Contemporary South African Art 1985–1995

Jacqueline Nolte

The South African National Gallery recently underwent a voluntary exposure in the spirit of national reconciliation. In a retrospective, spanning the decade from 1985 to 1995, the gallery opened up a space for a critique of the shape that its collection had assumed in the course of traversing the apartheid-controlled terrain to the still rocky landscape of a ‘rainbow’ culture. On entering the gallery and turning to orientate oneself, one met with others surveying the space in the form of Jane Alexander’s Butcher Boys, 1985–86. The unreflective eyes of these waxen beings stared incomprehensibly into the space around them and beyond the walls upon which hung an array of grand statements singled out for this prefatory view. Butcher Boys stated in the strongest of terms the dilemma of what, as privileged South Africans, we have chosen or not chosen to see.

Although the question of who carried out and who continues the act of legislating culture has worn a tired path, one readily forgotten since 1994, its presence haunted this exhibition space. It was interrupted by the magnitude, resilience and sheer output of artists who have asserted the importance of vision despite all that has threatened its emergence. Erased from memory in the accomplishment of the immanent object are those concepts and actions which paved the way to a terrain envisaged as destination, ‘peoples’ culture’, ‘working class culture’, a culture free of class distinctions, the cultural boycott, resolutions from conferences such as CASA, the dogged constitution of cultural workers’ organisations. What remained were blithe and defiant continuities of cultural production, the stylistic and ideological discourses of which were to be excavated by the viewer.

The considered selection and placement of paintings, graphics, photographs, mixed-media works and sculptures in the first room set the tone for the balance of form and media throughout the rest of the exhibition. Curator Emma Bedford had selected works which demonstrate key emotional, conceptual and stylistic expressions spanning a decade of visual production in South Africa. Tensions of complicity, defiance, hope and caution, as related to survival in South Africa, were placed in disquieting juxtapositions in this grand tour of contemporary South African art.

In general, the exhibition followed the design of verbal texts. Moving from left to right in the first room, one encountered a range of experiences marked by questions of culpability, of responsibility, then tending towards gestures of reclamation and irony. Geoffrey Grundlingh’s surreal photographic triptych, From the series: junctures, 1993, established a leading theme regarding personal and national cultural loss. Alongside this, Sarah Tabane’s abstract drawing In Times of Sorrow, 1990, provided a visceral response of that interior trauma resulting from such loss. Under the shadow of Alexander’s Butcher Boys, Tabane’s scratched marks dragged across the surface as if haunted by continual efforts to see through the numbed front of those in control. Also delineating the insidious mechanics of control, Keith Dietrich used airbrush to blur the possibility of clear categorisation. Sidney, Wandle, Aubrey, Richard and Arthur refused to be pulled into focus under the objectifying gaze of artist and viewer. Dietrich’s seamless illusionism was set against Paul Stopforth’s cubic incisions and planar rearrangements, rendering his subjects all the more obvious in their commitment to battering both self and designated other. That the South African National Gallery acquired Stopforth’s The Visit, 1986, during the height of the apartheid declared state of emergency is a credit to its then director, Raymund Van Niekerk,
and chair of Acquisitions Committee, Neville Dubow.

Unfortunately less than a quarter of these major icons in the first exhibition room were produced by women and less than half by black South Africans. This was a predictable outcome of past assumptions which, thankfully, are in a process of redress. But this redress could, and should recognise the great history of black practitioners in this country, long represented in collections such as that at the University of Fort Hare. Much of this exhibition emanated from privileged spaces of contemplation. William Kentridge’s elegant disinterment of African dignity in his LargeUntitled Head, 1991, raised self-conscious questions about authorship in this process of reconstituting history and culture. Immersed in an oceanic wash of blue gouache, this charcoal monument appeared to threaten a disintegration if revealed to all; its pain seemed to surface more readily than its beauty. Without such nostalgia for the aesthetic and obsessed more with the detail of decay was Diane Victor’s drawing, Judgement of Parys, 1988. Victor casts judgement on all who fetishise pleasure in the face of disaster. She explores a cruelty in the white South African psyche which was repeated in the visible frustrations of many artists categorised thus in the show.

