



Remembering what was: Land, landscape and memory

Despite the obvious physicality of South Africa's natural landscapes, the unavoidable obstacle of its mountains, the sheer expanse of its deserts, scrublands and rolling savannahs, even the totemic quality of its ancient baobabs, the very act of describing these physical attributes is problematic. Language is to blame. J M Coetzee, a South African novelist who has also written penetrating scholarly essays on landscape and ideology, offers a cogent rationalisation for language's deficiencies. The word landscape, he explains in his book *White Writing* (1988), "is both topographical and aesthetic in reference".¹ What this implies, quite crudely, is that what is presumed to be straight representations of landscape are often characterised by the existence of something more.

The tourist postcard with its richly orchestrated natural scenes offers a relatively familiar and benign example of how landscape can function as seductive hyperbole. In South Africa, where land was at the centre of a colonial and apartheid project to own and exploit the land, portrayals of the land have, historically, been motivated by more than just mawkish sentimentality. In the instance of white artists such as Edward Roworth, who painted in the picturesque neo-classical tradition, or J H Pierneef, who pioneered a modernist vernacular, landscape became a persuasive tool of ideology, a means for communicating white hegemony over the land.

The rote practices of white artists working in the mould of Roworth and Pierneef, of which there are still many today, have to an extent been challenged by the emergence of a distinctive subcategory within the landscape tradition. Still fundamentally concerned with the familiar signifiers and topographical markers of the landscape tradition – rolling hills, epic mountains, indigenous trees, bare scrublands, stones, rocks – the works of Diane Victor, Willem Boshoff, David Goldblatt, William Kentridge and Brett Murray offer a view of the land that is more than simply concerned with its presumed mute and/or sublime inevitability. In contrast to Terence McCaw, Erik Laubscher and Nico Roos, artists working in a more traditional manner, they portray the land as a repository of memory, as a visual archive for the telling of history.

It is useful to start by looking at the only photograph in this selection, David Goldblatt's work on the ruins of Dithakong. In his book *Intersections* (2005), which contains a reproduction of this photograph, Goldblatt explains how travellers in the 19th century "told of a flourishing Tswana town at this place".² But this place no longer flourishes; the only hint of life a cluster of modest houses in the far distance. Goldblatt's photograph is striking for both its compositional clarity and restraint. Leached of colour, his stark landscape speaks of a defined way of seeing. In the words of Nadine Gordimer, in her novel *The Conservationist* (1974), his is a landscape "without theatricals ... a landscape without any picture-postcard features".³ Although devoid of sentimentality, it does possess a certain solemnity, which is fitting. This is, after all, a sombre landscape.

Opposite:
Goldblatt, David (b.1930)
The ruins of Dithakong, a pre-colonial town of uncertain date but which in the 18th century was said to have had between 10 000 and 15 000 inhabitants.
Dithakong, North West Province. 13 June 2003
Archival pigment on cotton paper 4/6, 98 x 123.5 cm



Commenting on Goldblatt's extensive oeuvre, which includes numerous anti-sublime landscapes, the Nigerian-born curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor, in 2004, observed: "Within his photographic vision the land is cipher for a larger historical narrative, whether cultivated, sculpted or merely depicted."⁴ He further proposes that Goldblatt's near-forensic studies of the devastation and loss wrought by colonialism and apartheid, often in far-flung landscapes as much as in big cities, "serve as another form of remembering, a counter-memory which bears witness to what is unrecoverable".⁵

This argument could equally be applied to Terence McCaw's oil painting titled *Zimbabwe Ruins in Moonlight*, dated 1950, and one of only two works in this selection that predate the watershed moment of 1994. A founder member of the New Group, McCaw is perhaps better known for his Cape and Lesotho landscapes. Here he offers an arresting meditation on what was by unwittingly concentrating on what is: A moonlit scene of quiet marked by human absence. As in Goldblatt's photograph, his ruins are shown to have become naturalised, a part of the natural order of things. Classically interpreted, it is possible to argue that we are no longer viewing history but archaeology, the rubble of human enterprise here functioning as mnemonic devices alluding to human mortality. In his writing, J M Coetzee cautions against such universalising flights of fancy, reminding that the purpose-laid stones speak of "a giant or monster from the past, wordless but breathing vengeance – the curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,"⁶ as he quotes poet Roy Campbell.

Where Goldblatt's work is fundamentally concerned with recording and retrieving from abeyance South Africa's social history, the work of Diane Victor attempts the same but grafts onto this an added layer of psychological menace. An accomplished draftsman, Victor is widely known for her intense, if occasionally abject portraiture, less so her landscapes. One notable exception in this context is her *Disasters of Peace* (2001-2003) series of etchings, acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In this work Victor skilfully incorporates the landscape into a body of work that proposes a strident critique of recent history, focusing in particular on crime (in all its varied minutiae) and poverty.

