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Proposal for "DISLOCATIONS: SOUTH AFRICAN WORKS ON PAPER, 1984-1994"

Exhibition to be held at the Block Gallery, Evanston. April 1994

Our exhibition, "DISLOCATIONS: South African Works on Paper" seeks to take advantage of a new, reflective spirit that has opened up the debates on historiography, politics, and aesthetics. both internationally and in South Africa. The art history of the "new South Africa" is no longer constrained within the confines of the oppositional discourse of recent years that made it well nigh impossible to talk of contradictions, divisions, the power of ethnic self-identification, religion, the culture of migrancy, symbolic space, sexuality, and patriarchal authority over art production, to name but a few neglected terrains. As we move away from the binary logic common amongst many artists, critics, and theorists affiliating themselves to political causes in the 1980s, new possibilities for specialized, interrogative exhibitions have appeared. With the current constitutional negotiations directed at the installation of South Africa's first non-racial government, we are able to look back at what has been won, lost, repressed, and displaced in our most intense decade of struggle.

The exhibition has a dual focus. On the one hand, it seeks to complicate representations of contemporary South African culture in the United States and Europe. The manichean, binary logic of apartheid law and lore made the example of South Africa particularly useful for rhetorical purposes, and South Africa had come to serve as a metaphor in global political discourses. Ongoing violence, however, has challenged utopian representations of the withering away of the apartheid state, demonstrating that the structures of institutional violence, political exploitation, and economic abuse cannot easily be removed. Yet despite the awful conflict that still persists, there are, at present, painstaking attempts to effect a shift from the oppositional culture developed in the 1980s, to the beginnings of a culture of reconstruction. What began with the heady launch of the United Democratic Front in 1984, and the drive towards a "People's Culture" that would impel, enhance, and support the efforts of the popular mass movement, has, in large measure, run its course. There is still, everywhere, talk of a new, democratic national culture that will replace the old. However, in the imagination of artists, musicians, and cultural workers, this future public sphere now appears more varied and contradictory than ever before. It is this new moment in self-conceptualizations that our exhibition hopes to explore.

At the same time, it affords a moment in which to rethink some of the founding assumptions of South African art history. Concentrating on print-making, watercolor, drawing and collage, the exhibition gathers together some 180 works that exemplify the contradictions, fears, dreams and desires, of the last years of apartheid. The exhibition ranges, chronologically, from the mobilization of people's culture in 1984 up to the present. Though a wide variety of artists and media are represented, using paper in a variety of fashions, all of these works are further linked by a set of thematic and theoretical questions, which have to do with the relationship between the distinct but mutually constituted traditions of South African *landscape and portraiture*. "Pure landscape" and "pure portraiture" will provide the outer limits of a meditation on how these two

genres influence and inform each other. We will thus include a range of figural studies that challenge standard conceptions of landscape and portrait, and the differences between them.

Why should we concentrate so specifically on a particular medium, paper, and on an interaction between two genres? First and foremost, given the way South Africa has remade itself over the past decade, the time for generalization is past. Synoptic exhibitions, such as the recent *Art From South Africa* organized by the Oxford MOMA, have mobilized attention around such issues as the relationship between cultural production and work, the democratization of culture, and attempts at a progressive alignment of political art. However, such exhibitions do little to shed light on the specific themes, motives, and ideological contradictions of the works which they display; nor do they adequately theorize the assumptions they reveal, about notions of value, craft, labor, conception and skill. By constructing an extremely focussed and contained exhibition, we hope to encourage several underdeveloped aspects of South African art history: we want to explore the dimensions of possibility of a single medium, paper, as well as to theorize the relationship between figure and ground (portrait and landscape) in a political and historical situation which has, for generations, *legislated* space and subjectivity.

I: Of Landscape

In order to more fully recognize the usefulness of an enquiry into portraiture and landscape in South Africa, it is necessary to understand that South African establishment art has suffered under the tyranny of landscape throughout the twentieth century. This is not an issue confined to the examining of hegemonic tendencies within a single genre: landscape, the land represented as conventionally ordered, is inextricably linked to the staging of the colonial subject in her or his non-metropolitan home. Such an insight is, in large part, generated in dialogue with theorists like Raymond Williams, John Barrell, and, more recently, W.J.T. Mitchell and Ann Bermingham, whose significant work has enabled us to see the politics of landscape in terms of displacement and the management of ideological contradiction. No comparable analysis of South Africa has yet been attempted.

