

Searching for the dispossessed



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In her latest exhibition, **Hide**, Christine Dixie could be defined as a land artist, taking serious issue with landscape art. Dixie is a daughter of those settlers who came to the Eastern Cape so famously nearly two centuries ago. Unlike many of their present-day descendants who quixotically continue to bear the name "settler" with pride, Dixie fastens a sharp and unflinching gaze on her own history and position in this country and through her art (and previous exhibitions *Tracks* and *Fronteers*) asks some very unsettling questions about settlement then and now.

Dixie opened the exhibition in Nieu-Bethesda by performing a verbal installation. The word play was all about "hide", the catchword for the art.

In Dixie's lexicon: hide means to withhold, conceal, withdraw from sight. *Hide* means the skin of an animal (and in an interesting further use of this meaning, to flog). *Hide* also means a portion of land in Saxon times (60 to 120 acres, sufficient to support one family).

By pulling together these semantic strands Dixie has put on show the cataclysm caused by taking land, dispossessing indigenous South

Africans, fighting over animals, erecting fences and fortresses, raising armies, and hiding from future eyes the truth of what actually happened.

She does this, again, through multiple artworks that form layers of meaning. She uses actual hides, the traces of land shapes carved out by map makers, words (a letter from her settler great-grandfather, quotes from the *Grahamstown Journal* of 1835 and the *Grocott's Mail* of 1999); and exquisite naïve Victorian drawings of plant life and pastoral scenes.

There are three sections to the exhibition as it is arranged in the Ibis Art Gallery.

In one a triptych of sheepskins spread-eagled on iron frames hangs against the light. On each skin a piece of the wool is carved out in the shape of a piece of land. And below each skin is a box shaped in the same land shape containing the wool. Eerily the box (although not at all a coffin shape) becomes a coffin, saying to the viewer "the land you carved out and claimed will swallow you up too".

On the back of each skin is an idyllic pastoral scene from an actual European painting but copied into a South African setting with the labourers blanked out. The people who owned the land, lost it, but worked it for the new masters are in ghost form. The triptych has a spiritual quality to it and is deeply evocative.

The second part (in my mind this follows from the sheepskins) is in the small room in the gallery where two sets of artworks fight each other across a narrow room. On the one wall there are four beautifully drawn hand-coloured etchings of plants in the Victorian



Caught in time: Glutinous resin boxes under the flower etchings trap the unseen, in this case pumpkin pips someone kept in a tin.

PHOTOGRAPH:
ANTHEA GARMAN

explorer style. In the same frame below each is a resin box containing some underground, unseen thing: the death of a lizard; the gnarled roots of the plant; a battered tin of pumpkin seeds. Threads trace the same land-mapping patterns through the picture-perfect text book prints into the dark, glutinous resin. But these are very beautiful and sing of the exhilaration of discovering a new land and its life forms and being fascinated and amazed.

But on the opposite wall are the danger signs. Armed response signs of guns, fortresses and bullets warning "these premises are protected". The signs are made of wicker, barbed wire, tin, leather and hides and shaped like pentagons and colonial forts. Just outside in the passage are the articles from the settler journal and the modern day newspaper.

The parallels are powerful: W Smith, acting governor secretary of the fort of Grahamstown, advises settlers in the early 1800s on "the followings means of defending farm houses against savages and other robbers ..." The *Grocott's Mail* article of Febru-

ary 9 1999 has the headline "Silent war undermines the beauty of karoo farmlands".

Dixie's point exactly. Behind the idyllic, behind the naïve fascination with the flora and the big skies is the lurking terror of the savage avenger. And the war continues.

But the last part of the exhibition is the most poignant. An enormously large etching with the word *hide* and all its dictionary definitions shows falling bodies, displaced, in space. Bodies without orientation. Up or down, who can tell.

In another enormous etching the weightless bodies are in the red earth. Above them is the breathtaking landscape (beautifully rendered) that we all recognise as the big heart of our beautiful country.

This complex, multi-layered exhibition demands that we ask: "Who are the dispossessed, who history's displaced?"

Hide is on show at the Ibis Art Gallery in Nieu-Bethesda until 27 January. For more information contact Tel: (04923) 642