

# Landscape painting

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Contemporary painting (in South Africa), despite the centrality of landscape to the discipline in the past, seems at first glance to have reached a plateau in and of its own making. Traditional landscape painters such as Walter Meyer and John Meyer, while highly technically skilled, seem happy to rest within the constraints of long-established convention. In response, Frikkie Eksteen engages this mouldering state of affairs by cultivating mushrooms on the surface of his paintings, as in **Hanging garden**, thereby not only challenging the representational practice of painting to break free from the constraints of the past, but also to move beyond its own field of framing.

While tradition may prove fetid, it still provides fertile ground for cultivating new growth. Acutely conscious of the historical, geographical and political implications of style and aesthetics, Ryan Arenson picks up the baton left by Wayne Barker's iconoclastic engagements with the landscapes of Pierneef, initiated in the late 1980s. The title of Arenson's exhibition **Pierneef, Black White and Coloured** punningly acknowledges the links between the formal vocabulary of artistic production and the racial/colonial implications of its usage. Employing thick enamel and oil paint, he emphasises the pattern-making of Pierneef's renderings of the apparently unoccupied landscape, and juxtaposes this with other highly-stylised traditions, including nineteenth century engravings, Japanese prints and the designs found on local African fabrics/Dutch textiles.

The cultural coding embodied in such stylistic representations finds its echo in Simphiwe Zulu's use of dots to create his vistas of the townships outside Durban. Evoking the visual language of Zulu beadwork, his approach claims the territory as part of a particular cultural history previously under represented. Marco Cifanelli, on the other hand, subverts apparently decorative abstraction into a discomfiting associative figuration. Bringing contested arenas closer to home he engages the

embattled terrain of the contemporary urban landscape by creating images of razor wire on Acroglass, the silhouettes of which paint shadows on the surfaces behind them.

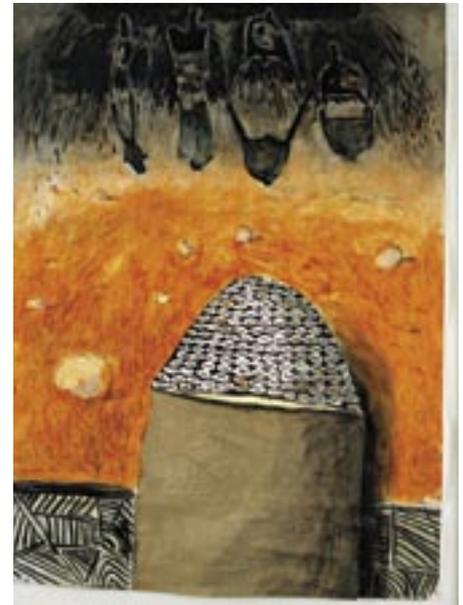
Such shadows, both literal and metaphorical are always present in the landscape. The conscious recognition of the viewer as an inextricable part of any landscape is exemplified in Peter Eastman's painted shadows cast across fields of shiny enamel so reflective that the viewer can't avoid being included in the frame of the piece. Many contemporary landscape painters engage the self-reflexivity that Eastman's work provokes. Instead of the external recording of visible topography they turn inwards, mapping out an interior morphology. Such painters acknowledge a diffusion/leakage across the boundaries of outside and inside. Instead of claiming dominion over the external world their work posits the landscape's interconnectedness with other, private, geographies that are hidden, forbidden or under explored. Through the metaphor of landscape they examine the borders of identity, reflecting on, and mapping, their position in relation to the outside world. Moshekwa Langa, alert to the arbitrary way the landscape is divided in the changing political terrain, and noting that official maps are unable to sustain their authority, began creating his own maps early in his career. Attempting to demarcate his place in the world, some of his painted landscapes overwrite existing maps; obliterating and personalising them he recovers their spaces for himself. Others are built up from lists of names and layers of information taken from his private archive of memory; palimpsests as stratifications of an individual geology. In other, more directly pictorial spaces, he creates images of himself, securing his place in the field of representation.

