

## TRACK

by Christine Dixie

Opening speech at the Market Theatre Gallery, by **Jo Ractliffe** on the 16 October 2000

"I walked into the Market Theatre gallery and before I had registered the work, had decided to suspend the other world so to engage with this one, before even measuring the detail of it all, I stood, as if in the passage of a train, looking at the strip of green and bluish grey that extended around the room and inexplicably, landscape emerged, simply there stretched out from me into an infinity. An evocation of something almost uncanny.

How to produce 'affect'? To re-enter memory; trace the real, gather evidence, search language and labour in intense care and so to produce - in the gallery - the space of the karoo itself? It's all there; the springbok's head etched into the glass, the shards of railway china, the canvas blinds to screen out the sun, even the account of a train journey across the karoo carefully detailed in a child's diary - all the scavenged and retrieved bits of paraphernalia presented like evidence of an archeological dig of sorts, emerge to draw you into a different time and place as you move through the work. But what happens here is more than the sum of it's parts; more than refined vision, carefully honed craft and sophisticated language. It's a 'feltness' for the ephemeral, for the ways objects and space trigger memory, recall the fugitive and instability of history and time....

Susan Stewart in her chapter 'On Longing' writes "The delicate and hermetic world of the souvenir is a world of nature idealized; nature is removed from the domain of struggle into the domestic sphere of the individual and the interior. The souvenir is used most often to evoke a voluntary memory of childhood, a motif we find either in souvenirs, such as scrapbooks, of the individual life history or in the larger antiquarian theme of the childhood of the nation/race. This childhood is not a childhood as lived; it is a childhood voluntarily remembered, a childhood manufactured from its material survivals. Thus is a collage made of presents rather than a reawakening of the past."

With this work we have been invited into the spaces of the journey, both 'actual' and remembered. The thing about journeys is that they exist in a suspended time and space; one where, as Mike Nicol says, 'the teller of the landscape is forced to adapt to a slipping world, a time between fact and fiction, between past and present, where the imagination travels upon the landscape as it moves between events'. This is the space of the 'inbetween'. And here in the gallery, as we take on this journey of a train through the Karoo during the furtive, half remembered time of childhood, we are also asked to reflect on a "bigger" journey, of our lives and collective histories in this country. See the traces of our past, delicate pointers to war, colonialism and apartheid - all carefully selected, laid bare for scrutiny.

In his book, "Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture", Jonathon Dollimore makes a point about happiness; that it is something felt only in retrospect; that in the moment it is experienced as something inconsequential, but on reflection, when past, it is always tied up with loss. There is a quote from Christine's diary on this exhibition which says: "all these black little boys sing under your window and it is quite uncomfortable" - so poignant a reminder of a childhood in this country, and the purity of knowing so little beyond the immediate world of the personal. And where this leaves us in adulthood - with loss and the desire to retrieve, restore and collate the fabric of this unstable and fragile world.

Michael Ondaatje in his novel 'In the Skin of a Lion' writes

"This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through the darkness. Outside, the countryside is unbetrayered.

The man who is driving could say, "In that field is a castle," and it would be possible for her to believe him.

She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms. And he is tired, sometimes as elliptical as his concentration on the road, at times overexcited - "Do you see?" He turns to her in the faint light of the speedometer.

Driving the four hours

To Marmora under six stars  
and a moon

She stays awake to  
keep him company..