Alongside this figuration was abstraction, assemblage, studied modernism and local practices of beadwork and woodcarving. What emerged from this diversity was a coherent collection of contemporary abstraction, particularly as practised by black South Africans. Despite fierce critiques of its political irrelevance, abstraction has flourished and has been avidly collected by the National Gallery. The works function as intriguing redefinitions of European and American abstraction, infused with commentary on the concrete rather than the transcendental. One such example was Sam Nhlengethwa’s Image 1, 1989. Amidst a lilac colour-field, Nhlengethwa stains his space with a smear of plastic waste. This is balanced between the symmetrical placement of two hovering cones as if to contest their perfect balance. Merging abstraction with both landscape and performative traditions, Randy Hartzenberg visits upon his canvas the relentless devastation that has been visited upon this land and its people. Applied to the canvas of After Driekopseland, 1989, is a split iron pail, clotted paint and rusted nails as remnants of an individual catharsis in the face of collective pain.

It was fitting that the photographs of

Kagiso Pat Mauutoa, Reconstruction, 1994, post office canvas bags, wood and paint, 245 x 127 cm
Grundlingh and Gideon Mendel should occupy prime space in the entrance to the exhibition, for it was the photographic collection that was truly impressive, marked by bold selections and an eye to fine detail. In acquiring this large photo essay, the Gallery demonstrated its commitment to exposing the challenges of the Reconstruction and Development Programme as well as supporting the best traditions of documentary photography. Mendel's project was co-produced with the Lévi Strauss organisation, the Terrence Higgins Trust and the Director of the Aids and STD Programme of the Department of Health. He pictured a spectrum of political, educational and cultural activities aimed at combatting the virus, as well as individual attempts to survive, to love and to surrender in the face of grief. Pointing to the impossibility of aestheticising disease, Mendel took care to picture its non-discrimination with regard to who is infected.

This moving essay was placed alongside the ironic play of Pat Mautloa's Reconstruction, 1994, and Brett Murray's Heritage: Milk and Blood, 1992. Mautloa uses a metal beam to support three mailbags of the old Republic of South Africa. Bolted centrally to each are cultural icons which speak to the past as to the present. Attached with wing-nuts for easy removal is a framed representation of a surface punctured by bullets, a framed assemblage of an abstract composition and a new South African flag painted upon wood. All are presented as if to illustrate their new exposure on these outer surfaces, yet still framed by the official byways of the past. Mautloa's querying of legislated culture raised important questions in this climate of rapturous national construction.

As a contribution to the new dispensation in South Africa, Murray evoked with humour the pathos of colonialism's demise. The radical juxtaposition between Murray's contemporary irony and the unmitigated jubilation in Christina Nkuna's beaded cloth, which celebrates the homecoming of Unkhonto wesiZwe, was as disquieting on these walls as in reality. The cloth, executed in 1995, speaks of a desired resolution that also informs every soiled tyre part, metal grid, barbed wire and squashed can that is appended to Willie Bester's Challenges Facing the New South Africa, 1990. The curator challenged the delineation of different viewing experiences reserved for works of disparate media, by placing this cloth next to a mixed media work which in turn was alongside an accomplished oil. In Stanley Pinker's Players in the Game, 1985, we see those very parameters of oil painting that are pulled apart by Bester's tactics of collage. In an erudite combination of formal play and political commentary, Pinker revealed the military role playing in all its sinister absurdity. In viewing works which assert the liberatory potential and victory of national struggle alongside works which question the 'miraculous' cures of nationalism, one was left with a querulous sense of the utopian.

