

Earth and Everything

Recent Art from South Africa

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Over the past few years, South African contemporary art has appeared as the most fascinating and stimulating artistic production of the continent. Since the ground-breaking Museum of Modern Art Oxford exhibition 'Art from South Africa' in 1990, which pointed to a fascinating internal debate within the ANC about the future role of art once it could break free of its direct propaganda function, South African art has appeared as a model of a revolutionary, challenging and still 'avant-garde' art. Almost uniquely amongst postcolonial societies, South Africa can look forward to an optimistic future, and one in which a new plural and tolerant national identity is seeking a visual form. The danger in these cases is always that the art could become little more than an illustration of government policy, however much we may sympathise with the particular government. For this reason, the ANC's decision to encourage an avant-garde art free of a narrow agenda shows much foresight and has unleashed a movement which may yet become an example to others.

As David Elliott pointed out in the catalogue to 'Art from South Africa', irony is frequently a defence mechanism against repression. Irony is a term often applied to contemporary European or North American production, but can the ironies of postmodernism be compared with those born of apartheid? Equally, can the references to travel or aeronautical technology in the work of artists such as Tito Zungu be seen in isolation from the dramas of migrant workers or forced repatriation? Many of the artists in 'Earth and Everything' are literally on the margins of the commercial art world, and the accompanying brochure gives much (perhaps too much) emphasis to the physical difficulties of reaching these artists, so that at times it reads more like the Rough Guide to South Africa than an exhibition guide. Still, the point is well made that physical distance from the centres of production and consumption does not condemn an art to irrelevance. In fact, quite the opposite.

The exhibits divided into three main groups. The first was made up of small figurative sculptures creating tableaux of humorous or ironic scenes. Johannes Mashego Segogela's *Burial of Apartheid*, 1993, showed the mixed reactions of a crowd at the metaphorical funeral of apartheid. The reactions of the crowd range from joy through indifference and the passive presence of media reporters. This type of work shows just how far South African artists have been able to move away from agitprop. *Burial of Apartheid* challenges precisely through its refusal to paint a simplistic picture of the upheaval created by the move from one system to another.

Emphasis in these figurative works was on the situations created by apartheid rather than on abstract issues. The sculptures of Claudette Schreuders or Noria Mabasa concentrated on the various characters of South African life. One of the most humorous figures in the exhibition was Schreuders' white South African lady at a cocktail party. The vacant expression on her face speaks volumes about the futility and mediocrity of racism, as this type of lady is 'universal'; one of the products of imperialism which can be found as much in London as in Johannesburg.

The second type of work in the exhibition encompassed the work of Derrik Nxumalo, Tito Zungu, Chickenman Mkize and Titus Moteyane. All of these artists work with drawing, but they describe the world in a 'naive' manner. Although the term has become worn down through cliché in recent years, 'mapping' describes these works well. Zungu's drawings of aeroplanes on envelopes sent to his wife when he was a migrant worker are particularly interesting when viewed as 'mail art', here concentrating on the means of transport which is converted from something impersonal into a humorous and imaginative fantasy. Chickenman Mkize takes another visual metaphor of industrial transport, the road sign, and subverts it through crazy lettering and quasi-nonsense messages. A seemingly harmless playing has other implications if we consider Paulo Freire's definition of street signs: Though street signs are not evil in themselves... they are among thousands of directional signals in a technological society which, introjected by people, hinder their capacity for critical thinking.*

The third genre of work was more conceptual. Jeremy Wafer was the 'purest' of this group in that his sculptural works seem to be exercises in form with subtly implied reference to tribal art or landscape rather than contemporary politics. Kay Hassan's installation was one of the most interesting works in the show. He collects the materials of homeless migrant workers and

