

**History, Memory and Inscription:  
An examination of selected works by South African Artist  
Clive van den Berg.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the means by which Clive van den Berg (b.1956) presents and explores the South African landscape and recent past, and in so doing examines the evolution of van den Berg's process of looking and interpretation. Seminal to such an investigation is a critical examination of what history, memory and landscape are or might be perceived to be. Chapter One centres on an evaluation of these terms and comprises a discussion of their perceived meanings particularly as they relate to the visual arts, and especially in terms of South African art history.

The investigation is facilitated by an examination of key works produced by van den Berg between 1983, which marks the commencement of the Views from the Oasis Series, and 1998, the year in which van den Berg produced the sculptural piece that comprises his contribution to the IXoe Site Specific Project. In addition, it was in 1998 that van den Berg added the medium of video to his range of materials.

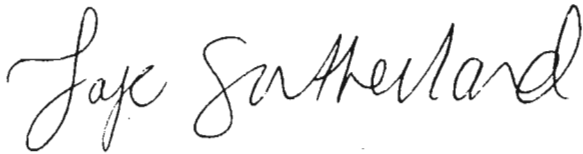
Selected examples of van den Berg's earlier works, those executed in the 1980s, are examined in Chapter Two. The works that are discussed here are: selected works from the Views from the Oasis Series (1983), the Large Oasis Series (1985) and the Sacred Site Series (1985). Reference is also made in this chapter to selected images from van den Berg's series of Invocations (1987). These images are examined

primarily in terms of the challenge they present to conventional definitions of landscape and history. In subsequent works of the 1980s van den Berg has presented the landscape more overtly as a symbol of self and personal experience. Central Park: Durban (1987) serves as an early example of work of this type and is discussed here as it well illustrates a transition in terms of van den Berg's approach to the landscape.

In Chapter Three selected works produced by van den Berg in the 1990s are discussed. The works under review here are: the drawings that form part of van den Berg's Mine Dump Project (1994), his installation Men Loving (1996) executed for the Faultlines Project and the sculptural piece created for the !Xoe Site—Specific Project (1988). With these works van den Berg explores not only the marks left on the land by South African recent and colonial history or memory, but also those aspects of South Africa's past which remain hidden and are unrecoverable. Van den Berg's more recent use of video is also referred to in Chapter Three as his use of, and approach to, this medium may be seen to add a further dimension to his investigations into history. Special attention is paid to the significance of the medium, or kinds of materials used in the creation of these works, and conclusions are drawn in terms of van den Berg's selection of subject and approach to medium in the period under study.

## DECLARATION

Except where the contrary is acknowledged, this dissertation is the original work of the candidate and is submitted for the degree of Master of Art in Fine Art, University of Natal, and has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Faye Sutherland". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word "Sutherland".

Faye Sutherland.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Declaration.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One.....	3
Chapter Two.....	15
Chapter Three.....	33
Conclusion.....	50
Primary Sources.....	52
Secondary Sources.....	53

## Introduction

This paper comprises an examination of the means by which Clive van den Berg (b. 1956) presents and explores the South African landscape and the recent past. The investigation is facilitated by an examination of key works executed by van den Berg between 1983, which marks the commencement of the Views from the Oasis Series, and 1998, the year in which van den Berg produced the sculptural piece that comprises his contribution to the !Xoe Site Specific Project. It was also in 1998 that van den Berg began to experiment with video imagery.

Seminal to a study of such key works by van den Berg is a critical evaluation of what history, memory and landscape are, or perhaps more significantly what these terms might be perceived to be. Thus, the first chapter comprises a discussion of the terms landscape, memory and history, particularly as they relate to the visual arts, and especially in terms of South African art history. Chapter One further involves a discussion of the perceived definitions and purpose, and selected theories and methods of presentation associated with, historical and landscape imagery in the visual arts.

In Chapter Two selected examples of van den Berg's earlier works, those executed in the 1980s, are discussed. The works that are discussed here are: selected works from the Views from the Oasis Series (1983), the Large Oasis Series (1985) and the Sacred Site Series

(1985). Reference is also made in this chapter to selected images from van den Berg's series of Invocations (1987) and to his large oil painting Central Park: Durban (1987)

In Chapter Three selected works produced by van den Berg in the 1990s are discussed. The works under review here are: the drawings that form part of van den Berg's Mine Dump Project (1994), his installation Men Loving (1996) executed for the Faultlines Project and the sculptural piece created for the !Xoe Site Specific Project (1998). Van den Berg's more recent use of video is also referred to in Chapter Three. It is with such works that van den Berg explores not only the marks left on the land by South African recent and colonial history of memory, but also those aspects of the past which remain hidden and are unrecoverable.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Landscape and History

For words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within...  
(Tennyson in Hyman 1973: 386)

The past and the land are things encountered daily. Initially, in terms of visual practice, history and landscape appear uncomplicated to define. History, after all, may be described as a record of events, or as Barzun puts it "...the story of past facts" (Barzun 1977:40). Landscape, in terms of visual practice, may be defined as a recording of environments in which events may take place or as a "Type of work in which natural scenery is the essential visual motif" (Turner 1996:700). Both landscape and history, are, however, more complex terms than they initially appear. In order to reveal something of this complexity I will now examine first landscape, and then memory and history in rather more detail.

The term landscape enters English in the sixteenth century as a term from the art of painting: landscapes were pictures of stretches of countryside (Coetzee 1988:37). John Constable, described by himself and his peers as "the great naturalist", is a figure who dominated British landscape art throughout the first half of the nineteenth century (Turner 1996:784). Constable defined landscape painting as "...an inquiry into the laws of nature" (Kenton 1989:12). Today, as J.M. Coetzee suggests, the term is used to "...designate both a specific terrain and the general

character of that terrain" and is thus "...both topographical and aesthetic in its reference" (Coetzee 1988:36).

Landscape and History Painting are both well-established genres within the tradition of western art. It is from this tradition, as Dianne Kenton asserts, that South African artists have, since the late eighteenth century, taken their cues in "...representing the natural world of appearances" (Kenton 1989:11).

Henry Stratford Caldecott (1886-1929), serves as but one of many possible examples of a South African artist whose approach to rendering landscape images is grounded in that of western tradition. Caldecott approached landscape painting in terms of Impressionist concerns with optical truth. He adapted the colour theories and principles of the French School in order to record the brilliant sunlight and geography peculiar to this sub-continent. For Caldecott and his contemporaries the rendering of the landscape was a topographical exercise informed by scientific realism -- a recording or equivalence of the real, visible world (Fransen 1982:269).

The physiognomy of the South African landscape has always been central to its painting. For South African artists and audiences alike landscape was and still remains a popular genre. This interest in landscape evolved out of the "...topographical and early settler artists' preoccupation with recording natural reality"(Kenton 1989:11). Aside

from providing a record of natural reality, the influx of draftsmen that accompanied the British forces provide, as Bredin suggests, as "...engaging record of colonial spatiality" (Bredin 1997:5)

While, as previously noted, the paramount concern of early landscape painters in South Africa was the translation or recording of optical reality, the desire to create a "...faithful rendering of nature and nothing else" has been claimed as the intention of each of the many modernist styles – from Impressionism to Cubism to Expressionism (Gombrich in Kenton 1989:11).

The differing approaches apparent in these styles are the result of each practitioner having their own conception of what 'nature' or 'essence' or 'truth' is. Thus, as historians such as Riegl and Gombrich suggest, the truth to nature of a landscape painting is always a relative truth (Kenton 1989:11-12). It follows then that Constable's definition of landscape painting as an "...inquiry into the laws of nature" does not adequately define what landscape is. Gombrich suggests that a painter investigates, not the nature of our physical world, "...but the nature of our reaction to it" (Gombrich in Kenton 1989:13).

