Above:
De Jongh, Marthinus Johannes (Tinus) (1885-1942)
Hex River Kloof Undated
Oil on canvas, 34 x 49 cm

Opposite:
Everard, Bertha (1873-1965)
On the Banks of the Komati 1916-1918
Oil on canvas, 127.5 x 128 cm

Dutch-born Tinus de Jongh spent the last 21 years of his life in South Africa. The undated *Hex River Kloof* is typical of his generally mountainous landscapes, and represents one of the many geographically-specific paintings produced during his extensive travelling in South Africa. De Jongh renders the river a place of contemplation at the foot of a sharply rising mountain range. It is a similar quiet that pervades Bertha Everard's *On the Banks of the Komati* (1916-1918), but while De Jongh's is a traveller's view, Everard's view is from her home. After marrying Charles Everard, she moved to his farm, Bonnefoi, overlooking the Komati valley and river in Mpumalanga. Depicted in the round, Everard's *On the Banks of the Komati* is a twilight farm view rendered in the shades of the setting sun and applied with a heavy brush. Along with her sister, Edith King, and daughters, Rosamund Everard-Steenkamp and Ruth Everard-Haden, Bertha Everard was part of the original Everard Group that first exhibited at the Herbert Evans Gallery in Johannesburg in 1931 and the University of Pretoria in 1935.[1] Before marrying, Everard was an art mistress at Pretoria Girls High School immediately after the South African War.

Above:
McCaw, Terence John (1913-1978)
Lily Vlei, Zambezi 1950
Oil on canvas, 56 x 71 cm

Walter Battiss began his substantial tenure as art master at Pretoria Boys High School in 1936. During one of his many travels, Battiss visited what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1951. The visual disjuncture between his undated *Edge of Zambezi* and Terence McCaw's *Lily Vlei, Zambezi* (1950), both in oil on canvas, highlights the general extremity of visual interpretations of the same or similar subject matter by different artists. What makes this particular instance of disjuncture especially interesting is that both Battiss and McCaw were active members of the New Group (1938-1954). Although working some time after the original impulse, McCaw is recognised as the South African artist who most closely mimicked the French Impressionists. His *Lily Vlei, Zambezi* is an impressionistic rendition of river flora and fauna that bears a remote resemblance to Claude Monet's many versions of water lilies. Battiss's abstraction of a group of people using the same river makes little distinction between water and land, leaving the boating, standing and sitting people to float in the watery composition. **Rory Bester**

Above:
Battiss, Walter Whall (1906-1982)
Edge of Zambezi Undated
Oil on board, 41 x 58 cm

The New Group: A departure from tradition

The New Group was officially formed in February 1938. Its members comprised young professional artists who were dissatisfied with local art conditions. Although most of the artists were young and relatively unknown at the time, many went on to shape and be catalysts for the history of 20th-century art in South Africa.

The first exhibition of the New Group was held on 4 May 1938 in the Argus Building in Burg Street, Cape Town. An entrance fee of one shilling was charged and over 1 000 people attended the six-day exhibition. Not only were South Africans shocked to see the innovative and challenging works produced by a younger generation of artists, but they were also able to attend lunch-time lectures. Most artists on the first exhibition were from the Cape and included Gregoire Boonzaier, Enslin du Plessis, Moses Kottler, Francois Krige, Lippy Lipshitz, Freida Lock and Terence McCaw. Prominent Cape artists Maggie Laubser, Irma Stern, Hugo Naudé, Robert Gwelo Goodman and George W Pilkington were present at the opening.

Above:
Van Essche, Maurice Charles Louis (1906-1977)
Woman with Fish Undated
Oil on canvas, 81 x 59.5 cm

Opposite:
Domsaitis, Pranas (1880-1965)
Night Rider Undated
Oil on composite board, 56 x 45 cm

Although one of the three founding members of the New Group, Walter Battiss did not participate in the first exhibition, but played a leading role in promoting the aims of the New Group, particularly in Pretoria and Johannesburg. These aims were to: (i) bring together artists and craftsmen in an effort to raise the standards of South African art production; (ii) help artists in financial difficulties by offering patronage and support; (iii) form artists' co-operatives to import and retail artists' materials at cost price; and (iv) hold exhibitions all over the country, the standard of which would be controlled by a secret-ballot selection method.[1]

Walter Battiss was responsible for organising the second New Group exhibition which opened in Pretoria on 23 November 1938. Lady Duncan, wife of the Governor-General of the Union of South Africa, declared during her opening address that "it is a privilege to be associated with the birth of a movement, which is destined to count for so much in the artistic development of our country's future".[2]

This greater awareness of the New Group's aims and activities led to the establishment of its official headquarters at 65 Church Street, Cape Town. The New Group also introduced a system of easy payment instalments that encouraged contemporary art as a safe investment and motivated a generation of young art patrons and collectors. Barter exhibitions were even held where groceries, clothes and other items of value could be traded for art.

