

Karen Milbourne interviews Christine Dixie, 14 November 2014

The Binding, a multi-media installation by South African artist Christine Dixie, was acquired in 2010 by the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Dr Karen Milbourne, a curator at the museum, interviewed Christine about the process of making the work, ideas of motherhood, and her artistic intentions regarding the experience of seeing the installation.

KM: Firstly, what drew you to look at this narrative of sacrifice?

CD: I read a book by David Lee Miller called *Dreams of the Burning Child: Sacrificial Sons and the Father's Witness*, in which Miller looks at different texts, from *The Aeneid* through to Lacan, Freud and several others that use the narrative of the sacrificial son. He attempts to explain why this image has had, and continues to have, such uncanny power and fascination. In *The Aeneid*, there is a description of Trojan boys at six years old leaving their homes for military training. That was at the back of my mind when Daniel, my son, turned six.

I became aware of Daniel in this in-between moment of life as he maneuvered himself around different roles—cowboy, Spiderman, soldier—and then went to sleep at night sucking his thumb. In sleep his body looked so vulnerable, in such stark contrast to the combative role models he mimicked during the day. So that was the beginning point, the idea of my child sleeping and dreaming, in a transitional state.

It felt too intrusive to go into Daniel's room while he was sleeping and take photographs, so instead I took photographs of him pretending to sleep.

KM: Would you pick the poses or would you just let him settle until you liked one?

CD: It was a bit of both. I'd say, 'Would you turn on your side, can you lie on your back', but he'd also just eventually lie in a pose that was comfortable to him. After a while he'd get bored and say, 'Mom, enough photographs!' But I think he also enjoyed the attention.

I used the photographs as reference material, what is interesting for me is what happened once the photograph was translated into print. I think that the print moved the image away from a specific child to an observation about boys of this age. The translation also circumvents the potentially problematic indexical nature of the photograph. So I took many, many photographs of Daniel in different poses and then chose the ones that would work in a suite of six.

KM: And why six?

CD: Daniel was six. Also six is the age that Isaac could have been when he was nearly sacrificed in the biblical story. Six just seemed to make narrative sense.

KM: And after the photographs, what came next?

CD: The next step in the process was to cut out pieces of copper into the shape I needed. It was a strange experience because I'd literally be carrying around in the studio with

me Daniel's head, or other parts of his body. Every now and again, I'd become suddenly aware, 'Here I am, carrying Daniel's feet or Daniel's head around.'

KM: That would be a little disturbing!

CD: I was working with plates that were the exact dimensions of Daniel. The dimensions were deliberate as I wanted to establish an intimate relationship with the body of the child and the viewer's body. Because of the scale the printing process seemed to mimic the rituals of putting a child to bed. The first process was in inking up the copper plate, massaging the ink in and then wiping it off with my hand. The idea of touch, of touching Daniel, was echoed in the process. Then I placed his 'body', the print matrix, on the bed of the press, I put him to bed. The next step was to place the dampened paper over the body and smooth down the felt blankets over him, tucking him in.

Once the plate and paper have gone through the press and the paper is lifted off, a mirroring has taken place, a reversal, which is an interesting idea: you are never printing what you see; you only ever print the reverse of what you see. Mirroring, doubling, inversion, the mirror phase, I think all those concepts come into play with the print.

How did these copper plates become prints?

CD: The prints are a combination of etching and collagraph, which was blind embossed. Placing these two techniques alongside each other set up a dialogue between what can be read as 'real' and what remains illusion. The etching component was about trying to create the illusion of the real, of a three-dimensional body, through the tonal qualities of aquatint. The collagraphic component is indexical, it has a physical reference back to the real. I used a real blanket or sheepskin, but what is finally embossed into the paper is only the trace of the real. The slippage between the 'real' and the illusion of the real helped enhance the dreamlike quality I was trying to achieve.

KM: I love that you have both the real and the trace in each.

KM: Let's through them one by one and then we can talk about how the installation works together.

CD: The prints *To Sleep* and *To Dream* frame the narrative and are obviously a reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In both of these prints the child is covered by a blanket. The blanket is very much about a maternal, comforting space. However, if you look closely, inserted within the blanket is an embossed gun. I think that the gun, based on a toy gun of Daniel's, is about deliberately disrupting the image of the innocent sleeping child, it anticipates the next phase in his life.

Bind refers to the actual binding of the sacrifice in the Abraham and Isaac story. In his book *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice*, Jon D. Levenson suggests that binding a person was a standard procedure in human sacrificial rites. The bandages that I used in this print also reference the swaddling cloth that Christ was wrapped in as a baby, as well as Christ's shroud. So this image incorporates the baby, the sacrificial child, the death of Christ. The act of binding is enacted from birth to death.

Burning, references the biblical Isaac's binding but I was more drawn to the psychologically complex interpretation of a dream analysed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud writes of a female patient who recounts a dream about a father who dreams that his dead son awakes. The child wakes up and says, 'Father, don't you see that I am burning?'

Burning is the most confrontational of all the images, the only one in which the child looks back. For me that was a very important moment, having the child open his eyes and look back at the viewer. In my mind, I imagined him looking back at his father and questioning his decision. When I first started the series I imagined the viewer as the father figure, but that changed during the process of making the installation and the idea of witnessing became a more central concern. The witness to the moment the boy child symbolically dies. The witness to that moment, male or female—who is also the viewer of the installation—becomes a crucial component, in fact is needed there to complete the work.

