





Above:  
**Findlay, Bronwen** (b.1953)  
*Isandithwana Flowers* 1994  
 Lithograph print 16/30, 51 x 39 cm

Opposite:  
**Arnold, Marion** (b.1947)  
*Change of Focus* 1992  
 Silkscreen on paper 12/15, 73 x 101.5 cm

### *Changing focus*

The act of interpretation – whether in a book, newspaper article, or a painting – is never a neutral process. Despite claims of objectivity or empiricism, the subjective position of an interpreter – including political, religious and ethical beliefs – serves as a filter in understanding and interpreting the world for readers and viewers. As both an artist and critic, Marion Arnold has published a number of books on women artists and botanical art, including *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996) and *South African Botanical Art: Peeling back the Petals* (2001). She sees her position as a white woman artist living in South Africa as fundamental to her artistic expression, and in *Change of Focus* (1992) she challenges a male-dominated artistic genre of the landscape – an ideological symbol of possession, authority and heritage – by integrating it with the 'female' ascribed genre of the still life. By unbalancing prescribed modes of expression, Arnold's silkscreen offers a "change of focus", positioning still-life elements centre stage and diminishing the importance of the landscape to 'background'. Bronwen Findlay, born in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, in 1953, is known for her prints of floral designs. In *Isandithwana Flowers* (1994) Findlay makes a similar integration of still life and landscape with an exuberant colour palette and a lack of perspective, thereby using her technique as conceptual tool. Her work references not only indigenous flowers, moving away from the Eurocentric bias of the still-life genre, but also the specificity of geography. **Catherine Green**



## Peter Clarke (b.1929)

Born in Simon's Town in the Western Cape in 1929, Peter Clarke is the third child of what was to be Peter and Rose Clarke's family of six children. His family came from elsewhere. On his maternal side, his Sierra Leonean grandfather was a sailor in the British navy and his grandmother was from the Atlantic island of St Helena. Art classes in primary school ignited Clarke's passion for colour, line and form. When he left school at the age of 15 he went to work at Simon's Town naval dockyards, scraping the lead paint off warships. After attending night-time art classes with John Coplans at the St Phillips School in District Six, he quit his dockyard job in 1956, aged 27, and focused on the precarious career of art and writing.

He was allowed to study etching for a short period at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in 1961 and spent the following two years studying graphics at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. His work was included in the Venice Biennale in 1964. In 1972 under the Group Areas Act, Clarke, his family and community were forcibly removed from Simon's Town to the nearby Ocean View where he has lived ever since. Although Clarke has rejected an overtly political reading of his work, it is impossible not to situate his oeuvre within the sociopolitical context of its time. At the same time, his rejection of this reading is not without merit, especially since his earlier pieces capture more than just the sociopolitical realities of their time; they capture human conditions of loss, longing, and a profound sense of hope. In 2005 the South African government awarded Peter Clarke the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for excellence in the fields of art and literature.

His friendships with the authors and poets Richard Rive and James Matthews, as well as Clarke's creative ease in the disciplines of poetry and illustration, are all brought to the fore in his *Fanfare* series. In 2004, on the occasion of his 75th birthday, Clarke exhibited *Fanfare* at the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town. It was his first solo show since a retrospective exhibition at the Natale Labia Museum in Muizenberg in 1992. *Fanfare* is a series of 100 works that fills in some of the holes left by history's subjectivities. Each of the fan-shaped collages includes handwritten prose or poetry, theatrical constructions of conversations, and first-person narratives the artist has had with these heroes and heroines lost to mythical time. They are historical, biblical and literary figures, as well as influential people in Clarke's own life. These are lives that have not been played out in the grand narratives of written history, but rather in the subtle yet extraordinary memories and oral accounts that still remain largely unknown and unacknowledged. It is within Clarke's *Fanfare* that we are now offered proof of the details and significance of their contributions. The *Fanfare* series includes an intimate narrative entitled *Eva/Krotoa* (2004).

