

# **SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING**

**1848-2008**

## **A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS**

My dissertation consists of this text and corresponding PowerPoint presentations.

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**Supervision by Professor Michael Godby**

**A Minor dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of the degree of Masters in Historical Studies.**

**Faculty of Humanities**

**University of Cape Town**

**2010**

### **Declaration**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date: 20 May 2010

# **SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING 1848-2008: A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS**



Priska Newham



# **SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING 1848-2008: A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS**



PowerPoint Presentations by Priska Newham



## **Abstract**

**Title: South African Landscape Painting 1848-2008 - A Handbook for Teachers**

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My dissertation looks at South African landscape painting with the requirements of high school art teachers in mind. It has been written in consultation with Professor Michael Godby, at the University of Cape Town, the curator of the landscape exhibition, to be held at the Old Town House in Cape Town from 9 June to 11 September 2010. The handbook is designed to be distributed to educators at the Ibhathane Project Workshop organised to coincide with the exhibition.

This is a teaching resource for Visual Culture Studies for Grades 10 to 12. It focuses on an analysis of artists in the school curriculum who have engaged with the genre in diverse and interesting ways. The handbook has been designed to be user-friendly in the classroom and all images discussed in the text are available on corresponding **PowerPoint presentations**.

The first two chapters form the foundation to an analysis of 20<sup>th</sup> Century artists in Chapters Three and Four. Chapter One provides a concise, general introduction to conventions, styles and media used in landscape painting. Chapter Two analyses paintings by Thomas Bowler (1813 - 1869) and Thomas Baines (1820 - 1875), two of the first British artists to document life at the Cape of Good Hope's British Colony.

Chapters Three and Four are closely based on the requirements of the National Senior Certificate curriculum for Grade 12. Titles have been chosen to provide a clear link between the handbook and the subject framework. Chapter Three, Section One combines Theme 2: Search for an African identity and Theme 8: Art and the spiritual realm of the Grade 12 subject framework. It looks at how Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886 - 1957), Maggie Laubser (1886 - 1973) and Cecil Skotnes (1926 - 2009) moved away from naturalism to give expression to their African identity and spirituality.

Chapter Three, Section Two corresponds to Theme 1 of the curriculum. It analyses the art of Gladys Mgudlandlu (1925-1979) and Gerard Bhengu (1912-2001), who were among the first black artists to engage with the western tradition of landscape painting in South Africa.

Chapter Three, Section Three focuses on Theme 3: Art and Politics – Resistance Art in South Africa. During Apartheid, William Kentridge (b.1955) and Penny Siopis (b.1961) engaged with the landscape genre to draw attention to political and social injustices in South Africa.

Chapter Four looks at the Land Art of Strijdom van der Merwe (b.1961), who fits into Theme 7: Multimedia – alternative, contemporary and popular art forms in South Africa.

The curriculum expects learners to respond to and analyse artworks in relation to their cultural, social, political and historical contexts. South African landscape representations from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century lend themselves to such an in-depth analysis. Landscape paintings depict what was most contested in South Africa's past history of colonisation and Apartheid politics – the ownership and distribution of land.

# **SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING 1848-2008: A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS**



**An Ibhabhathane Project**  
**Visual Arts Learning and Teaching Support**  
**Material for the National Senior Certificate**  
Priska Newham



**Cover Pictures:**

Gladys Mgudlandlu, Landscape (1961)

Maggie Laubser, Landscape with yellow bushes in a ploughed field (n.d.)

Strijdom van der Merwe, Red cotton wrapped around burnt reeds (n.d.)

Thomas Baines, Devil's cataract (1862)

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This text was submitted as a minor dissertation in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town, 2010. It was supervised by Professor Michael Godby, who is the curator of the landscape exhibition *The Lie of the Land*, held at the Old Town House in Cape Town from 9 June to 11 September 2010. *South African Landscape Painting 1848-2008: A Handbook for Teachers* was written in consultation with Jill Joubert and designed for teachers attending The Ibhathathane Project workshops organised to coincide with the exhibition.

Editing by Romi Bryden

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1848-2008: A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS**



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**Visual Arts Learning and Teaching Support**  
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Priska Newham

*CONTENTS PAGE:*

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>HOW TO USE THIS TEXT.....</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>INTRODUCTION TO SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING.....</b>                                  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>CHAPTER 1:</b>   |           |
| <b>DIFFERENT MEDIA AND ARTISTIC CONVENTIONS USED BY SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTERS.....</b> | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>1.1 Different media used in landscape representations.....</b>                             | <b>7</b>  |
| • The nature of a painting.....   | 7         |
| • Sketching.....  | 8         |
| • Watercolour painting.....   | 9         |
| • Oil painting.....   | 10        |
| • Lithography.....  | 11        |
| • Relief printing: Woodcut and linocut.....   | 11        |
| • Mixed media.....  | 13        |
| <b>1.2 Artistic conventions used by 19<sup>th</sup> Century landscape painters.....</b>       | <b>14</b> |
| • 19 <sup>th</sup> century naturalistic landscape painting.....                               | 14        |
| • Naturalistic effects of space and light.....  | 15        |
| • The human figure in landscape painting.....   | 17        |
| <b>1.3 Ideas about 20<sup>th</sup> Century landscape painting.....</b>                        | <b>18</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 2:</b>   |           |
| <b>BRITISH VALUES AND CONVENTIONS IN THE WORKS OF THOMAS BOWLER AND THOMAS BAINES.....</b>    | <b>21</b> |
| <b>2.1 The English tradition of the picturesque.....</b>                                      | <b>21</b> |
| <b>2.2 The tradition of the sublime.....</b>  | <b>23</b> |
| <b>2.3 Thomas Bowler (1813 - 1869).....</b>   | <b>24</b> |
| <b>2.4 Thomas Baines (1820 - 1875).....</b>   | <b>27</b> |

## **CHAPTER 3:**

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>IDEAS ABOUT 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN SOUTH AFRICA.....</b> | <b>34</b> |
|--|-----------|

### **20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ART, SECTION 1:**

#### **PIERNEEF, LAUBSER AND SKOTNES: THE SEARCH FOR AN AFRICAN**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPES.....</b> | <b>34</b> |
|---|-----------|

- Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886 - 1957)..... 36
- Maggie Laubser (1886 – 1973)..... 44
- Cecil Skotnes (1926 - 2009)..... 48

### **20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ART, SECTION 2:**

#### **BHENGU AND MGUDLANDLU: LANDSCAPES BY BLACK ARTISTS AND**

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>THEIR SEARCH FOR AN AFRICAN IDENTITY.....</b> | <b>55</b> |
|--|-----------|

- Gerard Bhengu (1910-1990)..... 55
- Gladys Mgudlandlu (1925 - 1979)..... 63

### **20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ART, SECTION 3:**

#### **SIOPIS AND KENTRIDGE: RESISTANCE ART AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN**

|                                 |           |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.....</b> | <b>72</b> |
|---------------------------------|-----------|

- Penny Siopis (b.1953)..... 72
- William Kentridge (b.1955)..... 78

## **CHAPTER 4:**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>VAN DER MERWE: ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF WORKING WITH LANDSCAPE.....</b> | <b>83</b> |
|---|-----------|

- Land Art: Strijdom van der Merwe (b.1961)..... 82

|                         |           |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| <b>CONCLUSION:.....</b> | <b>89</b> |
|-------------------------|-----------|

- Brett Murray (b.1961) ..... 88

|                           |           |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY:.....</b> | <b>92</b> |
|---------------------------|-----------|

## HOW TO USE THIS TEXT

As an art teacher I am always on the lookout for good quality teaching resources and it is my sincere hope that art teachers will find the following text accessible, informative and easily applicable in the class room. The inspiration for this text came from Professor Michael Godby, at the University of Cape Town, the curator of the landscape exhibition, to be held at the Old Town House in Cape Town from 9 June to 11 September 2010. I was fortunate that Professor Godby supervised my masters' dissertation in History of Art. When it became apparent that the Ibhabhathane Project planned several educational activities around Professor Godby's landscape exhibition, including a workshop for art teachers, he suggested that I write my dissertation on South African landscape painting with the requirements of High School teachers in mind.

What emerged, in consultation with Professor Godby and Jill Joubert from the Ibhabhathane Project, is a teaching resource for Visual Culture Studies from Grades 10 to 12. It looks at the landscape genre within the context of the current school curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Except for the artists discussed in Chapter Two, artists have been selected from the Grade 12 subject framework. This text is not intended to be a historical account of South African landscape art in general but a focused analysis of artists who have engaged with the genre in diverse and interesting ways.

This text is designed to be user-friendly in the classroom and all images discussed in the text are made available on **PowerPoint presentations**. Each slide is placed and numbered in relation to the text. The artists are arranged in historical chronology to draw attention to a sense of artistic development within the genre of landscape. Each section focuses on a different era, from colonial times to democracy and analyses artists within their historical contexts and the artistic conventions of their time.

As teachers we have to accept that we cannot, within the span of any educational program, help learners acquire all that they must know.<sup>2</sup> It is up to the teacher to decide what we want our learners to understand.<sup>3</sup> In my teaching I like to start a new

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<sup>1</sup> (LO4 Visual Culture Studies)

<sup>2</sup> Harrington, H., 'Teaching and Knowing'. *Journal of Teacher Education*. May-June 1994. Vol. 45. No. 3. p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Harrington, H., 'Teaching and Knowing', p. 192.

theme by focusing on correct art terminology. Providing learners with a basic introduction to the theme before delving into a deeper analysis of specific artists and artworks, is also helpful. Chapter One provides such a concise and general introduction to conventions, styles and media used in South African landscape painting. Teachers are encouraged to start with this chapter to set the foundation for more complex analysis of art works in subsequent chapters.

Chapters Two to Four are intended to assist teachers in analysing landscape paintings with more knowledge and depth. Chapters are approached in relation to current significant readings on landscape painting and teachers may want to engage with some texts directly. For easy access the references for each chapter and each section are listed numerically at the bottom of each page. All sources are referred to alphabetically in the bibliography. Many of the books listed in the bibliography would also be suitable for the school library.

Chapter Two traces the beginnings of landscape art in South Africa and analyses paintings by two British artists who travelled to and settled in the Cape when the Cape formed part of the British colonial system. This chapter is appropriate for Grade 10 and 11 because it forms the foundation for an analysis of modern artists in Chapter Three and Four, in that relevant issues specific to 19<sup>th</sup> Century South African landscape painting are raised.

Chapter Three and Four are based on the requirements of the National Senior Certificate curriculum for Grade 12 and titles have been chosen to provide a clear link between the curriculum and this text. The introductions to each chapter are important in that they create an historical and theoretical context for the analysis of individual artists and paintings. The text focuses on different aspects of landscape painting in relation to specific works. Teachers need to help learners realise that arguments made in relation to certain artworks can often be adapted and expanded upon when analysing similar works.

This text offers factual knowledge and inspiration without claiming to be conclusive. It has been written with the intention of generating further discussion in the classroom. Dialogue around artworks allows learners to become aware of what they have in

common, as well as their unique qualities as individuals. Understanding and self-knowledge often emerge through an engagement with others who think differently.<sup>4</sup> The 'other' may be a teacher or a classmate, however, learners are often exposed to different interpretations of the world by engaging in the understanding of subject matter that embodies a new perspective, different to their own.<sup>5</sup> This enables learners to see that opinions and interpretations also have moral, social and political consequences.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of South African landscape representation shows that these artworks not only echo but perpetuate moral, social and political ideals.

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<sup>4</sup> Harrington, H., 'Teaching and Knowing', p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> Harrington, H., 'Teaching and Knowing', p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> Harrington, H., 'Teaching and Knowing', p. 192.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

*The landscape is not a pre-existing thing in itself. It is made into a landscape, that is, into a humanly meaningful space, by the living which takes place within it.* J. Hillis Miller <sup>1</sup>

Most South African landscape paintings show spaces which the artist has travelled through and/or lived in. Occasionally an artist will paint a landscape scene based on a verbal or written report or a landscape of his or her imagination. Often a painting is the end result of a process that involves the artist's direct experience of a place, combined with personal memories and ideas about it. By exploring and depicting South African landscapes, artists draw attention to the varied topographical features of South Africa and the way people live within the landscape. Landscape paintings show 'humanly meaningful' space because the space depicted is inevitably inhabited or claimed for human purpose in some way.

Landscape painting has always formed an integral part of Western art, but was only accepted as an independent genre from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Before that, landscapes often featured as background settings in religious, mythological and secular paintings that were primarily figurative. John Constable, a significant 18<sup>th</sup> century English landscape artist, was accused of creating paintings that were lacking in meaning, because simply depicting a landscape did not seem relevant enough to members of the Royal Academy.<sup>2</sup> South Africa has a strong tradition of landscape painting starting with the first European explorers who depicted what they observed on their travels.

The curriculum expects learners to respond to and analyse artworks in relation to their cultural, social and historical contexts. As you will discover, South African landscape representations from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries lend themselves to such an in-depth analysis. Landscape paintings depict what was most contested in South

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, J. *Washed with Sun*. University of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg (2008) p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Lynton, N. *Looking into Paintings*. The Open University, Walton Hall (1985) p. 179-182.



Africa's past history of colonisation and Apartheid politics: the ownership and the distribution of land.

Let's start by looking at the word 'landscape' and how landscape painting has evolved into a medium capable of expressing ideological values. In common usage the word 'landscape' describes nature itself and, within the Visual Arts, 'landscape' is a genre that takes nature or the land as its subject matter. Things become complicated once we look at how the two definitions influence one another. Ideas about the land and expectations of what a landscape painting should look like tend to overlap. This means that the genre of landscape is not only recognisable by its subject matter (which is landscape), but also by the 'typical strategies employed in the organisation of that content'.<sup>3</sup> Naturalistic landscape paintings follow these conventional strategies more closely than 20<sup>th</sup> Century landscape representations.

Bunn says that, by and large, landscape paintings depict 'a form of distant observation', often, an 'elevated view from a position that is bracketed by foliage'.<sup>4</sup> More significantly, landscape representations tend to be 'an imitation of prior views' and 'previous representations'.<sup>5</sup> Bunn refers to the fact that artists often imitate each other, in terms of composition and overall organisation of subject matter. In other words, artists draw on established artistic traditions and conventions within the genre of landscape to depict their observations convincingly. Nicholas Green calls these established conventions 'the vocabularies of looking capable of bringing nature into visibility as a mode of social activity'.<sup>6</sup>

The perception that landscape representations function within a continuously self-referential context of broader principles and beliefs has led to significant new art historical writing in British landscape theory over the past two decades.<sup>7</sup> These writings suggest that landscape is, in the main, 'a medium for expressing value', in

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<sup>3</sup> This paragraph is based on a text by David Bunn, in which he examines how representations of nature were used to manipulate public opinion in the years between the first Land Act and World War 2 in South Africa: Bunn, D. 'Relocations: Landscape Theory, South African landscape practice, and the transmission of political value'. *Pre Texts*, Vol. 4 No. 2, Summer 1993, p. 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> Bunn D., 'Relocations: Landscape Theory', p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Bunn D., 'Relocations: Landscape Theory', p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Bunn D., 'Relocations: Landscape Theory', p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Bunn D., 'Relocations: Landscape Theory', p. 44.

that landscapes play a unique symbolic role through which forms of class, race, and gender supremacy may be expressed and transmitted.<sup>8</sup>

It is important that teachers consider the radical implications of recent landscape theory and analyse landscape paintings with this in mind.<sup>9</sup> South African landscape paintings tell us about the values and attitudes of artists and their patrons, and in this they also reflect broader ideologies of their time.

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<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, W.J.T. quoted in Bunn, 'Relocations: Landscape Theory', p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> The revolution in the study of British landscape took place over the last two decades, begun by Raymond Williams and John Barrell, and continued by Ronald Paulson, Walter Hipple, Jr., James Turner, Dora Wiebenson, Ian Maclaren, Simon Pugh, Anne Bermingham, and others. It finally produced a type of symptomatic reading aimed at uncovering the class view of landscape to which the painted image gave expression: Bunn, D., 'Relocations: Landscape Theory', p. 44.

# **CHAPTER 1: DIFFERENT MEDIA AND ARTISTIC CONVENTIONS USED BY SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTERS**

This chapter provides an introduction to and overview of different media, techniques and stylistic conventions used by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century landscape painters in South Africa. This chapter could also function as an introduction to working with landscapes in a practical project.

## **1.1 DIFFERENT MEDIA USED IN LANDSCAPE REPRESENTATIONS**

Having knowledge of different media is essential when discussing landscape paintings, because an artist's choice of medium influences his/her working method as well as the outcome and the size of a work. Artists base their choice of media on artistic conventions, the intended use and expression of the artwork, as well as the availability and the cost of art materials.

### **The Nature of a Painting**

To start with teachers could consider the artificial nature of a painting. A painting is a flat, manufactured object with paint applied to one side Figure 1.1.<sup>1</sup> Usually paint is applied to a sheet of paper, a piece of board or a stretched canvas. More significantly, a painting is an artistic image. In naturalistic landscape paintings the artist strives to overcome the limitations of the flat support. Drawing on knowledge of perspective and shading, the artist creates the illusion of a receding, three-dimensional space. In contrast, 20<sup>th</sup> Century art often intentionally emphasises the two-dimensional, flat nature of the painting as an object.

It is important to remember that a painting is usually intended to be looked at directly, ideally in a home or a well-lit gallery space. Subtle nuances of colour and delicate effects of light and shade are central to landscape painting and can often only be fully appreciated when standing in front of a painting. The impact of a painting's size and the texture of the artist's paint application is often reduced or lost in a colour reproduction or a PowerPoint presentation. Although every attempt has been made

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<sup>1</sup> Lynton, N. *Looking into Paintings*. The Open University, Walton Hall (1985) p. 184.

to provide good quality images, you are encouraged to view original works whenever possible.<sup>2</sup>

## Sketching

Sketching is an artist's way of retaining information, generating ideas and working out compositions. A sketch can be in any medium. 19<sup>th</sup> Century artists used sketches as the basis for paintings to be later executed in a studio. In landscape painting a sketch is often a rapidly executed, on the spot record of first impressions and significant detail. Thomas Baines made watercolour, oil-paint and pencil sketches on his travels in Southern Africa. The leaping water looking NE (1862) Figure 1.2 is a preparatory study for his oil painting Devil's Cataract (1862) Figure 1.3 that he later executed in a makeshift studio. Baines' interest in scientific observation is evident in his detailed rendering of nature.

Baines also made sketches to document British scientific expeditions and on these expeditions he recorded new discoveries of Africa's hidden wealth: animals, plants, people and views of the land. Even though photography was invented in 1839, it was not used as a general practice during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. European expeditions into Africa preferred to have an artist present because photographic techniques were cumbersome and often unreliable.<sup>3</sup> Now days many artists use photography to help them record and memorise the details and impressions of a place or a scene.

Another artist who made extensive use of sketching was Cecil Skotnes. Watercolour sketch on paper for the Brandberg Wall series (1988) Figure 1.4 is one of his many watercolour sketches capturing Kalahari rock formations and colour contrasts. Skotnes initially explored the landscape by producing numerous watercolour sketches on site in the Kalahari Desert. He then reworked his designs several times in his studio before deciding on his final compositions for the Brandberg series. He photographed the sketches and cut the photos up to create photomontages such as Photomontage of landscape elements for the Brandberg Wall series (1988-91) Figure 1.5. These interim compositions were sometimes painted in oil, as seen

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<sup>2</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into paintings*, p. 184-217.

<sup>3</sup> Liebhammer, N. *Art from the African Continent*, Heinemann, Sandton (2005) p. 23.

in Oil sketch for the Brandberg Wall series (1988-91) Figure 1.6 and then subjected to further restructuring via photomontage and painting. In this way, Skotnes arrived at compositions that owed “as much to the artist’s sense of appropriate design as to actual forms in nature,” says Godby.<sup>4</sup> Skotnes’ working process offers an excellent starting point for a practical school project that explores abstraction within the landscape genre.

## **Watercolour Painting**

Watercolour is made with water-soluble Gum Arabic and requires an absorbent base, usually paper. It is more susceptible to fading and damage than is oil painting.<sup>5</sup> The fact that watercolour is fast-drying contributed to its popularity in landscape painting. The medium of watercolour is ideally suited for quick, small outdoor sketches but it has also long been used for fully resolved paintings.

Thomas Bowler painted almost exclusively in watercolour. Bowler’s On the Beach near the Military Hospital (1853) Figure 1.7 shows his atmospheric and detailed approach. Watercolour became the medium of choice for many naturalistic 19<sup>th</sup> Century British landscape artists.<sup>6</sup> Technically improved watercolours contributed to the trend in providing richer colouring and stronger tonal contrasts than were previously possible.<sup>7</sup> As a teacher, I frequently take learners outside to draw and paint directly from nature. I sometimes encourage learners to capture the essence of what they see by filling a whole page within the duration of a lesson.

George Pemba (1912-2001) was a skilled watercolourist. Korsten (c.1930) Figure 1.8 depicts his birth place, Korsten Village, a township in Port Elizabeth. Due to poverty and to a lack of opportunity for black artists prior to and during apartheid,

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<sup>4</sup> Godby M., ‘A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series and Other Representations of the South African landscape by Cecil Skotnes’ in Harmsen, F. (ed.). *Cecil Skotnes*, published for the 1996 Cecil Skotnes Retrospective exhibition at the South African National Gallery (1996), p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Lynton N., *Looking into paintings*, p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> According to Carruthers and Arnold, the concept of the picturesque had technical as well as visual implication in that it “helped to shift watercolour as a medium from a role where it was used to tint topographical drawings to one in which it was applied broadly and boldly to paper in washes and gestural marks.” (The tradition of the ‘picturesque’ is discussed on page 22 of this text): Carruthers J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, Fernwood Press, Vlaeberg (1995) p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Carruthers J. & Arnold M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 94.