In order to demonstrate the extent to which the likeness of a landscape painting to reality is inevitably limited by factors such as technique, style and indeed context, it may be appropriate at this point to briefly discuss the work of J.H. Pierneef (1911-1936). For Pierneef the South African

landscape was a lifelong source of inspiration. It was not the surface appearance of the land that drew Pierneef's attention, but the underlying structure and geometry of the landforms. Pierneef's geometricized, stylized clean edged forms are the product of his quest for "harmony and order" (Berman 1974:39). For Pierneef these two qualities together constituted the essence of nature.

Ntabeni, Soutpansberg (1930) is but one example from a large body of works expressive of Pierneef's profound respect for natural order. There is nothing haphazard or accidental about his landscapes. Evident in this painting, and characteristic of Pierneef's *oeuvre* is that the individual trees, shrubs and bushes are not viewed by him as mere fragments of information but serve as "...units of the pictorial architecture" each contributing to the stability of the composition (Berman 1974;40). The logical, crisp structure of Pierneef's landscapes evokes a sense of the natural world as the expression of what Berman terms "...a grand primordial design" (Berman 1974:40).

Pierneef uses geometry to project qualities of logic and order perceived in nature. This use of geometry forms part of a formal or classically inclined approach based on scientific principles such as those of linear perspective and vanishing points. However, the manner in which Pierneef perceived and depicted the surrounding environment is informed as much by a keenly felt nationalism as it is by formal aesthetic principles. His landscapes present the South African landscape as it

was perceived in terms of Afrikaner ideology – divinely ordained as theirs to possess, given to the Afrikaner by the ‘hand of God’ as it were (Coetzee 1992:37). Pierneef’s landscapes, from his earliest works to the Station Panel Murals (1931-33) depict the land as “...empty, silent and virgin”. They invite habitation and serve to legitimize the Afrikaners right to the land, and in so doing reaffirm their identity as God’s chosen people (Coetzee 1992:37). It is important to remember that Pierneef was living at a time when the Afrikaner nation had recently experienced a number of significant social upheavals such as the Second Anglo-Boer war: 1899-1902, and the birth and demise of the Transvaal Republic: 1886-1902. Thus the need to assert the national identity and self-esteem of the Afrikaner was likely great. (Nel 1990:11-23)

Pierneef’s landscapes, in hindsight, serve as evidence of the Afrikaner struggle for identity. They are an assertion of Afrikaner Nationalist ideology. Further to this his landscapes serve to reveal that, as Ronald Paulson states “...the visual structure of the landscape is the place to look” for such subtexts as “...plots of desire, struggles for power and needs for prospect or refuge, escape or protection” (Paulson in Kenton 1989:21). While for Pierneef the landscape may not consciously have been a ‘site of struggle’ his paintings nevertheless contain a subtext – that of the Afrikaner struggle for legitimation. As J.M. Coetzee notes in White Writing, Pierneef’s unpeopled and pristine landscapes invite freedom of movement and this in turn infers freedom of personal and national destiny (Coetzee 1988:61).

From the above it can be seen that the rendering of landscape is neither a simple, nor a neutral act. Recent postmodernist and postcolonial studies, like those of Ronald Paulson (1988) have revealed that "...the whole process of landscape may be one of secondary revision". In other words, landscape is not, at its core an attempted rendering of the land alone. It is, more importantly "...an attempt to control something that seems uncontrollable"-- be this an actual or a psychological space-- and written into this subtext of control is also the realization that no landscape can be completely controlled (Kenton 1989:21-23).

Observations made by Coetzee in White Writing further reveal the hidden complexity of the term landscape -- the inner workings of the machine, so to speak. Coetzee observes that the west has burdened pastoral or landscape art with "...the task of asserting the virtues of the garden--simplicity, peace, immemorial usage" against such urban vices as competitiveness, luxury and novelty. In the strain of pastoral art known as the Georgic the "garden in bloom" is also held up against the garden in decay -- that space once cultivated now degenerating into wilderness (Coetzee 1988:4).

Historically, in South Africa, landscape art has assumed both these roles. It is, as Coetzee, suggests, essentially conservative and nostalgic, harkening back to the calm stability of the farm, "...a still point mediate between the wildness of lawless nature and the wildness of the new

cities”(Coetzee 1988:4). These images, as Coetzee suggests, served to exemplify the time of the forefathers as a utopian age when the garden of myth became realized in history.

This tendency to romanticize the relationship between the Boer and the landscape is far from unique to Pierneef's work. It is in fact a thread common to landscape images produced in South Africa during approximately this time. Perhaps among the better known instances of such idyllic depictions are those that constitute the Voortrekker Tapestry (1960) designed by W.H. Coetzer. The tapestry was to “...focus on the role played by women in the Trek” (van der Watt 1996:25). The figures depicted in the 15 panels that comprise the tapestry are shown in complete harmony with nature; the frontiers presented as a “...sanctuary for an idealized domesticity” (Van der Watt 1996:28).

Landscape art in the west has, in addition, been under unmitigated pressure to show that the escape from society that it promotes is not a retreat into indolence (Coetzee 1988:5). In South Africa during the early 1900s this pressure was intensified since when depicting landscape images, in order to satisfy the critics of rural retreat, labour must be portrayed; and to satisfy the critics of colonialism white labour must be portrayed. (Coetzee 1988:5) Given what is known about the South African past this is clearly not an accurate reflection of either the demographics or the harsh realities of the local environment and conditions.

The observations of writers such as Paulson, Gombrich and Coetzee, coupled with the discussion of Pieterneef's works, have it is hoped served to suggest that landscape images perceived as 'merely recordings of the visible world' are in fact far more than that. Consequently the term landscape as it applies to visual practice is both a complex and, on occasion, contentious term.

Van den Berg, like many South African artists prior to him, works both with history, memory and with the landscape. Recent research implies that memory does not comprise a discrete, biologically grounded, universally shared mental property as previously believed, but is, in fact, a cultural construction. Studies have shown that forms of memory vary from one society to another, and that even concepts such as time and space are culture bound (Roberts 1996:20).

Unlike history, which is bound by time, memory can be seen to exist in "...uchronia -- a structured world, nowhere in time". This standpoint can be seen to refute previous Aristotelian and Platonic theories which propose that memory is a universal function of the mind, a repository from which information can be retrieved and deposited at will (Kuchler & Melion, in Roberts 1976: 20).

Since memory is both subjective and individual one might assume that of the two terms, history and memory, the latter is the more problematic.



History, it would appear, comprises a recalling of past events. And history painting, as defined by the Illustrated Dictionary of Art Terms (1981), consists of "...subject matter drawn from classical history, poetry, religion, and, since the late eighteenth century, contemporary events" (Reynolds 1981:83). Within the various fields of painting "...history painting was generally considered the most important by academies from the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries"(Reynolds 1981:83). History painting, as acknowledged in The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists (1996) is intended to perform "...a morally edifying function" and thus presents imagery in "...a suitably grand and noble way" (Chilvers 1996: 234).

The reality of history is something encountered almost daily, and is thus something generally taken for granted, defined by such phrases as 'a precious heritage', and 'a force'. Initially it would seem that history is not an entirely elusive concept and can easily be pinned down by such epithets. Barzun makes the following observation regarding the relationship of man to history:

Seeing how impossible it would be to uproot historical ideas and feelings from our lives, we are tempted to conclude that man is "by nature" an historical animal. He is a being who remembers his past, individual and collective...without this developed sense of the self, and without words in which to record experiences, man would be doomed to live entirely from moment to moment. (Barzun 1977:37-38)

At its most basic, history may be described as a recalling of past events or as Barzun suggests, "...the story of past facts" (Barzun 1977:40).