The sheep or ram in the biblical narrative is the substitute that Abraham kills as the 'burnt offering' instead of his son. In the print, *Offering*, the blind-embossed sheepskin refers to several absences: the absent body of the child (in the print the sheepskin literally covers the entire body and only the head hovers over the skin), the absent body of the sheep that is now flattened out like a map, and the absent sheepskin that is only revealed in the print through its trace.

In *Blind*, the child who lies in a foetal position literally disappears into the paper. It's the position of the child when first alive, but in the print becomes the position the child dies in.

KM: Of course the foetal position, the position you're in in your mother's womb, is also the only place where you don't see the boy as a man, or the son, or the father. It's the place where he's enveloped by the womb, as he was in you.

CD: I hadn't thought of that, but that's a lovely point.

KM: It's a sort of—and this is not a word—re-enwombment.

CD: Yes, so the print *Blind* refers directly to blindness as opposed to the confrontational print about sight, but it refers also to blind embossing and to being blind to the sacrificial ideas that you enact.

KM: It's provocative because of the element of witnessing. It's no longer witnessing or blinding yourself, rather it's witnessing the child being blind to the motivations of the sacrifice, and it's also the will to blind yourself to the moral ambiguity of the moment and move forward.

CD: Yes. One of the other narratives that Miller examines is Virgil's epic *The Aeneid*. There is a poignant description of the young soldiers as they stand 'all shining before their parent's eyes.' Miller suggests that what the fathers are actually celebrating in this moment is a reflection of themselves in their sons and more ominously that what they are in fact admiring is death, embodied in their sons. The next component of the installation, the embodied shadows, was inspired by seeing Daniel at play with his little

army figures, placing these shadows onto an altar/bed. So these dormitory beds, altars, hospital beds for the wounded, all refer to a transitional place, the kind of space where bodies are in transition, where they are being altered in some way. I call these figures embodied shadows because they have a dimensionality to them and they are also the mirror image of the child in the prints, but with one important difference: each figure is amputated at the knee. That amputation refers to sacrifice, wounding, to the idea that these little toy soldiers that my son was playing with in a kind of fantasy land had very real consequences.

The first process of making the embodied shadows was to rub each toy soldier in a layer of fine graphite powder. The soldiers were then divided into different boxes, depending on the action performed, whether, for example, he is shooting from the ground, standing to attention or walking with his rifle over his shoulder. The figure of the young boy's body was made by gluing soldier upon soldier together in tight formation. I had to cut off the arms and legs of many soldiers, micro amputations necessary to contain the plastic soldiers within the delineated form. Working with graphite powder and glue day and night gave me sinus infections and there were days I was so blocked up I felt I could hardly breathe. For weeks at a time I was always dirty because graphite powder is so fine and settles everywhere, especially on anything I touched. By the end of the day the glue, black with graphite, on the tips of my fingers would dry. I would wash and wash my hands but it would not come off. I was constantly picking at my fingers as if trying to remove the scab of a sore. (sadness – purgatory)

The veils are the third component of the installation and create a space in which the viewer is fully encompassed. The viewer has to walk into the exhibition space, and walk through the veils.

KM: So, you come in and you're on the outside, and then you have to be physically inside the space. You can't witness separately. Do you walk around the veils? Or through the veils?

CD: Around or through, there are spaces on either side of each veil.

KM: This gives the installation the feel of a hospital with those curtains that you pull around a bed.

CD: The hospital curtain. Exactly. So I also had in mind the idea of the viewer being fully encompassed in a space. And then in between the time when I had made the prints and when I made the veils, Daniel had turned seven, that transitional moment had taken place. In contrast to the vulnerable, naked body depicted in the prints on the veils he is depicted fully clothed, in imitation army gear.

Coming back to the scene in *The Aeneid*, the soldier boys in the troop, having now stood in front of their admiring parents, begin to demonstrate elaborate military manoeuvres, mimicking their father's battle skills. This is the role enacted by the 'soldier boys' I depict on the veils. I looked closely at the little toy army figures, used their stances and photographed Daniel in those poses. The boy child transferred onto the veil, in effect re-enacting or mimicking the positions of the toy soldiers he plays with—toy soldiers that in their turn are based on the poses of 'real' soldiers.

The soldier child transferred onto the veil is seen from behind, he looks over the altar/beds at himself in the more maternal space depicted in the prints. So there is also a gaze, a looking-at between the two versions of the child who is in that moment of transition between the spaces—the gap between the maternal and paternal. The embodied shadow falls between, connecting the two selves.

KM: On previous occasions we've talked about land and place, essential to your work. It's interesting to think about a previous body of work *Hide* in which you still have ground, but then everything starts to become isolated. And as you've moved away from place to the subject of role, everyone becomes isolated.

CD: Yes, though I think ground is referenced indirectly in *The Binding*, ground, territory, after all, is what soldiers kill for, what they march on, where they are buried. I come back to referencing ground more specifically in the body of work that follows *The Binding*, the installation *To be King*.