

Artthrob Archive: Issue No. 63, November 2002

Outpost 11 at the University of Stellenbosch Art Gallery
by Sue Williamson

Well, the curators called it 'Outpost 11'. Should the rest of the country refer to Durban as the 'last outpost of the British Empire', as magazine feature writers are wont to do, there's usually an immediate injured denial. So let's hear it from co-curator Virginia MacKenny: "Outpost 11, rather than being a beleaguered camp under siege in the badlands, is a place that marks a point of departure for necessary forays into the terrain of uncertainty. Questions rather than assertions might indicate such tentative sorties into the unknown, and the works on this exhibition engage with erosion of certitude, lack of identifiability, ambiguity, intertextuality and dissolution of expected boundaries."

Ambiguity. To start, then with Andries Botha, an artist who in two works addresses those crucial frontier issues - who labours for who, and the reclamation and redistribution of land. The smaller and more engaging piece is a maquette called *Acre: Imperial Unit of Land Measurement*. In what seems to be a watchtower or a mineshaft of sorts, a little light flickers on and a whirring suggests industrial activity in a semi translucent chamber below which a square of tiny workers houses are packed close together. The larger piece is entitled *Surface Area is Equal to Land Multiplied by Memory Divided by Time*. Within a metal construction, a bladder of animal hide suspended above a block of salt drips water onto the block. The drips are recorded by a microphone, somewhat clumsily covered in plastic, and by standing close to the piece one can hear the sound of the dripping magnified. The catalogue tells us this "instrument" measures the battle over land/soil in the history of this country. A little too crudely put together, one didn't feel that the piece was fully resolved.

Erosion of certitude. Thando Mama's video *(Un)hea(r)d* doesn't move from his face, as in a low voice he sibilantly expresses his feelings, his difficulties, as an African man. "The history of an African man is that of forced silence, of confinement to an impossible space. No one speaks for him any more ♦ those who speak for him find themselves surrounded by the fear of 'blackness'". Made on night shot mode in a darkened room, Mama's soft hiss, hugely dilated pupils and pallid skin add to the feeling that one is listening to a spirit.

Lack of identifiability. Carol Anne Gainer's two minute looped video *Sleeping* is shot in even tighter close up. The gentle rise and fall of a hairy surface reveals itself to be ♦ the belly of a sleeping animal. Oh. The piece gains more resonance from the work nearby, Clive Hardwick's *Severance*, two lightboxed images of the artist's naked thorax, laid out on the floor, like a corpse, showing a long vertical surgical scar. One is reminded of Andres Serrano's morgue series. Hardwick completes his installation with large blowups on the wall of three dead leaves. Oval shaped, the crumpled appearance and the centre and side veins of the leaves echo the scar and ribs of the thorax. Dissolution of expected boundaries. Isabella Qautrocchi hangs veils of grids of soil and grass, of images imposed on diaphanous supports with nails and tacks - masculine materials used to painstakingly "embroider" images in a long labour of creativity.

Intertextuality. In one of the strongest works on the show, Greg Streak shows *Public Speaker*, a piece which looks like the funnel of one of those ships which used to steam into the harbour, bringing news to Durban from the old country. Raking backwards at a slight angle, the

pristinely made white structure is marked with a row of tiny knobs attached to wires❖ which in turn are linked to microphones placed throughout the exhibition space. Leaning over the funnel one becomes privy to snatches of unguarded conversation. Amusing, but also unpleasantly reminiscent of the time when all activists believed their phones to be tapped, and important conversations were carried out at the bottom of the garden. Langa Magwa shows three 'books'. Large, the size of encyclopaedias or state records, the books are made of the materials of Africa, hide and vellum, and in making them unable to be opened, merely the shape of books, Magwa questions the received knowledge by which this country was ruled.

Ingrid Winterbach mines the Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman story again for its layers of exploitation, drawing charcoal images on old maps. It is probably time to leave Baartman to rest in her own grave, now she is back, though Winterbach, who is also a writer, provides an evocative piece about Baartman in the catalogue entitled *Exile*.

MacKenny's co-curator was Storm Janse van Rensburg of Durban's NSA. The two are commended for bringing this show to the Western Cape and providing a vigorous artistic exchange.

Opening: October 10, 6pm

Closing: November 6

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