

“TRANSLATION/SEDUCTION/ DISPLACEMENT”

WHITE BOX

This exhibition of work by contemporary South African artists derived its title from some of the implications of the word “translation” in several of that nation’s languages: translation as libidinal, spiritual, or cartographic displacement and as an act of seduction, enticing, or leading something or someone astray. Gesturing toward the slippages and the communicative potentialities of language, curators Lauri Firstenberg and John Pepper clearly wanted to avoid mounting a regional survey show (“South Africa Now” or “Young South Africans”) that would claim to be definitive or exoticize practices that are as intimately linked to the rest of the world as is South Africa’s economy. The titular emphasis on language also reflects the Conceptual slant of the work, which is in fact as much about distortion and repulsion as it about translation and seduction.

The curators and the artists they included stressed the tenacious residue of apartheid in the postapartheid period and the nuanced complicities between representation, power, and history that are nowhere more evident than in South Africa. The exhibition featured the work of twelve artists from two generations, those already known for making art in the late ’70s and early ’80s and those working today. The earlier generation’s Willem Boshoff, of Afrikaner origin, and Santu Mofokeng, a Soweto-born black, both produce brilliant work that sometimes overshadows that of their younger “descendants” who showed here. Boshoff’s exquisite book *Kyafrikaans* (Look Afrikaans), 1977–80, comprised typed visual poems that turned grids and clusters of significant Afrikaans words into twisted knots of meaning. One example is



Santu Mofokeng, *Chasing Shadows* (detail), 1996,
black-and-white photograph, 20 x 24".

“*Verdwaalkaart*” (Map to get lost by), 1979, a set of written directions that obscure themselves even as they make up a physical map. Boshoff considers skin, law, and place through the elusive concreteness of language and produces a severe, ethical art that resonates back to Beckett and forward to J.M. Coetzee. Mofokeng was represented by both his older black-and-white photographs and some of his more recent work. “On the Tracks,” a 1994 photographic series, features sweaty men working in dark spaces that one assumes are South African gold or diamond mines until realizing, from their titles, that the shots were taken in the New York City subway. “Nightfall of the Spirit,” 2000, a superb suite of photographs taken over the last few years, depicts the now placid, bucolic landscapes that were once killing fields in Germany, Poland, Vietnam, South Africa, and elsewhere. Skeletons, skulls, memorials, and plaques aside, the blunt truth that Mofokeng confronts is that the land always forgets: It cannot testify to suffering but bears witness only to a dislocation from its own past.

In the younger generation, among the artists who stood out were Siemon Allen, Rudzani Nemasetoni, and Hentie van der Merwe. *Screen*, 2000, Allen’s room-size installation of woven half-inch videotape, created a black, light-absorbing vacuum that dominated the exhibition space. As with Boshoff’s poetry, the viewer senses that something important might be on the tape but cannot decipher it. Nemasetoni’s *Litany*, 1999, comprised eight altered photographs of the dreaded passbooks

and police records that defined “identity” for many South African men. Van der Merwe presented a grid of archival photographs of naked soldiers stationed in German-occupied Southwest Africa (now Namibia) during World War II. *Untitled*, 1997, already laden with a bizarre blend of homoeroticism and eugenic fascination, could only be viewed through a mirrored contraption, which implicated the viewer as unseen voyeur/participant.

This was a low-gloss, low-budget show, but an important one, whose best works demonstrated that contemporary art in the “new” South Africa is uniquely positioned between a traumatic past that must be reckoned with and a hopeful future that remains to be articulated. In the meantime, these artists, unacknowledged legislators, offer their own interpretations of what “truth” and “reconciliation” might mean.

—Nico Israel

ARTFORUM

MAY 2000