BIG Wednesday
WHATIFTHEWORLD | Cape Town

The public notice for Big Wednesday, which takes its name from a 1970s surfer film, included a short quotation excerpted from the movie. “Stay casual, Barlow,” offers Fly, the film’s narrator. Big Wednesday is the coming-of-age story of three young men who love surfing together. But the lure of money, booze and war spoil their fun. The context of the quote is the night before Barlow leaves for Vietnam. The comment is earnest, but the irony is clear: staying casual in war is impossible. Indeed, this gesture’s impossibility repeats itself in the ostensibly dissimilar context of this other Big Wednesday.

This show is also a coming-of-age story. It presents the work of a host of emerging artists (Linda Stupart, Liam Lynch, Georgina Gratrix amongst others) alongside a sprinkling of more established artists (including James Webb and Tom Cullberg). In line with the inquisition raised by the show’s epigraph there is no explicit theme to it; rather the show presents itself simply as a deft selection of discrete yet similarly refreshing new works. However, its purported insouciance is necessarily undermined by the gallery context’s demand for exegesis.

The constellation of Stuart Bird’s painstakingly crafted enormous wooden penises, positioned near the gallery’s entrance, sets the tongue-in-cheek tone of the show. Each polished up to a magnificent shine, they stand delicately poised on custom-built props. But their proximity to Athi-Patra Ruga’s framed embroideries, which explicitly parody two paintings by Irma Stern, gestures toward the criticality that is imminent in both these playful works. Indeed, this dialectic between work and play is apparent throughout the show. Its viewing is randomly informed by erratic popping bursts of flashes, and subsequent recharging whines. Rowan Smith’s 1/2000-of-a-second Supernova is a hanging mass of camera flashes, spherically mounted, and programmed to fire at random. Unlike the annoying but often-unchecked sound of video artworks in many shows, Smith’s Supernova could be said to interact rather than interrupt. (Only superficially ironical

is the fact that James Webb’s video – which documents a planned audio interruption – is here ideally displayed.) These fleeting “interactions” in the viewing of other works bring to mind the act of their photographing – and thereby the essential bathos of the (photographic, and probably digital) form in which, after the closing of the show, their subsequent viewings will mostly take place. Indeed, what this juxtaposition of diverse media foregrounds is the significance of the specific materiality of the art object to its singular performance.

Thus, despite the show’s professed nonchalance, what makes it a “show” necessitates its failure to exceed significance. And as the original Big Wednesday demonstrates, coming-of-age implies an end, an end of the age of casualness. In this artists are subject to the same fate as Barlow, who said: “It’s time I moved inland, get a job, pay taxes – the whole damn thing”

I wonder how many surfers there were on Big Wednesday. Julia Rosa Clarke and Daniel Lev’s group show at Whatiftheworld? Taking its curatorial impulse from the 1978 surfer film of the same title, described in the press release as “a coming of age film about a group of young surfers poised for success, failure and change in their lives as the world transforms around them,” this show presented as much inconsistency as the pithy summary of the

including work by recent Art South Africa Bright Young Things Stuart Bird, Rowan Smith and New York-based Andrzej Nowicki, there was no limit to the amount of talent on display. Of the dozen and a bit artists selected, some are definitely poised for success, others for failure, some for change. Narrative devices for group exhibitions are awkward things for negotiating meaning. Often dealing in the currency of misapprehension, the metonymic function they serve to fulfill can distract from the individual works at hand. As the viewer searches for the links between the works, hoping to discern the ‘big picture’ that ties them together, the individual
dialogues are lost in the haze left by those rolling breakers. Rowan Smith’s 1/2000-of-a-second Supernova (2008) commanded a dominating presence throughout the gallery. Issuing a collective bang from 17 combined speed lights every couple of minutes, the work presented a violent assault on the unsuspecting viewer. Attempting to simulate the moment of creation when a star is born, this spontaneous burst never failed to surprise, inadvertently subjecting the viewer to its impulses. Stuart Bird’s Traditional Weapons (2008), a selection of 20 carved wooden penises mounted on plated steel stands, offered a similar, yet not so active form of violent address. His fashioned knobberries carry with them a distinctly political subtext that is common to Birds oeuvre, his installation addressing the awkward question of cultural relations in South Africa where gender-based sexual violence has become an uncomfortably common feature in the press. It is unapologetic in its appeal. Politics, although cryptically veiled, is also the subject of artist Dan Halter’s work Zimbabwe Bag (2008). Shrouded in neon light, revealing text in luminous thread that reads “When the bag tears the shoulder gets a rest”, this found object (synonymous with migratory patterns in Southern Africa) powerfully addresses the common issue of immigration from our stricken geographical neighbour, Zimbabwe. Unlike his installation from the MTN New Contemporaries, where the bags where fresh and pristine, the bag Halter chose here was worn and used, adding a distinct corporeality to the piece.

These artists aren’t surfers even if poised for success, failure and change. They are however living in a transforming world, and like the swell of the sea that carries them into rolling breakers, they can only hope to come out unscathed.

Matthew Partridge