From the statements noted above it might appear that history is at least simpler to define than memory. Despite its apparent simplicity the following observations will reveal that history, like landscape, is both quixotic and complex in nature.

The term history is typically used in a number of ways with varying implications. For example, in one use, such as in the phrase 'the history of the Anglo-Boer War' reference is made to the story of what happened. In another, such as 'with that speech Smuts made history' what is meant is not the notable fact itself, not the story but the substance of what happened. This ambiguity is, as Barzun acknowledges, both inevitable and telling for at its heart lies the assumption that what has been recorded in text corresponds to what occurred in reality (Barzun 1977:40).

It is also possible that history may have a third meaning implied by such phrases as 'history requires the most painstaking research'. The history referred to here is something that falls somewhere between the past event and the, as yet incomplete, recording of the event, in other words "the fashioning of written history" (Barzun 1977:40). This fashioning of written history is a task that requires method and analysis. A more appropriate term for this disciplining of the mind might be historiography. But, as Barzun concurs, the associations made between the event; the account of it; and the means by which the account is prepared, exist so closely in the consciousness that the concepts overlap. Thus one is

prompted to use the most general term for the science, the art, and its substance: history (Barzun 1977:40).

In order to better demonstrate its complex nature it may be appropriate, at this point, to examine the ways in which historical consciousness is generally created in western society. In the west, historical consciousness is created partly through a remembrance of written texts, and partly through memories of stories told within family groups and communities. These stories are 'proved' by reference to objects such as photographs, monuments or documents. It is such objects that render memories 'true' by showing them to be unchanging since they are embodied in unchanging material things (Roberts 1996:2).

At this point it could be argued that history is neither a complex nor contentious term as little could be simpler and more tangible than that which is embodied in unchanging material things.

However, as Roberts suggests, in reality historical consciousness continually re-invents its contexts with the changing of time in spite of the object, or objects in which the historical truths or facts are grounded. The words of an original document never change, but their interpretation certainly does, as is the case with monuments, photographs and other works of expression (Roberts 1996:2).

The points raised in the preceding paragraphs serve to reveal that history, in the words of Pierre Nora "...is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (Frow 1997:221). Our knowledge of the past is transmitted to us through documents and other products of witness' experiences. There is, as Barzun suggests, no such thing as a perfect witness. Each witness' knowledge of the event is bound to contain both exact and erroneous knowledge, and "...these two parts, multiplied by as many observers as may be, are all the knowledge there can be" (Barzun 1977:136).

An event, once past, can only be accessed via an individual's imperfect knowledge of it. It has, as Barzun acknowledges, no independent existence. One person's or one culture's version of history is not necessarily the same as another's, and often the history of one group exists in conflict with that of another (Roberts 1996:21).

Aside from the mutability of history by those who experienced it firsthand there is also the problematic issue of its being recorded. As Barzun notes "...every historian differs from every other", and each rejects their preceding generations version of the past (Barzun 1977:45). All these factors in combination reveal that despite its apparent simplicity of meaning, like memory and landscape, history is a complex and contentious term.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Presence: Memorials and Traces

Life in this country is so much like life aboard a sinking ship, one of those old-time liners with a lugubrious, drunken captain and a surly crew and leaky lifeboats. Age of Iron (Coetzee 1990:20).

Clive van den Berg's paintings, drawings, installations and videos deal with such issues as recorded and unwritten history, and with intersections of space, time and memory. He uses the South African landscape as the field of play in which space, time and memory converge. His work is underpinned by an interest in issues relating to such concepts as identity, boundaries, horizons and differences. A concern for human rights permeates his more recent works, such as those executed from approximately the early 1990s onwards. Selected examples of these later works are discussed in Chapter Three.

This chapter centres on an examination of selected examples of van den Berg's somewhat earlier works. The works discussed here are all drawn or painted images executed in the 1980s. Initially, in the 1980s, van den Berg's work centered on the landscape and the local environment. During this time he was living in Durban and produced a number of series' of large scale pastel drawings and paintings utilizing imagery that was taken from the local environment. These images will be examined primarily in terms of the challenge they present to conventional definitions of landscape and history.

As indicated in Chapter One, landscape imagery has at times been viewed by critics, audience and often by the artists themselves as a neutral act, a rendering of the land alone. However, as discussed previously, certain postmodern, postcolonial and related theorists, Paulson and Gombrich for example, have revealed that visual presentations of landscapes are in fact 'sites of struggle'. And that, as Paulson eloquently puts it, "the visual structure of the landscape is the place to look for such subtexts as 'plots of desire', struggles for power, and needs for prospect or refuge, escape or protection" (Kenton 1989:21). These spaces ought to be viewed, not as neutral renderings, free from subtexts, but as "...an attempt to control something that seems uncontrollable" (Kenton 1989: 21). This may refer to an actual or a psychological space. Written into this subtext of control "is also an awareness of the futility of this attempt" (Kenton 1989:21).

In one sense van den Berg can be seen as a traditional artist in that he has located his work within the broad mainstream of western art, rather than challenge historical conventions, although van den Berg has manipulated such conventions to suit his purposes. For example, he retains the conventional pictorial horizon as a constant of nature, but frequently renounces the stability of the traditional horizontal format in favour of a soaring verticality (Berman 1993: 344). The viewer is further prevented from reading the landscape image in the way one would normally read it through van den Berg's throwing conventional

landscape elements into irrational relationships and through his drastic and dramatic manipulation of scale.

Van den Berg's work expresses an interest in postcoloniality. His visual imagery address questions of identity and power both in terms of what it might mean to be living in South Africa at this time, and in terms of what the act of representing the landscape involves. To this end van den Berg's process of investigation and imaging may be viewed as a deconstructive and decolonizing practice. Deconstruction may be defined as: "...the analysis of visual or verbal 'texts' in an endeavor to penetrate culturally, ideologically or subjectively encoded meanings. Associated with semiotics"<sup>1</sup> (Berman 1993: 380). Decolonization may be defined as: "... a process of emancipation through mirroring, a mix of defiance and mimesis...it is deeply preoccupied with boundaries of territory and identity, borders of nation and state" (Nederveen 1995:11).

Van den Berg is very conscious of the complexity and possible subtexts associated with visual renderings of the landscape. It is hoped that this research paper will serve to reveal, at least in part, the sensitivity and insight van den Berg displays with reference to issues associated with landscape and history. That van den Berg's landscapes can be seen as an open acknowledgement of both the desire to control the landscape, and the uselessness of this attempt, is revealed in a number of ways.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The study of signs and symbols, and their meanings. Primarily a linguistics tool, adopted by literary critics, artists and art critics, in association with revived attention to content and meaning in art (Berman 1993: 389)

While there are a range of works to which one could look for such evidence, the works that will be discussed here are selected images from the Views from the Oasis Series (1983), the Large Oasis Series (1985) and the Sacred Site Series (1985), with a specific focus on Sacred Site 15 (1985). Reference will also be made in this chapter to selected images from van den Berg's series of Invocations (1987). In latter works of the 1980s van den Berg has presented the landscape more overtly as a symbol of self and experience. Central Park: Durban (1987) will be discussed as it serves as an early example of work of this type and well illustrates a transition in terms of van den Berg's approach to the landscape. The author has chosen to focus on these particular works as they are, principally, works to which the author has direct access, or are works that have been the focus of critical media attention.

