

Elfriede Dreyer, Book review for *de arte*, February 2012

*Claudette Schreuders*, 2011. Texts by Rory Bester, Faye Hirsch and Antjie Krog. Johannesburg/Cape Town: Jacana and Munich/London/New York: Prestel.

It's been a while since publication on a South African artist has been done in such a comprehensive and attractive format as the recent major monograph on Claudette Schreuders published by Jacana and Prestel (239 pages in total). 188 pages consist of high-quality documentation of the artist's complete oeuvre up to 2011, ending with the *Close, close* series, which makes the publication border on a coffee table book. Illustrations of Schreuders' major works, her sculptures in carved wood, as well as her series of lithographs based on the sculptures, selected commissions, and some thumbnail, preparatory and finished drawings are included. A handful of photographs are shown of the artist in her studio, with family and in suburban surroundings, covering her thirteen-year long career as a professional artist already commencing at the time of her student days at the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. Photographs of black nannies with white babies on their backs, for instance, and a pregnant sister are indicative of Schreuders' artistic engagement with South African and colonial histories as well the influence of close and extended family life on her art production.

The publication's scholarly relevance is rescued by three relatively different interpretative texts by art historian Rory Bester, the New-York-based writer and senior editor at *Art in America*, Faye Hirsch, and poet and author Antjie Krog. The three essayists navigate through the artist's four major bodies of work and present three very different takes on her work. In his essay entitled 'Claudette Schreuders and the autobiography of complexity', Bester traces the artist's relatively short but illustrious artistic career of producing superficially simplistic looking, monolithic sculptures carved from wood, as well as her series of lithographs derived from these. He argues that each of the six bodies of her work signifies a specific phase in her life: *Family tree* (1998), her graduate show, he interprets as dealing with experiences as a young adult and of family; *Burnt by the sun* (2001) he views as reflecting the impact of travel on self-identity in Africa (done during her residencies in Nigeria and Kenya); *Crying in public* (2002) comments on the complexities of emerging in to a life in the world; *The long day* (2004) is seen as reflecting suburban life in Johannesburg; *The fall* (2007) as prompted by the artist's experiences of having her first baby and associations with the biblical narrative of events in paradise; and the recent *Close, close* (2011) series that seems to be a response to a life of being surrounded by her own small children.

Bester provides a descriptive narrative on the artist's themes and demonstrates how Schreuders' artistic identity has been shaped by her academic training, mentors and experiences of close

relationships, immediate and more distant environments. He tracks the artist's process of developing her ideas through diaries and artist's books, and the seminal influences of German Expressionism and the West African colon figure on especially the form of her artistic expression. He (Bester in *Claudette ...* 2011:12) points out that Schreuders takes care not to "create any sense of realism, but rather to evoke a strong sense of believability in what the figures encapsulate and represent." Especially the colon figure - in its traditional ritualistic significance, colonial contextualisation and post-colonial derivation - is argued as providing representational and conceptual complexity to her work. Another figure Bester isolates is the mermaid, in its Western narrative figuration and as encapsulated by the African Mami Wata, appearing in several guises throughout the artist's body of work. Such embracing of indigenous African mythologies and wood carving as medium and methodology places the artist at the centre of discourses on African modernities. Notions of alienation, belonging and displacement that are central to post-colonial and post-african discourses are shown as constant themes in all four her series.

Although Bester identifies several recurring images and concepts of an alchemical and mythological nature in Schreuders' work such as the snake, the cycles of life, notions of becoming, the Mami Wata figure and the almost comatose figure in 'another' world between dream and nature, he does not delve into the melting pot of the artist as shaman nor into the neo-romantic dimensions thereof. Schreuders' dystopian images of outsiders, victims of violence and the mythic narrative of the Fall in Paradise, for instance, posit a profound lament on the fragile creature that is the human being, and a deep wish for that which lies beyond the boundaries of everyday reality and for an escape from the prisons of mortality.

Maybe hers is a search for another reality; a spiritual reality, described by Faye Hirsch in her essay entitled 'At home with the sacred: Claudette Schreuders' sculptures and prints' as a concern with the 'holy'. Hirsch points out the seminal influence of David Freedberg's *The Power of images* (1989) on the artist, especially his statement that the printed mementos of cult statuary that pilgrims take away with them in order to remember a shrine, "bring into our lives something of the grace of the larger images they produce ... [and become] protectors of our homes and tokens of the presence of the holy" (Hirsch in *Claudette ...* 2011:30). A main conclusion Hirsch draws is that the banality and familiarity in Schreuders' work create sites of sacredness and "otherworldliness" which are shown to be inserted into the daily existence. She takes the reader on a journey identifying various engagements of the artist with the spiritual and the sacred, mainly in what she calls a "saintly quality in Schreuders' figures" (Hirsch in *Claudette ...* 2011:31) bespoken by their suffering in metaphors such as sunburn, childbirth or a wound. In her view the martyr-like characterisation of the artist's

figures is enforced by their enduring and impassioned expressions, "eternally waiting and watching patiently".

