Jane Alexander
Sculpture and Photomontage
Jacqueline Nolte

What is visually apparent is often that which is not spoken, or if you will, spoken in a different register. This is an exhibition about which registers are permitted and which not, about what is sealed and remains to be disclosed. It is an exhibition of work by a South African artist, Jane Alexander, whose images assault one with the 'silence' which they represent, an oppressive silence displayed in an evenly lit and undisrupted space.

The space is that of the South African National Gallery, the last of seven venues to display the work of this 1995 winner of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award. That these discomforting sculptures and photomontages are lent credibly by the National Gallery is a factor echoing the artist's investigations regarding the exercise of authority. National institutions in South Africa are busily reorienting themselves in accordance with the country's new constitution and policy making processes. The authoritative positioning of the gallery (adjacent to the South African Houses of Parliament), and its elegant and restrained interior allude to broader and seamless enclosures of identity which Jane Alexander attempts to expose. South Africa has long been a place of enforced silences, one of the many restricted sites which have informed this artist's consciousness and which she attempts to excavate.

The images speak of this historical silencing. They refer, also, to the attendant dangers of newly legislated languages used to govern current changes in South Africa (see, for example, Reconstruction, 1995). The show is a timely commentary on the effect of past policies on the psyche of South Africans and on the dangers of obliterating associated pains. It is also a commentary on Jane Alexander's own historical journey as a woman 'classified' as white and, therefore, 'privileged' to reflect on atrocities. But the pain which is reflected on, and that is contained in this work, is also that which is experienced from her subordinate positioning as 'woman', and as descendant of a German Jewish marriage.

Forty-two black and white photomontages propel the viewer repeatedly from one historical testimony to another, forcing a witnessing of horrors which only history seems to have the knowledge to build upon. And yet these works are obscured by various visual devices through which one has to focus, and then refocus, in order to witness more clearly. Their textures and unevenly detailed surfaces, exaggerated grain, and linear obstructions prevent easy access; their deep space and extreme contrasts refer to the impossibility of being, or surviving, within these or similarly controlled spaces. Unless, of course, one finds a means of dissociating from the pain, and developing the skill of endurance.

These works date back to 1981, with images such as Delivery, where a newborn baby is held up, but away from its mother. Three sets of hands grasp the baby at its neck and one covers its naval, thus severing any possible bond with the mother who is signified by the one hand which cannot make contact with the child. All possibilities of an 'earlier' comfort are denied. The shadowed form between the lighted spaces above and behind the child suggests an image of both cross and scythe, suggesting a future of relentless labour and sacrifice. The child has no choice as it is managed into, and delivered from, life. This insistence on confronting pain from the first visible moment of life, is echoed in Alexander's numerous other insistences that we confront what is always easier to deny. In Search, 1981, the viewer is presented with foreground evidence of that which a search party has yet to discover. The question regarding the substance of this discovery is but one amongst many which the image provokes. Questions surface regarding the discrepancy between what one knows but others do not, and what one has no option but to witness yet others might choose to ignore. The issue of concealment and the place of memory in recovery is pursued in Alexander's work right up to 1995.

Warehouse, 1985, is such a testimony to processes of storage and retrieval, the slaughterhouse of carcasses a metaphor for the movements of memory. Pastoral Scene is a sculptural tableau of three women, two of whom are black women seated on a bench, the third, an elderly white widow who stands nearby and offers, in an unconvincing, seemingly symbolic gesture, a slice of bread topped with three sardines. One of the seated women is represented as a tattered black Madonna, breast-feeding an infant, the other is an elderly women clothed in what appears to be the apron of a poorly paid domestic worker. A mongrel stands at their feet with teats swollen from feeding. Each offers up
what she can, exhausted by perpetual nurturing, wrecked by her services, surviving in the margins of a society whose icons denote the opposite of that which they purport to value. The halo is an ironic reminder of the absence of transcendence in their lives, a reminder of a suffering without meaning. Most disturbing in this work are the blank expressions of those who ‘endure’. They do not betray the ‘beauty’ of those figures which Alexander depicts in death or in sleep; instead they are frozen into a combination of compliance and a defiant refusal to give up entirely. The figures in *Pastoral Scene* live on, as does the man in *Integration Programme: Man with T.V.*, 1995, but the survival is at a cost.