In 1982 the African National Congress armed wing placed a bomb at the base of the Cenotaph in central Durban. In 1983 Durban's NSA Gallery hosted an exhibition of van den Berg's works. The exhibition comprised a range of works, from shaped paintings, to pastel drawings. A series of drawings on this exhibition were based on the bombing of this monument, and it is this Cenotaph Series (1983) that will serve as a point of entry into an analysis of van den Berg's landscape images and process of investigation. The Cenotaph stands in the centre of Francis Farewell Square. Francis Farewell was one of the pioneer white settlers of Durban. The square is a celebration of the colonial past, home to a



host of monuments and statues of former governors and figures such as Queen Victoria and Jan Smuts.

The square maps a short history of power and serves as a kind of heroes' acre. Van den Berg finds the square "...remarkable in its almost complete denial of local circumstances" (Golding 1997:299). There is so much about the colonial past that does not find expression in this monument; the unavoidable confusion and anxieties of conflicting cultures, and the inherent messiness of conquest. There is, in this square, no acknowledgement of 'other', nor of the trials that the victors themselves might have suffered. "Granite and marble have ", as van den Berg suggests, "...sealed history under a hard skin of language, which in its impermeability, neither absorbs the present nor allows access to the past" (Golding 1997:299).

Van den Berg recorded, in 7 pastel drawings, each measuring 700mm x 600mm, the bombed ruins and isolated moments in the rebuilding of this monument. The African National Congress bombed it as an act of defiance against the state. Van den Berg's recording of the ruined Cenotaph, serves as a form of counter memorial, an acknowledgement of all the conflicting ideologies and strains that lay buried beneath its concrete epidermis. By framing these 'fragments' van den Berg creates new images, which are, as critic and artist Vester acknowledges "...monuments in themselves" (Verster 1983:5).

In a sense these works serve as an inverse form of History Painting in that they are a response to, not grand heroic actions, but conflict and chaos. Van den Berg states that he used these images metaphorically, transforming and altering the images so that the drawings speak not only of bricks and mortar but also of "...ideology and feelings and passions" (Ferguson 1988:3).

That van den Berg creates a psychological space from a literal one is evident in a number of ways. The drawings, for example, are filled with an extraordinary, clear, unearthly light which turns shadows into forms with a tangible reality of their own. This shadow-shape dichotomy renders the forms ominous and imbues them with a sense of foreboding, creating a tension within the viewer as to what is real and what is not real. Colour is also unnerving, and is used symbolically as Verster suggests; red, for example, alluding to passion, energy and blood. Read through a frame, the chipped stone surfaces "...become a view into a furnace" suggestive of hell and of primal forces beyond man's control (Verster 1983:5).

Also on this exhibition, in addition to these drawings, were a number of shaped canvases each possessing "...the presence of a monument in terms of size and shape" (Kenton 1983). These canvases are large in scale, with a number being greater than life-size. The canvases were presented either suspended from the gallery walls or resting on bases. These shaped canvases of van den Berg's evoke associations rather

than refer to specific events or actions. Some of the 'monuments' depict shards or fragments from a lost past, others "...the accumulated marks of time and the chance by-product of events in the form of stains, burn marks, aging and decay" (Kenton 1983). They possess, as Verster suggests, "...a presence of their own that is mysterious and ambiguous" (Verster 1983:5).

Van den Berg created another group of images derived largely from the Durban beachfront and its immediate surroundings. These are the images that together constitute the Views from the Oasis Series (1983). Part of this series comprises a suite of drawings based on the old jetties and piers that have been demolished. The Durban Art Gallery has seven of these drawings, each measuring approximately 650 mm x 650 mm. Van den Berg was fascinated by the aging remnants of concrete and stone, by the marks left on them by the passage of time. He describes the weathering and erosion processes as having lent them a "...presence which was very akin to mummies" (Ferguson 1988:4). The pier struts, in their highly eroded state, had been reduced in size to roughly that of a human figure. The struts had the texture of something "...old, and a little bit bruised and hurt" inspiring van den Berg to use these fragments of stone to "...suggest human presence... human feelings and the passage of time" (Ferguson 1988:4).

Thus, although these works are based on sites in Durban, they can also be seen to speak in broader, more universal contexts, alluding perhaps

to the frailty of civilization, and to the temporary hold the human race has on the space it claims to possess.

Sacred site 15 (1985) forms part of the Sacred Site Series (1985) and is possibly one of van den Berg's best known works. This work was exhibited at the Cape Town Triennial Exhibition in 1985 and is now housed in the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg. This work, typical of the series, was executed in pastel on brown dressmaker's paper and is large in scale, measuring 1960 mm x 1260 mm.

Pastel drawings on this scale are not currently unusual but at the time this combination of an expansive format with a delicate, painstakingly applied medium was probably quite unique in South African art. The use of this kind of delicate medium on such an extensive format can also be seen to relate to the concerns and themes that promote van den Berg's imagery. Pastel is a layered process with one layer building on the next; the creation of the image becomes in itself a kind of inverse archeological process, with the medium lending not only a great luminosity to the work, but also a sense of history. Before focusing on this particular image it may be useful to examine the Sacred Site Series (1985) in more general terms.

The original source of imagery for the landforms in the Sacred Site Series (1985) is the Bluff, Durban. These images of the Bluff have been transformed, by van den Berg, into something other than literal, physical

spaces through a number of means. The landmasses themselves are stripped of vegetation while in reality the Bluff is a richly verdant area. The land has been altered in such a way that it seems to take on the appearance of damaged skin, of flesh that has been burnt and minced. Of this van den Berg says: "...it's half land, half rock, half flesh. So once again it can talk about many things... They are not landscapes, they are not places. They are about feelings and experiences and processes of being" (Ferguson 1987:6).

In addition to this sloughing off of the vegetation the landforms themselves are altered in that they have become separated from the main landmass and form 'islands' – large isolated fragments of a form that was one whole. These landforms are pierced and ruptured by walls, toppled monuments, searchlights and other, to use van den Berg's terminology, "...tokens of our being" (Ferguson 1987:10). Through these means van den Berg presents the landscape quite literally as a 'site of struggle'. These islands are depicted as being submerged partly by, or collapsing into the sea, which serves to add to the sense of desolation and chaos that they evoke.

In Sacred site 15 (1985) the Bluff has been transformed into a vast ruddy heart-shaped form incised by walls and punctured by serrated forms. It appears as if it is about to collapse into the sea.

The image is rendered more disturbing due to connections made between the human body and the heart shaped form of the landmass. Van den Berg has imbued this large island with "...a type of anatomical living quality" (Taylor 1993:16). The landmass appears to be squeezing out, or folding in on itself, objects such as swimming pools, sculptures and pier struts, which "...appear as painful intrusions and incisions" (Taylor 1993:16). The body reacts in a like manner to intrusions, ulcers, tumours and disease and thus the viewer is encouraged to view the landscape "...as if in pain, fighting against the cancer of human industry and abuse" (Taylor 1993:16).

While Sacred Site 15(1985) is an alarming work imbued with a nightmarish, almost dystopic, mood there is about it also a magical or whimsical quality. The image possesses, as noted by Ferguson, "...a strange sense of play" (Ferguson 1987:10). This is due to the absurd, illogical scale of the objects, like the tiny lights and toppled statues, when juxtaposed with the expanse of the landmass. These tokens of civilization take on the quality of small trinkets like those found in Christmas party crackers, rendering the image as a whole simultaneously playful and disturbing.

Coupled with the illogical use of scale in this work is the fact that van den Berg has deliberately denied a number of other pictorial conventions. For example, rather than utilizing a single light source van den Berg has utilized many disparate sources which encourages the eye to jump about

the image and enhances a sense of unease and displacement in the viewer.