Pemba was long classified as a township artist of little significance. Although Pemba's work did not fetch a high price and he remained poor, he continued to paint until well into his eighties. With the coming of Democracy his work was finally publicly exhibited and given more recognition. A major exhibition at the National Gallery in 1996 and an honorary doctorate from the University of Port Elizabeth have helped to establish Pemba's deserved place as an important 20<sup>th</sup> Century South African artist.<sup>8</sup> Pemba has been included here, because he was the focus of a previous Ibhahathane Project teacher's workshop.<sup>9</sup> His work will not be discussed any further in this text.

### **Oil Painting**

Oil paint uses the same pigments as watercolour but is made with oil (traditionally linseed oil), into a paste that is slow drying and therefore more flexible a medium than waterbased paints. Oil paint is also very durable if applied and dried correctly. It requires a non-absorbent base, traditionally a primed wood or canvas. Oil paint was developed during the Renaissance to facilitate the accurate blending of colour and tone desirable in naturalistic painting. The skilful blending of colours helps to create a convincing landscape in Baines' painting, Outspan under Mocheerie Tree between Koobie and Lake Ngami (1861) Figure 1.9.

Oil paint is very versatile. It can be applied in layered washes or as a paste straight from the tube (this is called impasto). When applied generously, oil paint will retain the texture produced by a brush or palette knife.<sup>10</sup> In my choice of works by Penny Siopis she uses the impasto technique. In Piling Wreckage upon Wreckage (1989) Figure 1.10 Siopis has sculptured oil paint into relief-like shapes, especially in the foreground. The textured tangibility of the paint encourages an emotive rather than an intellectual response to the image as a whole. The works selected by Siopis examine the relationship between art and politics and are classified as Resistance Art.

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<sup>8</sup> Feinberg, B. George Milwa Mnyaluza Pemba (1912-2001). Department of Arts and Culture p.1.

<sup>9</sup> The Ibhahathane Project teacher's workshop: Feinberg, B. George Milwa Mnyaluza Pemba.

<sup>10</sup> Chilvers, I. (ed.). *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*. Oxford University Press, New York (2003) p. 294.

## Lithography

Lithography is a graphic printing method based on the antipathy between oil and water. The lithographer first transfers the original design with an oil-based crayon onto a stone (or metal) plate. Before the stone is 'inked up' with an oil-based printing ink, it is chemically fixed and treated with water to ensure that the oil-based printing ink attaches itself only to the drawn image. Prints are often reproduced by using a printing press. Colour lithography uses a different stone for each ink. Many lithographs are hand-coloured.<sup>11</sup>

Lithographs made the reproduction of paintings possible. Prior to commercial photography, lithographs were a relatively inexpensive and lucrative way of disseminating images. Thomas Bowler became well-known to a broader public due to his lithographs known as the 'Bowler Prints'. A total of 63 different lithograph prints were made by trained lithographers that copied and printed his paintings for distribution in India, Brittan and other parts of the world.<sup>12</sup> An example is Bowler's King William's Town, a lithograph by F. Jones, published in The Kafir Wars and British Settlers in South Africa in 1864 Figure 1.11. The name of the lithographer is usually acknowledged on the print. Many of Thomas Baines' paintings were also distributed as lithographs.

## Relief printing: Woodcut and linocut

The practice of woodcut and linocut are similar in that they are both relief printing techniques. Relief printing played an important part in early modern art, in that it became the technique of choice for many artists. A woodcut or linocut demanded a simplified, graphic approach since complex natural phenomena had to be translated by the artists into clearly defined shapes or recognisable patterns. Modern artists were influenced by forms or imagery derived from the art of non-European societies, such as carved African masks, Japanese prints and Oceanic art, which they admired for its expressive potential. The influence of these cultures on artists of European

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<sup>11</sup> Chilvers I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 346-347.

<sup>12</sup> Godby, M. 'Chapter 5, Ideas of 'home' in South African landscape: paintings by Thomas Bowler and Thomas Baines', p. 84-90, Barringer, T., Quilley, G. & Fordham, D. (ed.). *Art and the British Empire*. Manchester University Press, Manchester/ New York (2007) p. 85.

origin and training is called 'primitivism'.<sup>13</sup> These societies were labeled as 'primitive' by Europeans because they judged them as technologically and culturally inferior compared to Europe. The term 'primitivism' can promote misleading perceptions about certain cultures.<sup>14</sup>

Linocut was developed as an alternative to woodcut, one of the earliest printing methods. The term linocut is applied to the technique of making a print by carving a design into a thick piece of linoleum, conventionally used as a floor covering. Compared to wood, linoleum is a soft and grain-less material that is relatively easy to carve.<sup>1</sup> It is an inexpensive medium that is well suited to colour prints. Colours can be added by way of reduction linocut or a number of blocks can be used, one for each colour. Erich Heckel (1883-1970), a German Expressionist, was probably the first major European artist to use the technique of linocut in 1903. Other early practitioners were Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). Linocut is a very suitable medium for High Schools. Learners enjoy its expressive potential and benefit from designing and thinking about images in a 'reversed', simplified manner.<sup>15</sup>

Table Mountain (1924) Figure 1.12 is a linocut. It dates from the year Maggie Laubser returned permanently to South Africa.<sup>16</sup> She would have arrived by sea at Cape Town harbour. "Laubser brought an explicit Expressionist style directly from Germany to South Africa" and "in this she became part of a new generation of South African artists seeking to move beyond naturalistic descriptions of the Western Cape" says Foster.<sup>17</sup> The blatant lack of naturalism of this image perplexed a South African public used to naturalistic pictures of Table Mountain. The influence of Expressionism and 'primitivism' is apparent in Laubser's choice of medium and in her intentionally crude and simplified design. No attempt has been made to create illusionary depth or a sense of linear perspective. Instead Laubser has carved out simplified shapes intended to capture her spontaneous impression of Cape Town.

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<sup>13</sup> Chilvers I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 476.

<sup>14</sup> Liebhammer, N., *Art from the African Continent*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Linoleum can be expensive. In my classroom I use "Marley" floor tiles (a product of Floorworx). Marley tiles can be bought at hardware stores. They are cheaper and just as easy to carve.

<sup>16</sup> Berman, E. *Art and Artists of South Africa*, A. A. Balkema, Cape Town / Rotterdam (1983) p. 251.

<sup>17</sup> Foster, J. *Washed with Sun*, University of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg (2008) p. 180.



Laubser has purposely left out details not essential to her message. A sense of playful rhythm is achieved by the way in which the birds seem to echo the shapes of the waves.

Twin Peaks (1921) Figure 1.13 is a black relief print on white paper by Jacob Hendrik Pierneef. Carved lines and textures create simplified recognisable shapes, depicting a Cape Dutch farmhouse below an impressive mountain range. He worked in linocut and woodcut throughout his long and successful career as a landscape artist and according to Berman, Pierneef's stylised paintings were influenced by his linear approach to relief printing.<sup>18</sup> Pierneef initially achieved general acclaim because of his public murals but became better known to a wide audience for his easel paintings.

Cecil Skotnes developed a unique approach to woodcut inspired by expressive and decorative carvings found in African art. Skotnes' Mountain Landscape (1975) Figure 1.14 is a colour woodcut. In a colour woodcut each colour has to be printed separately. This print was made a year before Skotnes received South Africa's highest official award of the time, the South African Academy of Arts and Science's Medal of Honour, in 1976.<sup>19</sup>

### **Mixed media**

Mixed media works combine the use of media that were traditionally used separately. A mixed media approach allows artists to experiment with unconventional visual effects. In Landscape (1969) Figure 1.15 Cecil Skotnes has combined wood carving and painting. By painting on an incised panel, his stylised image appears in low relief.<sup>20</sup> The first engraved panels that Skotnes exhibited were the negative forms from which he made his prints. Subsequently, Skotnes began to develop the panels as independent artworks by adding paint and colour to the initial woodcut engraving.

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<sup>18</sup> Berman, E. *Art and Artists of South Africa*, A. A. p. 329.

<sup>19</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 424-428.

<sup>20</sup> Relief sculpture is a term applied to sculptures that project from a background surface.

Gladys Mgudlandlu's Landscape (1960) Figure 1.16 shows a combination of watercolour and gouache on paper. Mgudlandlu was a self-taught painter who drew inspiration from Xhosa mural painting.<sup>21</sup> This work was painted prior to her first exhibition in 1961. Throughout her life Mgudlandlu struggled to make ends meet and often could not afford to buy art materials. This mixed media painting may have resulted from working with materials available to her at the time.<sup>22</sup>

In Patience on a Monument – A History Painting (1988) Figure 1.17 Penny Siopis has made use of collage and oil on canvas to create the impression of a very busy and convoluted space. The surface is built up with cuttings from history books and thickly applied paint.

In his choice of charcoal Kentridge is following in the footsteps of inter-World War artists, such as Otto Dix (1891-1969) and Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) who established charcoal as a medium of social commentary.<sup>23</sup> Although Kentridge mainly works in tones of black and white, he often incorporates traces of bright colour. In Landscape with Pipe (1988) Figure 1.18 he has introduced brown pastel marks to describe the soil.

Artists work in different media based on personal preference and availability of art materials. Artists also choose a style in which to express their observations. Naturalism was the preferred approach of 19<sup>th</sup> Century landscape painters in South Africa.

## 1.2 ARTISTIC CONVENTIONS USED BY 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY LANDSCAPE PAINTERS

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century Naturalistic Landscape Painting

Most 19<sup>th</sup> Century landscape paintings of South Africa reflect a naturalistic approach. Naturalism can be defined as an approach to art in which the artist intends to

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<sup>21</sup> Mgudlandlu was born and raised in the Pedi District near Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape.

<sup>22</sup> Miles, E. *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night; The Art of Gladys Mgudlandlu*, Fernwood Press and Johannesburg Art Gallery (2002) p. 7 and 22.

<sup>23</sup> Benezra, N., 'William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection', p. 14.

represent the world in an empirically observed, rather than in a stylised or conceptualised manner.<sup>24</sup> Naturalism is not incompatible with idealisation: a painting can be naturalistic and idealistic if it depicts a measure of natural beauty remote from the everyday world. An example of this is Bowler's Table Bay from the Beach Blueberg (1851) Figure 1.19. 19<sup>th</sup> Century landscape paintings were often described as 'picturesque', implying that the landscape has been depicted in a particularly pleasing way.<sup>25</sup> Although minute detail is often part of 19<sup>th</sup> Century naturalism, it is not essential to naturalistic landscape painting.<sup>26</sup>

### **Naturalistic Effects of Space and Light**

A convincing illusion of space is central to naturalistic landscape painting. It is vital that learners understand the basic principles of this approach, as it still guides conventions within the genre today.

Bowler created a convincing recession of natural space by composing his landscapes in horizontal bands that diminish in colour intensity and detail. In Table Bay from the Beach Blueberg (1851) each band is occupied by figures and objects, such as rocks, shrubs and boats that decrease in size and detail. The strategic placing of figures and objects creates overlaps between adjacent planes and helps to create a more fluid sense of perspective. The shrub on the right-hand side is the most detailed element in the painting and cuts across all planes.

Bowler made use of a technique known as aerial perspective. Like linear perspective, aerial perspective is a technique that was already used during the Renaissance.<sup>27</sup> It is based on the observation that what is closer to you appears more brightly coloured and clearly defined, in comparison to what is further away. Aerial perspective works on the basis that objects appear to diminish in size and look increasingly less detailed, paler and bluer the further away they are from the viewer. In Table Bay from the Beach Blueberg (1851) the foreground plane is intentionally warm in colour, while the furthestmost details of the mountain range are rendered in a pale blue and vague outlines. The middle distance has been carefully considered to help achieve

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<sup>24</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 413.

<sup>25</sup> The term "picturesque" is defined more fully on page 22 of this text.

<sup>26</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 413.

<sup>27</sup> Coleman, W. *Art 10 Textbook* p. 5.7.

an even transition from foreground to background. By using warm colours in the foreground and cool and de-saturated colours in the background, Bowler achieved a convincing sense of space in his paintings.

Lynton points out that even though we use the word 'landscape', the "majority of landscape paintings are 50 percent about the sky."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the sky often takes up a large area of the painting and tends to dominate the mood and overall expression of many landscape paintings. In fact many landscapes could be described as 'cloudscapes'. In 1821, John Constable (1776 -1837), a British artist observed, "The sky is the source of light in nature, and governs everything."<sup>29</sup> He believed that the way the sky was rendered was of utmost importance in that it dictated the pattern and quality of light on the land.

Recording an observed light effect is fraught with difficulty for the painter, given the constantly changing nature of light. A naturalistic painter can attempt to capture a moment in time, for example a sunset as in Table Bay from the Beach Blueberg (1851) Figure 1.19. Alternatively painters recreate light effects from memory or based on previous paintings by themselves or others.<sup>30</sup>

Lynton maintains that, "any discussion of light in landscape necessarily leads to a discussion of emotional impact."<sup>31</sup> Artists can influence the emotional impact of their paintings by intentionally exaggerating or dulling natural colours and sky formations.<sup>32</sup> To enhance the meaning of their work artist's often create artificial or unnatural light effects, as in Baines' Eastern Portion of Victoria Falls (1863), Figure 1.20.<sup>33</sup> Baines has arranged the light into a perfect double circle to draw attention to the European explorer standing on the edge of the falls, seemingly directing the flow of water.

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<sup>28</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 211.

<sup>31</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 211.

<sup>32</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 211.

<sup>33</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 212.

Mathematical solutions based on linear perspective work well in street and town scenes such as Thomas Baines' Potter's Row, Hill Street, Grahamstown (1848) Figure 1.21 and Church Square Grahamstown (1849) Figure 1.22, but are of little help in paintings with broad horizons.<sup>34</sup> The basic principles of linear perspective were first laid down by the Renaissance artist Alberti in his book *De Pictura* (1435). The artist looks at a scene from one fixed viewpoint, as if through the viewfinder of a camera. The artist then assumes a vanishing point on the horizon, towards which all horizontal lines converge, hence imposing a grid-like structure of diminishing size that helps to create the illusion that the pictorial space is receding into depth.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Human Figure in Landscape Painting**

Many naturalistic landscapes show human figures. Lynton points out, "human figures and human activity tend to be a focus of attention, and because there is an instinctive identification with them they influence our reading of and interpretation of landscapes."<sup>36</sup> The small human figures in Bowler's Table Bay from the Beach Blueberg (1851) Figure 1.19 create human interest and draw attention to the beach as a public space. Furthermore, the strategically placed figures enhance the paintings sense of scale and perspective. This is called staffage. The term applies to small figures and animals in a painting that are not essential to the subject but are used to animate the composition.<sup>37</sup>

Human figures can provide information about the clothing and lifestyle of a particular period. This can be seen in Bowler's lithograph King William's Town (1864) Figure 1.11 where fashionable figures have been included in the foreground. Figures often indicate what kind of people occupied a certain space and in what way they made use of the land. It is significant that Bowler represents the settlers in King William's Town (1864) as elegant people looking across the land towards the city they have built. Their positioning within the painting suggests that they are in charge of the land they occupy. In contrast, Table Bay from the Beach Blueberg (1851)

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<sup>34</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 192.

<sup>35</sup> Coleman, W., *Art 10 Textbook*. Mind Action Series, Allcopy Publishers, Sanlamhof, p. 5.6.

<sup>36</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 217.

<sup>37</sup> Clivers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 564.

Figure 1.1.9 depicts Malay people in their role as fishermen. Their positioning makes them part of the landscape and emphasises their trade and socioeconomic role rather than their individuality.

### 1.3 IDEAS ABOUT 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Many learners find 20<sup>th</sup> Century modern art difficult to appreciate because it is built on entirely different principles to 19<sup>th</sup> Century naturalism. Art teachers are in the privileged position of facilitating an understanding of modern South African landscape artists and modern art in general.

Modern art is often misunderstood because it tends to fall short of naturalistic skills. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century artists in Europe and South Africa intentionally challenged and changed the rules that had governed naturalistic painting for centuries. This initially led to severe criticism from the public and art critics alike. Maggie Laubser, for example, who became a famous South African landscape painter, was initially insulted and shunned for her expressionistic, non-naturalistic approach. In works such as Onrus Lagoon (1927-32) Figure 1.23 and Lagoon near Hermanus (n.d) Figure 1.24 Laubser was inspired by new ideas about art in Europe that encouraged painters to arrange shapes and colours in non-naturalistic ways. Early modern movements in Europe, such as Expressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism used nature as a starting point, but made a conscious effort to create landscapes that differed from the natural world and signalled a departure from established conventions and meanings within the genre.<sup>38</sup> Henri Matisse's *Notes of a Painter* (1908) was very influential on many 20<sup>th</sup> Century painters. He said, "I cannot copy nature in a servile way: I must interpret nature and submit it to the spirit of the picture."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 234.

<sup>39</sup> Lynton, N., *Looking into Paintings*, p. 234.

Abstract Art is art that does not depict recognisable objects but instead is made up of forms and colours that often exist purely for their own expressive sake.<sup>40</sup> The term is usually used to describe modern art that does not adhere to traditional European notions of art as an imitation of nature.<sup>41</sup> In the Brandberg Wall series (1992). Figure 1.25 Skotnes has simplified natural appearances to the degree that formal qualities of the works, such as form and colour, start to exist independently of its initial subject matter, which is landscape.<sup>42</sup>

Many landscapes by South African painters show a combination of naturalistic and simplified or abstract approaches. On the one hand, painters wish to convey their passionate response to nature and well-loved places. This requires that the image remains recognisable. On the other hand, artists are acutely aware of the painting as an independent object, with painted marks on a flat surface and want to communicate their focus on the art-making process as an artistic activity in itself. To understand 20<sup>th</sup> Century landscapes, we need to keep these two considerations in mind.<sup>43</sup>

The artworks of land artist Strijdom van der Merwe (b.1961) exists as temporary modifications of the landscape or site itself. In Using a broom to clear lines and circles on the early morning dew (Detail) (2008) Figure 1.26 he uses the landscape as a 'canvas'. As indicated in the title, Van der Merwe has replaced the traditional painter's brush with a broom. The 'painted' shapes are intentionally simple and create a temporary man-made intervention within the setting.

Van der Merwe's Land Art can be linked to Conceptual Art. Conceptual Art is art in which the idea or ideas that a work represents are considered to be its essential component and the finished product. If a finished product exists at all, it is regarded primarily as a form of documentation rather than an artefact.<sup>44</sup> Van der Merwe's works usually only exist for a brief period of time, in a space inaccessible to most

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<sup>40</sup> Also called non-objective, non-representational and non-figurative art.

<sup>41</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 135.

people. Van der Merwe takes great care to document his work because most people will only see his photographs and not the actual work itself.

This chapter has provided an overview of South African artists who engaged with the landscape genre in diverse ways. It has focused on the use of different painting media and printing techniques and highlighted some of the fundamental working methods and conventions that artists use to render the landscape in a convincing manner. This knowledge will assist learners in their art theory, as well as in their practical work.

Learners need to understand the fundamental differences between 19<sup>th</sup> Century naturalistic landscape painting and 20<sup>th</sup> Century approaches to art. Learners who know the theoretical and practical differences between naturalistic, simplified, abstract and conceptual modes of art can express themselves more successfully in theory and in practice. It is important that teachers expose learners to a variety of approaches and ways of working within the genre, instead of promoting a single approach at the expense of other approaches. A broad knowledge base will enable learners to more easily form their own opinions and preferences.

By the end of this chapter learners will be equipped with the basic tools to start analysing specific artists in more depth. Visual Culture Studies, like other fields of knowledge, has its own terminology that allows people who analyse art to express themselves in a specific and accurate manner. The curriculum expects learners to analyse artworks by using the correct terminology because it is important that learners express their observations clearly and confidently.



## CHAPTER 2: BRITISH VALUES AND CONVENTIONS IN THE WORKS OF THOMAS BOWLER AND THOMAS BAINES

British explorers, naturalists and travellers were among the first to depict the South African landscape.<sup>1</sup> This chapter analyses landscape paintings by the two English artists who travelled to South Africa and successfully established themselves in the British Colony between 1834 and 1875. Neither artist had any formal art education in England, although Baines had been apprenticed as an ornamental painter prior to his departure.<sup>2</sup> In South Africa, Thomas Bowler became a well-known colonial landscape painter, while Thomas Baines specialised in documenting expeditions into the interior by way of writing, drawing and painting. Adapting British artistic traditions and conventions allowed these artists to see the landscape in similar terms to those in which the British landscape was seen at the time.<sup>3</sup>

Artists are strongly affected by artistic traditions. Artists, art critics, patrons and collectors play a critical role in promoting certain attitudes and value judgements about art. This determines public taste and what style or genre will be bought or commissioned. Bowler and Baines came from a background that valued the naturalistic style of the picturesque. By working within this style, they were understood and valued by their British contemporaries.

### 2.1 The English Tradition of the Picturesque

The term 'picturesque' describes a type of landscape, real and painted that is pleasing to look at. It is characterised by roughness, irregularity, variety and chiaroscuro.<sup>4</sup> In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century the 'picturesque' was a much discussed and written about aesthetic cult in England, which subsequently spread to the whole of

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<sup>1</sup> There are Dutch landscapes and depictions of the Cape that precede the British examples.

<sup>2</sup> Godby, M. 'Chapter 5, Ideas of 'home' in South African landscape: paintings by Thomas Bowler and Thomas Baines', p. 84-90, Barringer, Timothy, Quilley, Geoff & Fordham, Douglas (ed.). *Art and the British Empire*. Manchester University Press, Manchester/ New York (2007) p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> The Cape of Good Hope became integrated in the British colonial system after it was occupied by British forces for the second time in 1806. The first British occupation occurred from 1795-1803. From 1803-1806 control of the Cape reverted to Holland: 'Brief History of South Africa', Catalogue for the exhibition *Panoramas of Passage; Changing Landscapes of South Africa*. University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, Johannesburg (1995) p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Chiaroscuro is a term describing the effects of light and shade in a work of art, particularly when there is a strong contrast: Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*. (1995) p. 94.