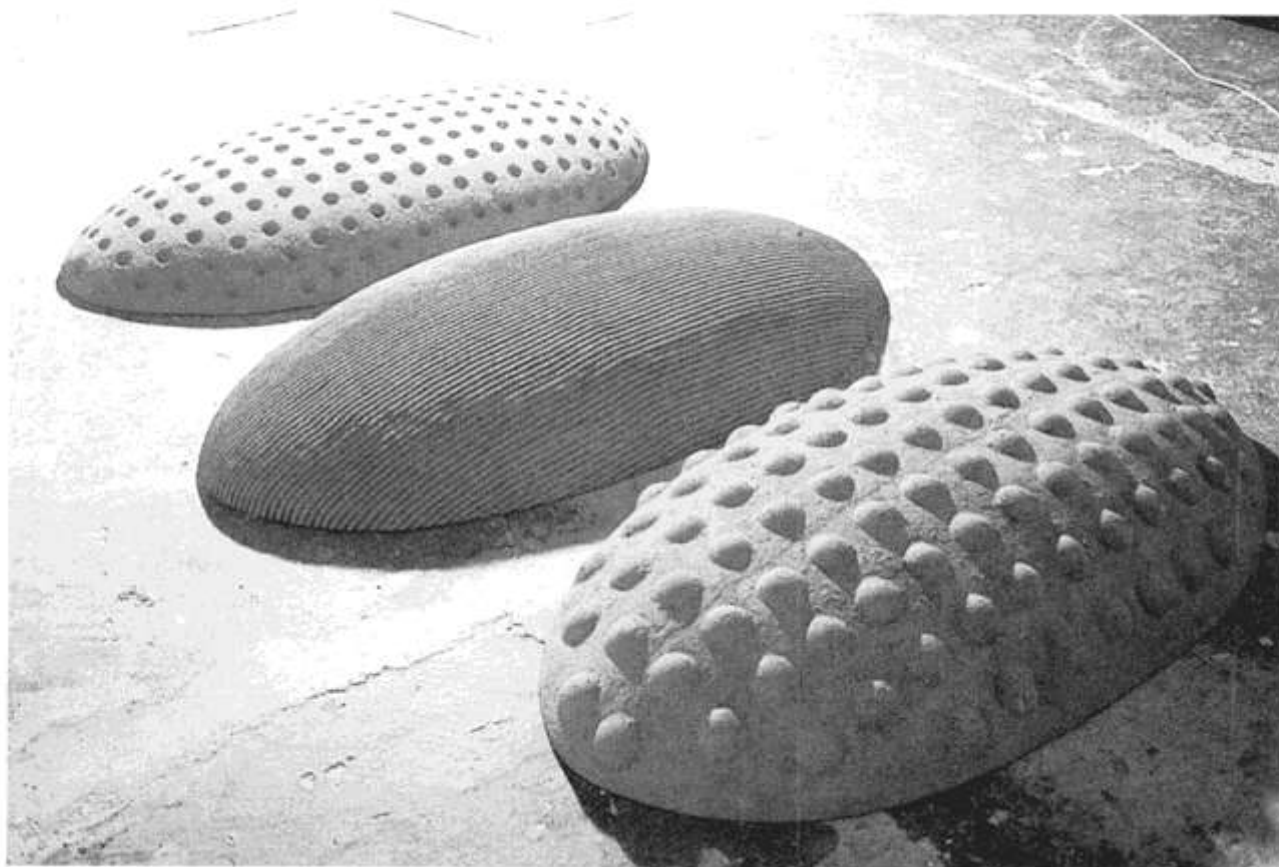
displays them in the gallery, as though the inhabitant had recently moved away and left them behind. The tension and violence of a forced departure, together with the intrusion on someone's privacy is tangible and uncomfortable. To be viewing such a collection of objects as sculpture in a gallery feels wrong, yet there is also a strange seduction in prying into such a reality. Such a scene could be as relevant to the homeless of Britain as to those of South Africa, and this work must count as one of the successes of the show. Another comparable piece was by Anton Karstel, who filled the gallery with a temporary construction hut into which holes were drilled, allowing a view of a body inside, probably dead. As in Hassan's work, the implication that violence happens at this level of everyday banality, in the underground world of migrant workers and exploitative bosses, leads us away from

overreaching discourses about race and social development, and prompts us to consider to what extent such unspeakable things can and do happen in our own society.

There were disappointments in this exhibition, not least the drawings by Walter Oltmann which seemed little more than dull academic studies, especially in comparison to the fascinating sculptural work reproduced in the exhibition guide. Equally, Jenny Siopis' works, despite — or perhaps because of — their international success seemed to lack the genuine humour and 'edge' of the other works. Of all the work in the exhibition, hers conformed most closely to the idea of 'international visual arts' as fantasised from the West, with all the implications of body, race, representation and the other keywords which invariably attach themselves to Third World art. These terms and interests are in danger of

Kay Hassan, *Bundles*, 1995





Jeremy Wafer, *Mounds*, 1995. Photo: Colleen Wafer.

becoming as much of a trap of marginalisation as the 'exotic' or 'primitive' was some time ago. The recent boom in cultural studies and postcolonialism is in danger of creating an artistic apartheid in which only particular types of art which conform to a specific vocabulary (still 'made in the West' incidentally) can enter. Thus the centre continues to preselect and predetermine which of the peripheral arts can be exposed to the public according to its own agenda. There are, of course, valuable exceptions and those who still believe that art can reach a broad public without the mediation of a complicated theoretical apparatus. 'Earth and Everything' fell into this latter group. The absence of a catalogue, although accidental, helped to confront the work as what it is rather than what we are told it is. By not working to an agenda of national identity or cosmopolitan 'internationalism', the curators avoided setting up an absolute definition of what South Africa is or should be, preferring rather to suggest a series of possibilities.

'Earth and Everything' — intentionally or not — continued the exploration of South African art in terms of a tension between political struggle and the avant-garde, understood in terms of an

exploration of the limits of an art work within its context. Through the frequent demand in Britain for a 'political' art, a category has been created for art from troubled regions which ultimately confirms the divide between 'high' and 'sophisticated' art and an art which, while fulfilling ancient western dreams of social and political relevance, is still relegated to a minor status in our historical accounts. Exhibitions such as 'Earth and Everything' allow us an important insight into the tensions and possibilities of art created outside our own system, yet which can still be understood as challenging at a formal and contextual level and which, vitally, can teach us a great deal.

* Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, quoted in Jimmie Durham, *A Certain Lack of Coherence*, Kala Press, London, 1993, p 2.

'Earth and Everything' was curated and shown at the Arnolfini, Bristol, from 20th April to 9th June, the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, from 15th June to 4th August, Firstsite at The Minories, Colchester, from 7th September to 19th October, 1996, and Oriel 31 and Wrexham Library Art Centre from 26th October to 30th November, 1996.