And yet the search for the ideal persists. Vuyisane Mgijima's closely textured linocut Unification, 1991, positions human and animal forms in a secure and symmetrical frame envisaged as a genesis of both natural and national 'reconciliation'. It is quite different to that world of pleasure envisaged in Hennie Stroebel's Port of Plenty, 1987-91, a laboriously embroidered work in which literal frames delineate differently coloured worlds of individuals in separate cultural contexts. Stroebel presumes an equation of social positioning and pleasure but the work disturbs in its elisions. While interesting to see such a mammoth effort in fabric, thread and ceramic, this acquisition called for closer definitions of predilection.
There were many other works in this
ebulous space, attempting the question, in
bar Friedman’s *Wheel of Fortune*. The curator, however, attempted to underscore ideological
Both make use of narrative pictorial frames plus
depth and luminous colour, yet Mkame speaks of
of the impossibility of pleasurable breathing space
 amidst toil, rape, detention, torture, resistance,
suicide, prayer, and burial. The contingency of
sculptures by Jackson Hlungwane and Willem
Strydom was an interesting one: Hlungwane is a
self-declared mystic who has been ‘elevated’ from
his remote rural shrine into the heart of art insti-
tutional practice; Strydom, as self-conscious artist,
has chosen as his material marble acquired on a
pilgrimage of study to Italy. The most notable
feature of Strydom’s lament for Afrikanerdom is
the prominently displayed white gallery sign,
inscribed across its base ‘Please do not touch’
(Moenie aanraak nie). That the viewing of this work
was legislated through two pre-independence
official languages and that it has for years
occupied an insistent central presence in this
gallery was a tired reminder of settled resistances.

Progressing through the rest of this exhibition,
the viewer encountered a far tighter arrangement
accorded to historical context. The images from
the mid to late Eighties were extraordinarily
moving. Kevin Brand’s *Nineteen Boys Running*,
1988, combining polystyrene, paper, paint and
wood, create life-size screaming presences, fleeing
yet rooted to their wooden coffin-like pedestals.
They successfully ruptured the historical silence
of the pristine gallery space, setting an example
for how this show might further use installation
and sculpture to propel the viewer out of habitual
perspectives. Confronted by their expressive
painterly marks but equally by the pain-filled
presences, the possibility of abstraction was
denied at every turn.

This poignant visual experience was enhanced
by the arrangement of adjacent works. On one
side was hung a quietly moving ‘essay’ of black
and white photographs. The curator of
photography, Kathleen Grundlingh, had selected
photographs of children shown as guerrillas in the
bush (Meintjes) and amidst urban warfare,
devastation and protest (Tillim and de Vlieg), as
flag-waving ‘pioneers’ (Hilton-Barber) or at play
in South African Police armories (Zieminski).
Weinberg pictures them in the suffocating
enclosures of suburbia and Grendon in the dust of
Namaqualand. They hide under tables in
Mofokeng’s interiors and eat cake at laden tables

in Ledochowski’s images from Elgin. Here were
some of South Africa’s finest documentary
photographers, making the absence of recent
acquisitions of works by photographers such as
Goldblatt, Magubane, Schadeberg and Badsha all
the more lamentable.

Brand’s running figures were displayed as if
part of a grand South African tragedy, orchestrated
as though emerging from Grendon’s
massive theatre of the grotesque. Nearly 3 metres
high and 12 metres in length, *Ons Vir Jou SA*,
1984–86, was made as a mural to tour community
art centres. That it is now housed in the National
Gallery is fitting: the work is a realisation of the
worst aspects of South African history. Picturing
the colonial assault by European settlers on
enslaved autochthonous peoples, it subverts the
supposed celebratory associations of monumental
style. In a painted assemblage of surreal
mechanised components, Grendon produced an
allegory of conquest and corruption, picturing
relentless exploitation, greed, loss of humanity
and a wilful absence of vision, reminiscent of the
biting satire of George Grosz.

In reaction to the assault of having lived within
the policed borders of South Africa, many artists
delivered blows as hard-hitting back into the
public arena. Wielding satire akin to Grendon,
Willie Bester’s mixed media sculpture *The Soldier*,
1990, and Michelle Raubenheimer’s *Pielkop or Bust*, c. 1986, set up an interesting comparison of
a formal learning of modernist language and
untutored assemblage. Meaning in Bester’s work