Britain and to the British colonies.<sup>5</sup> Bowler and Baines would have been aware of the tradition of the picturesque and would have searched for 'picturesque' scenery in the Cape of Good Hope. The picturesque was influenced by a strong interest in empirical science. Artists strove to render nature in a scientifically correct way by depicting natural textures and shapes in a detailed and accurate manner. Due to the naturalistic approach of the picturesque most landscape scenes appear to be truthful records of the environment, until closer examination reveals their artificial nature. This is supported by Carruthers and Arnold in the following statement, "Picturesque landscape painting is not concerned primarily with accurate recording; the contrived nature of art-making is acknowledged but a new set of criteria prioritising romantic wilderness over classical formality determines the selection and structuring of visual elements."<sup>6</sup> Bowler and Baines' landscapes appear to be documentary in content but they are carefully constructed to reflect the tradition of the picturesque and the political and social ideals of the British colonisers.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the tradition of the picturesque had become so fashionable that it appeared to contain the very essence of 'Englishness'. Picturesque characteristics could be applied to a wide range of landscape paintings, including village scenes, rural life, seascapes, wilderness areas and mountain scenery. Due to its adaptability and broad public appeal the picturesque seemed an obvious choice to record the often romanticised 'wilderness' of the British colonies.<sup>7</sup>

By adapting the artistic conventions of naturalistic British landscape painting, Bowler and Baines rendered foreign spaces in ways that could be appreciated by their British audience in South Africa and abroad. Imitating and adapting British techniques also offered Bowler and Baines a provisional strategy by which to approach and understand the unfamiliar African environment.

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<sup>5</sup> Lynton, N. *Looking into Paintings*. The Open University, Walton Hall (1985) p. 212.

<sup>6</sup> Carruthers J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Mc Lean, I. 'Chapter 1, The expanded field of the picturesque: contested identities and empire in Sydney-Cove 1794', p. 23-37, Barringer, T., Quilley, G. & Fordham, D. (ed.). *Art and the British Empire*. Manchester University Press, Manchester/ New York (2007) p. 26-27.

Bowler's On the Beach near the Military Hospital (1853) Figure 2.1 is a good example of picturesque qualities. The asymmetrically composed scene contains variety, as well as intriguing details and textures to inform the viewer about life in the Cape during this period. McLean, in *Art and the British Empire*, suggests that the tradition of the picturesque was so successful in the British colonies because it enacted 'a psychology of recovery' and in that sense compensated for the loss of 'home' and 'origin' among colonials.<sup>8</sup> I assume that Bowler depicted the Cape in the English tradition of the picturesque to confirm his own colonial identity as an English subject. By depicting the Cape as if it were a slice of England, Bowler also claimed it as 'homeland' and hence naturalised the presence of the British colonists within an essentially foreign place. By evolving as a colonial style, the picturesque helped to establish a 'trans-national Englishness'.<sup>9</sup> In this, the picturesque supported the idea of a vast British empire, made up of colonies that were British in character but imitative and hence subservient to the 'motherland'. Although this is a relevant aspect of the picturesque, it is equally important to notice how Bowler contrasted African scenery with British prototypes by depicting typically local landscapes and people. By adapting English naturalism Bowler started to interpret the uniqueness of the South African landscape and, in doing so, helped to create a South African landscape tradition based on naturalistic conventions.

## 2.2 The Tradition of the Sublime

Although often discussed in conjunction with the picturesque, the sublime was seen as a different aesthetic. Like the picturesque, it was a very calculated way of composing and representing the land. In contrast to the picturesque, the sublime was associated with ideas of awe and vastness and focused on high drama and precarious effects. The sublime was based on the idea that dark, exaggerated and uncertain images evoke strong feelings and stimulate the imagination.<sup>10</sup>

The tradition of the sublime encouraged the use of extraordinary viewpoints and an exaggerated sense of drama. In Baines' Eastern Portion of Victoria Falls (1863)

<sup>8</sup> Mc Lean, I., 'The expanded field of the picturesque', p. 23-27.

<sup>9</sup> Mc Lean, I., 'The expanded field of the picturesque', p. 23-27.

<sup>10</sup> Soaners, C. & Hawker S. *Compact Oxford English Dictionary for Students* Oxford University Press (2006) p. 574.

Figure 2.5 and Devil's Cataract (1862) Figure 1.3, a likeness of the natural phenomenon is retained but he has modified and enhanced information to evoke an emotional response. The high horizon line, intensified tones, unnatural light effects and areas of confused space add to Baines' dramatic interpretation of the falls.

In keeping with the tradition of the sublime, Baines has added small figures to the setting. The figure at the centre of Eastern Portion of Victoria Falls is the painter himself, authenticating his direct experience of the falls. Many colonial landscapes included a witness, a human figure who was there at the crucial historical moment, when the depicted landscape was first discovered by Europeans. Although insignificant compared to nature, the small figure at the very centre seems to direct the flow of water. This interpretation is supported by Carruthers & Arnold who say that, although "reduced to being the onlooker, man exerts himself and takes control of the environment by naming, classifying and measuring."<sup>11</sup> In keeping with his time, Baines believed that man, especially Western man, can dominate nature with his knowledge of Western science.<sup>12</sup>

### **2.3 Thomas Bowler (1813 - 1869)**

Thomas Bowler arrived in Cape Town in 1834, at the age of 21. He came from a middle class family and his decision to travel to South Africa showed personal initiative and courage.<sup>13</sup> The sea voyage was long and dangerous and life in the colony was in many ways uncertain and different to life in England. Bowler was initially employed as an assistant to the Royal Astronomer of the Observatory, but soon acquired independence as an artist.

Bowler became a successful, influential artist and art teacher in the colony. During his 30 years of residence in South Africa he produced numerous accomplished watercolour paintings and in this way created a detailed record of many important events in the Cape's colonial history. Bowler made a good life in South Africa but remained emotionally connected to Britain and returned there towards the end of his

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<sup>11</sup> Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> Bradlow, F., *Thomas Bowler. His Life and Work*. A.A.Balkema, Cape Town (1967) p. 17.

life.<sup>14</sup> He made use of the British tradition of the picturesque to depict his observations of South Africa, a land which was both 'home' and 'exile' to himself.

Influenced by the tradition of the 'picturesque' Bowler was primarily a watercolourist. In Arrival of the "Bosphorus" in Table Bay on the 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1851 (1851) Figure 2.2 he has applied watercolour in bold translucent washes, allowing the white of the paper to shine through. Interesting details and white highlights have been added to enhance the picturesque scene. Arrival of the "Bosphorus" in Table Bay on the 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1851 (1851) records the arrival of the first English mail ship in Cape Town. The 'Bosphorus' made the trip in 40 days, which was considered a fast run.<sup>15</sup> A regular mail service between Britain and South Africa would have been an important event for the colonists.

Bowler's Prince Alfred inaugurating the Breakwater (1860) Figure 2.3 depicted an important event for the British colony that marked the beginning of a period of British economic development in the Cape.<sup>16</sup> Hundreds of small figures, carefully rendered boats and disproportionately large flags (Union Flags and others) give an impression of the ceremony that took place when Prince Alfred of England (Queen Victoria's second son) tipped the first truck for the construction of a breakwater at Cape Town harbour. Prince Alfred inaugurating the Breakwater (1860) also demonstrates how detailed and complex a watercolour painting can be.

The dramatic rendering of the sky enhances the emotional impact of this painting. Bowler has visually merged the mountain with the clouds and he has exaggerated light-dark contrasts to achieve a more dramatic effect. The source of light has been placed on the left-hand side, which has allowed the artist to create a sense of space by modelling all other objects accordingly.

The artificial rendering of the sky suggests that the sky in Prince Alfred inaugurating the Breakwater (1860) Figure 2.3 has symbolic significance. The composition is

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<sup>14</sup> Godby, M., 'Chapter 5, Ideas of 'home' in South African landscape, p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> Bradlow, F., *Thomas Bowler. His Life and Work*. p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Bradlow, F., *Thomas Bowler. His Life and Work*, p. 40.

based on an S-shaped spiral that leads the eye from the pier, across the mountain into the cloud formations. We know that Bowler came from a strongly Christian background. By creating a visual connection between the pier (built by the settlers) and the heavens, Bowler possibly alluded to the idea that the white man was called on to develop Africa, an idea that was widely accepted among British colonists. The foreground creates a low horizon line, which places the viewer above the scene, as if observing from a far distance.

Bowler's Stellenbosch (1867) Figure 2.4 depicts the 'Braak', an open space in the centre of Stellenbosch that was frequently used as a parade ground and a setting for colonial life that is still recognisable today. The building with the bell tower is the 'Kruithuis' or armoury and the background depicts the Jonkershoek Mountains, both of which are clearly identifiable local landmarks.

Later works by Bowler, such as Stellenbosch (1867) Figure 2.4 represent an emotional approach. Forms are less carefully defined in outline and colour. In earlier works, Bowler tended to approach his subject matter in a more factual, investigative manner, paying careful attention to the detailed and accurate description of specific landmarks, buildings, costumes and modes of transport. Michael Godby writes in *Art and the British Empire* that Bowler's later style records experiences of places, rather than topographical information. He suggests that once the artist had become familiar with the local landscape, he was able to see it through the eyes of a resident rather than those of a foreign observer/reporter.<sup>17</sup> Godby's statement is supported by Lynton who maintains that artists with an objective or investigative approach tend to use a fairly hard-edged, detailed technique, compared to those whose approach is essentially emotional and hence more generalised in form.<sup>18</sup>

Bowler's significance lies in his historical record of life in the colony. Frank Bradlow states in his book, *Thomas Bowler: His Life and Work*, that Bowler was not the forerunner of a typical South African school, because he represented the Cape through the lens of the picturesque tradition, initially invented to capture the misty

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<sup>17</sup> Godby, M. 'Chapter 5, Ideas of 'home' in South African landscape, p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Lynton, N. *Looking into Paintings*. The Open University, Walton Hall (1985) p. 217.

English countryside.<sup>19</sup> Although Bowler approached the South African landscape via his knowledge and appreciation of English naturalism, I think he was successful in adapting the tradition of the picturesque to depict a space that was fundamentally different in topography and social structures to those of England. In this way Bowler helped to create a strong and long lasting appreciation of the landscape genre in South Africa.

## **2.4 Thomas Baines (1820 - 1875)**

Jean Carruther's and Marion Arnold's book, *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, draws renewed attention to the artistic output of this skilled and historically significant artist. It is important reading for anyone who would like to acquire a more detailed appreciation of his work and of colonial life in South Africa. My analysis of Baines is more content oriented as, in Chapter One, I have already drawn attention to general principles in naturalistic landscape art.

Thomas Baines was apprenticed as an 'ornamental painter' before he travelled to South Africa in 1841. Baines saw himself foremost as an explorer and a scientist and he documented his impressions of South Africa in travel journals, letters, drawings and paintings. This analysis focuses on Baines as a landscape painter and the way in which he represented topographical and historical information about colonial South Africa. His paintings were primarily executed for his British patrons in South Africa and abroad who were interested in the colony as a space that was intriguingly different and exploitable. Baines recorded and promoted Africa's wealth and many of his images show South Africa as a treasure chest ready for the taking. Given the time and place in which Baines lived and worked, his paintings reflect unquestioned assumptions of colonial supremacy in that he frequently depicted the colonists as brave and capable and the Africans as exotic, passive and nomadic.

In Outspan under Mocheerie Tree between Koobie and Lake Nagami (1861) Figure 2.6 Baines depicts an old Mocheerie tree. The expedition group consisting of Europeans with wagons and the San people employed to assist the expedition party, is setting up camp around the tree. While they were there, they also encountered

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<sup>19</sup> Bradlow, F., *Thomas Bowler. His Life and Work*, p. 67-68.

some of the local Damara people (the two tall men posing in front of the camera and the two women carrying water containers on their heads).

Carruthers and Arnold point out that in spite of ‘the detailed information of particular localities contained in Baines’ oils, few of them are merely topographical in intention’.<sup>20</sup> Baines was aware of the process of selection and elimination that underpins all image-making. He often composed landscape scenes that were convincingly naturalistic but essentially fictitious.

While the detailed surroundings and beautifully rendered figures are based on accurate observation, the composition as a whole has been manipulated to communicate Baines’ subjective value judgements about social hierarchies and the white man’s leading role in Africa. The white man is in the process of ‘capturing’ his environment with his camera, due to his superior knowledge of science and technology while the majority of black men are depicted as cooperative and passive. Two women are fulfilling simple domestic tasks (carrying water), while the woman resting in the foreground appears to be naked. The way Baines has contrasted white and black in terms of clothed/naked, sophisticated/primitive, active/passive, would have confirmed British prejudice that white people had a more developed culture and a greater sense of sophistication. Baines came from a background that classified Africans in negative terms, as not white, not Christian and not civilised, in order to position Europeans positively, according to Carruthers & Arnold.<sup>21</sup>

British Imperialism was based on Britain’s policy of extending its power and influence through establishing colonies that would yield profitable returns.<sup>22</sup> Baines identified with imperial objectives and often selected his subject matter accordingly. Wagons on Market Square, Grahamstown (1850) Figure 2.7<sup>23</sup> is a horrific image by today’s

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<sup>20</sup> Carruthers, J., & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> Carruthers, J., & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> Soaners, C. & Hawker S., *Compact Oxford English Dictionary for Students*, p 506.

<sup>23</sup> Baines provided extensive annotations at the back of many of his paintings. Notes and sketches on the reverse of Wagons on Market Square, Grahamstown, explain the different objects for sale: “Zoolu dress, Crocodiles, Pangolin, Rhinoceros horns, Vlake Verk, flat pig’s tusks, Lions and panther skin, Elands Horns, Elephant tail, Koodoo horns, Buffalo horns, Korosses”: Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 146.



standards, as it highlights the shameless killing of animals and the exploitation of Africa's natural resources by the colonials.

During the early years of colonisation, hunting and trading of animal produce was the primary source of prosperity in Southern Africa. Wagons on Market Square, Grahamstown (1850) Figure 2.7 shows elegantly dressed Europeans as the producers, traders and buyers in Baines' market scene. Africans are rendered as passive observers, limited to the fringe of the painting and by implication, excluded from the market scene and the wealth generated by white traders.

In many regions large herds were diminished by ruthless profit driven hunters.<sup>24</sup> The English tradition of hunting was frequently used to demonstrate white dominance and colonial power. For example, to celebrate Prince Alfred's visit to southern Africa in 1860, the independent Boer Republic of Orange Free State organised a hunt in which hundreds of animals were slaughtered. Baines recorded the 'orgy of killing' in his painting The Greatest Hunt in Africa near Bloemfontein (1860) Figure 2.8, based on eye witness reports and his imagination.<sup>25</sup> The painting was commissioned to illustrate a book entitled *The Progress of his Royal Highness Prince Alfred Ernst Albert* (Cape Town, 1861). It is painted in tones of black and white to facilitate reproduction.<sup>26</sup>

By 1874, wildlife species became seriously depleted and the impoverished colonies embarked on gold prospecting expeditions into the interior. Baines' The Discovery of Gold (1874) Figure 2.9 is set in the northern goldfields of present day Zimbabwe. The painting depicts the discovery of gold by the hunter Henry Hartley, who after shooting an elephant discovered that the rocky ground beneath the elephant consisted of quartz mixed with traces of gold.<sup>27</sup> Working from imagination, Baines depicts the Englishman standing next to the dying elephant, whose large valuable tusks are resting on a field of gold. Hartley, the white man, appears to be in control of the situation due to his superior knowledge of technology and geology.

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<sup>25</sup> Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 116.

<sup>26</sup> Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 66-119.

Shooting Wildebeeste near Brandt Spruit (1848) Figure 2.10 depicts a landscape that was explored and assessed by early settlers for purpose of colonisation and economic benefits. Exploring colonial frontier space would have required skills such as being able to use a gun and hunt wild animals. Baines paints the landscape in a limited range of browns and blacks. The monochromatic colouring captures the relative bleakness of the 'veld'. The sense of bareness is sustained by the empty foreground, which is free of bracketing plants or rocks that could soften the feeling of isolation generated by his use of colour. The largely 'empty' foreground is structured internally by introducing formless shadow effects. The fluid composition is dominated by a dramatically lit sky, a typical feature of the 'veld'. Within this vast and desolate setting, the small figures seem insignificant and out of place.

Delmont and Dubow refer to landscapes without recognisable signs of indigenous civilisation as 'empty landscapes' and point out that such landscapes could be interpreted in more than one way. On the one hand, the 'empty landscape' functioned consciously as a document of power, in that it supported the imperial myth of Southern Africa as a 'virgin space' waiting to be explored and dominated. This kind of interpretation denied the indigenous communities of South Africa historical visibility or their legitimate claim to the land. On the other hand, the landscape may have appeared empty to Baines and other explorers, because they did not understand the landscape or the way in which it was inhabited by animals and people.<sup>28</sup> As such the barren landscape could have depicted Baines' lack of knowledge and identification with the land.<sup>29</sup>

Between 1848 and 1853 Baines was based in Grahamstown, which was an important frontier town at the time. Baines' colonial town images, such as Potter's Row, Hill Street, Grahamstown (1848) Figure 2.11 and Church Square Grahamstown (1849) Figure 2.12 show the colony as a space that is culturally recognisable and inhabitable by Europeans seeking to make a life in Africa. Delmont

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<sup>28</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape: Colonial Spaces and their Legacies', p. 10-18, *Panoramas of Passage; Changing Landscapes of South Africa*. University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, Johannesburg (1995) p. 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 12-13.

and Dubow point out that images of settlement towns depicted a different colonial experience to that of the 'empty landscape': "Within it the colonial returns 'home' and is restored to sameness." 'Taking over' here, is also 'making over'.<sup>30</sup> By imposing built structures of European origin on the landscape, space is not only claimed, but is transformed into a space that looks and feels like a place where Europeans belong. Grahamstown, an important frontier town, is shown as a sheltered space that offered its inhabitants order and permanence. St George's Church marks the highest point in both paintings and symbolises the settlers' spiritual life, while buildings based on Western architecture indicate civilisation and sophistication.<sup>31</sup> The town appears to be nestled between green, rolling hills, reminiscent of the English countryside.

Delmont and Dubow maintain that because town scenes offered a more recognisable topography, they were more suitable to picturesque descriptions. Baines' town scene King William's Town and Buffalo River (1850) Figure 2.13 shows an intimate vantage point combined with a sense of enclosure and control. Space is structured in a way that encourages 'going down into', 'being in' and 'moving through'.<sup>32</sup> The naturalistic landscape composition is asymmetrically composed. It focuses on textured surfaces and depicts, in the background, carefully rendered farm houses and tended fields. The foreground is inhabited by relaxed figures involved in their daily tasks. This creates the impression of a peaceful, 'domesticated space with a human point of focus'.<sup>33</sup> The same can be said about View of Durban from Currie's Residence (1873) Figure 2.14. The enclosed domestic English garden overlooks a tranquil bay. Within the garden Baines depicts different aspects considered as essential to a successful colonial lifestyle, such as an interest in botany, a telescope symbolising further exploration, enjoying a cup of tea prepared by servants, a hunting dog and a gun.<sup>34</sup> From such a space of interest and comfort, the colonist could enjoy life in Africa.

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<sup>30</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Carruthers J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 132-138.

<sup>32</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 14.

Bloemfontein (1851) Figure 2.15 does not show Bloemfontein in favourable terms, perhaps foreshadowing Britain's withdrawal from the Orange Free State three years later, because the territory was not considered to be economically viable. Many of Baines' works, including Bloemfontein, show how black people lived in simple huts, made of natural materials. Carruthers and Arnold maintain that this "confirmed popular Victorian thinking"<sup>35</sup> that Africans had not attained and developed a culture, technology, aesthetics and religion comparable with those of Europeans."<sup>36</sup> Although Baines' sketches of black huts, as seen in Striking the Colours – the Last of Logier Hill (1863) Figure 2.16 were factual, he emphasised impermanence, possibly implying that the indigenous lifestyle could not sustain a legitimate claim to the land.

This chapter shows that many landscape paintings of the British colony can be read as evidence of European conquest.<sup>37</sup> In addition to reflecting broader social and political values, landscape paintings also represent the artist's personal experience. Bowler and Baines regarded the colony as a place that needed to be conquered and exploited on behalf of the British Crown but at the same time, it would have been an unknown and possibly threatening space for them and a place where the artists and other Europeans strove to make a life for themselves.<sup>38</sup>

Landscape images exert a powerful influence. They shape peoples' ideas about a country and its inhabitants. Bowler and Baines' paintings cannot be read as objective records of the places and people that they encountered in South Africa.<sup>39</sup> Bowler and Baines' paintings provide valuable topographical and historical information about colonial life, seen through the lens of the English picturesque and prejudiced attitudes of white entitlement and superiority.

The same can be said of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century works to be discussed in Chapter Three. Likewise, these landscapes need to be interpreted within the context of the artists'

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<sup>35</sup> Victorian thinking: Thinking current during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837 -1901).

<sup>36</sup> Carruthers J. & Arnold, M., *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, p. 135.

<sup>37</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow J., 'Thinking Through Landscape: Colonial Spaces and their Legacies', *Panoramas of Passage; Changing Landscapes of South Africa*. University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, Johannesburg (1995) p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Delmont E. & Dubow J., 'Thinking Through Landscape', p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Liebhammer, N. *Art from the African Continent*, Heinemann, Sandton (2005) p. 23.

lives and the changes that were taking place in South Africa due to the formation of an independent South African Union in 1910 and the National Party's rise to power. There is no such thing as an objective record. Every landscape painting is ultimately a personal and ideological interpretation of a place and events within a certain historical and a cultural context.

## **CHAPTER 3: IDEAS ABOUT 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The early 20<sup>th</sup> Century landscape painters discussed in this chapter appear to have used their art to communicate their African origin. Guided by modern trends in Europe, these artists explored innovative pictorial techniques that would distinguish them from the tradition of the picturesque and the history of English colonisation.<sup>1</sup>

The trend toward naturalistic portrayals of nature was particularly strong up to the 1950s, due to the influential voice of Edward Roworth (1880-1964), the founder member and long-time president of the South African Society of Artists (SASA), who rejected all modern influences on art. Foster states that although art patrons 'saw landscape as an appropriate subject of indigenous art, they demanded little of painting other than that it be a romantic or naturalistic depiction of what they could already see around them, preferably the landscape of the Old Cape'.<sup>2</sup> It was up to early 'modern' artists such as Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886 - 1957), Maggie Laubser (1886 - 1973) and Irma Stern (1894 -1966) to break the mould. Others soon followed.

