ABSTRACT OF: BELOW THE SEDIMENTS: DISSECTING WATER ALIENATION IN THE SEMI-DESERT REGION OF THE KAROO, SOUTH AFRICA

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The Karoo is a semidesert region that lies in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa and is recognized for its stark, arid and harsh beauty. This landscape holds a particular metaphysical place in the country’s imagination. Much public debate on access to water in the Karoo in the late nineteenth century, and in contemporary debates around fracking, have pitted the rational and scientific against the intuitive, the irrational and the emotive. In my art, I explore the registers of language employed between these apparently opposing epistemologies and the resulting fabricated dichotomy that veils other concerns. Below the Sediments (2018) is a five-paneled, two-layered print that visualizes the earth below the Karoo landscape, with images of pipes used for fracking superimposed on this image (Fig. 1). In the paper, I weave into my discussion nineteenth-century water divining in the Karoo and contemporary debates about fracking. I question the dichotomy constructed in the popular press, then and now, between a rational scientific epistemology and “irrational” local lore. The panels illustrate these tensions.

Below the Sediments is an iteration of an earlier work, Even in the Long Descent (2002) [1], a series of five color etchings printed onto paper. The setting for both of these works is the Karoo, a desert landscape known for its extensive dinosaur fossils. Between the first and second iterations of this work, fracking in the Karoo emerged as if inevitable. This was despite the opposition by local landholders, descendants of settlers who were beneficiaries of land in the Karoo formerly inhabited by the Khoikhoi people. Forcibly alienated, Khoikhoi pastoralists found it increasingly difficult to survive [2,3].

The mountains in Below the Sediments are part of the Sneeuberg mountain range in the Karoo. These mountains form a significant portion of Southern Africa’s Great Escarpment. From about 1740, supported by the Dutch East India Company, the colonial settler frontier advanced rapidly into this area, but faced with unpredictable rains, struggled to survive. Some 150 years later, however, the introduction of windmills turned their fortune; the consequent water rush appropriated more land for cultivation and, by extension, “civilization.” The farm panorama in the middle ground of the panels depicts an “unpeopled” landscape with traces of “cultivation” (fences, farm roads and windmills).

The imagery draws on the European tradition of the “picturesque” landscape, a convention imported to interpret, contain and control the space in which settlers found themselves [4]. In Below the Sediments, as in Even in the Long Descent, the windmill remains in the distance. But now, dominating the foreground, dissecting the image into hard grid-like spaces, are the hydraulic pipes laid below the earth’s surface to extract shale gas; in the fourth panel the extractor pump pushes its way through the surface. In the public debate on the potential effects on the Karoo environment of proposed fracking, a debate that echoes the polarities of land use and geologic incursions in the nineteenth century, the economic priorities of Royal Dutch Shell and the market for gas in urban centers are pitted against a nostalgic desire by “locals” for an “undisturbed” landscape of their making.

In Below the Sediments I–V, I counterpose these debates against what I see as a blind spot, both of the Karoo as a geological, archeological and deep historical phenomenon and as a site of militarization, violence and colonial incursion. Each of the five panels is made up of two large digitally printed sheets. The front sheet of brushed metal evokes the history of mining, central to the Cape Colony and still critical to South Africa’s economic growth. This front sheet depicts the Karoo landscape with bodies falling/ floating below the earth’s surface. Laser cut across these panels are the fracking pipes and machinery, diagrammatic images of horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing (Fig. 1). The laser cuts recall the procedures of drilling and digging. The second sheet holds the digitally printed image of water. Drawn from a still from a stop-frame animation sequence, this image has an uncanny, surreal aqua blueness. By depicting sea water, it serendipitously references the large inland sea that was once home to dinosaurs of the region.

The laser-cut “pipes” and “cracks” threaten to disturb the floating bodies of the panels, revealing the different representational practices of art and science. These two “languages” are brought together to speak about the apprehensions that are often veiled by the emotive, romanticized language of the land of the artists, hunters and farmers, countered by the allegedly rational language of science. The parallel in both the public debates at the time of the Water Rush in the nineteenth century and in the recent debate on fracking is the unacknowledged history of war, exploitation and genocide [4].

References and Notes

Based on a paper presented at the 2018 Watershed: Art, Science, and Elemental Politics program at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, September 2018. The full paper is available with the online supplemental materials.

1. Even in the Long Descent was exhibited in Washington D.C. at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in 2012 as part of the exhibition Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa.