Anna Zieminski, *75th Anniversary of the SAP*, 1988,
silver print on fibre paper, 22.2 x 33.4 cm.
resides in the material transformation of objects presumed harmless in our environment. A can of insect repellent is put to use as a tear gas cannister, a fuel tin is tuned to the purposes of communication, an electric switch is inserted into the back as metaphor of individual and collective control. If Bester's figure is the minion of the state then Raubenheimer's represents the grand surveyor of external, and internal, controls. Equipped with regulatory gloves, fly-green shades and the costume of bondage constricting her ample form, this figure speaks of a fetishistic desire which arises in the over-regulated zones of political, cultural and sexual survival. On the wall behind was a photograph documenting the destruction of Gail Neke's sculpture of Eugene Terreblanche and his Two Sidekicks by members of the right wing Afrikaner Weerstands beweging (of which Terreblanche is the leader), together with a cartoon by Derek Bauer Sorry ou Groote, 1992, which depicts an attack on Terreblanche himself, as if mistaken for sculptural monstrosity.

The apartheid state's attack upon free expression was underscored by the inclusion of Jonathan Shapiro's cartoon Look Sancho... More Evil Demons, 1988. Shapiro's work complemented the array of photographs by the 'alternative' press on the opposite wall. This welcome admission of the art of satire and caricature into the gallery space was reinforced by Stacey Stent's Untitled — Aah — There's That New Young Artist From the Township, 1990. A member of the Visual Arts Group of the Cultural Workers' Congress, Stent produced this work in the context of the entry of international art moguls into South Africa, posing to local artists the challenge of contending with superimposed categorisations. Stent makes reference to the high modernist criteria that initially informed the MOMA exhibition in Oxford, (prior to consultations with insistent cultural workers), to publications which manufactured terms such as 'township' and 'resistance' art as well as to the ensuing art historical and cultural debates that occupy academicians and administrators. That this work was placed alongside Sophie Peters' Cape Scene, 1989, highlighted Peters as a community-arts-tutored painter who also deals with issues of exclusion from the Houses of representation. Reiterating the reference to arbitrary categorisations, Maswanganyi's painted sculptures P.W. Botha and D.F. Malay were placed in front of Stent's commentary, and to the right of Grendon's mural. Less macabre, these humorous replicas of pillars of apartheid portray them as bespectacled yet sightless wooden torsos.

One of the major accomplishments of this collection lies in its range of media and its attempt to erase boundaries between the categories of 'craft', 'popular', 'folk', 'community' and 'fine' art. Following in the path established in 1986 by Ricky Burnett's 'Tributaries' exhibition, the gallery had incorporated many previously maligned forms of expression. What remain to be evaluated however are the criteria exercised within this reparation. The gallery seems caught at present between regarding the work as pure experience of empirical matter, thus eliding the subject, or as direct manifestation of the subject, thereby ignoring the relevance of material presence.

Adjacent to the hall of historical commentary was a space devoted to imaginative excursions into urban and rural 'scapes. The centrepiece was Andries Botha's massive alleenspraak in Paradys, 1991, ostensibly an attempt at reconciling the country's material traditions. Eulogised as a triumph in this respect, it was less convincing as a statement of political and psychic reconciliation. The voluptuous black figure rises phoenix-like in her tyre-bound form, 'sniffed' out by a carved buffalo/dog at one end and fanned/served by a well-manpered wire mannequin with neon heart. The questionability of this work, as in many works by white male artists in South Africa, was in stark contrast to the delicacy and humility of scale of works by black artists in the same room. Such contrasts were humorously exaggerated by the placement of, for example, Julius Mfele's Man Ploughing, 1995, next to Botha's travail. However, the assumptions which informed these juxtapositions became more worrying when viewed against Ishmael Thysen's Zulu Dance, 1989, and Ezrom Legae's bronze African Goat, whose exquisite attenuated form spoke more eloquently of forgotten tradition and regenerative aesthetic endeavour. The acquisition of this work is an important complement to that of other great black artists such as Durant Sihlali, represented here by Fragments of the Ancient Wall, 1991. Sihlali's innovative printmaking is an endeavour to retrieve patterns of buried dignity through the textural tracing of a form resonant of both flayed and cured skin as well as the crust of the land itself. His abstraction was placed in the context of Jenny Stadler's In the Heart of the Country, 1986-87, David Koloane's Emergence, 1988, and Kevin Atkinson's print Once Upon a Time There Was a Beautiful Country — A Paradise, 1986, the latter a fine example of formal relationships articulated with the utmost discretion, and a contrast to a rather staid assembly of prints.