### **20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ART, SECTION 1:**

#### **PIERNEEF, LAUBSER AND SKOTNES: THE SEARCH FOR AN AFRICAN IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPES**

Personal and group identity within art has been the focus of much art historical writing in recent years. Identity can be defined as the characteristics and attributes of a person or a group of people and how a person or a group of people can be distinguished from others.<sup>3</sup> In *Washed with Sun*, Jeremy Foster examines how landscape and white identity became 'intertwined' in South Africa. I refer to Foster on several occasions to support my arguments on identity formation and its relevance and connection to landscape art.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The tradition of the 'picturesque' is discussed on page 22 of this text.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, J. *Washed with Sun*, University of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg (2008) p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Chilvers, I. (ed.) *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, Oxford University Press, New York (2003) p. 501.

<sup>4</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 4.

Contemporary social theory does not perceive identity as given or innate, proposing instead that identity is an ongoing process, formed by life experiences.<sup>5</sup> Within this situationally constructed model, two alternative models of identity formation are recognised.<sup>6</sup> According to Foster: “The first sees identity as deriving from a sense of incompleteness that leads to the desire for something missing; this lack defines a person ... because identity is known through difference.”<sup>7</sup> This model of identification or identity formation requires that you can know yourself as lacking. Thus, identity is based on the process of trying to make yourself whole, built on the pain of perceived differences and deficiencies. The second model focuses on identity as a socially constructed experience, formed through interactions with others and the environment.<sup>8</sup>

A powerful aspect of identity formation is a person’s geographic origin. To be from a certain place, such as England or South Africa, is assumed to say a lot about a person’s identity. Foster maintains: “So powerfully are geographical territory and nationhood intertwined in most people’s minds that it is almost impossible to talk about national consciousness in isolation from the physical territory with which that consciousness identifies itself.”<sup>9</sup> This implies that a people’s sense of national identity is strongly rooted in shared ideas held about the land as the place that sustains, moulds and unites a people.

Foster maintains that: “during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the preoccupation with finding some kind of psychic accommodation with ‘the land’ became a defining feature of white South African nationhood, an ever-present topic in art and literature, and a recurring anchor of identity in the minds of those who controlled the land and those dispossessed and exiled from it.”<sup>10</sup> Within this broader context, landscape painting became an important genre in South Africa during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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<sup>5</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 2-3.

### **Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886 - 1957)**

Jacob Hendrik Pierneef was born in the newly founded colonial town of Johannesburg in 1886. His birth coincided with the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, which attracted widespread mining interest. After the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899 -1902) and the signing of the Union Pact (1910), the previously independent Boer Republics fell under direct British imperial control, leaving the Dutch Afrikaner culture impoverished and without a land to call its own.

Pierneef was prevented from studying architecture, due to financial constraints but received art tuition while working as a shop assistant in Johannesburg. Esmé Berman (an authoritative writer on South African art, to whom I will often refer in this chapter) says that the formal art training Pierneef had received in South Africa: “followed severely academic lines.”<sup>11</sup> Pierneef’s close ties with Europe exposed him to innovative artistic trends and led him to abandon his previously naturalistic tendencies in favour of a more modern approach.<sup>12</sup>

Influenced by modern trends in Europe, Pierneef consciously integrated European ideas into his work. He initially experimented with Impressionist techniques and geometrically organised compositions. Geometric Landscape (1928) Figure 3.1.1 shows that Pierneef is no longer concerned with a naturalistic depiction of natural space. He has rendered nature in abstracted angular geometric forms of different shades of blue. Inspired by modern trends, Pierneef painted space as ‘active and full’, hence in Geometric Landscape (1928) Figure 3.1.1 the background is given equal importance with the foreground motif.<sup>13</sup>

This painting is part of a short-lived experimental period that Pierneef described as his “geometric styles”.<sup>14</sup> Berman points out that Pierneef was often wrongly described as a Cubist due to superficial resemblances between his geometrical

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<sup>11</sup> Berman, E. *Art and Artists of South Africa*, A. A. Balkema, Cape Town / Rotterdam (1983) p. 327.

<sup>12</sup> In 1900 Pierneef studied drawing under an architect in Holland. In 1925 Pierneef travelled to Europe and exhibited in Amsterdam. On this visit he was particularly impressed and influenced by the theories of the Dutch painter Willem van Konijnenburg. He returned to South Africa in 1926: Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 327.

<sup>13</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 327.



designs and the compositional faceting of Cubist paintings. Unlike the Cubists, who sought to portray multiple perspectives, Pierneef was interested in the symbolic and decorative possibilities of his geometrical designs. In this he was influenced by the theories of Dutch artists such as Willem van Konijnenburg and Piet Mondrian who applied mathematical and geometric solutions to their depiction of beauty and harmony.<sup>15</sup>

Berman says that Pierneef's geometric paintings were probably: "far too unconventional to meet with the approval of Pierneef's conservative associates."<sup>16</sup> Although Pierneef did not take abstraction any further, as many of his European contemporaries had done, he continued to structure his landscape paintings along geometric lines, albeit in a less severe manner.

Pierneef's lifelong passion was to depict the South African landscape in a way that expressed its unique character and the Afrikaner people's values and connection to the land, especially that of the previously independent Boer Republics. According to Berman, Pierneef's father was a 'Hollander' and his mother the daughter of a 'Trekker'.<sup>17</sup> As such, Pierneef's identity was deeply rooted within the complex 'Voortrekker' history of the Afrikaner people with whom he identified and whose cause he promoted passionately throughout his life.

Pierneef was primarily interested in capturing the character of the Transvaal. For example, Ntabeni Soutpansberg (1930) Figure 3.1.2 depicts the rugged mountain slopes of the Northern Transvaal (now the Northern Province) in a way that was distinctly different from English picturesque landscape representations of the Western Cape. Pierneef carefully observed and captured the unique natural features of the Northern Transvaal in terms of overall appearance and contours, vegetation and colouring but simplified and formalised the elements of his composition into an essentially linear design.

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<sup>15</sup> Berman, E. *The Story of South African Painting*, A. A. Balkema, Cape Town / Rotterdam (1975) p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 330.

<sup>17</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 327.

Foster explains that even though Pierneef was: “working within a style that challenged the dominant artistic taste, he was becoming popular among the white establishment of South Africa in the 1920s.”<sup>18</sup> His formalised paintings were always based on preliminary sketches done in nature. Pierneef had a profound understanding and appreciation of the local landscape, gained from sketching trees and fragments of the landscape out of doors, a discipline he started during his formative years in Johannesburg.<sup>19</sup>

Karoo (1930) Figure 3.1.3, Table Mountain, Cape Town (1932) Figure 3.1.4 and Rustenburg Kloof (1932) Figure 3.1.5 are three of the 32 landscape murals commissioned for the ‘whites only’ section of the main concourse of the then new Johannesburg railway station, known as Park Station, which opened in 1930. The completed works were installed in November 1932. This prestigious commission solidified Pierneef’s long and successful career within a climate of growing Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>20</sup>

The square format of the mural panels, dictated by the architectural setting, was unconventional for the time and challenging. The paintings, showing different views of the South African landscape, were initially placed above eye level, in view of each other. Berman maintains that mural painting imposes certain requirements. Murals are usually seen from a distance and hence subtleties of brushwork and refinements of detail are wasted. This may explain why Pierneef has minimised texture in favour of a linear approach, smooth paint application and uniform areas of colour. Pierneef also consciously and skilfully integrated the paintings within their architectural setting, an aspect which cannot be appreciated by looking at the works individually. After the Johannesburg railway station panels, Pierneef was commissioned to paint murals for South Africa House in London and for other nationally significant projects.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> Berman, E., *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 328.

Pierneef's formative years coincided with a period of Land Acts and Land Legislations that entrenched racial segregation and increasingly dispossessed black South Africans of land and a place within the country's growing economy that was based, primarily, on farming and mining.<sup>22</sup> In a climate of ongoing land disputes, prompted by British colonialism, the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) which left the Boers defeated and dispossessed, and land legislation rulings, ideas about the land and the landscape were of utmost importance to the emerging nation of South Africa. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, space was not only physically claimed and reserved for white people, but space was also claimed artistically, such as in landscape paintings, as a place that could be called 'home'. In other words, the emerging 'nation' not only needed land, it also needed a landscape with which it could identify itself as a nation.

Economic growth led to a new intellectual, cultural and artistic centre in Johannesburg which endorsed an interest in landscape paintings that did not depict the Cape.<sup>23</sup> Pierneef was suitably placed to take up the challenge. He was also well connected to the emerging elite of Afrikaner nationalists who actively promoted the idea of a unique Afrikaner culture. Pierneef was a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond (Brotherhood).<sup>24</sup> The Broederbond was a secret organisation of white Afrikaans men, founded in 1918 which developed during the 1920s to become an influential political power. The Broederbond constituted the elite forefront of Afrikanerdom and was ultimately responsible for propelling the Afrikaners into political power in 1948.<sup>25</sup>

In 1932 Pierneef wrote the following words to Dr. D.F. Malan, who became the first Nationalist Prime Minister in 1948: "And it would be a disaster if we allowed ourselves to be dictated to by such outsiders as to what African art is. And since Art is the spontaneous and highest expression of our people, who are of Dutch origin, it is essential that we as Afrikaners should take care that no foreign influences creep into our heart." This quote highlights how Pierneef personally identified himself with

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<sup>22</sup> The Land Act of 1913, which reserved less than 8% of the land for black occupancy, was followed by the Urban Areas Act of 1923, the Natives' Trust, the Land Act of 1936 and numerous other land related policies that served to protect white interests. These land rulings effectively paved the way for the Nationalist government's apartheid regime from 1948 to 1994: Delmont E. & Dubow J. in *'Thinking through Landscape: Colonial Spaces and their Legacies'*, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Foster J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 179.

<sup>24</sup> Atkinson B. *Wayne Barker, Artist's Monograph*. Chalkham Hill Press, South Africa (2000) p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Delmont E. & Dubow J., *'Thinking Through Landscape'*, p. 18.

the Afrikaner people (of Dutch origin) and his desire to participate in the creation of an art form that would express this identity clearly. This is in keeping with Liebhammer's assertion that Pierneef was deeply patriotic and envisioned creating a 'national identity' via art that would reflect and promote the cultural ideals of the Afrikaner people.<sup>26</sup>

People and animals are seldom seen in Pierneef's paintings and many of his landscapes depict nature undisturbed by any signs of civilisation. When Pierneef depicted man-made structures, they were usually buildings from white Afrikaner culture. The farmhouses, towns, and churches included in many works were usually placed in a central position, as in Mountainous Landscape (1943) Figure 3.1.6.<sup>27</sup> As in colonial landscapes, the landscape here is presented from an elevated viewpoint which overlooks the land. Within the rhythmically composed, seemingly ongoing landscape, the small farm takes central place. Pierneef's monochromatic colours are descriptive of the landscape itself but the warmer tones of orange in the foreground confirm the idea of a friendly and liveable space.

Through his art Pierneef attempts to promote the Afrikaner people's claim to the land, the romance of the 'bushveld' and the 'Voortrekker' ethic, says Liebhammer.<sup>28</sup> Hence the only culture and cultural identity depicted in Pierneef's landscape paintings, is that of the Afrikaner nation.

While colonial artists had often emphasised similarities between South Africa and Europe, Pierneef's Mountainous Landscape (1943) Figure 3.1.6 emphasised difference and the notion that 'the experience of inhabiting an empty, spacious landscape' was one of the 'common and distinguishable qualities of South Africanness', and by implication, the Afrikaner culture.<sup>29</sup> While enforcing the theme of a robust and independent Afrikaner people, the virtually empty landscape also 'helped erase the presence of a substantial other population, whose practical and imaginative relations with the same territory were poorly understood and ignored' by

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<sup>26</sup> Liebhammer, N. *Art from the African Continent*, Heinemann, Sandton (2005) p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Liebhammer, N., *Art from the African Continent*, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Liebhammer, N., *Art from the African Continent*, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 80.

the ruling government, says Foster.<sup>30</sup> While colonial artists had shown black indigenous people and cultures as inferior to European standards, Pierneef hardly ever depicts black people in his work. By not depicting black culture or black housing, Pierneef visually banished them from 'his country'.

Foster maintains that Pierneef's Transvaal paintings such as Leadwood Trees, Bushveld, Northern Transvaal (1944) Figure 3.1.7 were 'meant to be symbols denoting the life of the cosmos and expressing the essence of Africanness'.<sup>31</sup> Pierneef was influenced by the Symbolist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century which held that art should not simply describe what is there but should use symbols to suggest the spiritual reality behind appearance. To Pierneef the landscape of South Africa, and especially the landscape of the Transvaal, was not just existential, but also spiritual in content and meaning. In Pierneef's paintings trees are often symbolic of the vital force between heaven and earth, while large skies and cathedral-like, towering clouds are meant to lend a transcendent quality.<sup>32</sup> As such his landscapes may also be seen as a place where God might appear and speak to the Afrikaner people, many of whom believed that South Africa was the New Jerusalem and that they were the equivalent of the chosen people of the Old Testament.

Pierneef's approach reflects an aesthetic tradition that originated in classical times. It is a formal approach that makes use of geometric shapes and pleasing proportions to impose order and logic onto nature.<sup>33</sup> Pierneef is working within this classical tradition. First he studied the landscape, based on numerous sketches produced on site, and then imposed on the landscape a perceived structural order or architectural structure. Within this formal composition all individual features have become units within a grand design, specifically designed to persuade the viewer of the permanence of natural creation.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 194.

<sup>32</sup> Liebhammer, N., *Art from the African Continent*, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Berman, E., *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Berman, E., *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 39.

Golden Gate (1951) Figure 3.1.8 was painted in the early years of Apartheid politics.<sup>35</sup> With Verwoerd's 'homelands system' of the 1950s the fantasy of a 'pure white South Africa' reached its zenith.<sup>36</sup> Golden Gate can be interpreted as one of Pierneef's strongest statements regarding the Afrikaner *volk*'s claim and entitlement to the land. Although empty, this is not a threatening environment, but one that is inherently meaningful and ready for settlement, say Delmont and Dubow.<sup>37</sup>

The stark linear composition suggests a comprehensible order and certainty. Although Pierneef's classical compositions imply rational thinking, he was also a deeply passionate man who only had eyes for his own people. According to Delmont and Dubow, Golden Gate (1951) Figure 3.1.8 reflects the 'very logic of nationalism to disavow internal fracture; to write history as a steady march forward, a route that unfolds with neither detour nor fissure'.<sup>38</sup> There is only uniformity and balance, divorced from any signs of struggle that could be suggested by uneven brush marks or lapses of meaning in the composition. Afrikaner Nationalism was invented, like all forms of nationalism.<sup>39</sup> It was essentially a doctrine of self-preservation, dependant on the creation and preservation of a unifying language, religion, history and artistic tradition. Pierneef played an important role within the creation of Afrikaner Nationalism in that he helped to naturalise the connection between the Afrikaner *volk* and their land.<sup>40</sup>

Foster defines identity as the result of a sense of incompleteness which requires that you see yourself as 'lacking'. Thus, identification is a process of trying to make yourself whole, built on the pain of perceived deficiencies. I think this image was so popular because it reflected a new Afrikaner identity based on political confidence. In this image Pierneef transformed the pain of loss and dispossession suffered by the Afrikaner people over the years, into an image that not only naturalised the

<sup>35</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s the South African National Parks Board, a government administered department, established nature reserves throughout South Africa. One of these was the Golden Gate Highlands National Park in the Orange Free State, which was replacing older farms: Delmont & Dubow, 'Thinking through Landscape', p.18.

<sup>36</sup> All black Africans were forced to accept citizenship of fragmented, ethnically based 'Bantustans': Delmont & Dubow, 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 17-18.

<sup>37</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 15-18

<sup>40</sup> Delmont, E. & Dubow, J., 'Thinking through Landscape', p. 15-18.

Afrikaner's claim to the land, but presents it as a natural identity of unshakable strength and durability.

While Pierneef lived and participated in what was a highly divided and unequal society, he was also a dreamer, a storyteller and a fantasist, caught up with finding his own way as an individual and as an artist.<sup>41</sup> His dream of a perfect place that could be called 'home' was shared by many, making him an acclaimed interpreter of the Transvaal landscape during the years of growing Afrikaner nationalism Pierneef became a revered 'painter of the nation' and 'a popular and influential speaker on all aspects of the arts, and in 1936, he was the first artist to receive the medal of the *Suid Afrikaanse Akademie for Westenskap en Kuns* (the South African Academy of Science and the Arts)".<sup>42</sup>

Pierneef's landscapes reflect both his personal journey as an Afrikaner and the political currents of the time. His landscape paintings have in recent years been re-evaluated in content and style. According to Esmé Berman, "a growing dependency on mechanistic formulae and an inherent tendency toward decorativistic formulae" prevented Pierneef from exploring truly unconventional solutions.<sup>43</sup> Delmont and Dubow seem to agree, saying that 'by the time he was elevated to the ranks of Master-painter he had already abandoned his radical experiments and was directing himself to the cause of a hypothetical idea of national art'.<sup>44</sup>

Pierneef's stylised landscape designs were widely distributed by the Nationalist government in textbooks and other government-related literature, and became more real in many viewers' minds than the actual landscape itself. A nation's perception of the land is shaped by shared life experiences, but also, and often more significantly, by paintings and pictures of the land. Because cultural identities are based on how populations relate to their surroundings, engaging with landscape, real and painted, becomes an act of self-definition.

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<sup>41</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 329.

<sup>44</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 329.

### **Maggie Laubser (1886 - 1973)**

Maggie Laubser was born and brought up on a farm near Stellenbosch. Her parents could only afford to send her to boarding school for four years, after which she returned to the farm to assist her mother with farming tasks.<sup>45</sup> Between 1915 and 1924 Laubser was able to travel and study in Europe. She was sponsored by JHA Balwé, the influential Consul of the Netherlands who admired her talent and supported her artistic career. In Europe, Laubser was exposed to modern artistic trends in Holland, Italy and London (Slade School of Art). In Germany, Irma Stern,<sup>46</sup> a fellow South African artist, introduced her to many leading German Expressionists, including Emil Nolde (1867-1956), Max Pechstein (1881-1955) and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884-1976). Laubser was deeply moved by the paintings of Franz Marc (1880-1916), a member of the 'Blaue Reiter' Expressionist group.<sup>47</sup> According to Miles, Laubser liked the way Marc expressed the 'encompassing spirit of nature'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly to Marc, Laubser's landscape paintings of South Africa show emotional expression in her use of non-naturalistic symbolic colours and her choice of simplified, rhythmic compositions.<sup>49</sup>

On her return to South Africa in 1924, Laubser became a local pioneer of modern art, alongside Pierneef, Irma Stern (1894 -1966) and other early modern artists. Like other artists who returned from Europe, Laubser endeavoured to find an 'indigenous expression of contemporary European artistic theories'.<sup>50</sup>

The conservative South African art establishment demeaned Laubser's paintings as lacking in naturalism and skill and she suffered many years of poverty and hardship. Farming was a struggle during the depression years and Laubser's art was the source of ongoing ridicule. The level of rejection Laubser had to endure is evident in a statement by Bernard Lewis, the art critic, in 1932: "Atrociously unattractive landscapes, in which not one colour, not one shape ... has any similitude with

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<sup>45</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 252-253.

<sup>46</sup> Irma Stern is also in the curriculum. She was heavily influenced by German Expressionism.

<sup>47</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 251-253.

<sup>48</sup> Miles, E. *A Liberatory Vision; Maggie Laubser from the Sanlam Art Collection*. Published by Sanlam Life Insurance Ltd. Stellenbosch (2004) p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 366.

<sup>50</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 180.



nature.”<sup>51</sup> It took many years of determined effort before Laubser was finally publicly acknowledged. In 1946, at the age of 60, Laubser was the first woman to be awarded the Medal of Honour for painting by the South African Academy.<sup>52</sup>

Landscape with Sheep (1924) Figure 3.1.9 and Landscape with Sheep (1924) Figure 3.1.10 probably depict Laubser’s family farm, where she lived a secluded life for many years after her return from Europe. Laubser’s lifestyle and her choice of subject matter indicate that she preferred a rural lifestyle, a preference she shared with many German Expressionists. ‘Die Brücke’ artists in particular favoured the idea of a lifestyle that was close to nature and unspoilt by civilisation and often depicted such a lifestyle in their work. They were also influenced by African masks and their own interpretations of African life and often included African subject matter to show their affinity with so-called ‘primitive cultures’.

Berman maintains that: “the key to full enjoyment of Laubser’s style lies in acceptance of the subjective pictorial reality she defines.”<sup>53</sup> Her landscape paintings usually represented recognisable places but were painted in her studio, from memory. Influenced by German Expressionism, Laubser intentionally used angular, distorted shapes, subjective colours, dramatic contrasts and sketchy brushwork in order to move away from naturalistic conventions of depicting space and light.

Foster says an artist’s choice of subject matter: “invites us to see how the world appeared to them.”<sup>54</sup> Laubser’s paintings of the South African landscape can be understood as a subjective expression of her own experiences of the land that she inhabited and loved. In Landscape with Sheep (1924) Figure 3.1.9 and Landscape with Sheep (1924) Figure 3.1.10, Laubser simplified shapes and colour relationships in order to add personal expression and meaning to her work.

In Landscape with Mountain (1927-32) Figure 3.1.11 Laubser makes a radical departure from established conventions of perspective in landscape painting. Instead

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<sup>51</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 254.

<sup>52</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 252.

<sup>53</sup> Arnold, M. *Women and Art in South Africa*, David Philip Publishers, Cape Town/Johannesburg (1996) p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 180.

of a distant observation from a high vantage point, Laubser depicts a cropped mountain in close-up view hence diminishing the illusion of pictorial space. The imposing composition of Landscape with Mountain leaves no space for the human subject to act or to move within. The seemingly rushed paint application draws attention to the paint's material nature and, in effect, further flattens the picture plane.

