of some daring. He dares to let his art develop, leaving his proven formulae of effectiveness behind where necessary. He dares to stick to the path of his own logical development even when the Hamelin-pipings of metropolitan fashion call for radical transformations of style. AND he dares to commit himself to an intellectually definable meaning in his pictures. The first two aren't examples of superlative boldness, but, natural as they seem, they aren't common courses in South African art today. It is only a minority among our known artists who manifest a living imagination that has to unfold and grow.

Years before 'hard edge' was part of the with-it gospel, van Heerden had evolved a personal idiom, based on the solid linear definition of biomorphic shapes with flat or patterned surfaces. Now, by the time 'hard edge' has come to town, he has moved on, through meaningful phases, to a much softer and more fluid manner, based on the delicate use of broken and varied lines and subtle transitions and gradations of colour, shading and texture. I refer, in this article, to the drawings in coloured pencil which are being exhibited at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg from May 9 - 24. My impression, when previewing this exhibition, is that van Heerden has made a unique exploration of the powers of this medium.

Working, it seems to me, with thoroughgoing deliberation and design, no short-cuts, no reliance on accident, he has made his pencils speak eloquently of powderiness or metallic shine, light or shadow, opacity or translucence, hardness, softness, fluidity or empty space. The term 'drawing', in fact, will be misleading, since linear effects are at a premium in these compositions of luminosities and textures: it is only when one looks closely at the pictures that have not been subjected to rubbing that one sees they are built of thousands of thread-like lines, as though in a sort of tapestry.

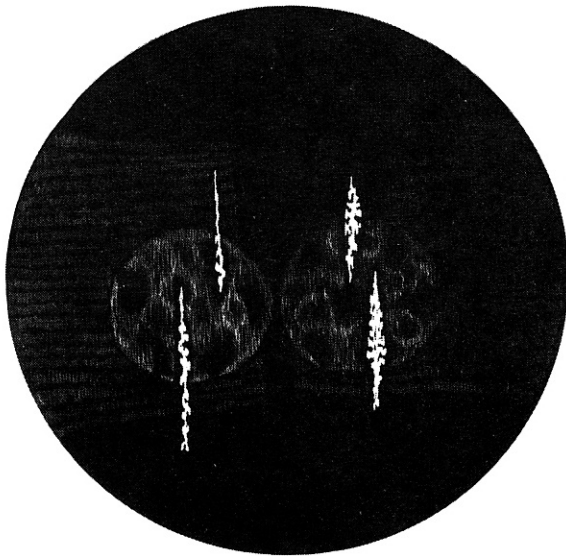
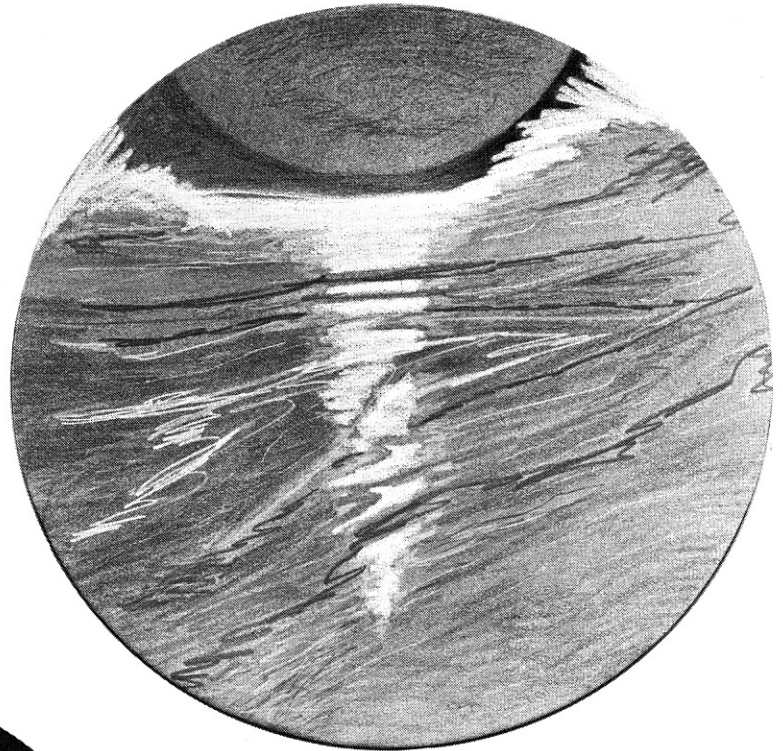
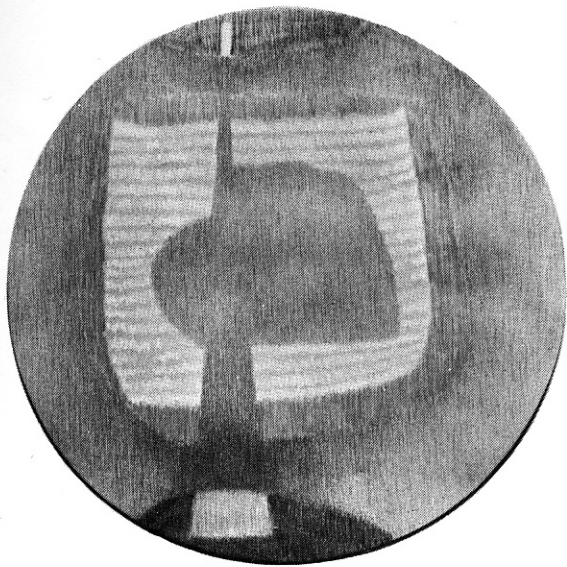


