

SOPHIE PETERS



Photograph by Ricardo Dunjwa

On Sophie Peters: Registering the everyday through lithography

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Printmaking has often offered artists a way to work experimentally and with immediacy, especially in contexts where access to materials and institutions has been limited. Many innovations in the field – both in subject matter and technique – have emerged from these positions of marginality. Lithography, with its capacity for precision and expressive mark making, has served as a particularly rich medium for artists to engage with the texture of daily life. This is the lineage against which I wish to read the work of Sophie Peters, considering printmaking not only as a historical medium but one filled with possibility today. Peters' prints are intimate in scale and charged with feeling, composed of layered motifs and density. She registers the world not as it is ideally imagined, but as it is lived: difficult, precarious, often absurd. Through lithography, she captures the daily contours of existence, showing us what is fragile, what is at risk, and what persists.

Born in 1968 in Johannesburg, Peters moved to Cape Town where she established herself as a committed artist and educator. She left Eerstelaer High School in Kliptown, Johannesburg, after completing Standard 8 (Grade 10), and later enrolled as a full-time student at the Community Arts Project (CAP), where she completed a two-year course (1987), before going on to teach art to children for CAP for several years. Her practice, like her teaching, is grounded in the everyday and shaped by sustained engagement with place.

Peters works across a range of media – from linocuts and oil painting to sculpture and public murals. Her prints, however, offer a distilled encounter with her central themes: homelessness, illness, social decline, capitalism, and the ongoing attempt to make meaning from it all. In *Uitgesit* – a work whose title translates to "evicted" – these themes are brought to the fore through dense, emotive composition. The image is layered with symbolic content that, while specific to the artist, can be read in multiple ways. There is the idea of turmoil: clouds swirl in the background while a line of trees arranges itself diagonally, introducing a sense of instability and movement. The intensity of these visual elements speaks not only to emotional unrest but to structural conditions of persistent precarity. "You have been put out," is how she describes the work, speaking directly to people who have been displaced – those who have moved into spaces where they might soon be moved again. It highlights the fragility of home, the effects of housing insecurity and homelessness, which exist not only in Cape Town but in cities around the world.



Sophie Peters, *Uit Gesit*, 2024. Lithographic print on paper, 42 x 28 cm, edition of 6.



Sophie Peters, *Guiding Angel*, 2024. Lithographic print on paper, 42 x 28.5 cm, edition of 7.

Among the motifs in *Uitgesit* is a Kudu head – unusual, but deliberate. In the artist’s own words, it gestures toward capitalism: “everything is about money,” she explains – a reality that cannot be escaped. On one hand, the Kudu anchors the composition with a clear, if at times didactic message. On the other hand, its symbolism remains open, perhaps also as a reference to power, the commodification of things (including nature) and a sense of danger.

A sense of complexity and fullness is consistent across Peters’ practice. Like her personality, full of life and overflowing, her work does not withhold or reduce; instead, it builds, accumulates, and seeps out. This is also evident in *Guiding Angel*, a work that explores illness as part of the fabric of daily life. Featuring a goddess-like figure towering over the city, with Cape Town’s monumental Table Mountain and Lion’s Head positioned behind her, the work merges the real with the fantastical. Of it, Peters speaks of the reality of trying to survive, to make a life, even as illness prevails. The angel depicted in the work emerges as a potential for grace and guidance. As in much of Peters’ work, there is a tension between hardship and dignity, between burden and beauty. The composition is coherent and held together tightly through careful gestures. Her technique mirrors the subject matter: life may be in decline, but it is not falling apart. There is structure, even in fragility. The work sits in a space that recognises illness and decline as enduring realities, and yet offers room to imagine the potential for strength.

In both works, several continuities emerge – a reflection of and engagement with conditions that shape everyday life alongside enduring themes of displacement and dislocation. In her practice, these subject matters are presented with nuance and clarity while also allowing for ambiguities and contradictions. In many ways, her prints continue her broader commitments, perhaps with an even more heightened attention to composition, form, and surface – all the while figurative, expressive, and layered with meaning.

Sophie Peters is an artist who sees clearly. Her images reflect the complexity of the world without claiming to resolve it. She does not smooth over difficulty; she renders it, imprints it, exposes it.

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References

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