

Redoubled Lives: Christine Dixie at the Millennium Gallery

"But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away and displaying the infinite which was hid "

You never know when some other force will rise up and double itself against your life, bringing one world into sharp juxtaposition with another, to the illumination of both. Christine Dixie has been making a philosophical habit of this sort of counterpointing, for much of her recent career. Self critical doubling is one of the main principles in her work: placid surface features of one landscape and sphere of human life are frequently counterposed against a more ambiguous, inverted geography, somehow part of the first but still strangely other.

As an Eastern Cape girl from a settler family, Christine began some years ago to use her own life to explore the wounding history of landscape representation, and its role in the formation of white settler subjectivity. She has done this through a series of extraordinarily interesting experiments in printmaking: in many of these, we are made conscious of the fact that for every act of landscape representation, there is an equal and opposite repression of competing systems of meaning. Consider the *Even in the Long Descent* series on this show, with five panels combining etching and mezzotint. Looked at from some distance, you can see immediately that the normal scale of value in landscape is reversed: the top third of each is ordered around a gently recessional farm landscape, but the entire lower two thirds shows another perspective. Caught between the pull of these two planes, we are not sure whether the lower view is of grave stratigraphy, a bank of earth, or a pool of ox blood, in which bodies huddle, hiding eyes or genitals, or tightening into rigor mortis. The implicitly narrative landscape elements at the top, are met and matched by an older, obverse universe of the body. Throughout Christine's work, from her earliest student pieces, that realm of bodily meaning has been signalled by an uncanny blue green colour, reminiscent of the verdigris cheekbones of Grunewald's dead saints.

Christine Dixie is one of the very few South African artists to use printmaking processes to successfully explore the problematic relationship between representation, power, and value: the naturalised presence of the farm relies on a world of buried bodies, of repressed force. In South Africa, settler consciousness was founded on this primary repression: the achieved calm of the homestead represses knowledge of complex structures of pre-existing ownership, and the understanding that the earth is a place of presences, of those referred to in Xhosa as "abaphantsi".

In Christine Dixie's world, one representation always drags a shadow alternative with it, a hitherto unnoticed obverse upon which it depends for meaning. Look at those exquisitely hand coloured botanical etchings documenting her great grandfather's four main crops. They show a Linnean sequence of plant parts: but the syntactical development of the pumpkin flower, neatly ordered and coloured a, b, and c, is marred by an intrusion, the mapped outline of the great grandfather's farm. This is a lovely meditation on the contingency of value: botanical science anatomizes the crop; and the force of cartography secures the plot of land necessary to produce it. But it does not end there: the top section is then stitched, literally, into another realm of meaning: at the base of each of the prints, there is a collection of uncannily associated objects, sticky, and oozing, as though dragged up from some well of snail slime.

What I think this suggests, is that white subjectivity finds expression not only in the larger canvas of land ownership, but also in the domain of hidden desires: the value of the pumpkin image depends, as much on the childishly obsessional little acts of hoarding seeds, shells, and

treasures, in a tin box, on a summer afternoon before supper. This image has a tremendous mnemonic power for me as well: my grandfather, too, believed utterly in Allenburies Throat Pastilles, and took one with his glass of brandy each evening. Once a week, I and my friends were allowed one pastille each, popped into our mouths as we stood in line. It was a remarkably parsimonious sharing of joy. Some time later, when the old man was nearly blind, I once helped myself to a second sweet as the tin circulated, and the immeasurable affluence of that redoubled blackcurrant flavour taught me a lesson about pleasure and repression that I have never forgotten.

This show is part of the larger exhibition project called "Hide," Christine Dixie's meditation on a keyword that spans a range of lexical associations from foetal cowering to embossing. One of the revelations of show is the discovery that the Anglo Saxon noun "hide" is associated with an apportionment of land. In the linguistic history, therefore, a brutal set of equivalences is sedimented: the carrying capacity of the land needed to feed a flock stands in a relationship of mathematical equivalence to the product, the amount of wool clip. This highly instrumental form of equivalence is examined in the main installation: the outlines of the farm boundaries are clipped from the fleece, making up an exact equivalence in the encircling shape which then contains the product, as though the wool had a willingness of its own and fell neatly into the prepared receptacle.

There is a deadly, circular logic here: the shape of the farm is redoubled in the wool clip, and the coffin. Beyond this, there is no room for other forms of meaning or desire. Historically, the argument is very resonant: the wool industry in the Eastern Cape experienced an explosive growth in the early nineteenth century: in 1883 113,000 pounds of Cape Wool were exported; twenty years later, 5 and a half million pounds were exported. Thus the system of equivalence that had come to be established in the eastern Cape, linking expropriated land, wool production, and controllable labour, was part of a larger order of capitalist exchange now expressing itself globally. Seen from the Eastern Cape, it is all brutally abstract: the labour put into the production of wool seems to be expressed as a commodity value; labour itself is spectralised, as though the wool itself had the desire to travel to meet some distant demand. But even here, in this installation, the idea of a doubled, occluded landscape is present: embossed on the reverse of the hide are images of the pastoral labourers, and of sheep stealing, the excess in the system that is elsewhere repressed.

The installations and printmaking that go into "Hide" use a more abstract and didactic set of connections than Christine's much more narrative earlier work. Nonetheless, they are also highly personalised, and mix memory, history, and faux documentary in a most unsettling way: the Dixie patriarch appears, magically, as an image in the 1839 *Grahamstown Journal*, bracketed by ads for contemporary armed response companies; we have already seen his secret seeds and hoardings. Then in the most recent works on show, *Albany Gold*, he appears as a doubled figure, two little child sentries, one with lead gun and the other a golden lamb. The iconic elements of the prints are embossed and hand coloured against the flatter aquatint ground.

I find it hard to describe the mixture of conscious and unconscious logic that this show explores. In some respects, it is a dream of radical coevalness and coresponsibility, where everything connects; it's a bit like those pre-oedipal moments at nursery school when one child receiving a blow sets off a chain reaction in which each child, perceiving no personal boundary, understands itself to have been struck. Most strongly of all, though, the interrogative doubling that goes on in Christine Dixie's work reminds me of the method of a much earlier landscape artist, the poet Wilfred Owen. You probably know the poem "Miners". There, like Christine Dixie, Owen is concerned to meditate on the surface appearance of an apparently natural process, and how this both masks and entails an invisible

violence. The speaker looks at a coal burning fire, and hopes to hear whisperings about the primeval origins of the fuel. Instead, the embers tell of the pain of the labour process that produced it, and of human subjects in the chain of production. From there, the mind moves to a horrendous analogy with the dark pits of the First World War and the consumption of young lives. This is how the poem ends:

I thought of all that worked dark pits
Of war, and died Digging the rock where
Death reposes
Peace lies indeed.

Comforted years will sit soft chaired,
In rooms of amber; The years will stretch their
hands, well cheered
By our life's ember;

The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned, Whose warmth shall
lull their dreaming lids,
While songs are crooned; But they will
not dream of us poor lads,
Left in the ground.

I have been following Christine Dixie's intellectual project for some years now, and she remains for me one of the most exciting people working across a range of printmaking techniques. It's wonderful to have work like this entering into such a strange, and discordant relationship with the spaces of Johannesburg, and I'm delighted to be able to declare this exhibition open.

Professor David Bunn

Opening speech for *Hide*

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