

THE WORLD AS IT IS MADE TO SEEM

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How to cite this article:

Anderson P. The world as it is made to seem. *S Afr J Sci.* 2010;106(7/8), Art. #349, 2 pages. DOI: 10.4102/sajs.v106i7/8.349

This article is available at:

<http://www.sajs.co.za>

'The lie of the land: Representations of the South African landscape': Exhibition curated by Michael Godby at the Iziko Michaelis Collection, 10 June – 11 September 2010

By 'landscape' we properly mean 'representations of space', so the subtitle of Godby's exhibition seems tautologous: 'representations of representations of South African space'. But, of course, it is not. Just as we have come to understand that landscape shows us the world not as it is, but as it is made to seem, so we know also that any exhibition is as much a way of making things seem as a painting is, and that the curator is a maker of that subjunctive world, rather than an objective collator of things as they are.

It is important to set this out plainly, because Godby's intriguing exhibition is an exercise in both scholarship and criticism, yet the apparatus of the scholarship can work to obscure the curatorial ideology, as well as its polemic. The collection is governed by what appears to be a candid declaration of curatorial intent, with five sub-collections informing five theses of South African landscape (remember: I do not mean *terra firma*, but artefacts and texts, *infirm* things). These theses are titled: Interface, Contestations, Interventions, Inventions, and Interrogations, with each being more or less accorded its own space in the Michaelis Townhouse in Cape Town, South Africa.

But we ought to be a little cautious of these shaping systems, the capital letters and echoes of which imply a kind of Linnaean taxonomy, as if there exists an inevitable and necessary order to things and a relationship between them. 'Interface', for example, is inclined to connote 'statements of awe in the face of a new Landscape', which pretends that a landscape is 'found' rather than 'made' and present rather than represented. In fact, the occasion of that 'awe in the face of a new Landscape' is really colonisation and the making of colonial space. When we come to the images of this section, the exhibition is contrarily clear about the manufacture of the landscape. Godby includes, for example, Johan Nieuhof's 1682 *Map of the Cape of Good Hope*, on which the great interest to that occasion of 'tillage' and 'pasture' is clearly marked, even to the extent of their potential, rather than as fact, and on which the bestiary of Africa is shown in Noah-paired ostriches and snakes, elephants and fat-tailed sheep. That map is as much an Intervention as an Interface – as much a Contestation *and* an Invention. We cannot ascribe to the landscape of 1682 an inventive awe and a newness, simply because the mapmaker was not scrupulous about what he found and what he made, that is, what was there and what he made to seem there.

What I mean by this is that the implicit language of the images and their arrangement is critically at odds with the curatorial 'directions' of the scholarly sounding text that anticipates them. Godby's assemblage is much more cross-examining and internally querulous than his framing thoughts would let us suspect. Even the sequence of his sections traces a vestigial chronology, from the arrival of a canonical (Western art-historical) landscape mode at the Cape to the quicksand textuality of contemporary responses,



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Initiation Scene by Gerard Sekoto

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which are inevitably responses not to the land, but to the idea and history of landscape here. That chronology seems to hang upon a progressive logic, as though we are moving towards the fulfilment of *knowing-seeing* and away from superstitious and ideologically blinkered signs. But that is not the case – more people today trust implicitly the evidence that their eyes provide, while a more pallid, picturesque and vulgar sublimity attends the landscapes that appear in hotel foyers, travel brochures and on living-room walls. Contrarily, there are all kinds of witting ironies in the earliest imagery of the European tradition of representation (for that, let us be clear, is what these artworks amount to): the grotesque carnality of Baines's charging elephants, for example, is as disgusted with, and disgusting about, creation as we would *not* expect from a Victorian and is, in every way, akin to the marvellous sprawling excess of the contemporary Pieter Hugo's *Discarded Tomatoes and Chillies in the Veld from Messina/Musina* (2006). Both Baines' *Gold and Ivory* (1873) and Hugo's photograph find their way into the butterfat of commodity capitalism without us having to worry about how they got there. Suffice to say that I could relish Hugo's photograph on my wall every day, scruffily riotous as it is, plastic bags in the thorns of the dump-veld, all those burst blood-cellular tomatoes ... but I would pay to get the Baines artwork off my hands. No, on second thought, I would *sell* it.