Leaving the Burnt Places (2003) is a more delicate and nuanced meditation compared to this other more famous body of work. This is partly because she denies the viewer any knowledge of the source of the violence at the centre of this work. We are not certain if we are looking at devastation wrought by a winter fire, commonplace on Johannesburg's high plateau region where Victor lives and works, or whether we are viewing the aftermath of malicious criminality. A similar uncertainty characterises William Kentridge's screen print *He that Fleed his Fate* (1994, p.130). In the manner of his colonial landscapes, a series of drawings produced in the mid-1990s, Kentridge employs colour-distinguished (red) markings to focus our appreciation on the grave-like markings and their relationship to the unusual array of inanimate objects.

Like Erik Laubscher in *Charred Mountain, Greyton* (1987), both Kentridge and Victor rely on a monochromatic palette to carry their work. Where the latter two use colour sparingly, Laubscher is less restrained, his brilliant red filling in both the sky and land. Possibly the vivid colour tone is more animated because it is not intended to be associated with human loss and suffering. Focusing on the natural cycle of rebirth through fire, Laubscher's theme is familiarly universal – and indisputably safe. As with Laubscher, Nico Roos, a painter of landscapes and abstract scenes – who in 1972 founded the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pretoria – similarly draws on expressionist techniques to communicate an encounter with a dramatic and burnt landscape. Despite his abstract tendencies, Roos's work, *Scorched Mountain* (1993), remains stoically representational.

Opposite:
McCaw, Terence John (1913-1978)
Zimbabwe Ruins in Moonlight 1950
Oil on board, 40.5 x 51 cm





Left:
Roos, Nicolas Oswald (Nico) (b.1940)
Scorched Mountain 1993
 Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 74.5 cm

Right:
Laubscher, Frederik Bester Howard (Erik) (b.1927)
Charred Mountain, Greyton 1987
 Oil on canvas, 81 x 116 cm

Opposite and detail overleaf:
Victor, Diane (b.1964)
Leaving the Burnt Places 2003
 Charcoal and chalk pastel on Fabriano paper,
 120 x 150 cm

It is perhaps at this point that Brett Murray's mixed media wall sculpture reveals itself as a more compelling attempt to engage the landscape genre as an abstraction, notionally and visually. The very titling of Murray's *Inheritance, Possession and Heritage* (1997, p.131) makes explicit his operational wariness of the genre. It is a suspicion not only manifest in the artist's schematic representation of familiar pastoral scenes, but also in his refusal to attribute even a colour to his "lines". Onto these colourless scenes he also grafts elements that further complicate and confuse our reading of the work: A bottle of sand, a neatly framed landscape painting and, centre of it all, an ironic verbal interjection. Similar to the early work of his contemporary, painter Wayne Barker, Murray sarcastically subverts the iconic and the canonical. As it turns out, his cynicism is not without historical precedent.

It is useful by way of argument to mention that right at the outset of South Africa's quest to define a national school – landscape was a central category within this drive – white artists and writers were vigorously debating the value of the landscape tradition. In 1919, artist Robert Gwelo Goodman appealed to South African artists to seize upon this country's "untouched and unrecorded" landscapes.⁷ Many acted on the call. Poet William Plomer, in a letter to the editor of *The Natal Mercury*, published in 1925, argued the retort: "We are in danger of too many veld-yearnings, too much Karoo-urge, too frequent sunsets on the Drakensberg, and moonrisings on Groot Constantia. A little less landscape and a little more portraiture would be highly stimulating."⁸

Willem Boshoff's work *Secret Letters* (2003, pp.132-135), first exhibited in Cape Town in 2003, offers a thoughtful engagement with Plomer's complaint. Not directly but consequentially, Boshoff's work is a possible example of the eventual confluence of portraiture and landscape; landscape not as physical reality, but as pure aesthetic interpretation. Comprising a total of ten wooden panels, each wall piece is lined with rosettes of white cloth containing text that is largely unreadable. The work, an attempt to monumentalise and memorialise the 9 377 days Nelson Mandela spent in prison, is intended to frustrate. It is neither a portrait nor a landscape strictly defined. Nonetheless, it could be interpreted as either, or both – or neither.

