



Silence

Nieu-Bethesda

Clockwise from top left: Greg Streak, *Drain*, 2002. Installation detail. Bharti Kher, *Echo*, 2002. Installation view. Paul Edmunds, *Shallow Water Sediment*, 2002. Detail

Both artmaking and the experience of art in the environs of Nieu-Bethesda must always contend with the exigencies of a spectacular landscape. At *Silence*, this year's instalment of the !Xoe site-specific biennial, they must also respond to an overtly thematic twinning relationship with *Violence*, at the NSA in Durban. It's a difficult brief.

But not impossible. Bharti Kher's *Echo* is a pair of red vinyl swivel chairs ("for times when angels pass over you") perched on a hilltop, with an immense landscape dropping away in every direction. Kher has a good feel for the pleasures of melodrama, and it seems she has tarried with sentiments more appropriate to a landscape painter or cinematographer without losing her wit. If there is an infinite conversation between the occupants of those two precariously mounted chairs, it's not about the ineluctable modality of the visible.

Where Kher provides a nudge in the ribs to ideas of perspective and communication, Greg Streak and Marco Paulo Rolla are interested in the drama of embodied being and exposure. Rolla's videotaped performances, which feature his naked form being flung into the frame and slowly covered by funerary mounds of stones or leaves, are simple – even slight – histories of an endless play between shelter and exposure, distinct existence and dissolution. That said, Rolla, like Kher, has produced work that would make sense in almost any sparse and dramatic landscape.

Streak's piece, *Drain*, is denser, and more responsive

to the particularities of its site; it's also not seduced by endless horizontal perspectives of the Karoo. A two-minute walk through a field of battered sisal plants leads to the wall of a dry reservoir. The crumbling cement circle frames a steel collar rusted in the manner of Richard Serra: it is the rim of a drain pipe, disappearing into infinite blackness – an illusion achieved with the help of a little coal dust. The metaphoric work performed by this installation is obvious enough in an exhausted corner of a dry farm, but what makes it really compelling is its formal control, and its suggestion of an emptying beyond anything imagined by the tourists who come to Nieu-Bethesda to cleanse their grubby urban souls.

One such is Argentinian photographer Adriana Lestido. Her *New Baptism*, at the Ibis Art Centre, is a slideshow tracing the journey from Durban. The sequence culminates in the camel yard of the Owl House, where Helen Martins' etiolated pilgrims stretch out their arms toward the rising sun. Despite some gorgeous images, the effect is a crushingly literal plod toward "spiritual serenity" that wouldn't be out of place among the new age books on sale across the road at the coffee shop.

A more sophisticated take on Martins' outcast position in the village that now relies on her legacy for survival, and the blindness which apparently drove her to suicide, is available in Carol Gainer's *Blind Spot Test*. Opposite the Owl House Gainer has installed three Perspex sheets at street level. On the left and right these read "passion" and "desire" respectively, while in the centre is the blind spot test itself. Instructions are provided, and viewers who look at the work in the pre-

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scribed fashion are made conscious of a lacuna in their visual field. The theme is picked up at the Ibis with a large photographic detail from one of Martins' painted windows, in deep, retinal red. The blind spot test is a fun parlour game, but Gainer has too much to say, or she has hewed too closely to the thematic demands of silence/violence; either way the result is a kind of easy, moralising phenomenology.

Predictably, perhaps, Paul Edmunds is at the opposite end of the scale. All over Nieu-Bethesda are slate flagstones with a deep and regular pattern of undulating ridges; they are fossil remnants of a time when much of the valley was under water, wave forms preserved by the falling ash of a volcanic eruption. Edmunds has identified 15 sites where these stones occur, mapped them and scraped them clean. In the Ibis gallery he has reproduced the pattern in finely crushed sediment, and left the red-handled rake propped against the wall.

Ordinarily Edmunds works at a glacier's pace to model a parallel natural history out of throwaway materials. Given only a few weeks for this project, he has ceded the work to the even more implacable patience of geology. The result is not only a walking tour of the town's culverts and ditches, or a meditation on patience in the shadow of disaster, but a brief, incisive essay on the artist's own work.

The most successful work in Nieu-Bethesda this year is not exhausted by the thematic and conceptual demands of *Silence/Violence*, or overwhelmed by the scale and drama of the landscape. It is also characterised to a greater or lesser degree by a careful response to the very difficult idea of place, not something that can necessarily be achieved in a flying visit from Durban. For all its infelicities, however, *Silence/Violence* suggests that !Xoe continues to serve as an important venue for grappling with the complicated notion of site-specificity.

Nic Dawes

Violence

NSA Gallery | Durban

Violence, curated by Greg Streak at the NSA Gallery in Durban, brings together the work of eight local and international artists, including Streak, for the companion exhibition to *Silence* and the second session of *Pulse*. Where the first *Pulse* project – *Open Circuit* (2000) – focused on the technologies of cultural exchange and transference, *Violence/Silence* asked artists to explore the diversity of association with the prescribed themes "rather than to prescribe meaning in relation to political circumstance only". If abbreviated, *Violence/Silence* neatly produces the acronym "vs".

South Africa boasts some of the most impressive crime statistics in the world, so it's difficult to think about violence without thinking crime. But violence in its various guises seems to be a current and pervasive global pastime, making this project not just timeous but an excellent exercise in international relations.



Marco Paulo Rolla,
Breakfast, 2002,
performance at NSA
Gallery, Durban

From the design and form of this two-part exhibition, *Violence* (Durban) and *Silence* (Nieu-Bethesda) are two landmarks or points of connection, both separated and bound by a lot more than six degrees of history, experience, individual Weltanschauung, political, sexual or artistic identity. In a show like this, one could make much of how similar or different, successful or unsuccessful, the links are between artists' responses to each situation.

In *Scene of the Crime*, art critic and curator Ralph Rugoff makes a strong case for a trend in post-war artistic practice that warrants what he calls "a forensic reading". Within this paradigm, artworks become artefacts, collections of clues that require a level of speculation to put together, suggesting the emergence of a particular social gaze. *Violence* is an exhibition that falls quite neatly into Rugoff's proposed "forensic aesthetic", not least in its encouragement that viewers make active connections between what is physically present in Durban and what is evident from Nieu-Bethesda. The latter exhibition is represented as a video mounted in the gallery's staircase between the upper and lower levels.

Streak has produced one of the more literally "violent" works on the exhibition, titled *Witness*. He has selected a fragment of the eponymously titled film in which a black man slits the throat of a white man while a small child looks on. Streak repeatedly fed this sequence out of the edit system and back in again, losing a generation of quality each time until he was left with a series of oversaturated colour stains. With the degradation of image quality go "detail", "truth" and "identity". It's a horribly quiet visual poem about the action of retrieving and retelling events.