The truth is that Krotoa's biography is unbelievable – unbelievable in fact to all those who aim to write and 'write out' history. Krotoa, renamed Eva by the Dutch settlers, belonged to the Gorinhaiakona, a coastal people who lived off the fruits of the seashore. She was the niece of Autshumato, otherwise known as Harry (aka "Herry die Strandloper"). While still young, Krotoa worked for Jan van Riebeeck's household and later she, like her uncle, played interpreter during Dutch and Portuguese interactions with the Khoi people. In 1664 she married the Dutchman, Pieter van Meerhoff, a junior surgeon and superintendent of Robben Island Prison.

In September 1668 her life took a tragic turn when her husband was killed on an expedition. She returned to the mainland and resided at the Castle with their children. Suffering from alcoholism, she left the Castle and returned to her family in the kraals. In February 1669 she was imprisoned in the Castle and then banished to Robben Island, where she died in 1674. Clarke's text in *Eva/Krotoa*, a rendition of her life, reads as follows:

That I existed is a fact. But the importance of my role in South African history is usually alluded to. As interpreter, the bearer of meanings, I moved with seeming lightness between the two language groups, the Dutch arrivals and the indigenous people. In the process of giving meaning to statements, I crossed the colour line, becoming one of the first local women to legally marry one of the foreigners.

Neither Hottentot nor Dutch my offspring were in truth new South Africans. But when my husband died, I, a victim of distress, became an alcoholic.

Eventually falling from grace, wanted by neither racial group, I was relegated to historical vagueness. People know I existed. But between the pages of official documentation I wander unwanted like a wraith in space, neither here nor there.

Tracey Rose

Opposite and detail overleaf:  
Clarke, Peter (b.1929)  
*Fanfare: Eva/Krotoa* 2004  
Watercolour, pencil and ink on Fabriano paper,  
50 x 35 cm



## EVA / KROTOA

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### *Against all odds*

Throughout history women have borne the brunt of violence, oppression and discrimination, often being relegated to a secondary role in a number of spheres in society. However, many women have rallied against such stereotypes to gain equal rights. In 1956 women came together to march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria protesting the extension of the pass laws to women, their resistance and camaraderie highlighting female resilience. The works in this selection capture portraits of enduring women. David Goldblatt is one of the most recognised photographers originating from South Africa and in his photograph of Anna Boois, his technical precision foregrounds the textured detailing and composition of a rather sombre portrait. Despite the apparent markers of celebration – a birthday cake laced with pink frosting – the sitter has a stoical expression and is dwarfed by the surrounding landscape. The bare vegetable patch in front of her, coupled with the gnarled branches that make up the fence, not only gives a sense of the isolation of the subject, but also prefigures her tragic abandonment of the farm. It is a poignant exploration of South African rural life that deftly moves beyond sentimental representation of pastoral scenes or victimised subject, offering resilience over abundance and celebration. Similarly, Samkelo Bunu grapples with creating a portrait of a South African woman. In the etching *The Poor Widow* (1995) a woman dressed in mourning attire donates money to a church collection plate. With the disembodied yet authoritative finger that commands contribution to the plate, Bunu captures a moment in the narrative transaction of grief that uneasily combines religion and commerce. The widow, buckled with age and grief, symbolises the remaining spirit of a nation struggling with poverty and HIV/Aids. **Catherine Green**

Above:  
**Bunu, Samkelo G** (b.1960)  
*The Poor Widow* 1995  
 Etching in colour 6/10, 30 x 29.5 cm

Opposite:  
**Goldblatt, David** (b.1930)  
*Anna Boois with her birthday cake and vegetable garden on her farm Klein Karoo in the Kamiesberge, Namaqualand, 20 September 2003*  
 Archival pigment on cotton paper 6/6, 98 x 123.5 cm





## Penny Siopis (b.1953)

Penny Siopis, born in Vryburg, North West Province in 1953 to Greek parents, has been a significant artistic talent in the trajectory of contemporary South African art during and after apartheid. Trained in fine arts at Rhodes University, Siopis uses her art as a means to grapple with a number of social issues. Given her training in the rhetoric of Western art history, she has often drawn on its iconography as a means to challenge issues which she has felt strongly about within her personal and local contexts.