Given the dispossession of the previously disenfranchised, such recouping is a necessity. Lola Frost engages landscape as the terrain of persistent patriarchal assault. Reinforcing Catherine Nash's assertion of the 'validity of a feminine heroic approach to landscape through a distanced and elevated viewing position, (in which) the power and naturalness of the masculine heroic is subverted',

Frost references aerial photographs to create a richly articulated, corporeal/imaginative locus of hallucinatory intensity. While intimate in detail, her landscapes are often large (one work measures over 750cm across), subsuming the viewer in their scale. By rarely titling these works, Frost denies a guide to the space surveyed. Creating a visual peristalsis that churns the eye across rutted surfaces, reminiscent of the gut with its corrugated villi or the convolutions of vaginal musculature, the body of her work is intentionally difficult to chart. Further dislocating the viewer, the skittering of paint across the surface encourages multiple readings, as the mind's eye makes and remakes images from the coalescence of marks in the highly ambivalent space.

Consciously gendered landscapes are a terrain long sequestered by feminists. More recently, however, this arena is being re-articulated by non-hegemonic masculinities. Tackling the testing physical and emotional ground in which traditional circumcision initiates find themselves, Colbert Mashile's large watercolours engage landscape as a place of social, cultural and gender relations. Coming from the Mapulana clan, and initiated when he was ten, Mashile speaks from within the event, able to both record his experiences and honour the privacy of the sacred. Claiming personal agency he, like Langa, maps not only an external, but also an internal topography. The landscape is, in effect, a central participant in the ritual, and here too, as in Frost's work, the land becomes flesh: marked, scratched and cut.

Clive van den Berg has long been a painter of the land as body, his interstitial landscapes fashioned between industrial storage tanks and on mine dumps in cities such as Durban and Johannesburg. Leaving the site markers of specific place for a physical geography that relates more broadly to both body and imagination he paints small, thinly layered, acrylic paintings where the drag of a brush or the organic pooling of paint create textured surfaces evoking subterranean caverns. In part of his series *Love's ballast*, where he continues his exploration and celebration of men loving men, Van den Berg mines these underground landscapes, excavating the previously hidden, marking and memorialising it with fragments of rock. The accretion of mark making in the paintings buries images of men, beds and isometric constructions. Shrouded in white veils of paint the figures are faint, vaguely seen, ghosts. Van den Berg both inters and



exhumes his experience, grounding it in intimacy, memory and resurrection.

While many artists operate in the arena of the private, others such as Tom Cullberg and Deborah Poynton engage the ubiquitous landscape of contemporary urban living, effectively displacing any notions of pure nature in contemporary landscape painting. Still others, such as Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, actively take on the public arena. In her Painting in public project, Kreutzfeldt takes painting beyond its expected frame, re-envisioning our conceptions of the urban landscape by inserting paintings directly into the public domain, onto architecture in central Johannesburg. Rather than depicting or describing landscape, her collaborative

work with migratory sign writers re-inscribes the existing landscape of the city.

Koloane's statement quoted earlier, ends with the words 'claiming art is also reclaiming space'. It is an assertion that seems appropriately apt in current landscape painting, which does not sit as comfortably on a plain as it at first appears.

Note

Excerpt from an article by Virginia Mackenny in *Art South Africa Magazine* volume 3 issue 1. This article is reproduced courtesy of the publishers; Bell-Roberts Publishing.

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Clockwise from top left:

**Out on the boundary** by John Meyer - 1998. Mixed media on canvas. Size: 76 x 91 cm

**Mourning our future Break the silence!** by Kim Berman - 2001. Monoprint. Size: 104 x 75cm

**Untitled** by Moshakwa Langa - 1996. Map collages with garbage bags and masking tape. Size: 93 x 73cm

**Birkenau - KZ2. Poland: the lake where the ashes of cremated inmates were thrown** by Santu Mufokeng - 1997/8. Black and white photograph. Size: not provided