These devices serve, however, an additional purpose. Through the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated elements and images, and through the erratic shifts in scale van den Berg is acknowledging the constructed, artificial nature of the act of rendering a landscape.

Such devices are used repeatedly in van den Berg's landscape images to highlight the artificial nature of this practice, and in a sense also to act as an acknowledgment of the futility of this attempt at controlling that which is outside one's control. They are utilized also in works like Farewell Square (1985), for example, part of van den Berg's Large Oasis Series (1985).

Apart from acknowledging the South African landscape as the site of particular historical and political struggles, through references to colonial architecture, monuments and so on, van den Berg also acknowledges the act of landscape painting as a site of struggle in itself: a juncture between the binary opposition of nature (external reality) and culture (translation of nature into image). This is achieved through the use of a number of devices, one being the use of images whose juxtaposition gives the work "...a kind of absurd, stage-like quality" (Ferguson 1988:8). In Farewell Square (1985) the fairy lights, "...rather desolate looking palm trees", and the absurd gestures of the lone female figure

serve, on one level, to emphasize the artificial, constructed nature of the activity of the landscape artist (Ferguson 1988:8).

Another work that forms part of the Large Oasis Series is Pool above the Ocean (1985). This work is owned by the Durban Art Gallery, but due to the delicate nature of the medium it is not housed in the Gallery but in the paper conservatory. Here van den Berg utilizes a vertical format, onto which is drawn a large fleshy landmass. The original source of this image is again the Bluff. This is a starting point for a host of van den Berg's drawings during the 1980s, and it is also the landmass on which the Sacred Site Series is based. The Bluff is Durban's most prominent landmark, and is the first area of *terra firma* one would sight if approaching the coast from the sea. Despite settlement and urban development it has remained largely unchanged since Europeans first entered the vicinity. The Bluff, covered in a dense blanket of greenery appears perhaps benign and unpeopled, but much of it is in fact a military site. It is a brooding presence that guards the entrance to the harbour.

In Pool Above the Ocean (1985) the topography of the landscape has been radically altered. The Bluff has been severed from the main landmass to form an island threatened by a vast and angry sea. The land is partly protected from the ravaging sea by a series of broken pillars. These pillars are evidence of the self reflective nature of van den Berg's work as they appear, for example, in the earlier series of works



based on the crumbling jetties on Durban's beachfront. The pillars in this work disintegrate under the tension placed on them; they are pushed outward by the land and crushed by the sea.

A mood of conflict permeates the work. Tension is created, not only through the opposing forces of land and sea, but also through the means by which the images are presented. Rather than depicting the image from a single unified point of view van den Berg increases the sense of dislocation by utilizing several points of view. For example, the tiny pool at the top of the landmass is rendered as if one were looking down upon it. This increases the viewer's sense of its diminutive size. The Bluff, however, is presented as if seen from below. It appears as a large seething form that towers above the viewer.

Despite its minute scale, the pool that is perched precariously on top of the Bluff, becomes a focal point of the work due to its iridescent turquoise colour. Its sparkling water slopes towards the sea, and it seems at any moment that it will slip off. The pool, and pillars, one of the oldest architectural devices utilized in the west and elsewhere, can on one level, be read as a metaphor for civilization and for the human condition. The images in this work seem to imply that it is nature, not culture, that is the more powerful force.

Another work from the Large Oasis Series (1985) which like Pool above the Ocean (1985), may be read as a comment on the transience and

absurdity of humankind's attempt to civilize and tame their environment, is the large pastel drawing entitled Hide our Heroes (1985). The 'heroes' the title refers to are images of statues based on those of Dick King found on Durban's Marine Parade, and of the angel that stands in Francis Farewell Square. Mere mortals are immortalized by making statues of them. What was in fact only a brief period of colonial sovereignty has, through monuments such as these been rendered permanent. These inanimate objects reflect both consciously and unconsciously the attitudes and ideals of the age in which they are conceived.

Van den Berg manipulates and alters the symbolic power inherent in these stone figures by altering the scale of the figures as well as the context in which they are placed. Heroes are only heroes when grand in scale, and when situated in settings appropriate for viewing and admiration.

However, here the statues are placed on a piece of land, derived once again from the Bluff, which appears bruised and collapsing. Hide our Heroes (1985) represents, as do a number of van den Berg's landscape images of this time, something which is in a state of transition or flux. This can be seen to refer not only to issues of conflict and folly specific to Durban, or even South Africa, but may also be read in a broader, more universal context. In this work the 'heroes' seem the antithesis of bravery and victory as they are depicted "...hiding behind concrete

walls” (Ferguson 1987:9). The walls are simultaneously protective and containing. The figures are lit by spotlights heightening the sense of theatre or artifice that emanates from the work. The light, like the walls that surround the figures, also performs a double-edged function, for while it serves to focus attention on the figures it also serves to reveal their lack of power.

The dystopic mood and sense of unease evident in Hide our Heroes (1985) and Pool above the Ocean (1985) is equally manifest in van den Berg’s series of Invocations (1987) of which the oil painting Docked in a field of Lights (1987) serves as an illustrative example. Constant also in this series is the image of an island being separated from the main landmass.

Docked in a field of Lights (1987) is located in the South African National Gallery, and is a large work measuring 900 mm x 2500 mm. Here the island has been transformed into a vast and monstrous protuberance that appears to be floating in the sky, about to thrust itself upon, or fall into the water’s edge. Funfair lights twinkle desperately in the lower part of the picture, and sailing vessels “...flaming on the horizon...are dwarfed by this huge intrusive presence” (Williamson 1996: 59). Van den Berg says of this large perplexing form “...I wanted it — because it was unknown — to be unnerving. To be, I suppose like a conscience” (Ferguson 1988:8).

The intense, vivid colours used in the work enhance the sense of menace and discomfort created by the looming form. Below the fleshy landmass is depicted a ship which is attempting to force its way through a sea of lights. The ship itself is a strange and enigmatic image. It is bedecked with fairy lights "...as if it were going on a voyage of great expectation" (Ferguson 1988:9). Yet spelt out in lights is the ship's name; the North Goodwin which is that of the ship in Apocalypse Now, thereby casting aspersions on positive notions, or thoughts of leisure and pleasure associated with the festive trappings that festoon the ship. Van den Berg suggests that the lights that cover the ship and the sea may be "...an attempt to attract attention from above...a cry for help" (Williamson 1996:59)

Throughout his work during the 1980s van den Berg continued to experiment with and combine disparate images and scale, as well as frequently utilize a number of light sources and viewpoints in favour of a single unified vision. Central Park, Durban (1987) is in this vein. Like van den Berg's earlier pastel works this oil painting is large in scale, measuring 2000 by 1500 mm. However, it differs from earlier works in that the symbols used and experiences alluded to are of a more overtly personal nature. It is, as described by van den Berg, a "...largely autobiographical" work (Ferguson 1988: 2).

This is a complex painting comprising many apparently unrelated images. Van den Berg describes it as being very difficult for him to work

out both conceptually, spatially and thematically, especially as the painting itself is not about unity, but about "...dissonance and things in a state of upheaval, a state of anxiety" (Ferguson 1988:2). Once again van den Berg subverts conventional pictorial practices by rejecting single point perspective. In this work there are many vanishing points and a number of different light sources. For van den Berg the structure, space and light in the painting all "...add up to that sense of things being disparate" (Ferguson 1988:2).