Viewed in the context of this selection of works, it serves as a fitting complement and counterpoint to David Goldblatt's representational photograph (p.123). Despite having dematerialised all reliable markers of the landscape tradition, it offers a closing bracket on what happened before, an aesthetic memorial for the land, not of the land. **Sean O'Toole**





1. 2001





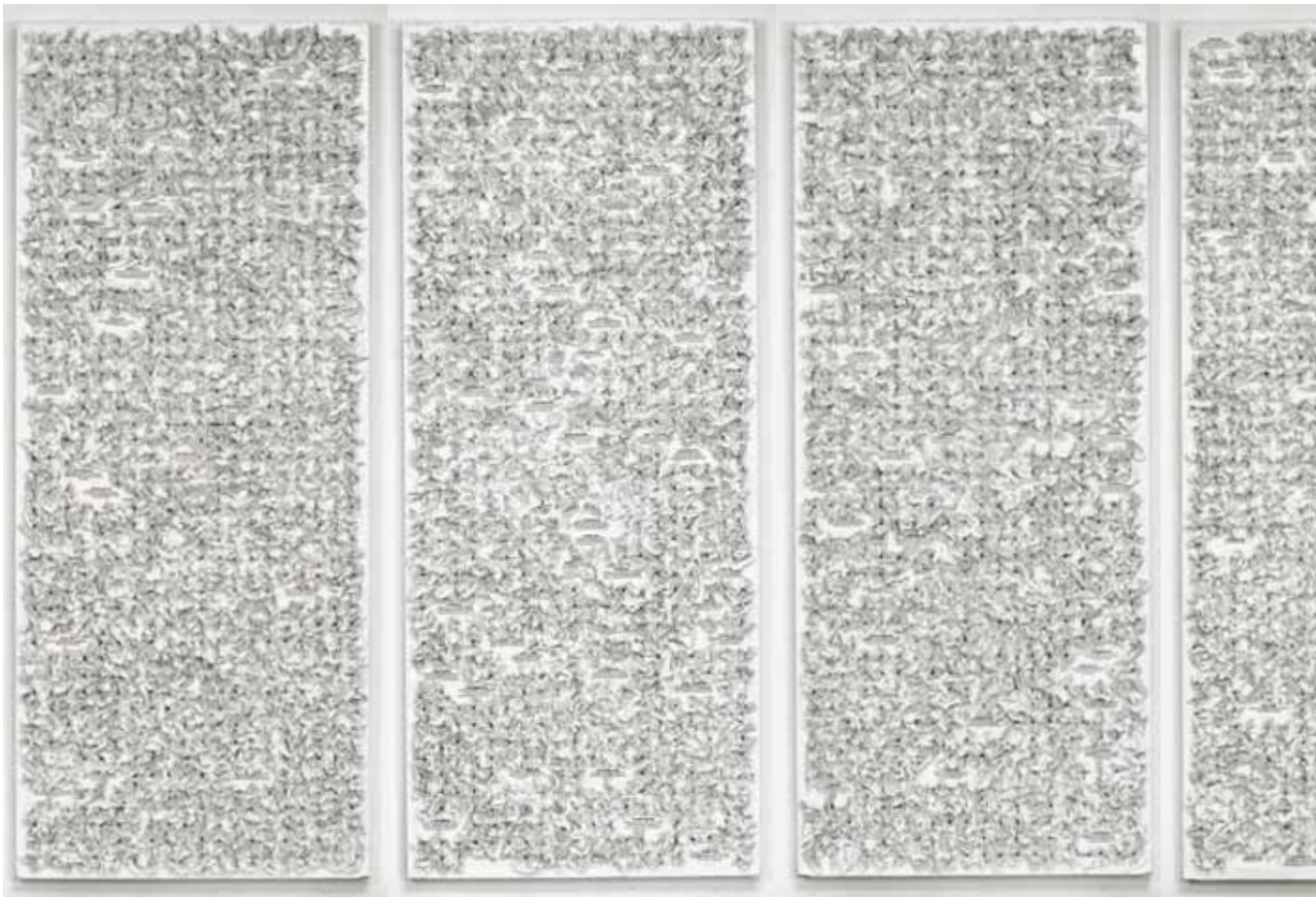
Above:
 Kentridge, William (b.1955)
He that Filed his Fate 1994
 Screenprint on paper 29/55, 45.8 x 62 cm

Opposite:
 Murray, Brett (b.1961)
Inheritance 1997
 Metal, wood and plastic, 60 x 200 cm

Murray, Brett (b.1961)
Possession 1997
 Metal, wood and plastic, 60 x 200 cm

Murray, Brett (b.1961)
Heritage 1997
 Metal, wood and plastic, 60 x 200 cm





Above, opposite and detail overleaf:
Boshoff, Willem (b.1951)
Secret Letters (Panels 1-10) 2003
Printed cotton on wooden panel,
205.5 x 84.5 cm (each)