Laubser painted many Oestyd (n.d.) Figure 3.1.12 or harvest paintings that include farm labourers working the land. Due to her own farming background she would have been familiar with the change of seasons and the tasks involved in sowing and harvesting crops. This particular composition was probably painted during the late 1930s, when her use of colours was becoming lighter.<sup>55</sup>

Laubser's harvest paintings depict the labouring class in a highly idealised and reductive way, says Arnold.<sup>56</sup> By simplifying her images of people, in patterns that correspond to the landscape around them, they become part of the pattern of the land. The simplified modelling and deliberate anatomical distortion has the effect of 'transforming them from individuals into symbolic, universal figures'.<sup>57</sup> Thus Laubser emphasises their integral and agricultural function within the landscape, at the expense of depicting them as individuals. By depicting farm labourers in such a generalised way, Laubser is ignoring the social reality of their lives, which was marked by poverty and social dispossession. Her paintings celebrate the virtue of a simple life of honest toil, but fail to acknowledge the black labourers' disempowered role and the reality that they are not cultivating their own land.

In both, Oestyd (n.d.) Figure 3.1.12 and Landscape, Orange Free State (n.d.) Figure 3.1.13, Laubser's figures occupy pictorial, rather than logical space.<sup>58</sup> The figures help to identify the landscape as rural or African in character and, as such, provide local content. However, in Landscape, Orange Free State the figures are too large in terms of the traditional rules of perspective.

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<sup>55</sup> Berman, E., *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 64.

<sup>56</sup> Arnold, M., *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 60.

<sup>57</sup> Berman, E., *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> Arnold, M., *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 60.

According to Marion Arnold and Elza Miles, two prominent writers on South African art, Laubser was 'interested in the capacity of the landscape to convey spiritual beliefs'.<sup>59</sup> During her stay in Belgium in 1919, Laubser was introduced to Christian Science and much of this philosophy informed her work from then onwards. According to Miles, her lifelong commitment to Christian Science is significant because it guided her towards a spiritual expression in her art.<sup>60</sup> Hence Oestyd (n.d.) Figure 3.1.12 and Landscape, Orange Free State (n.d.) Figure 3.1.13 can be interpreted as an expression of Laubser's religious world view.<sup>61</sup> Miles says that whilst Laubser's harvest landscapes cherish life on the farm, they also point to the 'transitory nature of a materialistic life'.<sup>62</sup> This assumption is supported by a revealing annotation on the back of a photograph showing farm labourers harvesting hay. The annotation states: '*God is good and He knows His time*'.<sup>63</sup> Arnold maintains that Laubser perceived the relationship between nature and man as an essentially a 'harmonious exchange of energy' that was mutually supportive.<sup>64</sup>

Exposure to German Expressionism gave Laubser a way to express her religious world-view. Expressionists, such as Franz Marc (1880-1916) and Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), also perceived painting as a spiritual activity and they expressed their spiritual beliefs through symbolic form and colour. Marc believed that animals had a 'purity and communion with nature that man had lost' and 'sought to make art that would lead him to a purer, more harmonious relationship with the world'. Kandinsky wrote in 1920: "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes it visible."<sup>65</sup>

An important aspect of Modernism in Europe and South Africa was a freer and less naturalistic approach to colour. This can be observed in many of Laubser's works, for example Landscape with yellow bushes in a ploughed field (n.d.) Figure 3.1.14. Arnold says that Laubser's palette emphasised the optical and symbolic, rather than

<sup>59</sup> Arnold, M., *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 60.

<sup>60</sup> In Antwerp she received FL Rawson's book *Life Understood*, a guide to spiritual growth based on the teachings of Christian Science. Rawson encourages artists to work continuously due to the spiritual nature of artistic expression: Miles, E., *Liberatory Vision*, p 11.

<sup>61</sup> Arnold, M., *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 60.

<sup>62</sup> Miles, E., *Liberatory Vision*, p 19-22.

<sup>63</sup> Miles, E., *Liberatory Vision*, p 19-22.

<sup>64</sup> Arnold, M., *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 60.

<sup>65</sup> Dempsey, A. *Styles, Schools and Movements*. Thames & Hudson, London (2004) p. 95.

the material or social meaning in her work.<sup>66</sup> Laubser's symbolic use of colour was influenced by German Expressionism. Laubser was also aware of the Fauve artists in France who often applied colour in a seemingly arbitrary, random manner. Fauvism, like Expressionism, insisted on the freedom of the artist to interpret sources in nature in individual ways.

Fauvism was also influential on modern art in its emphasis on two-dimensional picture planes and rhythmical compositions. The use of flat areas of colour emphasises two-dimensional zones, hence rejecting the illusion of depth. Laubser's work shared other visual characteristics with Fauvism, such as simplified drawing, exaggerated forms and bold, contrasting colours.<sup>67</sup>

Opinions about the value and skill of Laubser's artistic contribution underwent extreme shifts over her lifetime. Arnold points out: "Within the context of South Africa, Laubser's modernist paintings assumed a rather paradoxical role. Initially they were transgressive, but once the style was assimilated they were used to sustain wishful thinking about a land of serenity and harmony ... a vision of South Africa to which some viewers wished to subscribe."<sup>68</sup> Once the public was no longer concerned with naturalistic depictions of the land, modernism became better understood as an approach to art in South Africa. But more significantly, Laubser's later success was related to the perception that her paintings depicted South Africa as a harmonious rural space, untarnished by exploitation and abuse.

### **Cecil Skotnes (1926 - 2009)**

Cecil Skotnes was born in East London. Following his military service in Italy, Skotnes studied drawing in Florence for six months. Thereafter he completed a BA Fine Arts degree at the University of Witwatersrand and it was during this time that Skotnes was introduced, by Dr Maria Stein-Lessing, to the study of African art. On a further study tour to Europe he was particularly influenced by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Henry Moore (1898-1986) and in the way in which they incorporated non-European influences into their works. Skotnes went on to become a successful and

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<sup>66</sup> Arnold, M., *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 60.

<sup>67</sup> Dempsey, A., *Styles, Schools and Movements*, p. 75.

<sup>68</sup> Arnold, M., *Women and Art in South Africa*, p. 60.

influential South African artist. In 1976 he received the highest official award in South Africa at the time, the South African Academy of Arts and Science's Medal of Honour and in 2003 Skotnes was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga in Gold by President Thabo Mbeki for 'exceptional achievement in the deracialisation of the arts and for outstanding contributions to the development of black artists'.

Born 40 years after Pierneef and Laubser, Skotnes began his professional career within a more diverse and open-minded artistic climate. Many South African artists, including Skotnes, had been stationed in Italy during the Second World War. This fact, along with access to international air-travel, helped to reduce South Africa's isolation with regard to modern artistic trends. Like other young artists of European stock who had the opportunity to travel and study in Europe, Skotnes was motivated to bring South African art 'into line with international developments' while expressing an artistic identity rooted within the South African context.<sup>69</sup>

The trend towards expressing an African identity in art was supported by a growing appreciation of South Africa's unique geographical, historical and cultural environment. As early as the 1920s, Walter Battiss (1906-1982) found inspiration in copying rock-paintings and engravings, incorporating these indigenous sources into his essentially modern approach.<sup>70</sup> He did this to express his identification with the rock painters, whom he saw as 'sons of Africa', like himself.<sup>71</sup> Alexis Preller (1911-1975) was fascinated by African art objects and sculptures and often depicted these in his works.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Skotnes incorporated forms not typically found in European art, in a way that many art critics interpreted as expressive of an African identity. His landscapes, in particular, have been described by many as capturing 'the spirit of Africa'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 426.

<sup>70</sup> Carman, J. & Isaac, S. (ed.). *Walter Battiss – the Gentle Anarchist*, Standard Bank Studio, Johannesburg (2005) p. 19.

<sup>71</sup> Berman, E., *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 131.

<sup>72</sup> Berman, E., *The Story of South African Painting*, p. 142.

<sup>73</sup> Godby, M. 'A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series and Other Representations of the South African Landscape by Cecil Skotnes', Harmsen, F. (ed.). *Cecil Skotnes*, published for the 1996 Cecil Skotnes Retrospective exhibition at the South African National Gallery, 1996, p. 99.

My analysis of Skotnes' landscapes is guided by Michael Godby's and Neville Dubow's contributions in *Cecil Skotnes*, published for his retrospective exhibition at the South African National Gallery in 1995. Godby states that, despite the widely held view that Skotnes' landscapes capture 'the spirit of Africa', 'this reading seems not to have been encouraged by the artist himself'.<sup>74</sup> Dubow appears to support a cautious interpretation in this regard by saying: "obviously Skotnes has been influenced by African precedent," but that it would be "wrong to overstress the 'African' content in all his work."<sup>75</sup>

Skotnes was certainly very aware of art made by African artists. He collected African art and worked closely with African artists at Polly Street an influential art centre for black urban students in Johannesburg that focused on painting, print making and sculpture.<sup>76</sup> His early career was characterised by his importance as a teacher and from 1952 to 1966 he was the director of Polly Street. It was during this time that Skotnes began to work increasingly from African sources and simplified his imagery into semi-abstract symbols. As a teacher Skotnes introduced his students to the fundamental techniques of Western art and encouraged them to search for inspiration in African art.<sup>77</sup> While he was at Polly Street, Skotnes and his students were given many commissions by the Roman Catholic Church, which allowed his students to gain real work experience.<sup>78</sup>

According to Godby, Skotnes "preferred to discuss his work in the formalist terms of international Modernism" that confirmed "the abstract nature" of his landscapes. Viewed from a modernist perspective, Landscape (c.1969) 3.1.15 shows a strong link to German Expressionism and the prints done by the Die Brücke artists. The composition is rendered in an intentionally flat manner. Abstracted, two-dimensional

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<sup>74</sup> Godby refers to the art critics Harold Jeppe, Hans Fransen and Frieda Harmsen: Godby, M., 'A Reading of the Brandberg', p. 99.

<sup>75</sup> Dubow, N. 'Landscapes of the Mind', Harmsen, F. (ed.). *Cecil Skotnes*, published for the 1996 Cecil Skotnes retrospective exhibition at the South African National Gallery (1996) p. 112.

<sup>76</sup> In 1960 the centre was moved to Jubilee Social Centre. Skotnes resigned in 1966 to concentrate more fully on his own art: Coleman, W. *Art 11 Textbook*, Mind Action Series. Allcopy Publishers, Sanlamhof p. 9.5-9.10.

<sup>77</sup> Coleman W., *Art 11 Textbook*, p. 9.2.

<sup>78</sup> The Roman Catholic Cathedral in Soweto and the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Kroonstad both contain works by Skotnes and Sydney Kumalo (1935-1988) who joined the centre as a student and later became its director. Other important artists taught at the centre include Ephraim Ngatane (1938-1971) and Durant Basi Sihlali (1935-2004): Coleman W., *Art 11 Textbook*, p. 9.5-9.10.

shapes occupy the foreground and the illusion of receding space is successfully negated by the coarsely carved surface texture of the background. The design appears to be archaic and may have been inspired by a combination of sources, including Skotnes' intense interest in ancient history.<sup>79</sup> According to Dubow, the design principles evident in Skotnes' landscapes are not specifically or uniquely African in approach, but are: "almost universally applicable to any linear system of so-called 'primitive' art," which of course, also provided the impetus for Modernism.<sup>80</sup> An important aspect of Skotnes' landscapes is the coming together of European and non-European conventions in art. Skotnes' merging of these diverse influences can be interpreted as a conscious strategy to establish an artistic identity that could express his rootedness within both artistic traditions.

Landscape (c.1969) Figure 3.1.15 is painted on an engraved wood panel. Skotnes initially experimented with the printing technique of wood-engraving during 1955. By the 1960s, Skotnes began to conceive the inked panels as artistic works, independent of their graphic function as printing blocks. He incised and painted panels as images in themselves.<sup>81</sup>

The first engraved panels he exhibited were the negative forms from which his prints were made. In this, Skotnes was encouraged by the art dealer, Egon Guenther, who was an enthusiastic authority on African art and promoted what he termed 'Africanness' among local artists.<sup>82</sup> In 1963 Guenther initiated the formation of the Amadlozi Group, which means 'Spirit of our Father', because he felt that South African artists would have a bigger impact on international art circles if they exhibited their work together. The other four group members were Giuseppe Cattaneo (born 1929), Cecil Sash (born 1925), Sydney Kumalo (1935-1988) and Edoardo Villa (born 1915). They worked independently but jointly strove towards expressing an African character and an African aesthetic quality in their work.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Harmsen, F. (ed.). *Cecil Skotnes*, published for the 1996 Cecil Skotnes Retrospective exhibition at the South African National Gallery (1996) p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> Dubow, N., 'Landscapes of the Mind' p. 112.

<sup>81</sup> Skotnes, P. 'At the Cutting Edge, Cecil Skotnes as a Printmaker', p. 83-89, Harmsen, F. (ed.). *Cecil Skotnes*, published for the 1996 Cecil Skotnes Retrospective exhibition at the South African National Gallery (1996) p.86

<sup>82</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 31.

<sup>83</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 31.

Figure 3.1.16 and Figure 3.1.17 are two of the twelve paintings commissioned for the Brandberg Wall series (1988-92). In these works, Skotnes contrasts warm, earthy tones and saturated orange hues with chalky greys and whites to capture something of the uniqueness of the landscape. His shapes are reminiscent of bleached ocean debris, shells and fossil-forms but they remain essentially unrecognisable.<sup>84</sup> The variegated images and their placement against a negative black background emphasise the flat picture plane and the abstract nature of his landscapes.<sup>85</sup>

Godby points out that Skotnes' working method for the Brandberg Wall series confirms: "the priority of formal, rather than representational concerns."<sup>86</sup> Skotnes went through a lengthy process of modification and abstraction before arriving at his final compositions.<sup>87</sup> After an initial exploration of the landscape and many sketches produced on site in the Kalahari Desert, Skotnes reworked his compositions several times in his studio until they owed at least as much to his sense of design as to the actual landscape.<sup>88</sup>

"The recognition of particular qualities of geology, vegetation, season and atmosphere," means that there is more to Skotnes' abstract compositions, says Godby.<sup>89</sup> As already mentioned, the popular interpretation of Skotnes' landscapes as 'archaic' and 'moulded by ancestor cults' was not confirmed by Skotnes himself.<sup>90</sup> Skotnes painted the Brandberg Wall series in order to pay homage to a pioneer field recorder called Harald Pager.

Costal Landscape (1994) Figure 3.1.18 appears to be a sand dune made up of different planes of colour and viewed from multiple viewpoints. The unconventional perspective in Skotnes' landscapes was undeniably influenced by Paul Cézanne

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<sup>84</sup> Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 428.

<sup>85</sup> Godby, M., 'A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series', p. 99.

<sup>86</sup> Godby, M., 'A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series', p. 100.

<sup>87</sup> Godby, M., 'A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series', p. 99.

<sup>88</sup> Godby, M., 'A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series', p. 99.

<sup>89</sup> Godby, M., 'A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series', p. 105.

<sup>90</sup> Godby, M., 'A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series', p. 99.



(1839-1906), the modern European master of the landscape genre, who promoted the idea that “art could create a harmony parallel to nature,” says Godby.<sup>91</sup>

Skotnes avoids giving descriptive titles that might prompt a more direct interpretation of his landscapes.<sup>92</sup> The titles, Landscape remembering the past 1 (2001) Figure 3.1.19 and Landscape remembering the past 2 (2001) Figure 3.1.20, suggest a more contemplative and possibly a political angle to these works. Both works appear to have figurative qualities. In conversation with Dubow, Skotnes explains that he never consciously incorporated masks into his paintings and that the mask-like shapes were, for him, always ‘head-shapes’. In his Landscape remembering the past 1 Figure 3.1.19 figurative forms are evoked within an overall composition of anthropomorphic and geometric shapes.<sup>93</sup> Besides organic matter, boulders and fossil markings, there seem to be visual traces of masks and bones. As Dubow explains, when describing a similar set of landscapes entitled Head and Figure landscape (1993-95), these works seem to be: “about time, about records, about structures that underlie structures. There are shifts of nuances. Heads become boulders and boulders become headlands.”<sup>94</sup> It is difficult to say whether Skotnes perceived his landscapes as having spiritual meaning. Although he did many religious works for Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, I could find no evidence of his landscapes having any religious or spiritual content.<sup>95</sup>

Foster refers to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the heyday of landscape painting by white artists in South Africa.<sup>96</sup> During this time, representations of nature came to express complex ideals of national pride and national identity, held by white people. This chapter shows how 20<sup>th</sup> Century landscape painters introduced modern European trends to break with the conventions that had governed naturalistic landscape painting during the colonial period. Pierneef, Laubser and Skotnes were born in

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<sup>91</sup> Godby, M., ‘A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series’, p. 107.

<sup>92</sup> Godby, M., ‘A Reading of the Brandberg Wall Series’, p. 107.

<sup>93</sup> Dubow, N., ‘Landscapes of the Mind’, p. 113.

<sup>94</sup> Dubow, N., ‘Landscapes of the Mind’, p. 122.

<sup>95</sup> Examples of Church commissions: Murals in a Kroonstad Cathedral and at the Thabong Location Mission Church in Welkom. Tapestries at the Methodist Church in Durban and at St Anne’s Anglican Church, Piggs Peak, Swaziland.

<sup>96</sup> Foster, J., *Washed with Sun*, p. 180.

South Africa and were interested in defining their own place within the landscape of Africa.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ART, SECTION 2:

### BHENGU AND MGUDLANDLU: LANDSCAPES BY BLACK ARTISTS AND THEIR SEARCH FOR AN AFRICAN IDENTITY

*“When I grew up I thought black people were not allowed to be artists because I didn’t know of any artists in the community – other than musicians.”* David Koloane<sup>1</sup>

Gerard Bhengu (1910-1990) and Gladys Mgudlandlu (1925-1979) were among the first black artists that engaged with the western tradition of landscape painting in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> The idea of painting as a two-dimensional art form was initially a western concept, introduced to South Africa by colonial artists and images of western art, and promoted by western education and the emerging patronage of both black and white audiences in South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Bhengu and Mgudlandlu were both exposed to examples of European art, but they were essentially self-trained. Racial discrimination and Apartheid politics denied black people the opportunity to develop artistic and entrepreneurial skills.<sup>4</sup> As a rule black people did not have access to official government art schools, technikons or universities, so it is not surprising that David Koloane (born 1938) assumed that black people were not allowed to be artists. Although very talented, Bhengu and Mgudlandlu were unable to study art, which may have exposed them to different influences and a range of media and techniques. Like many other black artists, they could not afford to buy expensive art materials or demand professional remuneration for their art. When analysing landscape paintings by black artists it is important to keep in mind the adverse social and political context within which their art emerged.

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<sup>1</sup> David Koloane is an internationally respected contemporary artist. He studied at the Johannesburg Art Foundation from 1973-1977 and at the University of London where he was trained in Museum Studies: Croucamp A. 'Introducing David Koloane' p. 99-113, in McInnes, J. & Koseff, L. (ed) *Compendium of Taxi Art Books Educational Supplements*. David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg (2008) p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> Xakaza says that the word 'black' is used in South Africa to include all non-white racial groups, specifically Africans, Coloureds and Asians: Xakaza, M. M. 'From Bhengu to Makhoba: 'Tradition and Modernity in the Work of Black Artists from KwaZulu-Natal in the Campbell Smith Collection' p. 34-44 in Proud, H. (ed.). *Revisions – Expanding the narratives of SA Art*, Iziko, Cape Town (2006) p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Leeb du Toit, J. 'Bhengu in Context' p. 33-41, in Bell, B. & Clark, B. Exhibition Catalogue, *Gerard Bhengu 1910-1990 A Retrospective Exhibition*, Tatham Art Gallery (1995) p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Croucamp, A., 'Introducing David Koloane', p. 99.

### Gerard Bhengu (1910-1990)

Gerard Bhengu was born and educated at the mission settlement at Centecow in southern KwaZulu Natal. His family belonged to a group of people from the Bhaca clan of the Zulu tribe that had been converted to Catholicism by missionaries.<sup>5</sup> Bhengu's identity was rooted within the Zulu tribe and KwaZulu Natal, Catholicism and the European education he received at the Mariannhill Mission School.<sup>6</sup> The subject matter of his paintings shows his and his patrons' interest in traditional Zulu life and his naturalistic idiom reflects his exposure to western art. At the mission Bhengu was influenced and encouraged by white patrons, who promoted him as an artist but possibly limited his personal development by virtue of their own expectations of him.<sup>7</sup> From the 1930s onwards, Bhengu lived in an urban environment, first in Pietermaritzburg and then in Durban, to promote the sale of his paintings but the rural life of his youth remained the focus of his art. While in Natal, he often sketched people and landscapes directly from nature but later he worked mostly from memory or based his compositions on previous works.<sup>8</sup>

Bhengu's inherent artistic talent was noticed by Dr Max Joseph Kohler (1886-1948), a medical practitioner of German origin, who treated him at the Mariannhill Mission outstation for tuberculosis in 1925.<sup>9</sup> When Bhengu was well again, Kohler offered him a studio space next to his operating theatre and encouraged him to copy European masters, including landscapes, and images from advertising to improve his artistic skills. Kohler was also an amateur ethnologist and author of books on Bhaca and Kuze traditions and culture and he soon employed Bhengu to illustrate these books for him.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Zaverdinos, A. 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography' p. 3-32, in Bell, B. & Clark, B. Exhibition Catalogue, *Gerard Bhengu 1910-1990, A Retrospective Exhibition*, Tatham Art Gallery (1995) p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., 'Bhengu in Context' p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Proud, H. *Revisions – Expanding the narratives of South African Art*, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2006) p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 5.

<sup>9</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 4.

<sup>10</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 4.