The New Group was now working in direct opposition to the National Academy of Arts which had been founded by Edward Roworth in 1932. Roworth was also the director of the South African National Gallery at the time and had a notoriously conservative outlook. He was an outspoken critic of the New Group and would not consider its works for inclusion in the National Gallery collection. Roworth's true colours were exposed in 1939 when the IBM Corporation approached him to advise on purchasing some South African contemporary art.[3] Roworth was a painter of South African landscapes in an English 19th-century tradition, and it was therefore with some irony that he advised IBM to purchase one of his paintings along with a painting by one of his students. This incident sparked a violent reaction from the New Group. A short time later, in a newspaper interview, Roworth, who had now also been appointed Director of the Michaelis School of Fine Arts, openly supported Adolf Hitler's suppression of modern art:

> In our day art in Germany adopted some of the most degrading forms which the modernist movement has yet known, but quite recently this flood of degenerate art has been stemmed by Herr Hitler, who has given the exponents of modernism their choice between the lunatic asylum or the concentration camp.[4]

This error by Roworth was a blow to the conservative elements in the South African art world and, in turn, strengthened the position of the New Group during the 1940s. By 1948 Walter Battiss had begun the process of establishing the International Art Club of South Africa, Pretoria. When Battiss and Lipshitz finally broke away from the New Group, its activities fell into disarray. The New Group was officially disbanded after its final exhibition in Cape Town in May 1954. Excellent examples of work by New Group artists can be found in the South African Reserve Bank Art Collection. The prime example is the undated *Haunted Landscape* by John Dronsfield. This work is still dynamic and avant-garde in character more than 50 years after it was painted and distils many of the principles and ideals which the New Group stood for. Warren Siebrits

Opposite:
Dronsfield, John Marsden (1900-1951)
Haunted Landscape Undated
Oil on hardboard, 29.5 x 39 cm


COLLEGE DREAMING


A WAVE

Walter Meyer
(b.1965)

Walter Meyer has earned a reputation as one of the foremost interpreters of the South African landscape. And even if *Blue Station* (1995) is not, strictly speaking, a landscape, it exudes the same quality or timbre that followers of Meyer so admire in his work. A musical term is specifically chosen here because timbre – the distinctive property of a complex sound – seems a very fitting way to describe the specific rich sensory qualities of Meyer's art. For, despite the fact that these works are seemingly rooted in a transparent and easy mimesis, Meyer's works are never merely that; despite the careful descriptive realism, his work often slips into a realm where things are not easily described, borne out by the painter's repeated acknowledgement that he cannot quite "put into words" what he is trying to express through his art.

The realism of Meyer's work may seem unfashionable and strangely anachronistic, conservative even, in relation to contemporary artistic production in South Africa and in the rest of the world where realism, and painting itself to a lesser degree, has gone out of vogue. This penchant for realistic portrayal, as well as the fact that Meyer prefers to work in the very traditional medium of oil painting, is quite surprising for an artist who received his training in the 1980s when neo-expressionism, conceptual art and installation art dominated most academic institutions – such as the University of Pretoria and the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf where Meyer studied for four and three years, respectively, between 1982 and 1989. Indeed, unless they are conceptually interpreted, landscapes – especially those in a realist vein – receive scant critical attention in the contemporary art world.

And yet it is Meyer's relation to realism – the way in which he approaches form and subject matter – that sets him apart from a tradition in which he ostensibly follows. Painters of the South African landscape tended to beautify, exoticise or idealise the world around them – whether to bolster the colonial narrative about noble savages and the redemptive project of imperialism, as in the work of Thomas Baines and Thomas Bowler, or to reinforce the myths of ownership and settlement that attended Afrikaner nationalism, as with J H Pierneef, or merely to pacify and please, as many bland and unchallenging landscapes on the walls of commercial galleries do today. By contrast, Meyer's landscapes are completely devoid of this glamour or beautification. Instead, in a way that reminds us of the realist project of the 19th century, Meyer's realism repeatedly focuses on the ordinariness and banality of the South African landscape and *platteland* [countryside].

Take *Blue Station* for instance. One is confronted with station buildings and a pedestrian crossing somewhere in small-town South Africa. The buildings are derelict, dusty, deserted. The metal is rusted, the trees are windswept, the order is untidy, and the day is hot. This is seen from a distance, perhaps from the window of a car that drives by on its uninterrupted way elsewhere, as so many of us do, urged on by seamless, speeding highways. In a characteristic compositional manoeuvre, Meyer intensifies our distance from this godforsaken station by choosing a wide foreground: Gravel, on which the imprint of the wheels of a vehicle is faintly noticeable, punctuating its departure. The entire scene is swathed in a deep blue light, illuminating the state of affairs in a startling and slightly ominous manner.

One is made aware of disproportion, of colossal disuse so typical of the South African *platteland* and probably the most common theme in Meyer's land and townscapes. One could argue that these empty scenes may also be places of anticipation or stages of impending action, yet their stillness imprints on us the loss of that action, the absence of players. Like his townscapes which seem to debunk myths about small-town hospitality, gratification and simple but plentiful lifestyles, *Blue Station* – a place meant to connect – is filled with former (or at the very least disinterested) habitation, offering little narrative of hope, return or settlement.

How to read these works? Elsewhere, in a more invested reading, I have argued that they bear witness to the failed dreams of white settlement in South Africa.[1] In addition, it is worth remembering that landscape painting is often concerned with the spiritual, expressing internal states and evoking deep-seated sentiments. Read this way, one could argue that the timbre of these works resonates deeply with feelings of alienation and atomism that accompany so much of modern life.

Liese van der Watt

Previous page:
Hobbs, Philippa Anne (b.1955)
Dolosse Dreaming a Wave 1991
Woodblock print on Japanese paper, 89 x 173 cm

Opposite:
Meyer, Carl Walter (b.1965)
Blue Station 1995
Oil on canvas, 90 x 120.5 cm