

*The Lie of the Land: Representations of the South African Landscape* by Michael Godby with essays by Cheryl Walker, Sandra Klopper and Brett Bennett. Pinewood Studios, Cape Town, 2010. 136 pp. Illustrations. ISBN 978-1-874-81743-7.

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This book was published to accompany the exhibition at the Iziko Michaelis Collection in the Old Town House in Cape Town between June and September 2010. As such it may be considered as a catalogue, but it is in fact a stand-alone publication, containing some of the best writing to date about theorising the South African landscape as well as a magnificent collection of visual representations of the landscape.

Professor Michael Godby, who curated the exhibition and edited the book, starts from the premise, in his introduction, that 'landscape does not exist independent of modes of representation, in other words, landscape has no definite existence without human imagination. Another way of putting this seemingly startling assertion is to point out that landscape has a history, and that since it appears different at different times in that history – or is seen differently by different groups of people – then the apparently solid, objective form of landscape simply melts away.' Landscape does indeed have a history, and one of the things that the exhibition did was to trace the evolution of different types of landscape representation during the course of South Africa's history. Thus, some of the earliest pictures selected were attempts to capture or control the landscape for the colonial project. Works of cartography – also representations – strove to impose borders or boundaries whilst claiming possession of the demarcated territory; pictures of exploration suggested that the landscape was becoming tamed or discovered whilst works of pastoral beauty suggested that the wilderness (which is itself an imaginative concept) had been domesticated or made picturesque by the civilising eye of the civilised beholder.

Whilst the pictures in the exhibition were framed or contextualised by textual commentary on the gallery walls, the pictures in the book have the explanatory force of interpretative essays to help explain them. Cheryl Walker's essay reminds us to be careful of seeing South African history in terms of the 'master narrative' that these early colonial landscapes evoke. This 'master narrative' is one of the removal, or alienation, of the indigenous people of South Africa from the land. As Walker points out, the expectation of many is that the injustices of the past can be rectified by a return to the land. This, she argues, is misguided, for there were other forces transforming the landscape. We now live in a non-agrarian society and very little will be achieved by attempting to re-create a predominantly rural, or farming, society. Nostalgia is no cure.

Some of the works on display, and in the book, reflect the complexity of the changing nature of the South African landscape. It was transformed not just by colonial battles or invasions, important though these were, but by mining, industrialisation, road and mountain pass construction, the development of market-oriented

agriculture and urbanisation. As Walker reminds us, the South African landscape is one that has been scarred by segregation and racialised settlement patterns. The land bears these marks, but the scars were not given by simple blows.

Sandra Klopper's essay is a study of how certain landscapes become repositories for individual and collective memories – sacred and charged with symbolic meaning. In African societies, for instance, the burial grounds of kings become focal points for the collective memory of an entire people. A fascinating feature of Sandra Klopper's essay is that she shows how, in recent times, the landscape has been criss-crossed by the movement of migrant labourers. In ways which are reminiscent of Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*, the songs of migrant workers connect with points of the landscape and evoke memories of home as well as the experience of alienation. Of relevance here is Simon Schama's observation, contained in his book *Landscape and History*: 'Although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'

Dirk Klopper's subtle and sensitive essay focuses on landscape in the work of J.M. Coetzee. To compress his argument, brutally, his title 'An Unsettled Habitation' says it best. Coetzee's relationship with the land, like that of so many of the brilliant artists that feature in the exhibition, is uneasy, ambiguous, unrequited. Klopper insists that imaginative responses to the land are complicated, diverse and individual. He also reminds us how many extraordinary writers about landscape we have in South Africa – not only painters and photographers. As South Africans we love this land. But does the land love us? That is the central question posed by our relationship with this beloved country.

The last essay in the book is by Brett Bennett, and it is on the relationship between landscape and environmental history in South Africa. It is vital to remind ourselves that each landscape has a specific environmental determinant, made from particular soils, rocks, grasses, plants, trees, flowers and fruits. These change over time. Natural agents change them and human agencies change them. There is no 'pure' South African landscape, Bennett rightly observes, because neither nature nor human agency is static. We should acknowledge that our beliefs about nature are the product of a long, complex environmental history, says Bennett, 'a history that can be recognized in the landscapes that surround us'.

All of these ideas, and more, are contained within the works of art that are published here. We should be extremely grateful to Professor Godby for assembling so many wonderful works together in one place and for contextualising them so beautifully in a relatively inexpensive catalogue. These are truly world-class artworks that confirm that South African artists are second to none. The works also confirm that we live in a country with landscapes second to none. This is not simply a subjective view. A similar point was made recently in another book on the South African landscape, *Washed by the Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa*, by Jeremy Foster. Foster writes that although he has travelled widely, 'few landscapes I encountered – no matter how distinctive their scenic quality – seemed to evoke such a strong affective response in me'. Why is this? Why does this ashen-purple-coloured land move us so? Why did Laurens van der

Post find our mountains so melancholy? The reason, perhaps, is that if landscape is made both by history and by the maker of history, then nowhere else on earth has had so long and sad a history as South Africa. This is both the cradle of mankind and the grave of the earth's genetically oldest people – the Khoisan. Nowhere else on earth is so saturated with memories – some lost, some recoverable and some still to be imagined. The past is all around us in South Africa, in the landscape, and because it is not really past it can be evoked, in the landscape, by all who choose to interrogate it.

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