

Kenneth Bakker 1926-

Kenneth Bakker was born in Cape Town, studied under Erik Laub-scher and lived for many years in a beach chalet that overlooked the Indian Ocean in the neighbourhood of Simonstown. As a result of chronically imperfect health, his physical mobility was somewhat limited: the view across the ocean from his home was therefore a logical subject on which to base his earlier compositions.

From stylised paintings of marine perspectives, Bakker moved gradually towards the study of the more immediate aspects of the scene. His increased awareness of the close-up view related to a trend in modern painting which, in all probability, was stimulated by the influence of photography.

'Mystique of matière'. By virtue of the enlargement of the image which photography permits, details of texture and of microscopic form were brought to the attention of the modern artist, who responded by discovering a new theme for creative composition, in

elemental matter. That tendency, in its turn, was coupled to the contemporary painter's increased concern with the physical properties and possibilities inherent in his chosen medium — in this case paint. Traditionally the artist's medium is referred to as his *matière*, the French term for 'matter'. Thus the two artistic themes became identified under the single descriptive phrase — 'mystique of matière'.

Bakker's earlier abstract compositions. Bakker's second, abstract phase began with his exploration of the fascinating, ever-altering abstract landscapes sculpted in the beach by the shifting waters. His earliest studies were almost bird's-eye transcriptions of the varied colours, shapes and textures of formations scored by rivulets into the sand. At first he achieved his effects by applying scumbled layers of oil-paint, one upon the other; later, however, by incorporating plastic media he was able to produce a physically textured surface and actually to sculpt the elements of composition in relief.

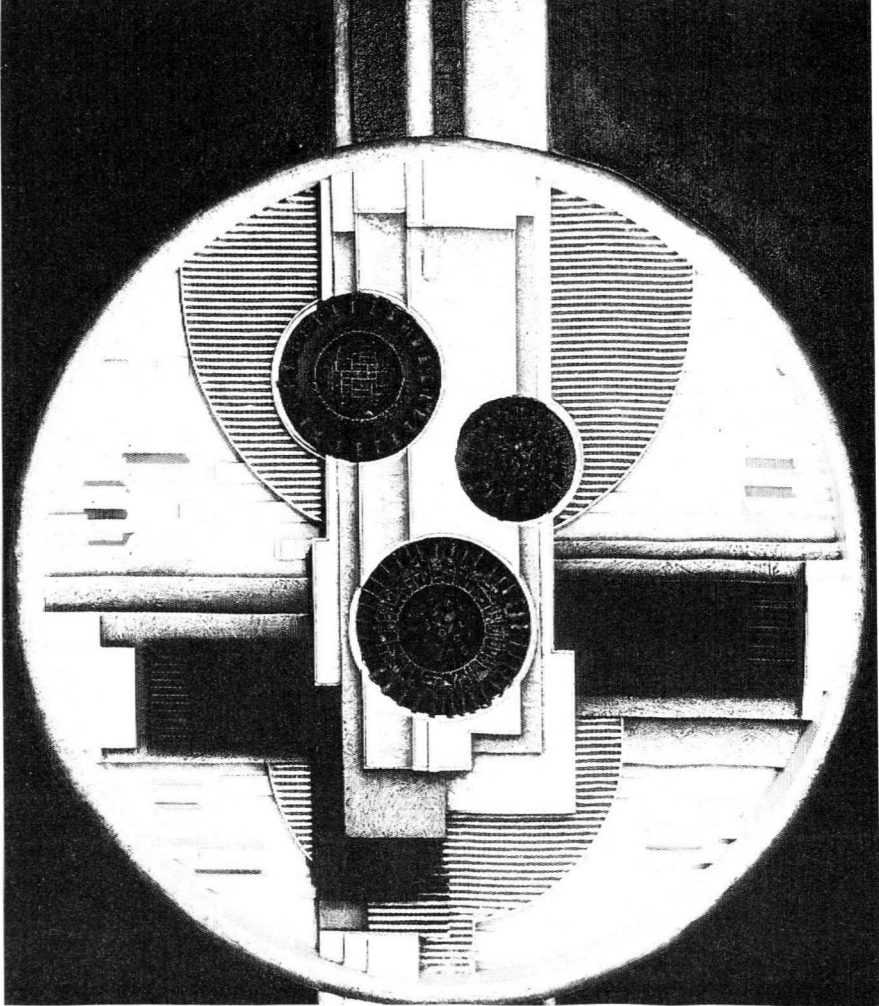
In 1963 Kenneth Bakker created a South African precedent by becoming the first local painter to receive an award at the São Paulo Bienal. He was not yet widely known beyond the Cape and it was only in 1968 that he held his first one-man exhibition in Johannesburg.

