

MAJAK BREDELL: THE NEW YORK YEARS 1981-2003

Curator's preamble: Elfriede Dreyer

Spanning a period of 22 years, *Majak Bredell: The New York Years 1981-2003* provides a captivating glimpse into the South African/American artist's oeuvre from its uterial beginnings to a mature phase of production. As a collaboration of artist and curator, the systematic layout and sequential ordering of the work on this exhibition follows an autoethnographical methodology that adheres to and analyses the unfolding of the artist's personal experiences in relation to what was happening in the world around her. Carolyn Ellis (et al 2010) maintains that such co-constructed narratives "illustrate the meanings of relational experiences, particularly how people collaboratively cope with the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions of being friends, family and/or intimate partners." In the process of curating the selection of work, narrative ethnography emerges, grounded in Bredell's biography and contextualised in socio-cultural perspective; at the same time it becomes a process of memoir-writing for Bredell, including "confessional tales" (Ellis et al 2010). The curatorial autoethnographical approach hence creates a 'frame' within which questions can be asked and comparisons be done, instead of trying to determine so-called 'truths'.

The life story of Bredell is unconditionally linked to her conceptual purpose and obsessive commitment to body in her art. The artist was born in 1945 in the predominantly Afrikaner town of Kroonstad, in the Free State, South Africa. Growing up she encountered the apartheid mindset — and its associated practices — displaying narrow views of race, gender, culture and religion, although it became a restrictive yoke to be challenged and rejected by the generations to follow. In 1967 she got married, took on the surname of Lewis and bore a daughter and a son. Her initial beginnings as artist include an exhibition in 1978 at The George Boys Studio and the Association of Arts in Pretoria. However, 1981 was a watershed year for Bredell when she followed her husband with her children in an emigration to the United States of America. Having abandoned her home country and arriving full of hope in New York, she was not prepared for the shock of her marriage breaking down soon after her arrival. She faced an uncertain future far away from home with two young children to raise. Bredell also had to cope with the adjustment process of being a foreigner and facing alienation. Christiane Kraft Alsop (2002) states: "Between the here and there, the we and they, the gap of not belonging opens up to the outsider. There are various ways of reacting to this not-belonging."

These shattering and distressing events are critical to the understanding of the content and themes in the artist's work. After the finalising of her divorce in 1988 she took back her maiden

name of Bredell. Besides her own personal heartache, the backdrop of apartheid provides a seminal layer to the autoethnographical discourse, contributing to the artist's concern with notions of gender, power and Othering. Fractured identity and the gendered self consequently developed as main foci of her artistic exploration in her early work of 1981 to 1983, and into 1984. Her prolific outpouring became a cathartic journey and transmutation of her personal pain into a search for who she was and wanted to be; apparent in the work is an autobiographical scrutiny and a fundamental doubt of the self. Her enquiry manifests in manifold self-portraits in graphic and mixed media (as in *Een identiteit* and *Gering is fielefooi*, 1981), and she starts taking sets of photos of herself, almost in a process of inverting the gaze. Throughout her ordeals, Bredell keeps diaries and sketchbooks; and she says in her artist's narrative: "The pages in my sketchbook gave me a secret place to safely express the abject suffering of loss and amputation. In the images and self-photos of this time, the desire to be revealed was simultaneously held by an opposing tension that feared being exposed. Long before the epidemic of the selfie, I had turned the camera on myself, thereby nullifying 'the male gaze' to become my own subject and witness." In particular, she searches for meaning and self-worth through numerous studies of her nude body (as in *The camera and I* series of works, 1981-1983) and attempts to overcome the rejection and find self-acceptance, her self-portraiture becoming an anchor. She depicts herself as crucified, abject and enormously vulnerable. Her longing for home, South Africa, anchors her in her personal history, as in *Portrait of childhood* (1983).

Bredell's layered account of stories, experiences and artistic exploration merges with the curatorial interpretation of her work in broader perspective: taking into account her status of cultural displacement and emotional alienation, as well as the state of feminist discourse in New York at the time that had a major impact on her thinking. In the early 1980s, second-wave feminism comes to an end with lingering intra-feminist debates on sexuality, for instance, how women have lost their own identities in that of family. Third-wave feminism emerges in the early 1990s responding to perceived failures of the second wave and to the backlash against second-wave initiatives (Sally-Ann Drucker 2018). As part of a process of introspection and self-discovery, Bredell's inner female voice comes forward during the early 1980s and we see her identity developing into a decidedly feminist orientation as an "emergent process" (Carolyn Ellis et al 2010). After gaining independence through separation and divorce in the early 1980s, Bredell starts to actively pursue a career as artist and she engages herself in printmaking, drawing and bookbinding workshops (her artistic vision was informed by formal studies in Art, Design, Dress Design and Visual Arts). She also teaches at the Pratt Institute later and works as a graphic designer for Pharmaceutical Advertising. From the time of her arrival in New York in the early 1980s, the artist develops a longing for her motherland, South

Africa. In her artist's narrative, she says: "Severed from my mother country, my identity became fractured. I felt stripped of my role as South African artist, daughter, sister, aunt. The old identity of wife held no comfort." She writes poetry in Afrikaans with her own English translations. She is hence mobilised and ushered into exploring new pathways of the self. Retrospectively, her engagement with the self and the body — especially the stark authenticity and authority of the nude — in combination with her participation in the Feminist zeitgeist can be interpreted as having provided the perfect remedy and cathartic process in the mending of her traumatised, fractured identity.