Considering Schreuders' upbringing and family background, quite lacking Hirsch's interpretation is a critique on the calvinistic underpinning of the artist's engagement with 'the holy'. Her figures display a discernable air of restraint, control and wariness that still today is encountered amongst Afrikaners with a strong religious penchant, grounded in calvinism. Often before calvinism has set up an uneasy alliance between religion and art, and has created tension between the sensual and the moral, all of which have remained one of the secrets of its appeal. Due to apartheid and nationalist legacies and its conditioning doctrines, Afrikanerdom in certain respects has been stigmatised and subjugated to polluting discourses on perceived evil (such as racism) that generally take place in subjective reductionist spaces and has led to the projection of discredit. In *The will to meaning*, Victor Frankl (1969:18) argued that: "One may conceive of conscience merely in terms of the result of the conditioning process. ... Reducing conscience to the mere result of conditioning processes is but one instance of reductionism." Such conditioning is strongly evident in Schreuders' work; it entails a kind of taming reminding of Victorian codes of suppression that erupted especially on the levels of sexuality.

Such reductionism is reflected in the artist's utilisation of restrained, stylised form, especially the colon shape. Interesting though and relevant here is the notion of populism encountered in Afrikaner religious contexts, which forms part of a legacy dating back to the sixteenth century and John Calvin's popular support in Holland and northern Europe. So-called 'calvinistic' art finds the woman's place in the home and posits her intrinsic value in the roles of quiet mother and housekeeper. Hirsch finds populism in images of the Mami Wata/Watermeisie figure as well as the elements of populist worship such as talismans, santos and spirit double, which she views as adding to the complexities in meaning and layers in Schreuders' spiritual references. Yet, given the prevalent deconstruction of the dimensions and influence of calvinism in contemporary art produced by Afrikaner artists and their generic adoption of international models and cosmopolitan lifestyles, the ontological and epistemological legacies of calvinism are but invisible strata in the complexity shrouding Schreuders' work. In a post-colonial logic and applied to Schreuders' work, it is a legacy that shrinks catholic sumptuousness to whitewashed and spartan notions of selfhood and womanhood, and generates new perceptions of self and identity.

The third essay, Antjie Krog's 'A letter to Claudette', is written in the form of two personal letters to a friend, revealing intimacies and the empathetic identification of one creative woman with another's

private circumstances, feelings and experiences. In poetic language, Krog (*Claudette ...* 2011:41) describes Schreuders as "an anguished mapper of vulnerability in a country embedded in dehumanisations." In her 'dialogue' with the artist, she ponders her very identity by way of abundant assumptions and rhetorical questions, and suggests the artist's claiming of her Africanness through her grappling with local issues. Typical of Krog's strong political inclination, she detects political deconstructions in the artist's work, describing these as dealing with old apartheid sensibilities as well as prevalent current racist attitudes, occurring in "a white world on their white pedestals: in the heart of what was going so wrong now in the country, corruption and discrimination fuelled by greed, were we, us white people - still" (Krog in *Claudette ...* 2011:49). Krog considers Schreuders' work as essentially speaking about South Africans' vulnerability but also their tenacity and indestructibility in the face of many 'storms' and winds of change.

Krog's politicisation of Schreuders' work, contending that she has humanised "those accused and regarded as nothing but callous, inhumane oppressors" with "small tentative concerns" seems somehow strongly worded in the light of artists such as Jane Alexander, Zanele Muholi and Nicholas Hlobo whose works have been more pertinently differentiated by their strong resistance to and criticism of intolerable social systems and conditions. Schreuders appears to be oriented more towards the human condition in a universal sense and as interpreting experiences of wounding, sacrifice and tolerance under duress as some of the existential commonalities belonging to human existence on earth. It is a passion for humanity she is expressing in her poignant and unsettling images such as cuts and marks on bodies - almost in the sense of a baby, a mother or a brother hurting - and images of couples spooning and a mother holding her twins, which Krog in emotive and exclamatory language describes as touching us deeply.

Although generally speaking the publication presents a comprehensive visual overview of Schreuders' work, illuminates several key moments in her development, construes meanings underlying her images and traces historical lineages in her work, I have missed a psychological reading of her many characters and perhaps a view on how her methods and forms function in support of her identity portrayals. A series such as *The Fall* is fascinating in its presentation of characters like the 'bystander'; the 'virgin'; and the 'trespasser'. Such archetypes open up hidden areas of our collective consciousness and could confront deep-seated anxieties; often in literature and art its iconography is drawn from many different sources without being reducible to a single source or meaning. However, in terms of the artist's relationship to society, the three essayists do converge in presenting Schreuders' conceptualisation as a kind of rhizomatic response to society and

culture, reflecting the position of culturalists such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha that cultural identity has no fixed 'essence' and is an unstable entity conditioned by history and context.

At a time when Africa's processes of so-called modernisation are fervently debated by cultural theorists and neologisms such as post- and neo-africanism have emerged, this publication shows Schreuders' work as charting the identity of a *white* woman in contemporary Africa and her engagement with hybrid legacies, histories and memories of both a Western and an African kind. The artist is staged as exemplifying the spirit of African modernism particularly through the presentation of intersubjectivity as an everyday occurrence in the South African context, leading to novel and fused agencies and articulations.

Source quoted

Frankl, Viktor E. 1969. *The Will to Meaning. Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*. New York: New American Library.