Geoniche 31 (Plate 68)

Meanwhile he had progressed beyond his earlier texture studies and was creating abstract forms, which still retained the quality of the metaphysical beach landscapes, but which had become increasingly three-dimensional in character and more precise in structure. The title, *Geoniche*, aptly describes the geophysical allusions in the series of compositions that occupied him during the last years of the sixties. This particular example was included in the South African entry to the São Paulo Bienal of 1969. Others of the period may be seen in the William Humphreys, Hester Rupert and Ann Bryant Art Galleries. The Pretoria Art Museum possesses, among others, an oil composition dating from his earliest abstract phase.

Non-objective works. Although the landscape served as a starting point from which several South African artists moved towards abstract expression, once they arrived at a non-figurative style, they frequently abandoned the perceptual sources of stimulation and began to improvise upon the abstract forms resulting from their earlier interpretative procedures.

By 1970 Kenneth Bakker had ceased to make allusions to the visible landscape and was inventing variations on his own artistic idioms. The earlier, informal shapes have given way to a more mechanistic kind of concept; the rigid structure of *Spherical Forms* seems to have been designed with a view to its ultimate location in and decorative relationship to a modern architectural scheme. The whole nature



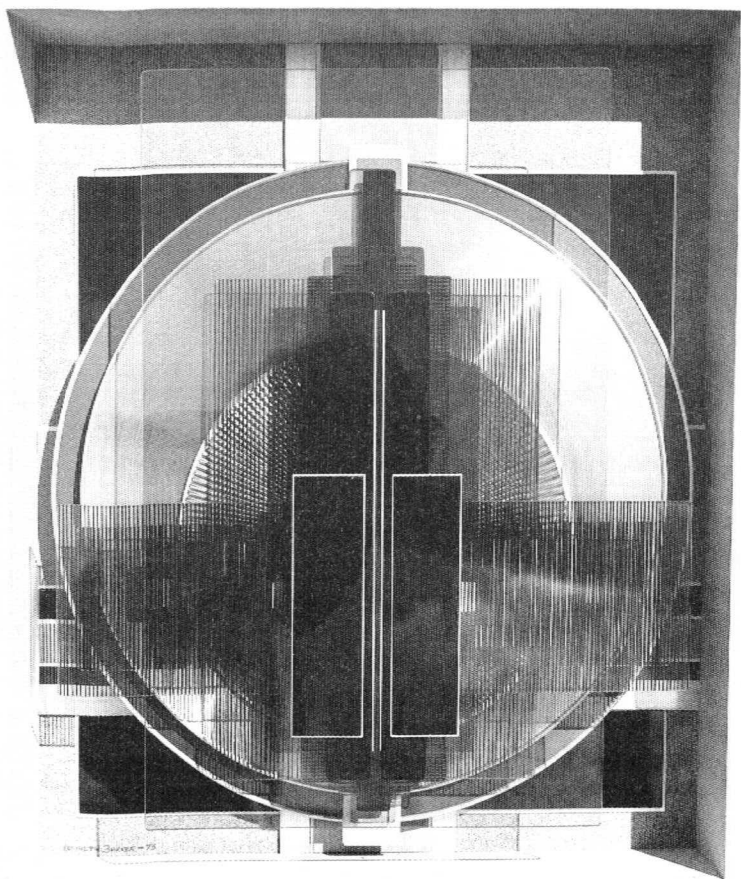
of the work is totally impersonal: only the small sculpted elements within the black bearinglike spheres recall the more subjective qualities of Bakker's previous conceptions.

Both the concept and the method used in *Spherical Forms* are in keeping with certain international artistic trends. One of these aimed to detach the artist from the object he creates and thus to reduce the mystique associated with 'original', or handcrafted, work. The inclination towards anonymous expression was symptomatic of a technological society and is reflected here in the use of formal elements which could be reproduced mechanically. The tendency was also discernible in the field of orthodox two-dimensional painting.

Works of art as 'objects'. Another modern trend, which is alluded to in the reference to 'orthodox' painting, has to do with the physical or technical aspects of the work. One of the most significant

developments in late 20th Century art was the dissolution of the traditional boundaries between painting and sculpture. While the procedure of applying colours to the sculpted object dates back to prehistory, painting per se had traditionally remained a two-dimensional art form. But so ambiguous have the forms since become that it is sometimes advisable to avoid the conventional classifications and to refer to works of art as 'objects', 'constructions', 'assemblages' or 'panels'.

As an object, *Spherical Forms* exists in its own right; it contains no literary allusions, refers to no extrinsic source. However, its genesis can be traced back to Bakker's earliest expression and, despite its mechanical character, it remains consistent with the artist's personal style. Its forms became the source of subsequent developments in Bakker's work. In 1972 the sculpted features were replaced by three-dimensional assemblages of overlapping sheets of perspex. Those elements were scored with geometrical linear designs and complex optical effects resulted from the superimposition of opaque and transparent components.



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