

# How the land lies:

## Exhibition by Lyn Smuts, Lien Botha and Sophie Peters

Keith Dietrich, 2000

Landscape is one convention in art making that has been riddled with problems in that it has been largely sentimentalised and trivialised. Working around this subject therefore presents enormous challenges to contemporary artists. Since the earliest colonial times, the genre of landscape has been central to South African art production, and in particular European-oriented art in south Africa. And within this tradition, it has been a general notion that "nature" stands apart from human activity and can, therefore, be viewed as ideologically neutral. This has always bothered me, and I think that the title of this exhibition - *How the land lies* - raises two interesting and related points regarding the specific genre of landscape in South African visual art.

Firstly, it implies an ambiguity in how we as humans view and interpret our topographical environments - that the land can take up many positions and shapes, depending on how we approach the subject. And secondly, it implies that the land or landscape can indeed lie; or to put it in other words, that there is no absolute truth in respect of the way in which we view the land.

Some years ago I was standing with a friend admiring a beautiful sunset. He appeared rather perplexed and asked why I found it beautiful. My own experience of the sunset was an informed vision, informed by the baggage of hundreds of ideas and images around the relationship between humans and our natural environments. Where my experience of the sunset was informed by the paintings of Kaspar David Friedrich and William Turner, and the picture postcards and glossy coffee-table books of our rich natural heritage, I guess those of my friend were something quite different.

Nature and culture are inextricably intertwined. For me, nature has always remained an idea created by humans, and in Western thinking has been an integral part of an urban discourse since Plato and Aristotle. As ideas of nature in Western thinking have generally tended to be formulated from the perspective of the city or polis, it is difficult (and perhaps impossible) to separate these notions from a political or ideological discourse.

It is interesting that the notion of nature as beautiful is a rather recent idea in Western thinking. In the European Middle Ages, having been corrupted by the Fall, nature was seen as wild and evil. Mountains for example, were described as warts on the land. The only really optimistic view of nature occurred in visual depictions of the hortus conclusus or enclosed garden that stood as a metaphor for the prototype prelapsarian garden created by God; the paradisaical Garden of Eden.

Renaissance humanism changed this vision by redeeming nature from the fall, and for the first time a positive view of nature entered into both European art and gardening conventions. This view is encapsulated in Vasari's concept of *natura* - to recreate or improve on nature.

I think that one of the lies concerning how we look at the land was informed by Kepler's theory of optics - that sight is like a camera obscura. For Kepler, humans cannot approach the world directly, and it was the disembodied *pictura* or image of nature projected onto the retinas of our eyes that stood for truth, and that truth was universal. Thomas Baines, for example, would describe a given landscape as something that presented itself to the eye. This disembodied view of vision held sway in landscape painting until the invention of the photographic camera, and played a fundamental role in visually recording the geographical features of our own land during the colonial period in South Africa.

Fascination with the topography of the country tended to dominate the interests of both amateur and professional artists throughout the colonial period. This interest in the natural features of the country stretches back to the earliest European descriptions of the Cape of Good Hope where strong associations were drawn between a terrestrial paradise and the topography of the Cape. From the occupation of the Cape onwards, European visitors largely viewed the land as a wild, formless and empty space. And in an attempt to bring order to this formless world, the empty interior of the country was systematically surveyed, measured, mapped out, visually recorded, and filled with places and names. This mode of conceptualising 'uncharted' territory through visual recording and re-presenting its cultural and natural phenomena implies an intervention to give structure to what was conceived to be an unstructured and unhistoricised African world.

Another important idea that strongly influenced visual depictions of our land from the onset of the second British occupation of the country was closely interwoven with Romantic notions of the sublime; of the wilderness as a place of hardship and spiritual renewal. For many adventure-seeking artist travelers and immigrants, the southern African wilderness offered a place of trial and expurgation, and they would often dramatise their own lives against the backdrop of a wild and romantic vision of Africa.

These sentiments cannot, however, be separated from the relationship between the 'land' and its possession contextualised within the colonial history of this country. As a visual system of recording the topographical features of the land, the landscape picture also implies possession. In the process of visually seizing the country, transforming it, and representing it through a pictorial form, the various topographical features of the country become preserved as a mental sight, as something passive that can be mentally owned. What, at a first glance, may be seen as innocent and impartial images of natural features of this country, are in fact ideologically loaded.

Against the background of the racial- and segregationally- dominated infrastructure during the apartheid era, conventional landscape painting became even more problematic, particularly in the

popular genre of abstracted landscapes. Beautifully rendered landscape paintings, graphic prints and glossy photographs can simply uncritically uphold the status quo by reducing the land to a convenient support to explore formal concerns in the name of art for art's sake.

Over the past decade or more, a growing number of artists have chosen to revisit the subject of the land, though have relocated the convention within the context of current socio-political debates informed by Postmodernist thinking. Given this, how does the land lie in terms of the works on this exhibition.

A common thread that runs throughout the works on this show is that all the artists actively challenge many of the conventions that have been pointed out. Each artist frames her vision of the land in the context of a human occupation of the land -acknowledging that nature cannot be set apart from human social, psychological and spiritual behaviour. And furthermore, each artist contextualises her experiences within personal narratives of their individual experiences of this country.

For Sophie, the narrative takes the form of autobiographical fragments or cameos. It is a struggle for survival against the background of having been dispossessed of the land on the one hand, and a celebration of the land on the other. For Sophie there is no land without its people, and it is we, the people who occupy the land, that gives meaning and purpose to our country. Sophie's land is supported by the hands and arms of the people, and, according to her, our struggle for survival is brought about through the sweat of our hands.

Like Sophie, Lien's work is strongly personal and autobiographical. Her vision of the land is intertwined with its human occupants. We carry the land within ourselves. Her works hinge on an allegorical journey or metamorphosis where she interfaces a narrative of the occupation of our land with an inner spiritual or psychological journey.

In a strange way both Lien and Sophie's particular individual approaches to the land correspond with Medieval Noachid maps where the land becomes a map of the body, and the body a map of the land. (And here I am thinking specifically of the Ebsdorf map where Christ's body spans a map of the ancient world surrounding the Mediterranean.)

Where Sophie and Lien's work are characterized by a mythological approach to the land, Lyn explores a more descriptive approach and her work is largely informed by colonial panoramic landscape, she subtly also sets out to undermine these conventions. Her prints explore the interplay between attraction and repulsion, seduction and danger. One is constantly reminded of the consequences of urban ordering and intervention. In contrast to the Medieval enclosed garden, paradise has now become barricaded by grids, boundaries and electric fences.

In terms of both the content and form of the works on this exhibition, I believe that Sophie, Lien and Lyn have challenged many of the stagnant conventions of landscape picturing, and have used the subject as a site for the exploration of socio-historical and spiritual concerns. The works are evocative, intensely complex and personal, and allow for diverse readings and interpretations. And they most certainly demand from the viewer serious contemplation and an intellectual reading.

In conclusion, I would like to congratulate these three artists for an intelligent and exciting show, and despite some of my remarks on beautiful landscape paintings, it really pleases me that people can still make beautiful art.