What will become increasingly clear, in this exhibition and the scholarly articles in the catalogue, is that landscape has been part of the anxiety of colonial influence, and crucial in enabling the liberal subject to remake Africa as her or his home. Consider the following statement about Hugo Naudé, one of South Africa's most important modernist painters:

> Imagine a parched area suddenly nurtured by a flow of water from a borehole - say, the first borehole in a country where such an innovation was unknown. There was little art of any description in South Africa on Naudé's return from Paris and Munich. . . . But Naudé was a great man with an all-embracing character which enabled him to work in what was then a state of isolation and to to express what he had learnt overseas. All this he moulded into

> his own personal style in landscape and portraiture, developed in loneliness but sustained by his broad humanity and dedication (Jeppe 63).

Naudè's battle is perceived as a lone one: a generous soul finds a home, situates itself, not in relation to other such souls, but in relation to a geographic space. His own artistic output is rhetorically inscribed as an act upon the land. It is as a "flow of water from a borehole." Such stagings of the artist, in isolated lyric context, are dominant in poetry and painting into the 1970s. It is only when the artistic establishment engaged with black intellectuals and artists, particularly from the 1970s onwards, that liberal representations of the individual in the landscape were challenged.

The tradition of "pure" landscape art, never, of course, represented a unified voice or style. There are, for example, tendencies toward abstract representation amongst Namibian artists, whose desert geography encouraged an emphasis on vastness and openness. The so-called "Grahamstown group" is identified with a singularly different treatment of landscape: the Grahamstown style is both expressive and representational, and formally is characterized by large blocks of color and the use of heavy line. In the 1980s, landscape entered a stage of representational crisis, and this has generated interesting departures in technique. Noel Hodnett, for example, whose visual logic is still strongly influenced by the Grahamstown group, has begun to incorporate iconographic elements that are ironic, even satiric, into his landscapes.

What, then, impels this "representational crisis" of the 1980s? There has been a very significant turn in the past decade, towards affiliated production and what we will refer to as the "historical indexing" of landscape (in which the Africanization, and, more particularly, the South Africanization, of context is signalled by use of certain iconographic codes). Landscape art, which had by then come to be a sign of apolitical aesthetic engagement, found itself under considerable pressure of History. At its most radical, post-modernist landscape took on allegorical and citational elements. So, for instance, Hilary Graham's *The Tragic Death of Hintsa* takes Eastern Cape bushveld and converts it into narrative with cartoon-like simplification; the surfaces of Penny Siopis's landscapes consist of a myriad intertexts in collage as she produces a new form of historiography. Part of our project consists of looking at such works in order to examine the various ways in which the landscape traditions in South Africa have responded to and been reconstituted around the imperative to figure history. The prevalence of apocalyptic landscapes in South African, and, in particular, Afrikaner art is, in large part, one strategy adopted in the flight from such historicizing pressures. Many of these works move into a post-historical domain where they can bring forth nightmares.

Given the alternative aesthetic and philosophic traditions, as well as the history of geographic legislation in South Africa, it is not surprising that representations of landscape by black artists generate visions which are strikingly different from those produced within, or in response to, the liberal colonial tradition. Whereas the affective, privatized, or existential aspects of landscape presented problems for white artists in the 1980s, many black artists were more explicit about what is effaced in the tradition: that is, that landscape is about settlement and power. One

elementary fact about the black artist's relationship to landscape is that many of the artists live effectively between places, because of the pervasiveness of migrancy, one of the most profound consequences of apartheid's labor-management strategies.

A received orthodoxy about black art in the 1980s is that it employs direct social realism. We trust that, by looking at works from the points of view of landscape and portraiture, we can open up new ways of theorizing such representations. Quite clearly, the major tendencies amongst black artists in the 1980s are toward urban landscape and the depiction of proletarianization. Simon Nkwadipo's *Botshabelo* is characteristic of this sort of view: the work depicts crowded informal settlements, a sea of shacks, where rural and agnatic links are signalled by the ubiquitous cattle. There is a community identity despite overcrowding and impoverishment. Other works use space as a kind of cognitive mapping, in which the artist-migrant locates his or her identity by grounding it in a representation of local geography. There are pieces which locate the viewer in relation to a maze of signifiers that make up the experience of informal settlements on the edge of highway interchanges. (Interestingly, a similar conception of urban geography is apparent in the work of the writer Mtutuzeli Matshoba, who describes the landscape as a "living map" of invisible connections and historical association that exist *beneath* the naturalized exterior.) Another element suggested in such representations of roadsigns and streetmaps, is the interrelationship between landscape and literacy. Thomas Kgope's *The Road to Pretoria* uses signs as objects: they are no longer transparent, but have instead congealed into landscape elements. Finally, the extreme case of this ideogrammatical treatment of the sign is, perhaps, the work of "Chicken Man," an illiterate, Zulu-speaking artist who creates English-language road signs as hieroglyphs. The word itself is treated iconographically, suggesting an alienation both from the languages of administration and public space.