In 1984, a first shift is noticeable in her engagement with gender, sexuality and identity in her depictions of male and female sexual partners and erotic entanglement, as in *Knots* and *Stretch* (1984). Her series of life drawings of male and female seem to suggest a yearning for the genderised Other and a partner. It is as if she has moved on psychologically and emotionally and is re-entering the closeness and intimacy of new love relationships. Her work of 1985 and 1986 shows an expansion of her imagery into the domain of male effigies and symbols (for instance *Matrix*, 1985), especially religious and male archetypes of power - muscular, dominant figures seemingly in seats of power (as in *Fearsome figure* and *Male* series, both 1985). Traces of her personal history are still ingrained in this new direction, but she is now confronting patriarchy in a wider sense, leading amongst others to a re-gendering of a male God. Bredell deconstructs the male figure into a personal language of signs and symbols, and intimidating torso's of brute physicality. In this set of works she deliberately turns away from any reference to a sexual partner. Her active and profuse process of production from the 1980s into the 1990s encompasses both writing and artmaking.

Another watershed year is 1989 when Bredell is invited to hold a solo exhibition in New York at the Ombondi Gallery. She chooses to deal with the theme of *Figures in attendance* in order to reflect her struggle to survive her personal dilemmas. Establishing herself as an artist in the highly competitive New York scene, the artist now becomes infused with the hope that she could actually 'make it' and become more settled in her newly adopted identity. The cathartic transition into emancipated independence is apparent in the works from 1989 onwards where the male figures and symbols are transformed into images of strength and endurance. They become empowered and revered as sentinels of time, but not as single patriarchs any longer. In many of the works, Bredell references the figure of the horned Minotaur (as in *Minotaur*, 1989) in Greek mythology, a monster with the body of a man and the head and tail of a bull. In the Greek myth, King Minos had a huge labyrinth built to house the beast, thereby containing his freedom and abolishing his destructive acts. Recalling this narrative beast, Bredell deconstructs male power and dominance, in a way 'containing' and 'controlling' the

male. This imagery continues well into the 1990s in works such as *Host of horned men* (1994) and *Time's sentinels* (1996).

In 1994, the year when apartheid officially came to an end when the African National Congress Party came into power, Bredell becomes an American citizen. As an almost archetypal turn to home as mother, her work from 1991 to 1995 deals with her memories of the motherland in works such as the *Moederdeur* (1991), *Going in* (1995), *In Afrika* (1995) and *Treedentity* (1995) series of works. She becomes interested in the notion of the sacred female (as in *Sacred mirror*, 1996) and goddesses, and explores post-Christian polarities of, for instance, body/sacred, human/superhuman. In ritualistic acts of empowering herself and her own abjected identity, she rejects western monotheism's misogyny and its casting of the female body into original sin. These works lead organically into her work produced from 1996 to 2003, dealing with various facets of womanhood, such as *Midwives*. Another watershed year was 2002 when the artist's mother and father died only six months apart. Bredell decided to return to her homeland in 2004, after almost 23 years, to the house where her parents lived and where she subsequently set up a studio and still works and lives today.

The thematic content in the work exhibited on *MAJAK BREDELL: THE NEW YORK YEARS 1981-2003* has been continued and expanded in the period after 2003 and is still ongoing. In 2009, for instance, the artist produced *Alter Images: The Black Madonna & Sisters*; in 2013 *Roll Call*, dealing with a vindication of the lives and bodies that were destroyed during the centuries-long European witch persecutions; and in 2016 *Codex Magdalene+*, which moved towards a new iconography and a re-imagining of the mythology and legends of Mary Magdalene. Her current works in progress are entitled *Earth/Body* and concerned with dialogues between the human body and the body of the earth.

Bredell's autoethnographic art continues as an ongoing dialogue with identity and the self in relation to others, mainly expressed through a depiction of the body. Her depictions of bodies are concerned with personal history and gender relationships as part of a fundamental awareness of physicality. Her work tells gender stories: of the 'seen' and the 'unseen'; the powerful and the powerless; and of emergence, empowerment and transformation. Although having gone the full circle from 'invisibility' and struggle to autonomy, self-confidence and success, Bredell wears her history and her double identity of a South African with an American passport like a second skin.

Becoming witness to Bredell's life narrative, the curator as well as the viewer become participants in her life story, since as Alsop (2002) maintains, autoethnographic 'writing' or

artmaking based on personal stories facilitates 'witnessing'. It becomes a process of the viewer/curator identifying with the artist through a process of contextual understanding and penetration of the layers of meaning in the work. We better understand how personal experiences as well as zeitgeist form our identities, and as such, the re-visioning of personal stories becomes therapeutic for all makers, witnesses and participants. Narrative enriches our own lives through sharing; it promotes self-understanding, change and transformation.

Prof. Elfriede Dreyer, 2019

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