What binds these apparently unrelated images together is that they are all drawn from the artist's experiences. The pivotal image is that of a large ceramic fountain that van den Berg designed in collaboration with Lance Smith. The fountain stands, presently in disrepair, in the new Central Park in Durban, and formed part of the refurbishment of the old station sheds into the Workshop shopping complex. Above the image of the fountain, also on the right hand side of the work, is an image of a World War II warship as well as a tiny image of Perla Seidle Gibson<sup>1</sup>.

In the foreground of the painting are two figures, friends of the artist, enacting a bizarre performance; their gestures are incongruous and difficult to read. "...We don't know what they are doing...again I wanted the absurdity of their actions to say something about a sense of uncertainty, a sense of anxiety, a sense of displacement" (Van den Berg in Ferguson 1988:1). The paving below the figures is equally

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1. Also known as "the Lady in White", she used to sing farewell to the troops as they left Durban harbour by ship during World War II. Van den Berg executed a series of etchings of her in 1986.

disjunctive as it is difficult to tell where one can step. On the left hand side of the painting is a huge dry dock, an unsettling image due to its great scale and emptiness. Once again van den Berg has utilized great shifts in scale and deals with spatial paradox, resulting in a heightened sense of anxiety and menace. This is a disturbing and fractured landscape in which, as Martin suggests, people are "...unable to move... unable to communicate" (Martin 1997:23).

Van den Berg's combination of opposites, such as his juxtaposition of land and sea, and of vast and tiny forms, serves to emphasize displacement and to create a state of confusion and questioning in the viewer. One is encouraged to engage with the work and to question why these very specific images have been used by the artist.

Bearing in mind that van den Berg's process of looking is self reflective, and the imagery in this work in particular is of personal significance to the artist, it is not always possible to find answers to the questions these images prompt. This is, in itself, a significant characteristic of Central Park, Durban (1987).

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Absence: Memorials without Facts**

The documents are liars. No man ever yet tried to write down the entire truth of any action in which he has been engaged. All narrative is parti-pris...we know too much and use too little knowledge (Garnett in Barzun 1977:41).

In order to force the past, when forgetfulness is hemming us in, poets engage us in reimagining ...They teach us "the audacities of memory." One poet tells us the past must be invented: Invent. There is no feast/At the bottom of memory (Bachelard in Roberts1996:17).

In this chapter selected works executed by van den Berg in the 1990s will be examined. While the earlier works discussed in the preceding chapter present some challenges to traditional conceptions regarding landscape imagery and raise questions about notions of landscape and history, these later works, it is proposed, reveal a substantial development in van den Berg's work. He explores not only the marks left by South African colonial and recent history or memory on the land, but also those aspects of South Africa's past which remain hidden and are presumed unrecoverable. Special attention will be paid to the significance of the medium, or kinds of materials, such as fire, stone, whitewash and bronze used within these works. Conclusions will be drawn in terms of van den Berg's selection of subject and approach to media in the period under study.

Van den Berg's more recent works, those executed in the 1990s, have continued to be informed by his interest in, and responses to, the local environment. In 1989 van den Berg moved to Johannesburg from Durban. Due to the extent to which van den Berg's work is informed by his immediate environment this change in locality prompted a changed focus. The Mine Dump Project (1994) formed van den Berg's contribution to the Johannesburg Biennale in 1994. This comprised a series of small paintings of the site, and a number of 'drawings' executed in the landscape surrounding the city. For the purposes of this study only the site-specific component of this project will be discussed.

The images that van den Berg executed on the mine dumps are iconic in intention, and many are large in scale, measuring several meters wide so as to be viewed easily from afar. While, in order to understand fully the meaning of certain of the images, such as the portrait bust and lamp imagery, one might be helped by having a prior knowledge of van den Berg's work and the interests that underpin these images, the elements used to execute these drawings are perhaps the most significant aspect of the work. An analysis of the materials used is, in itself, what is required to access the work. Here van den Berg has utilized a range of particularly unusual media, one of which is fire. At night the images that he had constructed were set alight using braziers.

In a sense he practices a kind of inverse 'truth to materials' in that the subject matter, or rather the issues that underpin his subject matter



dictates the kind of materials used. Fire, like history, is complex and contradictory. For example, like history, fire alters that which it touches, leaving a scar or trace. While it makes a mark it is, however, a thing in transition, its life is finite and flickering, ungraspable. Van den Berg believes that his imaging of these sites acts as a form of "branding" a laying claim to this space (Golding 1997:289). Coupled with this claiming of the land is van den Berg's awareness of the futility of such an act. The dumps are the manifestation of a civilization which for van den Berg appears to be "...a very transient thing" (Williamson 1996:59).

The locality of these drawings is, in addition to the medium, a point through which the work can be accessed. The site chosen for the project speaks also of van den Berg's interest in, and acknowledgement of, the artifice of the act of branding the landscape. The mine dumps are not what one assumes them to be. Having been part of the local environment for so long, they are perceived by the audience as a natural part of the landscape. The mine dumps "masquerade as nature" (Golding 1997:289). They are not natural structures at all but artificial, man made, and ultimately spaces over which civilization has but a fragile and temporary mastery. The choice of site reveals the extent to which van den Berg is drawn to sites "situated in the interstices of time", sites from which power has fled (Golding 1997:289). These are sites whose power we access through memory. Van den Berg utilizes media which speak also of the transient, quixotic nature of memory. The grass,

for example, is cut into, thus an image is created, or rendered visible, only when the light shifts. This method of imaging forms is a kind of 'embossing' which "... like the memory it serves, is fragile, elusive and only intermittently apparent" (Golding 1997:300).

Further marks were made on the face of the dumps with materials such as oxides, flags and whitewash. These are all the kinds of materials used as grave markers and simple memorials like those found on battle sites, and can be read on a number of levels. Such markings might refer to the particular history of the site: the struggles, toil and labour that occurred at that location. They can however, in addition, be seen to refer to what van den Berg describes as the silence of the place (Golding 1997: 289), thus serving as a testament to those aspects of the site's past that have 'slipped through the hands of history' so to speak and can now not be recovered.

At this point it may be appropriate to provide a brief background to the presence of the mines of the Witwatersrand as the past events, and sociological and physical controversies have had a significant bearing on what the site has generally come to represent.

In 1885 large deposits of gold were found in the Witwatersrand area. It was decreed, by the South African Government, that mines could only be worked with official permission. Once mining commenced the settlement known as Johannesburg began to rapidly take shape. As the richest

deposits lay deepest in the earth machinery and capital were indispensable from very early on in the development of the area. Shafts were soon sunk to depths of over 180 metres (Lacour-Gayet 1977:153-155).

In 1920 the western world experienced the first major post-war economic slump. South Africa was not unaffected by the crisis experienced in Europe and America and the gold price fell sharply. To solve the problem that 50% of the Witwatersrand mines were operating at a loss it was decided by the mining companies that more Black workers, and fewer Europeans, were to be employed, as Black workers were paid at least 7 times less than Europeans (Lacour-Gayet 1977:264).

In response to this decree, on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1922, 20 000 White workers went on strike thereby putting operations at the mines to a standstill and "...reducing 180 000 black mine workers to idleness" (Lacour-Gayet 1977:264). Chaos ensued as "Arson, looting and murdering of Africans spread through a terrified Johannesburg" (Lacour-Gayet 1977:264). Smuts declared martial law and the South African Airforce was called in to drop bombs and machine gun the strikers. As Lacour-Gayet suggests the gravity of the situation is, perhaps, best revealed by the large number of casualties. At the end of the crisis there were 153 dead, 534 wounded, 4 750 arrested, 18 men sentenced to death, and 4 hanged (Lacour-Gayet 1977:265).

