Special Section: ArtScience/Watershed

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

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Abstract

The Karoo is a semi-desert region that lies in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It is recognized for its stark, arid and harsh beauty. It is a landscape that holds a particular metaphysical place in the imagination of the country, the setting that the author J.M. Coetzee depicts in his novel, In the Heart of the Country.

Much of the 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 her art, Dixie explores the registers of language employed between these apparently opposing epistemologies, that have resulted in a fabricated dichotomy that veils other concerns. Below the Sediments (2018) is a five paneled two layer print that visualizes the earth below the Karoo landscape, with images of pipes used for fracking superimposed on this image (Fig.1). In this article, the author weaves into her discussion of this work the history of water divining in the Karoo in the nineteenth century and contemporary debates about fracking. The author questions the simplistic 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 voluble opposition to it by local landholders, descendants of settlers who were beneficiaries of land in the Karoo which had formerly been 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 Sneeuwberg 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; and the consequent Water Rush appropriated even more land for cultivation and so, 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 the 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 Earth’s 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 19th century, the economic priorities of 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, the artist/author counterposes these debates against what she sees 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 rehearse 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 not inland ground water, it serendipitously references the large inland sea that was once the home to the 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. In Below the Sediments 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

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.