Another exception was the massive silk-screened triptych produced by Kentridge for the Johannesburg Centenary in 1988, entitled Art in
State of Hope, Art in a State of Siege and Art in a State of Grace. With reference to constricted movement, failed utopias, and slippages of taste Kentridge exemplifies the best of engaged liberal critique. In the early ‘90s a number of works were acquired which spoke to stylistic developments in the Anglo-American world but of liberal concern with local politics. The installations of Sue Williamson have provoked much debate regarding her ‘rightful’ authorship in narrating the experience of others less empowered than herself. The Long Journey of the Brothers Ngosi, 1990, and For Thirty Years Next to His Heart, 1990, demonstrate her use of black persons’ identity and travel documents plus travel apparel. Metal trunks are decorated with printed apartheid legislation which forced migrant labourers to commute endlessly between ‘reserves’ and towns. Williamson wilfully aestheticises these gross symbols of black experience, presenting them as hand-coloured prints and signed artist’s editions, acts of objectification which remain questionable.

Judging the informing circumstances of cultural production in a country divided by cultural privilege is an unhappy task which leads also to passing judgement on political and moral commitment. Surviving as a privileged citizen in South Africa seems to produce a sort of cultural schizophrenia, benefitting from the system while also struggling for its demise. Some simply dispense with a belief in retrieving an ethical groundplan. The eager embrace of the play of postmodernism in South Africa was, in certain cases, a release from moral exertion. What is manifest today are adaptations of this fashion. Dominating the room of imaginative venture (described by the curator as a space given over to commentary on regulation and distribution of human and natural resources) was Malcolm Payne’s gargantuan shaped canvas with mock gold leaf, acrylic, underfelt and mirrors, entitled Tunnel Vision, 1991. Whirling before the viewer was a virtual mandala of gold veils, inscribed names of gold mines, dislocated limbs, chains, plus top hats as symbols of urban ‘prestige’ acquired by migrant workers. Here Payne consciously deconstructs modernist ideals of beauty and the codes of apartheid capitalism. A clever positioning of Samson Mudzunga’s wooden figure entitled Migrant Labourer, 1988, lent Payne’s statement an authenticity he so disdains. Placed on the other side of Payne’s work was a smaller ceramic sculpture, Wheel of Fortune, 1990, by Lovell Friedman, whose whimsy was almost lost beside the magnitude of Payne’s work.

A contestation of space also occurred in this room; Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi’s large pastel The Child’s Mother Holds the Sharp Side of the Knife was confined in one corner, whilst Francine Scialom Greenblatt’s Le Chambre 3326, 1988, might have been better placed in the context of other works exploring female desire such as Doris Bloom’s Miss Muffet. Similarly, Anthony Nkotsi’s etching Discussion, 1988, might have resonated more in the company of Koloane and Atkinson. These quibbles concern questions about what is prioritised in the selection process. At times the delineation of historical and geographical experience produced contradictory stylistic statements, the implications of which eroded the assumed similarities of content. Weinberg’s almost formulaic harmonies next to the self-conscious anti-aestheticism of Payne and numerous postmodernist formulations were a case in point.

Abandoning the use of image as text, room 7 exploded in an array of contesting visions, described loosely as landscape, secular and religious ritual. If any part of the exhibition gave lie to the claim of unity in diversity it was this room. In the gallery’s eagerness to show all the artists whose work it had acquired over the ten year period, over 70 artists’ works competed for space, without recognition of their individual frames of reference. Maswanganjii’s marvellous sculptural tableau Moses and the Burning Bush jostled against an uncomely group of display cases housing Joel Sibisi’s and Nester Nala’s ceramics, Albert Dlamini’s wirework and woven baskets by Reuben Ndwandwe, Kelswe Ntshangase and Noriah Manqele. It was due to this imperative of inclusivity that few areas coalesced. Simon Stone’s Punk and Duck and Penelope Siopis’s Those Places, amongst the best paradigms of painterly postmodernism in South Africa, were placed alongside laborious modernist studies. A more successful corner of this room housed the surrealistic enterprises of Giulio Tambellini, Nathan Margalit, Matthew Brittan and Braam Kruger, and, in an especially partitioned area, works by Wilma Cruise, Susan Rosenberg, Claire Gavronsky and Elizabeth Vels, linked by a shared chromatic value and tone.