While the mines of the Witwatersrand today may still be rich in ore many of these mines are no longer operational for, a mine lives, as Gordimer suggests, only as long as "...the percentage of gold recovered from it is payable in relation to the price of gold" (Gordimer in Goldblatt 1973).

On one level van den Berg's use of these sites can, as Sunil Gupta suggests, be read as a piece "...reflecting the gradual erosion of the material possessions of white South Africans" (Gupta 1995 220). But, as is characteristic of van den Berg, both site itself and the materials and images that form the total piece are inscribed with multiple, and flexible, references and associations. For van den Berg the dumps are historically and aesthetically complex sites as they are "...simultaneously enterprises of battle and labour", serving as "...declarations of a particular grubbing kind of history, yet also because of their silence, emptiness, height and history they are sites for contemplation and refiguring" (Golding 1997:289).

Due to the kinds of materials used to construct the images that comprise the site-specific component of the Mine Dump Project (1994) van den Berg's images are, as defined by him, "...images of the 'not', comprising horizons that cannot be fixed, surfaces that absorbs rather than fixing vision, and possessing a quality of light that confuses security (Golding 1997:289). Van den Berg's imaging of the dumps is imbued with a

similar strange mixture of awe, anxiety and hope as are David Goldblatt's incisive, clinical black and white photographs of the mines and mineworkers of the Witwatersrand taken during the 1970s when most mines were still operational. Like Goldblatt's photographs van den Berg's images seem to speak of what Goldblatt describes as "...the supreme audacity" of thrusting "...so hugely and deeply and yet so precisely into the blackness of the earth" (Goldblatt 1973).

In 1996 van den Berg created an installation entitled Men Loving. This work served as his contribution to the Faultlines Project, curated by Jane Taylor. The exhibition was housed in the oldest building in South Africa, the Cape Town Castle. This building still belongs to the military as it has effectively done since its construction. Once again, as with the Mine Dump Project (1994), the site itself played a significant role in determining the direction the work would pursue for, as Dubow suggests, "...anything installed cannot but interface with the stored associations of what the Castle itself has come to mean in our collective history" (Dubow 1996:1). The contributing artists were asked to focus on an issue much debated in political, legal and social arenas at the time-- that of truth and reconciliation.

In the space he was allocated van den Berg constructed a sloping battlefield of sand and grass. For van den Berg battle sites are places of significance in that they are symbolically complex sites, "...their collective distribution is one means of establishing or charting the

vicissitudes of colonialism. Viewed from one perspective, the efforts of clashing masculinities is deeply erotic, yet these places are the most guarded preserves of patriarchy” (Williamson 1998:2).

Onto this constructed battlefield van den Berg placed a double bed which took the form of an image burnt into the grassy slope. Once again van den Berg makes use of a medium which speaks of its subject matter. A burnt image is but a fragment, a tracery of what once was, so here again van den Berg explores the notion of history as something that is only ever partially within one's grasp. One cannot have access to all the facts, and certainly as in the scenario described by this work, the official facts, the records, tell but a small part of the story. Like many of van den Berg's materials the fire or the blackening of the grass may have multiple metaphoric connotations.

Apart from possessing those qualities associated with fire discussed in relation to the Mine Dump Project (1994), the scorched grass may refer also to damage and danger, as well as to passion and love. In addition to the bed the piece is made up of whitewashed stones that mark off the space around the bed image to form a grave, a cast of two male heads, and a pile of white stones, the kind used to mark graves on battlefields, spilling from a paper suitcase. This image is, as is characteristic of van den Berg, an open ended one. The suitcase may serve as a memory container, its thin fragile form referring perhaps to the fruitlessness and inability of humanity's attempting to contain the past, as well as referring

to the burden of past actions that must be acknowledged and lifted in the present.

The following text accompanied the work:

In 1735 two men were taken into the bay off Cape Town. When the ship was near Robben Island they were made to 'walk the plank' while chained together. They had loved each other.

On Friday, 8 May (1996) we adopted a new constitution which forbids discrimination on the basis of sexual preference. Perhaps now loving will be easier (Golding 1997:301)

Research for this particular project drew van den Berg's attention once again to the absences or gaps within history, for all that he found when searching for some record of a gay history in South Africa was evidence of such relationships in terms of censure or punishment (Atkinson 1988:1). If the documents of the past are all the history we have access to, such relationships existed only in terms of illegal acts. But as T. E. Lawrence writes "...the documents are liars"(Garnett in Barzun 1977:41), for what one has access to is only a fragment of the reality of these two lovers, illustrating the extent to which one's knowledge of the past is limited, and partial.

Since this time van den Berg has been focussing on a series of works entitled Memorials without Facts. With these works it is van den Berg's intention to "...probe those fugitive excesses of memory that don't have a public image or text" (Wilby 1997:28). This is a timely and valuable endeavour for, as van den Berg notes, despite the many steps currently

being taken to uncover those aspects of memory that have not been legitimized or had any public exposure "...there are always going to be those things that escape" (Wilby 1997:28). Van den Berg points out that in spite of what South Africans know or hear at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sessions, or find in the archives "...there are always questions unasked or unanswered, narratives untold, motivations unspoken, places unrecorded, graves unmarked or unmarkable" (Wilby 1997:28).

A work belonging to this series is the piece van den Berg created in 1998 for the !Xoe Site Specific Project initiated by the Ibis Art Centre in Nieu Bethesda. Nieu Bethesda can be seen as one of those places that exists in what van den Berg terms "the interces of time" (Golding 1997:289). It is a settlement so small and remote it was without electricity until 1992. This Northern Cape village, comprising approximately 1000 inhabitants, finds itself situated in uncomfortably close proximity to "...that part of the Karoo known as the Valley of Desolation" (Emslie 1997: 3).

Named, in anticipation of prosperity and fertility, after the biblical Bethesda the village experienced but a brief period of abundance. The village itself "...traversed or fought over at every historical tum" is currently a place through which people pass but do not linger (Wilby 1998:2). While small and underdeveloped the village has gained renown as it is home to Helen Martin's Owl House.



The word !Xoe means 'home place' or 'home-land' in the language of a nomadic San people known as the !Xam. These people once inhabited the Great Karoo. The project served as a platform for presenting site-specific works in and around the village of New Bethesda, and as suggested by the title "land or place became the common concern of these artworks" (Wilby: 1998).

As described by Beardsley, site specific works are created when the artist "...chooses to enter the landscape itself, to use its materials and work with its salient features" (Beardsley 1984:7). Rather than depicting the surrounding environment these works can be seen to engage with the landscape, they are not simply of the landscape but, as Beardsley suggests, in it as well. Their presence in the landscape sets such works apart from more portable forms of sculpture as the boundaries between them and their settings become blurred (Beardsley 1984:7).

Robert Smithson (1938-1973), creator of such works as Broken Circle (1971) and Spiral Jetty (1971), is perhaps one of the most notable examples of an artist who produced site-specific works. Smithson was drawn to sites that act as "...reminders of things primeval"(Sonfist 1983:49). Like van den Berg, Smithson's works reveal an interest in time and the gap between events, and in fragmentation. Site Uncertain - Nonsite (1968) serves as an example of one of Smithson's 'non-sites'. The piece comprises seven v-shaped steel bins, arranged in decreasing

order of size, and filled with coal. Smithson described his 'nonsites' as "...a fragment of a greater fragmentation" (Sonfist 1983:49). Those works by van den Berg's works that form part of his ongoing series, Memorials without Facts, display a similar interest in fragmentation.