The European paintings and drawings that Bhengu copied were based on availability and the vision Kohler had for Bhengu.<sup>11</sup> These images became instrumental in Bhengu's development as an artist and by and large determined his naturalistic and westernised approach to art. In retrospect it is difficult to ascertain Kohler's motivation for generously supporting Bhengu over the course of five years. According to Schlosser, Kohler wanted to demonstrate to whites the degree to which a 'raw native' could achieve artistically.<sup>12</sup> If true, Kohler's attitude could be seen as racially prejudiced, but it did express a belief in the black man's abilities that was not the norm at the time. Kohler investigated the possibility of art tuition for Bhengu at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg but it was unsuccessful.<sup>13</sup> At one point Kohler persuaded Bhengu to sign his paintings with the more Germanic sounding name of 'Bhenger', in the hope that such an intervention would disguise his race to potential buyers and promote sales.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to his early book illustrations of Zulu life, Bhengu is well known for his naturalistic portraits of Zulu people in traditional attire and his ability to render facial details with psychological insight.<sup>15</sup> Most of Bhengu's portraits are painted in watercolour and sepia ink on paper, largely because he could not manage to pay for expensive art materials but possibly also due to the popularity of photographs printed in sepia.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, many of Bhengu's landscape paintings are painted in colour and show his skill in creating a convincing illusion of space and atmospheric depth.<sup>17</sup>

From 1942 onwards the amateur ethnographer, Dr Killie Campbell, bought many of Bhengu's paintings for her Africana collection, a private collection that focuses on the

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<sup>11</sup> Art books and copies of art works, especially colour copies, were not easily available in South Africa at this time. According to Zaverdinos, Kohler gave Bhengu "advice and academic art prototypes to copy, including European old masters, paintings of Madonnas and European landscapes, as well as various advertising images: Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 4.

<sup>13</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 9.

<sup>14</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 7.

<sup>15</sup> Bhengu's contributions to Kohler's texts were regarded as having the quality of a reliable cultural document. "Bhengu's work was also included in several of Kohler's ethnological dissertations. These appeared in the Yearbook – he made for example records of facial markings of the Baca for Yearbook 1931 (cf cat.44) and two publications of the Union of South Africa's Department of Native Affairs: 'Marriage Customs of southern Natal' and 'The Izangoma Diviners': Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 7.

<sup>16</sup> Bell, B. & Clark, B. Exhibition Catalogue, *Gerard Bhengu 1910-1990 A Retrospective Exhibition*, Tatham Art Gallery (1995) p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Proud, H., *Revisions*, p. 66.

art of black artists.<sup>18</sup> These images reflect Campbell's and Bhengu's interest in preserving traditional Zulu culture at a time when it was rapidly disappearing. Valley landscape with stream Figure 3.2.1 is part of the Campbell-Smith Collection. This landscape could be mistaken for a colonial landscape painted by a white artist of the time. It reflects a 'picturesque' and naturalistic approach to landscape painting, similar to that of early British colonial artists such as Bowler and Baines.<sup>19</sup> The composition is skilfully balanced. Bhengu has made use of aerial perspective to achieve the impression of a spacious, sparsely inhabited country. The fertile foreground gives the impression of an inviting liveable space, whereas the rhythmically composed hills in the background are progressively smaller and bluer and hence recede spatially.

Generally speaking, white and black patrons admired the standards of the British art academies even when commissioning or purchasing South African art and hence favoured a naturalistic approach to art.<sup>20</sup> Although modernism had become more acceptable in South Africa by the 1940s, in Natal most art buyers were conservative and preferred naturalistic renditions of the local landscape. When Bhengu was eventually exposed to modern trends he remained uninfluenced by them and in fact, he set a strong precedent for naturalism among black artists in KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>21</sup>

Fighting the fire Figure 3.2.2 depicts a monochromatic scene with African huts and small figures fighting a fire. The dramatic tonal contrast seems to reinforce the painting's archaic 'African' content and the fire's elemental power. The huts in particular, serve to "reinforce the notion of Africa as 'Other', that is, not modernised and industrialized", says Xakaza.<sup>22</sup> Active figures fighting fires was a frequently repeated theme of Bhengu's from the late 1920s onwards. He believed that fires were purifying, in the sense of rooting out the old and allowing the new to flourish.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Proud, H., *Revisions*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> The term 'picturesque' is defined on p. 22 of this text.

<sup>20</sup> Proud, H., *Revisions*, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Arthur Buthezi and Simon Mnguni were also both self-taught and worked in a naturalistic style.

<sup>22</sup> Xakaza, M. M., *Revisions* p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 4.

Most of Bhengu's work shows his intimate knowledge of traditional Zulu life, based on his tribal and cultural background. In Tribal dance Figure 3.2.3 Bhengu seems to depict an authentic, pre-colonial way of life. Bhengu's detailed rendering of Zulu huts, traditions, costumes and significant objects shows the same innate attention to detail that Kohler had first encouraged in the drawings for his ethnological texts, as well as Kohler's Germanic ideas of Africa as a fascinating antithesis to western modernity.<sup>24</sup> While ideas of Africa as a pure and harmonious place had contributed to the emergence of Expressionism in Germany, similar ideas caused many patrons and artists in Africa to document the open landscape and the indigenous lifestyle of black people as if unaffected by Western influences.<sup>25</sup> Features such as semi-nakedness characterise the degree to which these figures are to be seen as traditionally African.<sup>26</sup>

Although Tribal dance Figure 3.2.3 is not a landscape, it is included here to show how Bhengu integrates African subject matter and western conventions. A detailed depiction of traditional Zulu life was welcomed by black thinkers of the time, in particular Herbert Dhlomo (1903-1956) and Reginald Rolfes Dhlomo. These intellectuals saw themselves as part of a 'new generation' of black people that had selectively absorbed European education, culture and religion in a way that it allowed them to redefine themselves, free of past interpretations by powerful or more articulate white people. The Dhlomo brothers promoted the idea of a national South African art and saw Bhengu as a 'genius', 'equipped in every way to equal the achievements of his white counterparts', while creating an authentic local art.<sup>27</sup> The recording of traditional life was also supported by the contemporary Zulu poet, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947), who encouraged all Africans, especially the Zulu, never to forget their heritage, 'in the face of unremitting cultural transformation'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., 'Bhengu in Context' p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Proud, H., *Revisions*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Proud, H., *Revisions*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., 'Bhengu in Context' p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., 'Bhengu in Context' p. 34.

Depicting rural life was a central theme of many pioneer black painters in Natal.<sup>29</sup> While many artists and patrons supported the recoding and preservation of tribal costumes and Zulu heritage, others saw all “attempts to preserve an artificial ‘tribalism’” in art and politics as a threat to black unity and empowerment. Negative emotions towards the promotion of ethnicity were stirred by the Native Administration Bill of 1927, which put tribal chiefs in charge of all Africans. This was not only seen as a regression to a ‘tribal’ structure from the past, it also denied the black urban ‘elite’ access to western identities.<sup>30</sup> In retrospect, the emphasis on ethnicity promoted by the Native Administration Bill can be seen as a divide-and rule strategy and a precursor to apartheid and the implementation of ‘homelands’ or Bantustans in the 1970s based on tribal identity.<sup>31</sup>

Landscape with huts Figure 3.2.4 shows a peaceful and seemingly secluded, green landscape that reflects nothing of the poverty in Natal, the Land Acts and the broader political climate that prevented black people from living, owning land, running businesses or working without permission outside of land designated for their race. Although this landscape appears to be documentary, it is idealised in the way it excludes evidence of poverty and western influence brought to black communities in Natal. Far from being drawn to rural areas, many Africans tried to escape the dire poverty and lack of political and economic opportunities there.<sup>32</sup>

In hindsight, it is difficult to ascertain Bengu’s reasons for excluding evidence of European influence from his landscapes. Landscapes, such as Landscape with huts Figure 3.2.4 may have been the result of instructions given to him by patrons interested in an idealised ‘authentic-looking’ Africa. Patrons were often prescriptive, and canalised promising black artistic talents based on their own preferences, says

<sup>29</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., ‘Bhengu in Context’ p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., ‘Bhengu in Context’ p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> The Native Administration Bill of 1927 is now seen as a precursor to the 1970 Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act that forced all black people to become citizens of one of the Bantustans even if a person’s whole life had been spent in a white area of the country. “The Bantustans were supposed to provide a political home for Africans, to accommodate African political aspirations, and so to serve as a counter to the charge that apartheid represented a system of minority rule that denied political participation to the black majority”, says Maylam. The Bantustans were essentially “dumping grounds for African people removed from the white rural and urban areas because they were deemed to be surplus to labour requirements in those areas”: Maylam P., ‘Chapter 6 Apartheid’, p. 179-204, *South Africa’s Racial Past: The History and Historiography of Racism, Segregation and Apartheid*, Publisher (2002) p. 181.

<sup>32</sup> Maylam P., ‘Chapter 6 Apartheid’, p. 181.



Zaverdinos.<sup>33</sup> Alternatively Bhengu's landscape paintings can be read as a celebration of traditional Zulu life and a claim to a black identity rooted within the land and the pre-colonial traditions of the Zulu people. By not depicting white people and western culture (roads, housing, modern technology, cars etc.), Bhengu visually banished whites from his landscapes. This makes for an interesting comparison with Pierneef, who rarely showed black people or black culture in his paintings. In his landscapes Pierneef claimed the depicted space for his people and promoted an Afrikaner identity rooted within the uniqueness of the landscape of the Northern Transvaal. Bhengu pictorially restores the land of the Zulu to its original beauty and its owners, based on similar ideals of a national South African art and pride in his culture.

As in Landscape with Zulu huts and figures Figure 3.2.5, many of Bhengu's landscapes show rural Zulu people living in harmonious relationship with nature. In this Bhengu's images speak of a paradise lost due to western interference and notions of western progress.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, his landscapes are similar to the landscapes of many colonial artists, including Bowler and Baines that depicted rural Africa as an unchanging 'wilderness'. In his insistence on traditional imagery, Bhengu's landscape paintings could be interpreted as perpetuating an image of Africa as rural, lacking in urbanisation and industrial growth. In this his landscapes seem to reflect a colonial notion of a culturally preserved or natural Africa, not yet exploited and changed by western influences but also not changing or transforming itself.<sup>35</sup>

According to Ozynski, landscapes with ethnic or tribal African imagery were popular in black and white circles for different reasons. Images of tribal life were enjoyed by black audiences because they 're-established an ethnic identity for the dispossessed and de-tribalised artist' and his black audience.<sup>36</sup> For a white audience in denial about the tragic discrimination suffered by black people, these pictures may have been comforting, because they do not confront them with the sad loss of traditional

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<sup>33</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., 'Bhengu in Context' p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> Proud, H., *Revisions*, p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> Ozynski cited in Leeb du Toit, J., 'Bhengu in Context' p. 37-38.

Zulu culture caused by white rule. Issues of poverty, violence and loss of black identity, caused by discrimination and Apartheid become the focus of urban 'Township Art' and Resistance Art.<sup>37</sup>

Connected to ideals of ethnically-based imagery promoted by the state, was the idea that the true black artist must be 'unspoiled' by European ideas about art and must preferably develop his style independently, in the absence of formal western training. Based on such misguided ideas – that amount to racial discrimination - Bhengu was prevented from studying Fine Art. He was told that he would be better to 'develop his own techniques' by Professor Oxley, head of Fine Art at Natal Technical College where he had applied for further studies.<sup>38</sup> Herbert Dhlomo criticised the "false and dangerous theory that to train Africans through and by 'western' methods spoils their 'natural' talent" and demanded that black artists should have equal access to education and training.<sup>39</sup> The belief that black artists have natural abilities that are unique and should not be interfered with by European standards proved to be detrimental to black artists as it excluded them from accessing training, recognition and financial success within the art establishment. In Bhengu's case the argument was particularly illogical, since he had completely assimilated European techniques and compositions prior to applying for further studies.

"The pioneers of apartheid promoted the false perception of black intellectual inferiority". "The Bantu Education Act (1954) and Extension of University Education Act (1959) were passed by Parliament to centralise and control the type of education black people might receive...The Act also clamped down on the alternative education mission schools offered to black people. This quote from the prime minister of the time, D F Malan, shows the manipulative ideology of Bantu Education: Racial relations cannot improve if the result of Native education is the creation of frustrated people who, as a result of the education they received, have expectations in life which circumstances in South Africa do not allow to be fulfilled immediately, when it creates people trained for professions not open to them."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Leeb du Toit, J., 'Bhengu in Context' p. 37-38.

<sup>38</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p. 10-11.

<sup>40</sup> Hobbs, P. (ed.). *Artist's Career Resource*, Heinemann, Sandton (2005) p. 6.

Analysing Bhengu's landscapes within the historical, cultural and political context of white domination raises issues regarding conformity and personal choice in the art of black artists. On the one hand Bhengu was a very talented artist who had benefited greatly from his exposure to European prototypes, and on the other hand his style may have been determined largely by the necessity of pleasing more economically powerful patrons. Viewed in this way, Bhengu's westernised idiom may have developed from necessity rather than from artistic preference.<sup>41</sup> Irrespective of his motivation, Bhengu proved Kohler correct in that a 'raw native' could be talented but more importantly, Bhengu created images of 'Zululand' that preserve and celebrate the cultural past of its people.<sup>42</sup>

### **Gladys Mgudlandlu (1925-1979)**

In my analysis of Gladys Mgudlandlu I have been guided by Elza Miles' book *Nomfanekiso: Who Paints at Night, The Art of Gladys Mgudlandlu*, which tells the life story of this exceptionally determined artist. A large part of Elza Miles' project is to recuperate black artists. This is an important book for every school library.

Mgudlandlu had a traditional Xhosa upbringing in the Eastern Cape. Little is known of her early life and the date of her birth is uncertain. It is now generally assumed that Mgudlandlu was born in 1925 but Miles claims that she was born in 1917 in the Peddie district near Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. Her grandmother was a strong influence on her development as an artist. She educated Mgudlandlu in the traditions and arts of Fingo and Xhosa cultures and taught her how to paint murals using feathers, stalks and naturally-coloured clays found in the vicinity of her village.<sup>43</sup>

Landscape with wildebeest (1960) Figure 3.2.6 shows a landscape far removed from the urban environment of Cape Town and Mgudlandlu's life in the townships of Athlone in the early 1960s. Critics seem to agree that throughout her life, Mgudlandlu's main inspiration stemmed from her childhood experience in the Peddie district and her knowledge of Xhosa fairy tales and indigenous mural painting.

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<sup>41</sup> Proud, H., *Revisions*, p. 35-37.

<sup>42</sup> Zaverdinos, A., 'Gerard Bhengu: A Biography', p 4.

<sup>43</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night, The Art of Gladys Mgudlandlu*, Fernwood Press, Johannesburg (2002) p. 7.

In Landscape with wildebeest the rolling hills, pointed mountains and purplish-blue wildebeest take on a dreamlike quality. When asked about her work, Mgudlandlu explained that her memory embraced a “deep well of inspiration ... calling up the mysterious and fascinating images of her childhood”. The paint appears to have been applied in quick, generous movements, as if “the sweep of her stroke carried the ancient process of preparing wall surfaces for decoration” says Miles. The colours are murky, and in that sense, similar to the coloured clay used for Xhosa wall painting.<sup>44</sup>

Mgudlandlu was educated as a teacher at the Teachers’ Training College at Lovedale, but only started teaching about five years later. From 1943-1944, she was registered for general nursing at the Victoria Hospital in Port Elizabeth and after that she nursed for four years at the Brooklyn Chest Hospital in Cape Town. When a fractured leg made nursing difficult, she started teaching at Athlone Bantu Community School where she was a primary school teacher for 15 years.<sup>45</sup> She was passionate about teaching art and her learners excelled in art competitions. When she was interviewed in the Cape Argus in 1971 about her teaching methods, “she replied that she had none – she simply gave the learners the necessary materials and told them to start. Each one approached the task in his or her own way and she was there just to help them make it better”.<sup>46</sup> Miles adds that Mgudlandlu also encouraged her pupils to experiment with different scrap materials.<sup>47</sup>

Most of Mgudlandlu’s adult life was spent in Cape Town. She started taking art classes in Rondebosch while nursing and she painted at home during her teaching career. As an artist Mgudlandlu embraced the same adventurous artistic spirit that she encouraged in her learners. She experimented with different art materials, such as gouache, pen, ink and oil, and worked in a spontaneous and intuitive manner. She often painted all through the night, by the light of a paraffin lamp, “to give

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<sup>44</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Miles, E. *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> *The Cape Argus*, 4 January 1971, cited in Miles, E. *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Miles, E. *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 14.

expression in vivid colours to her visions and dreams”, hence she was given the nickname Nomfanekiso, says Miles.<sup>48</sup>

Starting with her début in Cape Town in 1961 to her last solo exhibition in 1972, Mgudlandlu’s art featured frequently in the media and she enjoyed ten years of fame and good fortune.<sup>49</sup> After 1972 her work fell into oblivion, says Miles.<sup>50</sup> Mgudlandlu did not paint or work during the last eight years of her life, due to a serious injury sustained in a car accident and her death on 17 February 1979 went unnoticed in the press.<sup>51</sup>

Aided by white patrons who bought her paintings, Mgudlandlu had her first exhibition at the offices of the Liberal Party in Cape Town in 1961.<sup>52</sup> Up to 1967, Jean Ra’hel Fuchs was one of Mgudlandlu’s most influential admirers and supporters. She organised three successful solo exhibitions for Mgudlandlu at the Rodin Gallery in Cape Town, where she was Director. Fuchs also organised her débuts in Port Elizabeth and in Johannesburg.<sup>53</sup> Mgudlandlu’s success as a painter coincided with a particularly turbulent and violent time in South African history. In 1960, violence erupted all over the country when the nationwide campaign of civil disobedience was ruthlessly quashed by the Nationalist government. Government repression culminated in the Sharpeville massacre, in which policemen killed 69 unarmed demonstrators.<sup>54</sup>

Landscape (1960) Figure 3.2.7 reflects none of the current violent political upheavals. It shows a view of Sea Point from an elevated perspective. Shapes and colours have been simplified and adapted to emphasise the city’s built-up nature. Cape Town is depicted as an urban warren of cone-shaped houses, similar in shape to the Xhosa huts in many of her paintings of the Eastern Cape. Her depiction of Table Mountain is sharp and angular, reminiscent of the Amatola mountain range in the Eastern Cape. A sense of aerial perspective is evoked by the stylised houses

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<sup>48</sup> Miles, E. *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 41.

<sup>49</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, Introduction.

<sup>53</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, Introduction.

that get smaller and lighter towards the middle of the painting. Her use of perspective is based on intuition rather than on an academic application of linear perspective. Mgudlandlu's expressive style is also reflected in her non-naturalistic use of predominantly blue and red colours.

Encouraged by one of her patrons, Ray Alexander-Simons, the first national secretary of the Federation of South African Women, Mgudlandlu painted the houses in Nyanga, where she lived.<sup>55</sup> Mgudlandlu made several oil paintings of Nyanga and Guguletu using similar artistic devices to those employed in Landscape (1960). She called the houses in her township surroundings 'pondokkies' and said that she loved 'pondokkies' and that she had spent many years living in just such houses.<sup>56</sup> In Nyanga landscape (1962) Figure 3.2.8 the township dwellings appear unstable in their placement on sand dunes. The mountain range in the background is characteristic of many of her landscapes and could symbolise the nurturing aspects of the earth, in that they are shaped like women's breasts. Many of Mgudlandlu's paintings include shadowy figures that accompany the people. According to Miles the shadows could perhaps indicate that the ancestors are still present, guarding the townspeople.<sup>57</sup>

Nyanga landscape Figure 3.2.8 depicts the cramped conditions that spatial segregation imposed on people living in black townships.<sup>58</sup> "In the 1960s territorial segregation came to be implemented with new zeal and ruthlessness by the apartheid government. The implemented removals programme brought about the coerced relocation of about 3.5 million people, virtually all of whom were black," says Maylam.<sup>59</sup> In the urban areas black people were forcibly relocated to overcrowded, racially defined townships that were lacking in basic infrastructure and work opportunities. Due to spatial segregation and the Bantu Education Act of 1953, Mgudlandlu had to move from her residence in Athlone and her place of employment

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<sup>55</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p.8.

<sup>56</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> Maylam explains, "Spatial apartheid ... was integral to the Bantustan system. The aim, albeit an impossible one, was to achieve a correspondence between racialised political differentiation and racialised special separation." The Land Acts laid the legal foundation for rural and urban special separation: Maylam P. 'Chapter 6 Apartheid', p. 180-181.

<sup>59</sup> Maylam P., 'Chapter 6 Apartheid', p. 181.

at the Athlone Bantu Community School to live and teach in the 'black' townships of Nyanga and Guguletu.<sup>60</sup>

Although Mgudlandlu experienced racial discrimination and hardship, her work is not overtly political. In 1963 Bessie Head called Mgudlandlu 'an escapist' who ignored the injustices suffered by the blacks in a country where 'life and reality meant ninety-day detention and banning orders and bang, bang, bang...'.<sup>61</sup> Mgudlandlu did not depict the violence that erupted in the 1960s, the forced removals or the abject poverty in the township of Nyanga, but continued to have strong opinions about art and art education. In 1962, *The Evening Post* reported her as saying: "If more people in the world were artists, there would be more peace and understanding. They would speak the language of art, admire nature and beauty, and not seek to destroy."<sup>62</sup> Instead of representing the hardships of the black people under Apartheid, Mgudlandlu's landscape paintings celebrate the lifestyle and cultural heritage of the Xhosa people. In this way she promoted a positive image of black people at a time when black people's culture and dignity was under severe attack by the Nationalist government.

Many of Mgudlandlu's works are "infused ... with some kind of spiritual content," says Dubow.<sup>63</sup> The Fall (c.1960) Figure 3.2.9 depicts a biblical scene, that of the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Mgudlandlu's grandparents and parents were members of the independent African Methodist Episcopal Church and religion formed an important part of Mgudlandlu's life. According to Sheila Sontange, a fellow teacher from the Mseki Junior Primary School in Guguletu, Mgudlandlu encouraged her learners to pray at school.<sup>64</sup> Her grandmother initiated Mgudlandlu into the tradition of story-telling and many of her paintings tell a story with a moral message. The Fall could be interpreted as a contemporary warning against evil deeds.

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<sup>60</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Head, B. 1963, cited in Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> *The Evening Post*, 24 November 1962 cited in Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night*, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Dubow, N., *The Cape Argus*, 19 November 1963, cited in Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 36.