The wall text of this room explained that many of these works raise questions regarding what constitutes a home, as in Ingrid Hudson’s photographs of the Trekfolk of the Karoo. Lesley Lawson’s photographic studies, Isa Kabini’s Ndebele Painting and Fatima February’s appliqué District Six, Where We Lived. The provision of home and housing is one of South Africa’s primary challenges and it is the nature of what has and has not been established that concerns many South African artists. In this current
climate, the state is attempting to meet its challenges in the spirit of new nation building. Yet one of the ironies of nationalism is that we can expect a critique of its workings only when they occur. This becomes obvious in an exhibition dominated by those who were the educated ‘beneficiaries’ of white control in South Africa. Many of these artists protest the alienating effects of nationalism’s particular anonymity as citizens who have ‘enjoyed’ a legislated belonging. Amongst them, however, there are also those who persist with visions of settled ownership. This is evident, for example, in the peculiarly South African Super Realism in which the ‘super’ appears to pertain to a desire to retain that exaggerated reality of a lifestyle under threat. Whether in Elizabeth Riding’s *Familieportret*, 1991, or John Kramer’s *Boerewinkel, Loeriesfontein*, 1968, this nostalgia is invited through familiarity, as if not serious in intent.

The celebration of community and nation building was generally represented by artists previously disallowed nationhood and thus the space from which to fight for individual liberties. In the Liberman room the curator had selected celebratory works by Given Makhubele, Harold Mettler and Jackson Nkumande to mark the new democratic dispensation. Close to Nkumande’s joyful transformations of tin and cardboard into local and foreign dignitaries, praised poets and religious leaders who inhabit the sloping grounds of a shocking-pink Union Building, was a wooden sculpture by Tyrone Appolis entitled *Stompie*, 1991. The juxtaposition was a clever one. Appolis is not an artist to stand on ceremony and his work, which points to the murder of a young man allegedly by persons in the employ of a prominent leader of the African National Congress, displays an interesting caution toward euphoria on the part of the artist and gallery. Works by Barend de Wet, Roger Meintjes, Wayne Barker and Robert Hodgins partook in the erosion of icons of the ‘old’ South Africa. Meintjes’ photographs literally walked one through the shadows and cul-de-sacs of such limited visions. Like Lawson’s photographs in the previous room, they framed the unpredictable and often poignant detail of the unseen.

Occupying the central floor space in this room was Michael Mosala’s *Negotiation*, c. 1991. Acquired, like *Stompie*, in 1991, it embodies the painful emergence of long held dreams. Placing Strydom’s *Dorslandboom*, 1989, alongside this work might have made for an interesting dialogue. Mosala allows his forms to emerge from the gnarled bole of a tree, while Jackson Hlungwane carves out swathes of wood joined into magnificently asymmetrical thrones. The breadth of Hlungwane’s empty throne conjures up thoughts of a presence large enough to assume this authority. Its placement in front of Helmut Starcke’s accomplished *Legend*, 1995, provided a mutual statement defying the specifics of institutionalisation. Starcke’s canvas triptych of significant sites for a metamorphic ‘throne’ of wood, illustrated the transmutations of this symbol of power from its immersion under the pressure of white smouldering heat, to a charred and simmering site from which its power is reasserted in a shoot of fresh growth.

The bold but tragic beauty of Starcke’s work was enhanced by Hlungwane’s magnificence of gesture and Vivienne Koorland’s acute equations of hope and loss. Koorland’s faded newspaper pasted on canvas declared ‘welcome Mandela’, alongside other fading images of nuclear holocaust and apartheid victims. Hovering alongside an oil sketch of a child’s vision of home, they denied the possibility of arrival. Koorland’s *Terezin Painting: Tomaz 1943-1990*, and *Tomaz’s Garden*, 1990, attended to the sight, and its obliteration, of generations of children massacred by prejudice.