Deliberateness is also expressed in the scrupulous symmetry of several of the compositions, and though symmetry is new to him I think deliberateness is one of the qualities linking van Heerden's present with his earlier style. Another link is the allusions to biomorphic shapes. And another is the magic of the spatial tensions he sets up: between picture-surface and depths there are all sorts of mysteries and ambiguities for the eye to wrestle with – and I find them far more suggestive and rewarding than the aseptic conjurings of op-art.

To stick a while longer with technicalities – for these are abstracts, their essence as elusive to verbal description as music is – the pictures are all circular and fourteen inches in diameter, except for two slightly bigger ones. In some cases the circular frame produces only a peephole effect of enclosure; in others it adumbrates a theme that is taken up in quite a formal fashion by other circles in the composition; in still others, the circle enters the image organically, giving it its meaningful focus, or making of it a sphere over whose autonomously angled surfaces the eye plays, caught by contradictions that bewilder it into revelation.

I think for example of one restrained work in rich earth browns so streaked as to give a sense of moving downward as the eye moves up, but a patch containing white calligraphic markings near the top of the disc seems to hover vastly above one like a cluster of mountain peaks: the vision has travelled downward to arrive high up. In another disc most of the area is filled by a suggestion of rushing shining water while in the top-most sixth intrudes a segment of a grey-blue sphere (or disc of sky) itself lightless yet the apparent source of the light reflected below, and existing in a space of its own in no natural relation to the space occupied by the 'water'.

Several discs are bisected by wedge-shapes some of which can be read either as structures or fissures; in others, solid forms are crossed by two-dimensional strips which contradict the third dimension; and so on.



These visual dramas and mysteries, like the circular shape, and like the various devices that enter the designs – spheres, segments, nimbuses, hearts, filaments, horizons, scales of gradation, forms on the dividing line between organic and constructed objects – relate to the philosophical impetus behind this exhibition. Van Heerden describes the works as his 'visual reactions to the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man*'.

This, of course, is where the artist's daring takes him into danger. He is directing the symbolic force of his work at a specific, esoteric system. If the validity of the pictures were bound up with that symbolism, they could only be of value to people acquainted with Teilhard's thought. My own acquaintance is of the skimpiest, but one of the central notions, I gather, has to do with the recognition that even before amoebic life made its appearance in the physical cosmos, man with all his powers was potential in the 'dead' substance. A segment cut into the sphere of existence to the chaotic heart of the lowest forms of unliving matter would reveal in essence, to the sufficiently perceptive observer, the qualities of the highest extensions of life. The inevitable manifestations of these qualities occur at certain thresholds during the universal processes towards increasing complexity.

Subtle interpretations (and visual 'dramatisations') of these ideas may be read without great difficulty into van Heerden's images. But I value them less as containing a possible commentary on Teilhard's philosophy than as in themselves exemplifying an aspect of existence illuminated by him. In his scheme, the macromolecule represents one of the 'thresholds' of cosmic becoming, where the distinction between living and unliving is blurred. Art, I suggest, marks another 'threshold', the one at which the distinction between material and 'spiritual' falls away for the naked human eye.

Johan van Heerden's drawings have validity by virtue of their autonomous meaningfulness, their originality, chiefly their beauty. These qualities set them on that humanly most significant 'threshold' of the great fulfilment.