It is in this broad scheme that our exhibition attempts to define landscape. Our hope is to reassess the conception of landscape in South Africa: to see it, on one hand, as an aesthetic ordering of the environment, but also to see it as the context for contests over space, labor, surveillance, bodies.

II: Of Portraits

Landscape requires a body, whether directly represented, displaced, or implied. We will, in our essay, be addressing the *historical* division of the two domains of landscape and portrait in the English tradition, in order to theorize what it is that landscape art and portraiture assume about identity, possession and vision. The modern European categories of "pure landscape," and "pure portraiture," when applied to contemporary South African art, have been considered to be at the outside edge of what is politically acceptable. Just as South African landscape artists have had to situate themselves in relation to a colonial legacy, so too portraitists are haunted by the sense that there is something illicit in those faces and figures in their work that speak of individual subjectivity. In its earliest form, of course, portraiture has a specific relationship to patronage; for the modern portrait, however, the structures of power between sitter and artist have become extremely complex. For example, the tendency toward ethnographic study in certain works

empowers the artist, instrumentalizes the subject. Inevitably, the exchange between artist and sitter in South Africa often reminds of these earlier ethnographic forms of representation - what Mary Louise Pratt has called the "manners and customs" portrait. In fact, a painting of a landscape empowers its owner more than would a portrait, because, in our post-modern, intensely visual world, we identify with the point of view of the spectator, not the spectacle. All of these relations come into play in complex ways, as South African artists negotiate new conceptions of the individual subject.

Because in South Africa the idea of the individual subject has been denigrated, as part of the attack on liberal individualism since the 1960s, artists dealing in figures and portraits have felt under considerable pressure to place them within some recognizable historical context. Portraits in the eighties are prone always to that "historical indexing" which we noted in landscape art. Contextual signifiers, visual and verbal cues are used to signal the affiliation of the subject. Hundreds of minor works gesture towards affiliation through the inclusion of maps of Africa, political clothing, slogans, clenched fists. The artist Sue Williamson has constructed an entire iconographic repertoire by deploying political signifiers as integers within her portraits of women in the anti-apartheid movement. Terry Kurgan is another artist who is expressly confronting this pressure within her own work: while many of her subjects are trade unionists, she resists the indexing of political affiliation in her lithographs and this tension has led her, in many pieces, to insert her portraits into a vacant space, with little or no concession to contextualization. Cues are at times internal to the work, sometimes "pasted onto" the work through deliberate, often ostentatious, titles. Wendy Lovell Greene's group portrait, *Miscegenation* resituates itself as a comment on racial fear because of the title, and because the incendiary glow of gelatinized red color takes on symbolic meaning in the painting. The instability of the representation of character in this study is largely dependant on the title to suggest at the same time the anxiety over the instability of racial identity. Greene's painting is useful here because it also raises the question of how contemporary portraiture defines and delimits itself. What, for example, is the conceptual boundary that distinguishes a portrait from a figure study? If, loosely, a portrait is a work which is centrally about the representation of an individual identity, can a work such as *Miscegenation*, which is about the very idea of such identity, usefully be categorized as a portrait? What happens to portraiture under pressure from contemporary theoretical debates around the instability of subjectivity and identity?

We want to take the opportunity afforded by this exhibition to consider two other issues. We want to look at the relationship between the work of art and the sites of artistic production in South Africa. Such sites may range from personal, highly gendered spaces, to art collectives, to religious terrains. Furthermore, in our consideration of cross-generic influences, we want also to examine the influences of various other media on the production of works on paper. These media include the more usual influential forms such as sculpture, but also unexpected ones such as beadwork and ceramics. To demonstrate these connections, we will at times juxtapose works against pieces making use of other mediums: Bonnie Ntshalintshali's luminous serigraph *Elijah* will be exhibited with her painted clay sculpture of the same scene; Tito Zungu's intricate pen landscapes will placed in the context of the beadwork tradition.

Finally, too, we will engage with current debates about conceptions of national identity, landscape and the body such as have been generated by and in response to Benedict Anderson's thesis on *Imagined Communities*. For Anderson, the idea of a national consciousness is necessary for the political possibilities of nation building. Similar issues have been raised by Frederic Jameson's recent arguments about Third World national allegories. We will consider the ways in which landscape and portrait, as geography and body, become the fields for new representations of statehood and national identity.