Michelle Stuart is perhaps a lesser known artist but one whose interests and themes may, at times, be seen to resonate with those of van den Berg. Stuart works largely with earth and stone, chiefly in the United States. Her works often involve construction of cairn-like forms. Like van den Berg her work, of which Stone/Tool Morphology (1977-79) serves as an example, centres on and is informed by an interest in "...the various artifacts, rituals and monuments" of human culture (Turner 1996:807).

The work van den Berg created for the !Xoe project comprises three parts: one a large natural rock formation and the other two forms comprising cairns constructed from smaller stones found in the area. Additional materials used here are bronze -- in the form of a cast of rock striation -- stones and whitewash. The focal point is a large natural rock outcropping near the main dirt road to Nieu Bethesda on which is found a circular bronze cast of the rock surface. Flanking this natural structure are two cairns built out of smaller stones found in the area. The taller flanking structure has been covered with whitewash while the second shorter cairn has been left unmarked.

Ambiguous and enigmatic in nature these memorials almost seem to be anti-memorials, speaking of absence rather than presence. The three structures form a unit that stands out from the landscape and is clearly a monument to something. However, the piece is not intended to mark the spot of a victory or the fall of a hero named or unknown, but serves, as van den Berg suggests, rather as "...a prompt for such parts of personal or public memory that have, as yet, no other markers" (Wilby 1997:28). Nieu Bethesda is an appropriate setting for a work such as this, that speaks of things ungraspable as it is a place simultaneously well known and remote, both metaphorically and physically accessible and yet at the same time inaccessible and isolated.

In addition to creating site-specific works and installations van den Berg has, more recently begun to utilize video in his work. Sometimes the video is intended to stand alone as an artwork, or it may form part of an installation, such as Frontier Erotics (1988) held at the Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet in Johannesburg. Here the installation comprised, in part, a series of small intense paintings. Imagery for these works was derived from the sites of battlefields around South Africa, and is van den Berg's response to these sites and the structures that memorialized the event. In addition to the paintings van den Berg placed a steeply angled section of veld in the gallery. Onto this field of living grass van den Berg then projected a film comprising archival images from the Boer War, interspersed with footage of naked men running across sepia fields,

making love or dragging others, wounded from a river (Williamson 1998:2).

Although it is somewhat beyond the intended scope of this investigation to analyze in depth van den Berg's videos, it may, however, be useful to discuss van den Berg's use and approach to this medium briefly as the addition of this medium to his range of materials adds yet a further dimension to his investigations into history.

The videotapes and video installations, as was his contribution to the 1994 Johannesburg Biennale and the !Xoe site specific Project (1998), form part of van den Berg's ongoing series entitled Memorials without Facts. With these videotapes van den Berg addresses the fact that for certain subjects there exist no official records, save those found in police archives. He counters the problem that gay partnerships fall outside the boundaries "...of what is legitimate for the nation to mourn or memorialize" by presenting "...alternative narratives of history" (Williamson 1998:1).

In the seven and a half minutes duration Memorials without Facts: Men Loving (1988), for example, van den Berg describes the relationship of two male, colonial soldiers. Their long undergarments position them in time. The two figures are depicted meeting at, and swimming naked in a river. The narrative as such unfolds only through visual imagery and through music. There is no dialogue, danger is alluded to through an

increase in the volume and pace of "...the darkly humming soundtrack" (Atkinson 1997:1). A storm passes over the river, the figures flee and the viewer senses that their illicit relationship has been discovered.

Due to the lack or absence of documented gay partnerships in official records of the South African past, van den Berg presents his audience with an invented history. He splinters this invented narrative preventing an easy reading of the work. His constructed history is spliced with images that frequently allude to, or are drawn from his previous works, such as the incandescent fiery images that were ignited on the mine dumps. Other images that are referred to here and occur repeatedly in van den Berg's work are those of a double bed, constructed from whitewashed stones, as well as figures drawn from the series of small paintings produced for the Bringing up Baby project (1998).

At times the footage is shot as if viewed through a film of water which renders the forms difficult to read. Once again van den Berg manipulates the medium so that the processes used speak also of the difficulties of accessing the past. Thus the meaning, or significance of the videotape does not reside only in the story being told but also in the method or means through which the imagery is presented.

This video, like the film (or tape) that formed part of van den Berg's installation at the Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet, is characterized by a sense of dislocation, of 'narrative gone wrong', due to his combining of

seemingly unrelated images. By combining these images van den Berg sets up a dialogue between the present and the past.

This foray into video may be seen as a significant step in terms of how such a medium relates to van den Berg's concern with time, or more specifically with the passage of time, in that video, unlike painting or drawing, is normally experienced through time. Unlike painting or sculpture the viewer usually experiences it as having a beginning, middle and end. In addition to this the medium of video has a further and perhaps somewhat obscure relationship with what van den Berg is attempting to demonstrate about a person's ability to access their past. A film, unlike a painting or sculpture, is something transient; one cannot generally return again and again to review it. Once the film has been shown it is often something that is only accessed through memory. Because of this, the sense of its meaning alters with the passage of time, particularly as meaning which is subsequently brought to bear on the work will inevitably have been governed by changes in time and space. For many years van den Berg has been speaking about a desire to find a material language "...in transition and speaking of that transition" (Golding 1997:300). It would appear that, with film, he has found it most fully revealed, for these are qualities intrinsic to this medium.

Through works such as those discussed in this chapter van den Berg lays bare visually and publicly what writers such as Barzun have

acknowledged in print. What such works serve testament to is the fact that the past has no independent existence outside of a person's imperfect knowledge of it. No past event is hidden in "...some repository of the real" where it can be found. This is, as both Barzun and van den Berg are aware, "...important to grasp and remember: it makes one both humble and grateful about the known and the knowable past"(Barzun 1977:136).

## Conclusion

It is hoped that the analyses and observations made in the preceding chapters will have shown that van den Berg's work has undergone a development over the period under consideration, especially in terms of his search for material language appropriate to his themes. Van den Berg has, in terms of this search, explored a wide range of media, from conventional media such as pastel and oil paint to more innovative media such fire and video.

Van den Berg's work has also developed thematically. This development is revealed in a broadening and increasingly sensitive interest in imaging the landscape and recent history of South Africa, progressing from two dimensional pieces, such as the Views from the Oasis Series (1985), to more complex works that deal not only with what is known, but also with that which is unknown and largely ungraspable, such as the video Men Loving (1998).

Van den Berg's practice as a whole can be seen to perform a significant and timely function. His concern with memory and history cannot be disassociated from the artist's, and also the country's, desire for reconciliation, which is perceived as a vital and necessary condition for a productive and secure future for South Africa.



Michael Suttcliffe made some pertinent observations regarding reconciliation and its relevance for South African society:

Reconciliation is about perceptions and realities, the past, the present and the future. It is about South Africans coming to terms with themselves and locating their own practices within a broader social context... Reconciliation is about remembrance, rehabilitation and reconstruction. We must remember in order to commit ourselves never to allow such despicable violations of human rights to occur again. We must rehabilitate in order that we become conscious of the terrible scars that colonial conquest and racist apartheid created, and so that we emerge all the stronger in our commitment to doing good. We are all products of our history and must all be cleansed of those thoughts and deeds created by the past (Suttcliffe 1996:9).

Van den Berg's work has undergone a number of changes between 1983 and 1998. These changes or advances in terms of both theme and materials, however, do not serve to render his earlier works any less valid or less appropriate to the time and context in which they were situated. While van den Berg's work has changed in the period under review there is also a very strong consistency to his ideas. His past and present investigations are grounded in a serious, sensitive and critical commitment to questioning both the space, the country or society he is in and his place as an artist in that society.

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