Many works in this show questioned and tested the grounds for hope. A wall of landscape extended from Koorland’s intimate excavations to Hartenberg’s *Painting with Blanket*, 1993. Hartenberg presses a mix of media plus blanket onto the canvas as signifiers of spaces in which the body and soul seeks to be both contained and nourished. In his vista, as in Koorland’s, the satiation of life’s basic needs leaves evidence in its wake of all that is denied plus the unfathomable challenge of having to retrieve, in the dust of burned coal, something of its glitter. Alistair Findlay’s flippant reworking of early modernist heroes such as El Lissitzky in his *Land*, 1991, attests to the ease of symbolic transformations of land ownership. However it sat uneasily between Hartenberg’s insistence on life under the most dire of circumstances and Nicolaas Maritz’s earnest search for archetypal African vistas. Maritz’s *Home is Where the Heart is*, 1988, is a grand exercise in the precisions of harmony. The portentous landscapes of Philippa Hobs, Keith Dietrich and Deborah Bell rely more upon a rearrangement of select moments of narrative than a completed vision. Placed alongside one another, they shared a concern with detecting the immanent in these partial signs of the earth. Zwelethu Mthethwa places his concerns with prophecy in a more overt political framework in a pastel drawing entitled *People’s Messenger*, 1991. Produced on the eve of the unbanning of political
opposition, the work projects a sense of persons waiting to be delivered out of a saturated red ‘foetal’ cave into an element yet defined by fears of bewitching and persecution. The absence of practised hope in this image was poignantly juxtaposed with the irrelevance of such longing in Brett Murray’s Rich Boy, 1995. Murray’s acerbic humour poses under an innocence of comic-book charm. His black perspex cut-out of Richie Rich is bound in a metal frame of silver coins, testimony to the upkeep of class. Reference to South Africa’s new Constitution and Bill of Rights, which guarantees unprecedented individual freedoms, introduced the wall text of a room devoted to the exploration of individual needs and desires, although it is whose desires are recognised and what is attained that testify to the ‘agonal’ struggle of local discourse. The only evidence of black desire was Thoba’s My Private Love Affair, 1991. With concentrated control Thoba exposes his sacramental site for sustenance — a clitoral heart in the depths of an entangled forest. That completion is sought through the wounded body of the other is declared without regard for the sanctification of public discourse. So too in his I Don’t Want a Judge in my Toilet, 1994, (displayed in the Liberman room). The ejection of male desire upon female form was also consciously constructed as political metaphor in Eugene Hon’s ceramic The Joy of a Hypocrite is But for a Moment, 1987.

Curatorial space was also given over to a metanarrative of body in terms of women’s experience. Photographic works by Jo Ractliffe, Svea Josephy, Jean Brundrit and Bronwyn Thomson spoke from experiences of obliteration as subjects. Brundrit’s Portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa, 1995, questions the realisation of the new constitutional guarantee of rights of sexual orientation. Thomson’s Motherfucker I-III, 1995, is a grim reminder of women’s histories in back alleys with the presence of coat hangers and resultant stains indicating the absence of choice. Josephy’s Before/After, 1993, demands recognition of a practice of dissociation which surrounds mechanical exchanges of heterosexual favour. Using techniques of over-exposure for the reclining female form, she also reveals its replication and projection as barred, blinded and acted upon.