<sup>64</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 15.

In Cape Town Mgudlandlu would have been exposed to modern trends and attitudes towards art. Landscape (1961) Figure 3.2.10 shows Mgudlandlu's ability to simplify and arrange organic shapes in an interesting and original way. A limited range of colours creates a shallow composition with striking flowers in the foreground. Bold shapes are rhythmically composed into a landscape that is immediately recognisable as local. Her sketchy paint application and her use of emotive and decorative colours correspond with early 20<sup>th</sup> century trends in Europe. Several art critics have attempted to link Mgudlandlu's style to the European prototypes of German Expressionism and Fauvism.<sup>65</sup>

Mgudlandlu particularly admired Maggie Laubser's expressionistic work. In 1963 Cilliers wrote in The Cape Times newspaper, "her way of painting does suggest something of those movements ... The difference lies in the attempt of these European artists to break with a tradition; Gladys Mgudlandlu, on the other hand, has no painting tradition to break with. She is creating her own rules ..." <sup>66</sup> Although Mgudlandlu was not directly exposed to German Expressionism, her use of bold shapes and colours place her within Expressionism. In 1967, Miles writes in the Cape Argus magazine that "Mgudlandlu's work does not lend itself to pigeonholing," but that "she is primarily an expressionist."<sup>67</sup>

Landscape with aloes (1966) Figure 3.2.11 and Landscape (1962) Figure 3.2.12 show brightly flowering aloes arranged in rhythmical patterns. Mgudlandlu painted spontaneously and quickly, frequently finishing several paintings in one evening. In preparation for her exhibition at the Arts Hall in Port Elizabeth, she took a month's leave of absence from teaching and painted fifty paintings in one month!<sup>68</sup> The pattern-like repetition of shapes and colours lend a strong sense of design to these works.

Mgudlandlu's artistic life was characterised by great contrasts. From painting as a hobby, she was propelled into the limelight by the support of white patrons who

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<sup>65</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 37

<sup>66</sup> Cilliers, A., *The Cape Times*, 20 November 1963, cited in Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 37.

<sup>67</sup> Miles, E., *The Cape Argus magazine*, 5 August 1967, cited in *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 36.



organised exhibition spaces and bought her art. Between 1961 and 1971, at a time when it was difficult for black artists to gain public exposure and recognition, Mgudlandlu was celebrated as a distinguished Xhosa artist. Nearly 200 people attended her exhibition at the Rodin Gallery in 1962, where she sold 58 out of the 76 paintings on show.<sup>69</sup> Her exhibitions at the Rodin Gallery, in 1963 and 1967 were filmed and screened in cinemas across South Africa.<sup>70</sup> In addition to teaching and painting, she also talked and lectured on art to a wider audience.<sup>71</sup>

Mgudlandlu was essentially a self-taught artist, and a 'Sunday-painter' in the truest sense of the word.<sup>72</sup> She was a teacher by day, with classes of up to 50 learners, and a painter by night. She told a reporter, "I paint from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. ... I get shadows in the light of this paraffin lamp and I develop my pictures from these."<sup>73</sup> She also sometimes painted in front of her house.<sup>74</sup> To avoid the usual artist classifications such as 'Impressionist' or 'Expressionist', Mgudlandlu described herself as a 'Dreamer-Imagunist'.<sup>75</sup>

Bhengu and Mgudlandlu were both severely affected by the pervasive political, social and cultural disenfranchisement of black people during apartheid. Although working in very different styles, their art became noticed for its apparent African quality by white and black patrons who bought their art and supported them financially. Even though Mgudlandlu was hailed as 'The African Queen' by journalists and Bhengu was well respected as a 'Zulu Painter' by his patrons and friends in Natal, both artists remained poor.<sup>76</sup>

Colonialism and Apartheid politics were based on the premise that white and black people are fundamentally different and thus have different needs and capabilities. An important part of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century ethnology was to notice and record racial differences. Teachers are in a privileged position to expose pupils to ideas that may help to break down entrenched notions of racial difference that many learners hold.

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<sup>69</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 20.

<sup>72</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 14.

<sup>73</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 14.

<sup>74</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Miles, E., *Nomfanekiso; Who Paints at Night*, p.27.

Apartheid officially ended in 1994 but it will take a long time to eradicate the inequalities of the past, yet alone to change deeply entrenched racial attitudes that are still part of school life. As a teacher I would use this opportunity to question notions of difference between races by contrasting colonial and Apartheid notions of difference with a recent statement issued by UNESCO:<sup>77</sup>

“All people of the world are in fact of mixed blood, and scientific research has shown that no group is better equipped than any other as far as intelligence is concerned. Differences in culture and economics may provide different groups with different opportunities, but with the right opportunities most individuals can choose which aspects of their personality and intelligence to develop. Race is an invented category. It is difficult to define any ‘race’ using scientific evidence. Some have used common physical characteristics as an indicator of race, others claim to define race according to genes (found in a person’s DNA) that certain groups share in common... Depending on what you use as an indicator of race, contradictory conclusions will be reached. Many scholars are beginning to recognise that classifying people according to race is a fool’s game. Besides, scientists have shown that there are more genetic differences between individuals within one so-called ‘racial-group’ than there are between so-called ‘races’.”<sup>78</sup>

During Apartheid, racism was promoted by two ideas associated with racial science, says Maylam. “One was the crude notion of white superiority and black inferiority.” White political domination was based on this notion. The second idea, loosely based on biblical evidence and scientific research of the time, claimed that ‘racial differences were real and fixed, and that biological and cultural diversity coincided’.<sup>79</sup> In other words, black people were categorised as inferior and inherently culturally different, based entirely on the pigmentation of their skin, irrespective of upbringing, education or cultural exposure.

Racism permeated every aspect of society. Black artists and their art were negatively affected by racist thought, as was every other aspect of a black person’s life in South Africa. Race determined where an artist could live, whether he or she

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<sup>77</sup> United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation that encourages international peace and universal respect by promoting collaboration among nations: [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)

<sup>78</sup> Liebhammer, Nessa . *Art from the African Continent*, Heinemann, Sandton (2005) p. 53.

<sup>79</sup> Maylam P., ‘Chapter 6 Apartheid’, p. 187.

could receive a higher education and qualify as an artist and whether he or she could participate fully in the art market.

Early black artists working in a western style had an important but difficult role within a political environment that disadvantaged black people and black artists. Both Bhengu and Mgudlandlu benefited from white patrons that noticed their talent and promoted them in white circles. Racism also determined the expectations of art buyers. Black artists, catering for a white market were under pressure to create art that conformed to expectations of 'black art', especially in terms of subject matter. Even though Bhengu and Mgudlandlu were mission-educated and engaged with landscape painting as a western tradition, they were unable to achieve equal remuneration or recognition to that of white artists and remained marginalised during their lifetime.

Before 1994 few black artists became known to a broader audience and even fewer managed to earn a living from their art. As a teacher, you will have probably noticed that there is still not much information available on the black artists of this time, by comparison with information on white artists. Much of what has been written about the art of black artists has been researched and compiled more recently, in an effort to restore these artists to their rightful place in South Africa's history of art.

## **20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ART, SECTION 3:**

### **SIOPIS AND KENTRIDGE: RESISTANCE ART AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

In South Africa Resistance Art developed as a form of protest against the pervasive social and political disenfranchisement of black South Africans. It supported the intensified political initiatives, rallies and demonstrations of the 1970s and 1980s by drawing attention to issues of injustice, inequality and racially motivated violence within South African society. This section looks at landscape paintings by Penny Siopis (born 1953) and William Kentridge (born 1955) that challenged the Apartheid state's political paradigm. In my classroom, I introduce this section by looking at South Africa's present Bill of Rights. This Bill amongst other things, highlights human dignity, equality, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of movement and freedom of trade, none of which existed during Apartheid. It shocks learners to discover the extent to which basic human rights, even the right to life and the right to citizenship were absent in South Africa before 1994. In my experience, today's learners know little about life during apartheid. When learners are asked to interview family members about their experiences during Apartheid, the brutalities and absurdities of the Apartheid regime often become more real and believable to them.

#### **Penny Siopis (born 1953)**

Penny Siopis was born in Vryburg in the Northern Cape in 1953 and studied Fine Art at Rhodes University and at the Portsmouth Polytechnic in England. She taught at Natal Technikon for four years and then at the University of Witwatersrand, where she was a professor of Fine Art until recently. Siopis is an active and well-recognised artist and intellectual with a political and social conscience. She has curated a number of exhibitions and has been involved in several community projects. Siopis has exhibited extensively in South Africa and abroad and has received numerous awards.<sup>1</sup>

Siopis had an advantaged 'white' suburban upbringing and studied Fine Art at a time when art institutions were still mainly the preserve of whites. She acknowledges her

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<sup>1</sup> Liebhammer, N. *Art from the African Continent*, Heinemann, Sandton (2005) p. 52.

privileged background and the National Party's propaganda that defined her upbringing during Apartheid, by saying “we were brought up on those stereotypical images of colonised and colonisers.”<sup>2</sup> South African history books of the time described pre-colonial South Africa as an unoccupied land waiting to be discovered. This oversimplified and skewed interpretation of history claimed South Africa as a white domain and described Khoi/San and black people as primitive nomads with no legitimate claim to the land.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1980s Siopis painted a series of large scale works entitled ‘history paintings’, in which she challenges the idea that European colonisation brought progress and benefit to Africa. By questioning South Africa’s history of colonialism she also challenges the Apartheid regime’s claim to the land, a controversial issue at the time. These works date one to two years before Mandela was released and the ANC was unbanned. It could be said that Siopis’ history paintings anticipate the changed values of a liberated and democratic South Africa, still burdened with its past, but looking at history from a more inclusive and indigenous perspective.

Patience on a monument – A history painting (1988) Figure 3.3.1 and Piling wreckage upon wreckage (1989) Figure 3.3.2 are similar in that both paintings depict a wide open space viewed from a distant perspective, inhabited by a black female figure. In both paintings the title is significant in revealing something about the artworks intended allegorical or hidden symbolic meanings. Siopis explains that at the time as “it seemed difficult to reflect the catastrophic nature of our history other than through allegory,” because allegory lends itself to the expression of deep and passionate emotions.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically by calling Patience on a monument – A history painting (1988) Figure 3.3.1, Siopis consciously links her work to emotionally charged debates about South Africa’s historical past, as well as to the grand tradition of history painting, the

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<sup>2</sup> Williamson, S., *Resistance Art in South Africa*. David Philip, Cape Town (1989) p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Williamson, S., *Resistance Art in South Africa*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, S., *Resistance Art in South Africa*, p. 20.

highest category of painting in traditional Western art. The term, history painting, derives from the Latin *historia* ('story' or 'narrative') and is applied to large paintings representing actual, legendary, or literary historical events.<sup>5</sup> This line of reasoning is further enforced by the idea of a monument to history. A monument, like a history painting, usually represents something of lasting moral and historical value. For this reason, history paintings and public monuments traditionally show significant figures involved in heroic deeds. Although Siopis' 'history paintings' are executed on the large scale that is traditionally reserved for history paintings, her interpretation of the theme subverts any notions of grandeur.

Unlike traditional South African history paintings that idealise the history of conquest and colonisation, Siopis does not use the genre of history painting to glorify a specific important historical event or political power. Instead, she gives us a tactile and visually engaging central image of an ordinary black woman sitting on a pile of rubble, peeling a lemon (an ordinary household task). The heap that the figure is placed on turns out to be a jumbled up collection of objects and artworks of Western or European origin, including sculptures, paintings, ornaments and household objects. On closer examination the land behind the figure is not empty and spacious like the land depicted by early colonial artists. Instead, the background is made up of hundreds of tiny images representing colonial history. To understand the paintings meaning, 'your eye must travel the surface' of images and layered paint.<sup>6</sup> Depicted are scenes of adventurers, treaties, battles, missionaries, Boers, black warriors, slaves, British redcoats and Voortrekkers.<sup>7</sup> These images are collaged pictures which the artist has torn and cut out of contemporary South African history books and then painted over.

When looking at a landscape from a distant point of observation, in the way colonial artists or tourists would survey the land, it often appears to be empty and devoid of human drama. Living within the land is different to looking at it from the outside. For the insider, embodied in the figure of 'Patience', an ordinary black woman, the accumulative dramas of colonial exploration, battles, treaties and land claims have

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<sup>5</sup> Chilvers, I. (ed.). *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, Oxford University Press, New York (2003) p. 282.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, K. (ed.). *Penny Siopis*, Goodman Gallery Educations, Johannesburg (2005) p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, S., *Resistance Art in South Africa*, p. 20.

brought her to her present position. As an insider, she cannot walk away from the scene that is her life, as one “can walk away from a framed picture or a tourist viewpoint” says Andrews.<sup>8</sup>

The background images and the heap of broken debris signify a historical past that defines and limits the role of black women and black people in South Africa, because at this point in time social and political roles are still built on the ‘monuments’ of Western culture. During Apartheid black employees would often adopt an additional Western name, such as Patience, because many white employers and government officials could not pronounce the traditional African names. Patience was a commonly used name for domestic workers and could symbolise the attribute of patience, often accredited to black women.

In Penny Siopis’ Piling wreckage upon wreckage (1989) Figure 3.3.2, objects and fragments of furniture are placed in a vaguely triangular composition, reminiscent of classical art, but lacking formality and balance. The composition creates the impression of a mountain, a river or a flood of objects. Aerial perspective has been applied to enhance the illusion of a receding, yet ambiguous space, as there is no horizon to demarcate the congested area. Siopis uses the Western tradition of illusionism to create an environment that is convincingly realistic but simultaneously strange and inhuman. The artificial and theatrical mood is enhanced by saturated colours and thickly applied paint.

The black female figure stands either on top or at the source of the pile or flood of objects. She is dressed in a manner reminiscent of Liberty leading the people (1830) Figure 3.3.3 by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) Unlike Delacroix’s heroine that leads the French Revolution of the people, Siopis’ female figure almost blends into the landscape composition. Like her counterpart in Patience on a monument - A history painting (1988) Figure 3.3.2 her demeanour is plain and anti-heroic. She is

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<sup>8</sup> Andrews M., *Landscape and Western Art*, Oxford University Press, New York (1999) p. 20.

holding a large white cloth and is either exposing or covering up the myriad of objects strewn on the surface of the infertile landscape.<sup>9</sup>

The title of the work comes from Walter Benjamin's Theses on the philosophy of history in which Benjamin questions the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century notion that history is progressive and that European civilization represents the pinnacle of the human race. Where many see a chain of events, Benjamin's 'angel of history' sees "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage..."<sup>10</sup> Herein Benjamin suggests that the influence of European culture may have been a singular catastrophe for South Africa. He disputes the Western notion of progress, based on the achievements of people in power and suggests that we need to look for scraps left over from the everyday lives of ordinary people and assemble a whole counter-history based on that.

Knowing where the title for this work comes from, the represented objects start to signify the Western sense of progress and civilization that Benjamin is concerned about. The magnifying glass to the left, the binoculars, the open book and the pocket watch are items that were brought to South Africa by the colonizers. Colonial painters, such as Baines, often included these items as signifiers of the white man's so-called progress and technical dominance in Africa. 'Madonna and child' probably represents Christianity, introduced by missionaries and used by the Apartheid regime to justify its claim to power. A rolled-up certificate and a trophy emphasise an ideology geared towards achievement and competitive distinction. In the right-hand corner a television may point towards the one-sided reporting and media censorship of the Nationalist Government and the introduction of television to South Africa in the mid 1970s. What remains vital, based on Benjamin's text, is the willingness to look beyond and below the pile of Western 'debris', to rescue from disappearance the stories and ways of living which have been covered and eradicated by those in power.

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<sup>9</sup> Text by Penny Siopis, p.85, Exhibition Catalogue *Panoramas of Passage; Changing Landscapes of South Africa*, University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, Johannesburg (1995) p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Text by Penny Siopis, Exhibition Catalogue *Panoramas of Passage*, p. 85.



Some of the objects placed on the heap of historical rubble depict well-known art works. Anton van Wouw's sculpture of a black man, called The witness, is located at the bottom of the pile, below a magnifying glass.<sup>11</sup> The title of the work is significant in that it suggests that some kind of witnessing is taking place from below. A different sense of witnessing is also indicated by the high vantage point created through Siopis' use of aerial perspective. The sculpture emphasises the strong influence of Dutch Naturalism in South Africa. Dutch and English Naturalism were for long seen as the only art worthy of admiration, to the exclusion of all indigenous African art forms. William Hermanus Coetzer's painting on the right hand side depicts a group of Voortrekkers crossing the Drakensberg, a pivotal point in South Africa's colonial history.<sup>12</sup> It is also rendered in a naturalistic style.

Patience on a monument – A history painting (1988) Figure 3.3.1 and Piling wreckage upon wreckage (1989) Figure 3.3.2, both comment on the role of women – particularly black women within South African society. In both paintings women play an ambiguous role in that they are central to the composition and message of the work, yet seemingly powerless to take charge and bring about social and political change. In Piling wreckage upon wreckage (1989) Figure 3.3.2 Venus de Milo, a famous ancient marble statue of Aphrodite or Venus, the goddess of love, is lying upside down in the foreground. 19th Century art critics described her form and spiral pose as the perfect combination of grandeur and gracefulness.<sup>13</sup> Her arms are missing and many have speculated about what she may be holding. The upside-down Venus de Milo is a symbol of Western culture and female beauty that is of uncertain value on African soil.

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<sup>11</sup> Anton Van Wouw (1862 – 1945) was one of South Africa's foremost representational sculptors of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was educated in Rotterdam: Berman, E. *Art and Artists of South Africa*, A. A. Balkema, Cape Town / Rotterdam (1983) p. 472.

<sup>12</sup> William Hermanus Coetzer (1900-1983) grew up in Johannesburg and studied art in London. Despite his English education, he became very conscious of his Afrikaans heritage and portrayed the history and spirit of Afrikanerdom in his paintings: : Berman, E., *Art and Artists of South Africa*, p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> Chilvers, I. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, Oxford University Press, New York (2003) p. 282.

### **William Kentridge (born 1955)**

William Kentridge is one of the most prominent internationally recognised South African artists. His work is admired and exhibited worldwide. Kentridge was brought up in Johannesburg at the height of Apartheid. His parents were both lawyers who worked extensively with anti-apartheid groups. This meant that Kentridge was exposed to South Africa's harsh political environment as experienced by black people from a young age.<sup>14</sup> According to Ollman, Kentridge was profoundly affected by inadvertently noticing photographs of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre victims on his father's desk.<sup>15</sup> She says, "the shock of that discovery has been blunted by time and the necessity of carrying on, but Kentridge continually strives for its return."<sup>16</sup> In this sense, his drawings and films of Apartheid South Africa serve as urgent reminders against political ignorance and public amnesia to crimes committed during apartheid. Although Kentridge made some art while he was a student at the University of Witwatersrand, his degree was in Politics and African Studies.<sup>17</sup> After his studies he became involved in art and theatre to express his political views and from 1981-1982 he studied acting and directing in Paris. In his landscapes, Kentridge deals deliberately with South African themes of urban transformation, whilst exposing peoples' suffering within the physical and political landscape around Johannesburg. Whereas his work is local in content, it is universally meaningful in that it resonates with violent and violated urbanised communities throughout the world.<sup>18</sup>

Kentridge has often been interviewed and has given many public lectures over the years. This makes a more accurate interpretation of his work possible. He says the following about the landscape of his childhood. "Growing up in Johannesburg as a child, I suppose I always had the feeling that I missed out on a real landscape. A real

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<sup>14</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, C., Larner, M. (ed.). *William Kentridge*, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte, Skira Editore, Italy (2003) p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> At the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March, 1960, 69 demonstrators were killed and 180 wounded by the South African Police. In South Africa the 21 March is commemorated as National Human Rights Day. (Educational Supplement, Cape Times, date unknown)

<sup>16</sup> Ollman, L. in Dunn, J. (ed.). *Weighing ...and wanting*, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (2000) p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Benezra, N. 'William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection', p. 11-27, Sittenfeld, M. (ed.) Exhibition Catalogue *William Kentridge*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago/ New York (2001) p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Updike, D. (ed.), *William Kentridge Tapestries William Kentridge Tapestries*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale Press, New Haven/London (2007) p. 109-110.

landscape was woods and trees and meadows and streams. The sort of landscape you find in English children's books based on English village life, which was nothing like the dead, dry, waterless landscape around Johannesburg... It was only when I started drawing the landscape almost as a revenge against its nothingness, that I felt able to really enjoy the landscape around Johannesburg."<sup>19</sup> During his long career in art, film and theatre Kentridge has repeatedly rendered the landscape around Johannesburg, as a way of coming to terms with its bleak and uninviting character, and in an attempt to process his strong emotions towards South Africa's history of colonialism and Apartheid politics.<sup>20</sup> In this way, he relates his inner landscape, made up of personal memories, to the larger social and political and physical landscape of his time.<sup>21</sup>

Rhino (1989) Figure 3.3.4 depicts an urban landscape in which a rhinoceros, indigenous to this region before it was hunted mercilessly for its treasured horn, has become an incongruent object of curious interest. The flat stretch of land, devoid of any recognisable natural features, is structured by signs of urban engineering (roads, poles, and advertising boards) and a mine dump in the far right distance signifying capitalist exploitation. Like the rhinoceros, the old-fashioned oversized telephone is an image of metaphorical meaning that features in many of Kentridge's drawings. It could symbolise the world of commerce.