The cost is that the unbearable is made bearable by not quite hearing it. Many of Alexander’s sculpted figures are present yet not present, as if dissociated from their bodies which are the source of pain. It is a pain that most women know so well, yet which Alexander treats least successfully but overtly in *Stripped (‘Oh Yes’) Girl*, 1995. That this limp and ravaged creature signifies the aberrant within oneself is a significant current of this show, but Alexander is more successful in understanding this strangeness through her identifications with others, thereby erasing the fragile boundaries between self, as source, and other, as recipient. Her figures communicate a buried suffering and it is one which is akin to the repression of memory which insists on release in the photomontages.

*Integration Programme: Man with T.V.*, 1995, is another such being. Divided from himself, he is caught in a frightening contradiction whilst making uncertain attempts to re-enter society, as is expected of him in this ‘new’ post-apartheid era: having been so consistently denied a relationship to things in the outside world, he is now expected to ‘integrate’. And yet, what is evident in this work is that this individual’s internal relationships no longer correspond to the outside world. Negative relations with the outside world seem to have so reduced this ‘subject’s’ sense of self, that all that remains is a radically censored state of being. His careful grooming is unconvincing and insufficient equipment for survival; as if, having for so long deleted the frightening, the dehumanising, from his life, little else remains, least of all an interior relation to self. It is this very numbness that prevents him recognising his estrangement, played over and over as a decontextualised and uncertain action on the T.V. before him. The chilling effect of Alexander’s frozen beings is communicated through her working up of skin-like cloth ‘dressings’ closely wrapped around the bodies like wet stillborns, ineffectively laminated against relentless abuse. This is most literally expressed in *Integration Programme: Man with Wrapped Feet*, 1994, where the figure is positioned upside down upon a deep blue board, its bound feet protruding just above the edge or surface. That the body has been drowned is suggested by the ‘wet’ clinging of the clothes, its position, and death-like repose. But equally this could be a symbolic re-orientation, an anticipated resurrection of militants who, previously, were deemed ‘terrorists’, but now, redeemed, are expected to re-integrate with those who perpetuated the tyranny they resisted. Alexander’s ironic titles point to the hollowness of tributes, to the difficulty of reifications in the given circum-

*Integration Programme: man with wrapped feet, 1994, mixed media, 1975 x 830 cm.*
stances. The wrapping of the ‘integration’ man’s feet evokes that same ominous black parcel featured in Alexander’s Erbschein: An den Bergen, 1995, and in Something’s Going Down, 1994. These concealed presences serve as signifiers of selective decontaminations of self which, nevertheless, are displaced into eternally recurrent noxious feelings of terror, now split from their original context. Alexander’s figures drown from the weight of these ominous black parcelings, they drag them behind them as they attempt to ignore the invasions of their psyches, they stumble across them in the excavations of personal and social histories. Once recognised, these clinging memories cannot be effaced, they may be parcelled but their presence will persist.

This is a show which does just that; it shows, on behalf of those who have worked over the past decade, tracing the horrors of dehumanisation in apartheid-riven South Africa, making forms visible so that those who saw, and see, cannot excuse themselves of not knowing, and thus relieve themselves of complicit abuse. These moral testimonies are also ways of freeing herself of the memories. That they emerge now into the ‘official’ salons is both a relief and a sad testimony to the workings of oppression. When it is not safe enough to move, few breathe, even fewer reflect. Energy is turned inwards, perspectives are distorted. This work bravely disinter the past, but still withholds optimistic predictions regarding the release of what has been stoically endured. Often times, the pain is too deep; or there are moments when it recedes. Jane Alexander works in these moments of strange respite, allowing us to see the depths of immobilising pain, and thus, paradoxically, disclosing that which cannot be resisted alone.