Two of Kim Siebert’s small collage and oil compositions attested to her witty reclamation of aesthetic traditions. European Residue, 1986, and What Did Your Mother Ever Tell You About the Hard Edge School?, 1991, attain a delicate balance of joyfully asserting the self in an art historical terrain unprepared for such subversive domestic assimilations and public redefinitions. The humour in Jonathan Stodel’s Domestic, 1990, a diminutive bronze, also relies upon its subversion of a history of dominant forms. The macho ethic of public monuments which commemorate male conquest gives way to a making visible of the invisibility of domestic labour; the unimagined in the male psyche here takes the form of an extra-terrestrial dust-eating apparatus. For this space the curator selected works which, as she has written, “question restrictive stereotyping which forces them into masculinist modes”. Putter’s Gene Pool, 1993, is an iconoclastic gesture toward a cultural past of determined heroes and heroines. Stuffing artificial floral adornment into vials, he produces signifiers of journeys of the artifice of insemination as well as of test runs for whatever

Alfred Thoba, My Private Love Affair, 1991, oil on cardboard, 53.5 x 56.5 cm.
Photo: Kathleen Grundlingh
else is borne by bodily fluids. In a reframing of ‘Boys’ Own’ narratives, Putter produces an icon of a new age, deconstructing the presumed directions of desire, picturing the ‘kill’ of heterosexual foreplay and the limited pool in which we fool around.

Neil Goedhals’ Untitled, 1987, acquired in 1995, tells of the tragic demise of epistemes of representation. Inscribed and designated as habit, his scrawls speak to the obliterating effects of discipline. Also immersed in the pain of preserving subtle perceptions in a hostile world, Jo Ractliffe’s Reshooting Diana, 1995, speaks of women’s silent suffering and public slaughter. In Goedhals and Ractliffe, as in many works in this room there existed a shared concern regarding the very possibility of private language.

Despite the practice of fashionable simulations of infinite difference, despite receptions of imposed homogeneity and collective experiences of the devastation of loss, what was displayed in this exhibition was witness to artists’ attempts to make sense of what has transpired in South Africa and what is still desired.

1 ‘Culture for Another South Africa’ (CASA) was a conference held in Amsterdam during the week of 14–19th December, 1987.
2 Regional visual arts organisations included The Visual Arts Group (VAG) of the Cultural Workers’ Congress (CWC) in Cape Town, the Imvaba Visual Arts Group in Port Elizabeth, the Natal Visual Arts Organisation (NAVAO) and the Artists’ Alliance in Johannesburg.
3 The exercise of prejudicial exclusions has resulted in few black women having envisaged, or having been allowed, entry into public arenas of ‘fine’ art.
4 The English translation of Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging is Afrikaner Resistance Movement.
6 Unfortunately, apart from the beautiful earthenware of Nala and the innovative work of Van der Walt, the presence of contemporary ‘design’ was glaring in its absence.
7 The logistics of scale and available hanging space in an exhibition of this magnitude undoubtedly determined placement.

Displaces
Topography of Unbelonging

Shaheen Merali

O, my children, take refuge, just take refuge.
Then alone out of Her mercy, She will clear the way.

Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother

Are we not all refugees?

Do we not beg or pray for a better life? Do we not subconsciously chant utterances to win a better foothold? Refugees are a mixed bag. Economic, social, political, philosophical, geographical, religious, circumstantial, aback of conditions imposed that oblige a response — to seek refuge.

Refugees flee, refugees are flown, refugees generally depart from the circumstances that have predetermined a certain topography leading to a new geography. Away from home — if home can be identified in the late twentieth century. Is home a transient space that one calls one’s own or a real, identifiable place? Does the notion of belonging have any place on a fluctuating nomadic globe? Most of us are no longer citizens but subjects of one order or another, part of a syndicate of a multinational workforce, located by a fuzzy logic. We can no longer afford the luxury to speculate generational heredity. That seems to be the privilege of bygone eras.

Boundaries shift, borders collapse, zones mutate, geographies fuse, partitions are erected, bridges are built, super highways chain us together. Yet beyond these altering strategies of arrogation we still find ourselves ‘home sick’, to be where each one of us lived once upon a time in the beginning. According to Freud “this unheimliche Heimat”, finds its possible place in an intra-uterine existence. The impossible return to the womb.

To attempt an outline, or to work towards redefining a notion of the refugee, we find ourselves eventually floundering in the zone that intercedes between exile/homelessness/displacement/unbelonging. According to the late Madan Sarup “the concept of home seems to be tied in some way to the notion of identity — the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story that others tell of us”. The refugee is an identifiable