Siopis's signature style of accumulated surfaces began with her cake paintings that dealt with the domestic image commonly associated with her heritage (her family owned a bakery), as well as female sexuality. In these pink-hued pieces she employed confectionary utensils to apply paint thickly to her canvases. The product is what looks like a three-dimensional 'skin' projecting out of the painting. The human/tactile quality of the paint surface helped Siopis to evoke themes of time (as the 'skin' wrinkled and cracked) and female sexuality in seemingly tame imagery. One of her most famous works, *Melancholia* (1986, Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection), employing both historical references and gender concerns, won her the Volkskas Atelier Award in 1986. The accumulated and gouged surfaces, achieved by adding dried paint skins and scarring the surface with her palette knife, are vivid markers of the trauma of history.

*On the Beach near the Military Hospital, Woodstock, 1853* (1995) offers a regal profile of a black woman with her hair tightly braided away from her face. Surrounding her is an ornate frame coupled with the richly patterned blue area that resembles velvet. Both these visual markers, through their design and colour, give a sense of her importance. Her stately visage is placed over a found print by Thomas Bowler, produced in 1853, of the beach area near the multiracial area of Woodstock. The woman's positioning makes her dominate the small seaside vignette, which she surveys in a restrained manner. This work forms part of Siopis's *History Series*.

The *History Series*, produced during the 1980s and 1990s, makes obvious reference to the genre of history painting, a male-dominated genre marked for its epic recording of historical scenes. In this series Siopis sourced visual materials from high school history textbooks published during the apartheid era, as well as colonial prints that foregrounded white histories and couched black histories as subsidiary, or located them within the realms of biological rather than anthropological study.

Siopis's portrait in *On the Beach near the Military Hospital, Woodstock, 1853* is sourced from a hairstyle advertisement in the 1980s. The portrait's placement intervenes with the colonial landscape articulating the position of contemporaneous black subjectivity. The use of the print, a medium that can be easily reproduced, also speaks of the degree to which authoritative texts like a history textbook can be disseminated to imprint a problematic historical viewpoint on their readers. Similarly, to bring the viewers' attention to modes of presentation, her brushstrokes extend to painting on the frame itself, to show how history has been framed according to certain biases. By being a female artist, as well as choosing a female protagonist for her work, she also reclaims history for a gender that has been largely ignored in historical narratives and painting.

Siopis's accolades allowed her to travel overseas, which was inspirational to producing works that dealt with both her personal preoccupations and significant debates in South African history. Siopis did a number of works that dealt with Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman, or the Hottentot Venus, who was brought to Europe during the 19th century to be displayed as a sideshow attraction for her enlarged buttocks, genital area and breasts. People were invited to touch her, and when she died, her remains were kept as specimens of curiosity, displayed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Baartman's story stands as an exemplar of how indigenous people from Africa have been treated by the Western powers as 'exotic', 'primitive' and 'sexual'.

While Siopis's later work moved away from painting to installation and video, a concentration on the surface has always been apparent in her oeuvre. Significant pieces include the autobiographical film, *My Lovely Day* (1997), and the installation, *Charmed Lives* (1998). Her most recent works, the *Shame* (2004) and *Pinky Pinky* series, deal with female sexuality and sexual violence and marked her return to the medium of paint. She also exhibited at the Freud Museum in London in 2005. She is currently practising as both an artist and fine arts lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Catherine Green

Opposite and detail overleaf:  
Siopis, Penelope (Penny) (b. 1953)  
*History Series (Blue): On the Beach near  
the Military Hospital, Woodstock, 1853* 1995  
Oil and collage on board, 66 x 76 cm





*the beauty of the world*