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Book Reviews

Home Lands – Land Marks: Contemporary art from South Africa

Reviewed by Eldriede Dreyer

Tamar Garb (ed). *Home Lands – Land Marks: Contemporary art from South Africa*. 2008.

Catalogue for the exhibition at Haunch of Venison, London, 31 May – 3 July 2008. London: Haunch of Venison. £35,00.

In her introduction to the exhibition, Tamar Garb states that the curatorial intention of *Home Lands – Land Marks* was to bring together recent work of David Goldblatt, Nicholas Hlobo, William Kentridge, Vivienne Koorland, Santu Mofokeng, Berni Searle and Guy Tillim in order to present images and constructs of the specificity of South Africa's past, 'while confronting the ongoing traumas and triumphs of living in the aftermath' (p. 7). The three essays included in the catalogue, 'A land of signs' by Tamar Garb, 'The indeterminate structure of things now' by Okwui Enwezor and 'Modderfontein road' by Ivan Vladislavić, articulate the multi-layeredness of the South African landscape in terms of experiences, shifts in paradigms and especially 'threats' to the notion of home, homeland and ownership.

In his commentary, Enwezor (2008:38) identifies the common theme in two generations of South African photographers as the built environment and spatial practices. Excavating urban and rural terrains in both pictorial and documenting modes, these photographers render the predicaments of South Africa in images of squalor, poverty and survival, but also in the humour of eccentric hybrid multiculturalism. In characteristic poetic language, Enwezor traces the struggles and ideologies as depicted by the photographers in works exposing his premise that things in the country are in a state of radical indeterminacy. He argues, for instance, that Tillim and Mofokeng's works open up new avenues for reconsidering the historical past and the contemporary present, 'not only in how the structures of the past remain resilient markers of identity in the politics of dwelling in the present, but how the residues of the past remain visibly inscribed in spatial practices (p. 38).¹

Tamar Garb introduces her essay with a journey into images, signs and graffiti speaking about the colonialist and apartheid legacies, not only in historical documents and paintings, but also as these appear in the artworks of Kentridge, Goldblatt, Koorland and Mofokeng. Such relationships in history, memory and naming, she traces in the work of Koorland

in non-functional 'maps' where names and signs point to conditions, experiences and situations, rather than to actual places and people. Similar to Berni Searle, Koorland engages with the relationship of self to land in the exploration of themes of memorialisation. In a far more pronounced political tone than the other essayists, Garb hunts down traces of the 'savage imprint[s] of apartheid' (p. 26) in the artworks, and concludes with the statement that chronologically and conceptually, South African art production today has moved beyond the replaying of the old dichotomies of race and place. Such revisitation of the past reflects the mindset that seems to have directed the choice of artworks for the exhibition and almost politically preordained the aesthetic experience of the exhibition. A particular strength of the essay is the engagement with the complexity of subjective modalities in the rendering of this past and the ambivalences of acquiescence and resistance in the artists' work. As Amina Mama (Doy 2000:141) argues, it is through the analysis of subjectivity as 'positions in discourse' that allowances can be made for the person to be conceptualised historically as changing over time and in different contexts.

Vladislavić takes the reader on a postcolonial journey from Kensington, Johannesburg's largest and one of the oldest suburbs, to its CBD area and Modderfontein road. Along this journey, the city's rich colonial past is revealed in references to Kitchener, Count Rumford, Johan Rissik, Georges Perec, London Road, gold, Antwerp, and others. He concludes the essay with a hypothetical stance of a prevalent 'finders-keepers' principle (p. 160) that seems to have ruled this part of the world since colonial times and was the very idea that Johannesburg was built on. Using the pine cones as metaphors of the leftovers of and land marks in histories, he depicts the city as a hybrid structure interspersed with a conundrum of personal, indigenous and foreign elements. He closes with an almost post-apocalyptic and alchemic analogy:

At the end of the evening, when the fire has died down, I like to stand a cone on the coals. After a while it starts to smoulder and give off fragrant smoke. The half-formed bracts at the base ignite and in a moment a tongue of flame strides hissing up the spiral staircase of the cone, from one wooden tread to another, until the whole thing is ablaze. An architect's



Vivienne Koorland, *Rivonia map* (2007). Oil on burlap over linen, 325 x 254 cm.

office burns down in my hearth. The bracts turn to red metal as the heat flares out of them, and then again to bone, and the cone's luminous skeleton collapses. A long tree grows from my chimney, coils up among the trees from other houses, and all the trees become a forest, a forest of smoke rising from the rooftops.

The visual imagery conjured paints a strikingly pertinent scenario of the coals of an apartheid that is finally starting to die down and burn out, the smoke of past turmoil and strife becoming a forest and, dare I add, intermingling with

the 'new smoke' of internationalisation and globalisation.

An initial response to the curatorial statement of presenting and confronting the conditions in the aftermath of apartheid is that the diversity and depth of the socio-political realities of a country can in no way be represented by the small selection of artists, and especially not by the privileging of photography as medium. Also not, if as stated in the catalogue's introduction, the exhibition aims to problematise notions of post-apartheid, the postcolonial and, especially, the post-

euphoric. A post-euphoria (I presuppose post-1994) selection would have included the work of many other contemporary South African artists who, in very different ways, render facets of disillusionment, frustration, resistance and dystopia as manifesting in the social order, in personal relationships or in the mundane everyday existence. Yet according to Garb, the exhibition does not represent a survey, but constitutes a focused attempt at addressing a series of critical questions.

A particular merit of the publication is the abundance of large, double-spread illustrations, which allows for a meaningful comprehension of the exhibition as a whole, as well as of the individual artworks.

Note

- 1 In similar way, Sidney Kasfir (1992:49) speaks about a kind of a split between a precolonial 'self-contained symmetry and a postcolonial expressionism'.

References

- Doy, G. 2000. *Black visual culture: Modernity and postmodernity*. London: IB Tauris.
- Kasfir, S.L. 1992. African art and authenticity. *African Arts* 27 issue:pages.