Most of Kentridge's landscapes are composed in a naturalistic manner. In Woyzeck on the Highveld (1991) Figure 3.3.5 the viewer is slightly elevated and the receding landscape is based on the convention of aerial perspective. Objects and land features diminish in size and intensity towards a point on the horizon line in the centre. Aerial perspective was first used in South Africa by colonial landscape artists, such as Bowler and Baines. During colonial times, landscape paintings expressed the ideology of the colonial 'picturesque' that pictorially claimed the South African

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<sup>19</sup> Liebhammer, N. *Art from the African Continent*, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Enwezor O. '(Un)Civil Engineering: William Kentridge's Allegorical Landscapes', p. 87-95. Updike, D. (ed.). *William Kentridge Tapestries*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale Press, New Haven/London (2007) p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, C. 'On Defectibility as a Resource: William Kentridge's Art of Imperfection, Lack, and Falling short, p. 29-38. Larner, M., *William Kentridge*, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea (2004), p. 29.

landscape as a slice of Europe.<sup>22</sup> Kentridge describes his landscapes as 'anti-picturesque'. He does not want to be associated with the value system of the 'picturesque' and colonial ideals of Western progress and white superiority.<sup>23</sup> Although Kentridge adopts a traditional point of perspective, he successfully destroys any notions of the colonial 'picturesque' by adding industrial, man-made interventions to the landscape.

In Woyzeck on the Highveld (1991) Figure 3.3.5 the spacious landscape speaks of human intervention and man's domination over nature.<sup>24</sup> The natural woods are withered, while the centrally placed road, the vertical poles and the white boxes in the foreground give the impression of a landscape in the process of industrial transformation. The modulation on the distantly placed horizon is a mine dump.<sup>25</sup> Gold mine dumps were the only mountains that shaped the landscape around Johannesburg during Kentridge's childhood.<sup>26</sup> Gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand in 1886.<sup>27</sup> In the same year, the old city centre or central business district (CBD) was laid out on a small triangle of 'wasteland', chosen because it was the only scrap of land that was not farmed at the time, due to its lack of water.<sup>28</sup> Gold mining, urbanisation and industrialisation affected the appearance of the landscape unfavourably. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century artists like Maaggie Laubser, Jacob Hendrik Pierneef and Gerard Bhengu created images of the South African landscape that implied a harmonious relationship between man and the unspoilt land. Kentridge's relationship to the land is less idealistic and more confrontational.

Kentridge started to experiment with animated films in 1976. Many of his films have the same two main characters; Soho Eckstein, an unscrupulous white Johannesburg businessman who is dressed in a pin-striped suit, buys land and builds mines, and Felix Teitelbaum, a naked, sensual artist and dreamer who seduces Soho Eckstein's wife in one of the films. The film Felix in exile (1994) was made in the year of South

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<sup>22</sup> Picturesque is defined on page 22 of this text.

<sup>23</sup> Enwezor, O., '(Un)Civil Engineering', p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> *Woyzeck on the Highveld* is an adaption of Georg Büchner's famous play *Woyzeck, a tragic story of human suffering*.

<sup>25</sup> Enwezor, O., '(Un)Civil Engineering', p. 92.

<sup>26</sup> Benezra, N., 'William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection', p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Vladislavic, I. 'A Farm in Eloff Street', p. 96-107, Updike, D. (ed.). *William Kentridge Tapestries*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale Press, New Haven/London (2007) p. 97.

<sup>28</sup> Vladislavic, I. 'A Farm in Eloff Street', p. 97.

Africa's first democratic election, at a time of uncertainty and political violence. Kentridge says that in this film, he was interested in thinking about the way in which the landscape forgets and absorbs its history, as a metaphor for the way South Africans tend to forget their history of oppression.<sup>29</sup> In this drawing from the film Felix in exile (1994) Figure 3.3.6 the main character of the film wades naked through a pool of blue water amid a desolate landscape of shrouded bodies and wooden stumps.<sup>30</sup>

The film examines the relationship between the landscape and people. As in Kentridge's other works, the landscape is shaped by the exploits of modern capitalism. It is a landscape of modernity, progress, and industry. At the same time we are forced to examine this post-industrial site as a way of thinking about the political post-Apartheid landscape and what could become of it, says Enwezor.<sup>31</sup> "Where there's been a battle, where there's been a disaster, where there's been a massacre ... the landscape, after a certain time, kind of hides those traces," says Kentridge.<sup>32</sup>

Kentridge's series of Colonial landscapes (1995/96) including Figure 3.3.7 was inspired by the illustrations of the British nineteenth-century publication *Africa and Its Exploration as Told by Its Explorers*. Kentridge enlarged and redrew many of the colonial landscapes in this book in charcoal. Instead of allowing the evidence of colonisation to be hidden by the beauty of the landscape, Kentridge adds manufactured elements including surveyor's poles and marks that serve to disrupt and question the natural colonial settings. Kentridge's colonial landscape depicts a waterfall, similar to Thomas Baines' Eastern portion of Victoria Falls (1863) Figure 3.3.8 but in comparison Kentridge's image appears unfamiliar and hostile. The poles placed at the centre of the waterflow, appear to suggest an old land claim that will be swept away in due course by the powerful stream of water.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kentridge, W., is quoted in Basualdo, C., Updike, D. (ed.), *William Kentridge Tapestries*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale Press, New Haven/London (2007) p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> Enwezor O., '(Un)Civil Engineering', p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> Enwezor O., '(Un)Civil Engineering', p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> Kentridge, W. is quoted in Basualdo, C. (ed.). *William Kentridge Tapestries*, p. 90.

<sup>33</sup> Benezra, N., 'William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection', p. 25.

Kentridge's film Tide table (2003) Figure 3.3.9 is set in post-Apartheid South Africa. Like his film Weighing... and wanting (1997), it examines how one is to deal with the memory of Apartheid and the inevitable dulling of memory that takes place over time.<sup>34</sup> All is not well at the seaside, where colourless water threatens to erase all evidence of past and present life. Soho, a successful business magnate during the Apartheid years, sits alone on a deck chair at the beach. Nobody seems to notice him, nor does he notice the group of people performing a baptism on the beach. While the people are fading into the distance of erasures, the water current washes a sick human body away.<sup>35</sup>

The term Resistance Art usually conjures up images of aggressive confrontations between coercive agents of the state and the black population.<sup>36</sup> The landscapes by Kentridge and Siopis are not overtly aggressive in the sense of showing violent actions, but they are no less powerful in their message of resistance. Oliphant points out that subtlety "far from being ineffective, often turns out to be just as important as open and direct confrontation."<sup>37</sup> Kentridge and Siopis engaged with the landscape genre to highlight social and moral issues within South African society. This is in sharp contrast to traditional landscapes that tend to depict a world that is free of political conflict.<sup>38</sup> Kentridge and Siopis' landscapes are political in intention and call for the end of social decay and inequality.

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<sup>34</sup> Benezra, N., 'William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection', p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, C. 'On Defectibility as a Resource', p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Oliphant A. W. in Hobbs, P. (ed). *Messages and Meaning. The MTN Art Collection*. David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg (2006) p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> Oliphant A. W., *Messages and Meaning*, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> Andrews, M. *Landscape and Western Art*. p. 20 and 151.

## CHAPTER 4:

### VAN DER MERWE: ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF WORKING WITH LANDSCAPE

Ever since the Renaissance 'nature' and 'art' have been seen as distinctly different, yet related concepts. Nature has traditionally been viewed as 'original', while landscape art is admired as a man-made appropriation and interpretation of nature.<sup>1</sup> During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century this assumed relationship between 'nature' and 'art' was investigated and challenged by many artists.

The landscape works discussed in Chapters One to Three have one thing in common, they are art objects in the traditional sense. Traditionally a landscape is composed on a flat piece of canvas, board or paper, whose extent and framing sets limits to the depicted view and the work of art. As Andrews says, "the frame literally defines the landscape, both in the sense of determining its outer limits and in the sense that landscape is constituted by its frame: it wouldn't be a landscape without the frame."<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, landscape paintings are further framed by the walls of public galleries and private homes. The ordered space and even lighting of gallery rooms, where landscape paintings are conventionally viewed, often seem at odds with the organic shapes and uneven textured surfaces of the paintings.<sup>3</sup> Art galleries provide an exclusive environment that contextualises the framed representation within its broader culture as a valuable object worthy of interest and preservation.<sup>4</sup> The shifting borderline between 'nature' and 'art' became the focus of landscape art that is no longer contained by a frame or a gallery space.

#### 4.1 Land Art: Strijdom van der Merwe (born 1961)

Strijdom van der Merwe was born in Meyerton, Gauteng, and graduated from the University of Stellenbosch with an honours degree in Fine Arts. He taught graphic design for three years and has worked as a land artist for the past 15 years. During

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<sup>1</sup> Andrews, M., *Landscape and Western Art*, Oxford University Press, New York (1999) p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, M., *Landscape and Western Art*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Andrews, M., *Landscape and Western Art*, p. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, M., *Landscape and Western Art*, p. 202.

this time he has studied overseas, exhibited widely and made commissioned sculptures locally and abroad.

Land Art or Earth Art first emerged in the late 1960s as a type of art that uses natural materials, such as earth, rocks and soil.<sup>5</sup> It was influenced by other art movements such as Minimalism and Arte Povera. Minimal Art is an abstract art form, particularly in sculpture. It focuses on geometrical shapes that are characterised by an “extreme simplicity of form and a deliberate lack of expressive content.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly to Arte Povera, Land Artists often work with disposable or natural materials.<sup>7</sup>

Elements of Minimal Art and Arte Povera can be seen in Making a positive-negative line with autumn leaves (n.d.) Figure 4.1 in Canterbury, England; Arranging white flowers to form a line (n.d.) Figure 4.2 in Nieuwoudtville, South Africa; Drawing a spiral and arranging stones from the outside to the inside to form a line (n.d.) Figure 4.3 in Eersterivier, South Africa. Van der Merwe has formed lines on the ground by arranging natural objects found on site, such as leaves, flowers and stones. These works were most probably inspired by Richard Long’s (born 1945) A line made by walking England (1967) Figure 4.4 and A line in the Himalayas (1975) Figure 4.5.<sup>8</sup> Long walked up and down on a piece of ground until he had worn a straight line into the lawn, which he then photographed.<sup>9</sup> Long enjoyed the idea of engaging with the land without taking possession and maintained that his outdoor sculptures and walking locations were not subject to ownership.<sup>10</sup> His anti-capitalist values can be linked to the anti-colonialist attitudes in Britain at the time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The leading British Land artists are Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long. One of the well known American exponents is Richard Smithson. He made large-scale earthworks such as Spiral Jetty (1970) in the Great Salt Lake.

<sup>6</sup> Chilvers, I. (ed.). *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, Oxford University Press, New York (2003) p. 392.

<sup>7</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 324.

<sup>8</sup> Since 1967 Richard Long’s artistic activity has been based on long solitary walks that he makes through landscapes, initially in Britain, and from 1969 also abroad, often in remote or inhospitable terrain. In 1989 Long won the Turner Prize: Chilvers, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 348.

<sup>9</sup> Lailach, M. *Land Art*, Taschen, Köln (2007) p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Andrews, M., *Landscape and Western Art*, p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> Andrews, M., *Landscape and Western Art*, p. 215.



Van der Merwe maintains that he develops his ideas by walking around a site and that the placement of his work within a specific setting is fundamental to his work.<sup>12</sup> Like Long, Van der Merwe works within the land, using materials at hand and his art works cannot usually be separated or removed from the site itself. Picked leaves placed around root of tree (n.d.) Figure 4.6 and Lucerne sculptured into circles (n.d.) Figure 4.7 were both created in Meyerton, Van der Merwe's hometown. In these works, Van der Merwe has temporarily modified the landscape by creating simple, but pleasing shapes that exist in a harmonious relationship to the land itself.

The titles of Van der Merwe's works are significant in that they describe the activity that the artist engaged in when making the work. The titles' emphasis on an activity links Van der Merwe's work to Performance Art. For example, the title Using a broom to clear lines and circles on the early morning dew (2008) Figure 4.8 provides valuable insight into how the work was created. But unlike Performance Art, Van der Merwe does not present us with the event of making the work, but with a record of the finished work.

Van der Merwe describes his work as 'an art of the unknown' because each time he approaches a new work 'the material/medium/place itself is a revelation' to him.<sup>13</sup> In an interview with Tracy Murinik, Van der Merwe explains that this work was inspired by the unique natural setting at the Nirox Foundation.<sup>14</sup> He makes it clear that Using a broom to clear lines and circles on the early morning dew (Detail) (2008) was not influenced by the rich cultural meaning of the Cradle of Humankind and questions about the origin of mankind.<sup>15</sup> By working within the land in a way that consciously ignores the historical, political and social meanings attached to specific sites, Van

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<sup>12</sup> Murinik, T. 'Strijdom van der Merwe. Catalogue for the exhibition *Sources – Contemporary Sculpture in the Landscape*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg (2009) p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Minnaar, M. 'Significantly a Southern Shaman'. *Sculpting the Land – Strijdom van der Merwe*, Protea Book House, Hatfield (2005) p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Catalogue for the Exhibition *Sources – Contemporary Sculpture in the Landscape*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> The Nirox Foundation is near the Cradle of Humankind which covers 47000 hectares of land. It is situated in the Gauteng Province with a small extension into the neighbouring North-West province. The site contains dolomite limestone caves with fossilised remains of ancient forms of plants, animals and most significantly hominids. The dolomite, in which the caves formed, started out as coral reefs growing in a warm shallow sea about 2.3 billion years ago. The caves represent one of the world's richest concentrations of hominid fossils. The Cradle of Humankind site provides us with a window into the past, to a time when the earliest humans were evolving and changing. This has led some scientists to believe that all humans have their origins in Africa.

der Merwe refuses to engage in the making of value statements about land ownership and peoples' hierarchical positioning within the landscape. Hence his work does not comment on South Africa's past history of colonisation and Apartheid. He works within the land in a way that seeks neither to interpret it nor to claim it for a specific ideology.

Many of Van der Merwe's works are small and unpretentious, such as Elephant ear leaves stuck together to form a cup shape (n.d.) Figure 4.9 in Stellenbosch and Patterns carved on a bamboo (n.d.) Figure 4.10 in Kamiyama, Japan. Red cotton wrapped around burnt reeds (n.d.) Figure 4.11 in Franschoek and Wrapping the base of trees with red cotton (n.d.) Figure 4.12 in Stellenbosch, both show an intervention brought about by the wrapping of plants. The pictures invite the viewer to reconstruct and imagine the circumstances in which Van der Merwe has intervened in nature.<sup>16</sup> These works may be compared to the American artists Christo (born 1935), and Jeanne-Claude (born 1935), who are well-known for wrapping large natural and man-made objects such as Wrapped coast (1968-69) Figure 4.13 a shoreline in Sydney, and Wrapped Kunsthalle (1968) Figure 4.14, an art gallery in Bern, Switzerland.

Photography forms an important role in Van der Merwe's Land Art, because a substantial part of his work is never seen by anyone.<sup>17</sup> According to Van der Merwe, "it is difficult to imagine how people would observe the work in real time." Due to the temporary nature of his work and the inaccessibility of many sites, he photographs all his work carefully, by waiting for the 'absolute moment' to capture a good view.<sup>18</sup> Van der Merwe's photographs create an aesthetically pleasing record of his work. They verify and document his creative process but must not be confused with the work itself. In some instances a greater effort is made to preserve Land Art sites, either by the artist who builds a more permanent structure which can be accessed by the public, such as van der Merwe's Installation for the Klein Karoo National Arts

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<sup>16</sup> Minnaar, M., 'Significantly a Southern Shaman'. p. 8-9.

<sup>17</sup> Murinik, T., 'Strijdom van der Merwe'. p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Minnaar, M., 'Significantly a Southern Shaman'. p. 9.

Festival, using 48 cotton cloths to form a square (1997) Figure 4.15 in Oudtshoorn or by way of more careful maintenance in exhibition venues and public spaces.<sup>19</sup>

Installation for the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival, using 48 cotton cloths to form a square (1997) Figure 4.15 in Oudtshoorn, South Africa, represents a more permanent structure, using fabric squares of white cloth to demarcate a square of land in an arid landscape. Van der Merwe explains that creating a big installation for an Arts Festival requires a different approach. The work has to last for a period of time. He says that he has to take into consideration that people will be moving around the work looking at it from different angles.<sup>20</sup> This explains his more permanent and sculptural approach in Installation for the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival, using 48 cotton cloths to form a square (1997).

Land Art introduces an interesting perspective to the landscape genre. Landscape is not depicted in a painting but is used as an artistic material. The artist works directly within nature and takes into account the effect of the elements as they exist on location. Instead of representing a landscape, which in the process of representation becomes an object of symbolic significance, the artist's creation becomes a part of the land itself.<sup>21</sup> Often the work of the artist only reveals itself in the relationship between re-arranged natural materials and the site as it was before.<sup>22</sup> Van der Merwe's work is not transportable and often so impermanent or transient that it will easily scatter in the wind or disappear, like the work Using a broom to clear lines and circles on the early morning dew (2008) Figure 4.8, that vanished with the rising of the sun.

The relationship between the artwork itself and its documentation via photography is a complex one. Although the Land Art of van der Merwe moves away from the idea of a permanent art object, his carefully composed photographs nonetheless begin to function as artworks in themselves. His photographs can be admired for their visual qualities and for their symbolic significance, as records representative of the

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<sup>19</sup> Dempsey, A., *Styles, Schools and Movements*. Thames & Hudson, London (2004) p. 262.

<sup>20</sup> Murinik, T., 'Strijdom van der Merwe'. p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Lailach, M., *Land Art*, Taschen, Köln (2007) p. 7-25.

<sup>22</sup> Andrews, M., *Landscape and Western Art*, p. 204.

activities that took place. In its photographic form his artworks returns to being a commodity that can be sold in galleries and books, similarly to commercial photography.

Land Art had initially been founded on a rejection of materialism and the desire to get away from the traditionally elitist and money-oriented gallery world.<sup>23</sup> Far from side-stepping the gallery system, art dealers and artists have found ways of making money with Land Art. Documentation can take the form of photography, text, sound, maps, diagrams and film and art dealers have been successful in selling the documentation of conceptual art to collectors and museums.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 324.

<sup>24</sup> Chilvers, I., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists*, p. 135.

## CONCLUSION:

Art analyses inevitably occur within a specific cultural, social and political context. In South Africa, art and ideas about art have undergone many changes since the first colonial travellers and settlers depicted the local landscape. As the context changes, the interpretation of art is once again open to new debates.

Artworks can function as 'signposts along the way of self-discovery'.<sup>1</sup> Besides, learning more about South Africa's history of art, the analysis of local landscape paintings offers teachers and learners an opportunity to examine critically their own cultural, social and political values. Once learners have been taught how to approach the analysis of artworks and can express themselves using accurate art terminology they are ready to debate and challenge assumptions and 'pre-made' ideas about artists and artworks. An important aspect of art education consists of opening up discussions that can lead pupils along a path wherein they discover where their own ideals and values are positioned. It is vital that the analysis of artworks is not sealed off to new ideas but remains varied, open-ended and debatable.<sup>2</sup>

Many artists have made artworks that engage in debate about art and society. Brett Murray's (born 1961) Empire (1997) Figure C promotes debates around traditional conventions in landscape art and the colonisation of South Africa. Murray engaged with the landscape, not to show what it looks like, but to communicate his own ideas about the genre within the local context.

The overall abstracted metal design is unconventional in its use of medium but it conforms to established traditions within the genre in its conventional use of composition. The work is easily identified as a landscape because of what Bunn termed 'the typical strategies employed in the organisation of its content'.<sup>3</sup> It depicts a framed view from a distant observation that conforms to the rules of academic perspective. The composition is based on 'an imitation of prior views' and 'previous

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<sup>1</sup> Gule, K. 'On the Use and Abuse of African Art History for Life', in Hobbs, P. (ed). *Messages and Meaning, The MTN Art Collection*. David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg (2006) p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> Gule, K., 'On the Use and Abuse of African Art History for Life', p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Bunn, D. 'Relocations: Landscape theory, South African landscape practice, and the transmission of political value'. *Pre Texts*, Vol. 4 No. 2, Summer 1993 (1993) p. 45.

representations'.<sup>4</sup> It can easily be linked to similarly composed works by South African artists such as Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk (1853-1936), Jacob Hendrik Pierneef and Bertha Everard (1873-1965).

Murray comments on traditional, naturalistic conventions within the landscape genre. These conventions were first used in South Africa to depict colonial landscapes. He highlights one of the genre's most obvious strategies by using linear perspective to indicate a receding space. By adding elements that are unconventional, Murray invites a different interpretation to the one implied by colonial artists. The focal point is taken up by an oval plaque, inscribed with Victorian lettering. The positioning of the plaque is suggestive of the white farmhouses in Pierneef's landscapes. A jar filled with soil and a framed colour photograph have been attached on either side of the plaque. These objects contradict a sense of three-dimensional space and introduce new associations and meanings. The juxtaposition of the metal image, the two objects and the evocative Victorian feel of the elegant black script of the word 'Empire' invites us to "think of historical meanings associated with the landscape – the conquest of land in pursuit of imperial domination", says Rankin.<sup>5</sup> In simultaneously confirming and challenging established expectations of the landscape genre, Murray, like Siopis and Kentridge, engages the viewer to look at possible new meanings of South African landscapes.<sup>6</sup>

Murray artwork highlights the fact that the representation of nature remains a contested terrain of shifting vantage points and opinions and that landscape paintings from different time periods and contexts need to be analysed from a contemporary perspective to remain meaningful to our current experience of the land. In the classroom, learners need to be encouraged to debate possible meanings of art works. The art historians consulted in this text have made important contributions to the analysis of South African landscape painting but theirs' will not be the final word. Teachers and learners can be creative in the way they approach and analyse artworks, as long as arguments are based on verifiable dates and facts

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<sup>4</sup> Bunn, D., 'Relocations: Landscape theory, South African landscape practice, and the transmission of political value' p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Rankin, E., 'Material Messages: Sculptures and Mixed-Media Works in the MTN ART Collection' in Hobbs, P. (ed.), *Messages and Meaning. The MTN Art Collection*. David Krut Publishing Johannesburg (2006) p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> Rankin, E., 'Material Messages: Sculptures and Mixed-Media Works in the MTN ART Collection' p. 246.

about the artist's life and the time in which they lived. It is important that Visual Arts learners develop the confidence and the ability to critically analyse the content and the context of artworks by integrating and interrogating received information. Hopefully learners will get excited about landscape paintings, once they look more carefully and start to analyse, question and discuss the way the land and its inhabitants are depicted.

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