The relationship of portrait to landscape is, in many ways, suggestive of the perennial aesthetic problematic of relations of figure and ground, subject and context, image and frame. With our dual inquiry, into recent experiments in landscape and portraiture, we hope to engage with both the particular circumstances of art production in South Africa, but at the same time, to use the works to engage with broader theoretical and artistic concerns. In its emphasis on landscape and portraiture, the exhibition, further, is not only addressing the logic of generic categories, but is also considers the consequences of the pressure on South African artists to demonstrate affiliation. We are interested in the implications of such pressure for the very definition of received notions of genre.

III: Catalogue Publication

The Block Gallery, in association with *TriQuarterly* magazine, intends to publish a scholarly catalogue that enables the documentation of the exhibition. Moreover, with the inclusion in this volume of a number of articles on contemporary South African printmaking, our exhibition will contribute towards a redefinition of contemporary art historical writing. In addition to the main catalogue, we hope also to produce a shorter, less unwieldy guide to the exhibition. This visitor's guide will provide details about all of the works and introduce viewers to major thematic connections in the collection.

a. Main Catalogue

We imagine the main exhibition catalogue as a significant scholarly publication of about 250 pages, in softcover A4 format, printed on acid free paper, containing some color plates as well as black and white illustrations of all of the works.

As we presently conceive of it, the main catalogue will consist of a short foreword, followed by acknowledgements, a list of lenders, a key to acronyms, a map, and the curator's introductory essay of about twenty five pages. This will be followed by a handful of color plates which call attention to highlights of the exhibition, then the main catalogue entries for each of the works, in the order of their appearance in the exhibition. Each entry will consist of the following information:

* name of the artist, followed by date and place of birth
* title and date of the work
* medium, and dimension in centimeters
* collection source

This documentary section of the catalogue will be followed by a series of scholarly essays that call attention to important themes in the exhibition, attempt to intervene in the received art historical interpretations of the development of landscape and portraiture, and actively seek to break with previous historiographical and art historical methods. We are considering commissioning several articles, and have tentatively identified the following.

i) an article on the changing material conditions for printmaking in the 1980s and 1990s. This will be a survey article on the politics of the medium, and on different sites of production. Possible author: Colin Richards, University of the Witwatersrand.

ii) An article on the historiography of South African landscape. Possible author: David Bunn.

iii) An article on violence and the experience of apartheid space, looking at the experience of surveillance, township overcrowding, and migrancy. Possible author: Njabulo Ndebele, University of the Western Cape.

iv) An anthropological view of the construction of symbolic space. Possible author: Jean Comaroff from the University of Chicago.

v) A piece on the idea of the portrait in South African history. Possible author: Jane Taylor.

vi) An historical essay on the discourse around land ownership, the delineation of borders, and boundaries. Possible author: Isabel Hofmeyer, University of the Witwatersrand.

vii) An article on leisure and the logic of social space. Possible author: Farieda Kahn, South African Botanical Society, Cape Town; and Simon Goudie, University of Cape Town.

iii) A brief selection of new South African short stories and poems that explore the relationship between figure and ground, or landscape and politics. We would approach some of South Africa's better known writers like Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, and J. M. Coetzee, as well as important new voices like Gcina Mhlope, Zoe Wicomb, and Ivan Vladislavic.

This essay section of the catalogue extends the concepts of "work on paper" to include writing. Yet a further extension of the concept will be found in the last two items of the book: two collective photo essays by well known South African photographers like Peter Magubane, Santu Mofekeng, Ingrid Hudson, David Goldblatt, and a number of others. For the first essay, we will ask photographers to explore the relationship between the tyranny of space and the ability of

individuals to embellish personal spaces in extraordinary, visionary, or political ways. (We expect to find some surprising insights into the space of mine compounds, informal squatter camps, village huts, white suburban houses, the Zion churches, police and railway stations, and so on.) Secondly, we will ask photographers to select one of their favorite portraits from the last decade, and to comment briefly on it; we will also encourage photographers to produce new works specially for the exhibition.

b. Visitor's Guide

The visitor's guide will be short, to the point, and designed to be carried around the exhibition. It will offer an abbreviated version of the editor's introduction, and detailed documentation (including black and white photographs) of all the works, in the order of their appearance. We also hope to include four separate commentaries, page-long inserts that reflect on the radical new insights it is possible to draw from the exhibition. We would choose to comment on topics such as the following:

* migrancy and transnational cultural influence in Southern Africa;
* art collectives, community organizations, and "People's Culture";
* the role of artists in exile;
* the history of specific mediums like linocut

The guide will conclude with a program of events associated with the exhibition. Such events might include:

1. a series of lectures and seminars, hosted in conjunction with the Program of African Studies, Northwestern University.
2. a performance by the handspring puppet company.
3. contemporary film and video.
4. an artist in residence, to produce an on-site work.
5. dance and music performances: "Amapondo" and the "Gereformeerde Blues Band"