Indeed, as a general comment, and without any way of knowing to what extent this is an effect of curatorial intent, the established names of the landscape genre featured in this exhibition come off badly. Battiss is offered at his most ethno-kitsch, Sumner is represented by a sky of *Desert Stars* that anticipate New Age airbrushes and Kentridge features by 'stills' that mostly work to remind us of how much his landscapes are the psychological projections of the more interesting narratives and characters that belong in them – here they seem hopelessly 'unpresent' to the history of the earth. By contrast, the naive and the relatively unknown artists are really present to that history. It is as if the established figures, by their knowingness, work only within the genre, whereas the uninformed, by virtue of so being uninformed, are able to inform (which is to say, they *form* the landscape). Mary Elizabeth Barber's *Town of Tents* (Kimberley) draws the rush of the diamond fields in 1871, bristling with fidgety attention. Frank Hillman's ghastly gorgeous *Blaauwkrantz Bridge with Train Crossing* of 1906 is dark with disaster, the train preposterously hubristic on the cobweb of the bridge, the girders wrongly ruled by a schoolboy engineer, inevitably failing. Crowded around the anticipated event is a Kowie bush of dead grey cliffs and a toxic verdure, forever the frontier antagonistic to the agency of the coloniser, as it has been since I'ons and Baines and has remained through to Hodnett and Becker (the later tradition of eastern Cape landscape, an intellectual powerhouse, is not much on offer here).

I keep coming back to the successes and less-successes of this exhibition because it seems to me uncommonly curated. The best things to be seen here are made so by the worst, unflinchingly acknowledged, and herein lies the genius of Godby. There are several pictures to laugh at, nervously and with self-conscious, ambiguous, negotiated delight. The weird *Lake Ngami* (1856) by Joseph Wolf (weird not least because Lake Ngami is not local) is wonderfully awful and one cannot help admiring Godby's polemic insistence upon the sheer plasticity of nationalism in the pictures he has chosen to represent the history paintings of the *Euufeys* era: gloopy oils, steep compositional angles, inevitable

iconography of pink mountains, heroic cumulus, wagons and bonnets – these come as a wonderful, relieving giggle to anyone brought up when history was all about The Great Trek. It is a nervous giggle, though, because Pierneef's piled clouds (everywhere rehearsed) are still disturbingly *ours*. (When you look long enough at Hugo's dumped tomatoes you come to notice that one of the best things about his lurid landscape is that the clouds are so washed out in such an equally washed-out sky. At last, you say, tomatoes, not clouds!) And it is a nervous giggle because the verbal text framing these images refers to nationalism as 'Nationalism': the capital letter summons an absent, capitalised modifier, which, here, can only be 'Afrikaner'. All nationalisms are plastic and poisonous. 'Our' national flag is the plastic packet and that, too, is lyrically stated in Hugo's photograph of the dump outside Musina, as poisonous as the wasted tomatoes and chillies would be nourishing.

So, the best things about this exhibition are mostly the small things: the 19th century watercolours and prints, the meticulous draughting of imperial engineers, the work of Bertha Everard, whose status grows through this showing, as well as the awkward, brilliant accommodations of African visions in formerly, formally European frames. Examples of the latter include Gerard Bhengu's *Young Boy Herding Fat-tailed Sheep*, where the Claudian conventions of the picturesque are disappointed by the luminous cloud that shines like the smog of photochemical inversion, the *coulisse* that is as rangy as an oak in Cape Town, the mountains that are as ink-stained as Spud's fingers and the whip that our peasant wields, every bit as vicious as if we might need to be reminded of *dominion* in Arcadia. These may not be intentional failures, but, in Godby's hands, they instruct. Trevor Makhoba paints *Cattle for Lobola* (2000) with a wry horror. The horizon is submerged to the depth of the corrugated backs of the herd, the sky is camp cowhide: cobalt and blush-white (the end of the 'great South African cloud tradition') and the cattle are so literally horny, all of which seems to suggest that the image is sinking into the picture, like hopes, or women under men.

What would I take if I was allowed a reviewer's reward? The painterliness of Johan Louw's *Tierberg* (2000) is persuasive. As a geology of paint, it is as feral as the stink of a cave in which a cat has lain. He is the voice of the *duende* in the South African earth, the dense place we go to when we die. But I think Gerard Sekhoto wins out. He is not a painter I usually like, but Godby has found a small *Initiation Scene* from 1939 that really accomplishes everything I think Godby intends by this exhibition. The white forms of initiates dance in a line outside their lodge in the winter grassveld. Everything about them is unreal: they float as caricature-like stick figures or inept trance-dancers as seen in an image on rock. As figures, they have passed into a ghoulish space, somewhere beyond the landscape they are bringing into being by appointing it their occasion. Through this painting, we look upon two worlds simultaneously, each deriving and informing the other; their world is lost to we who look on, but, more and more it seems, it is also lost to them. They are dancing it out of existence. They are dancing *themselves* out of existence. And what of the landscape in which they fail and which fails them? It is a yellow world of winter grassland, in which can be seen some rudimentary buildings of commercial farming, the lines of apportioned land. Along the horizon and in the gullies, dark continuities of wattles abound. And the yellow – or the yellows – jaundice and resurrection in a single compass. ■