

My most basic theme

2007 & 2008

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"When I pulled out the "Guardian Weekly" out of the mail box in Berlin in 1992, the image of ANC supporters fleeing before the bullets of the Ciskei homeland guards, I was riveted to the spot. At a time when one had really begun to hope for real change, there again were people being forced to flee for their lives. As I slowly mounted the stairs to my studio, the figures at the back drew my attention more and more. They seemed to be ducking and running at the same time, in a desperate attempt to survive. Survival was already one of the basic theme threads in my work and I started immediately drawing and re-drawing these figures, echoing the way in which the San artists had depicted human and animal figures in motion. I grounded A4 sheets of paper with acrylic and started working up the layers of paint, rubbed pigment into the ground, added pastel and oil stick. A series of over 40, which were exhibited as a block in Bonn and Berlin, plus a 2 meter by three meter piece on paper and a series of 5 pieces on paper (1 meter by 70cm) resulted over a period of months. The theme of flight and survival has remained with me. "Here is stand" (a quote from Luther) shows the feet of people applying for refugee status standing, not running, demanding their right to a refuge. (One of these works is part of a folio "home/homeless" created by foreign women artists and presented to the Berlin Senate by the Villa Oppenheim.) At the present (2007) I am developing ideas for a piece of work on refugees. It seems to me that people have always moved and will always move. Very often the only way to survive is to flee. If one looks back into one's own family line, the theme is there, for all of us. If we happen at present to be in the happy position of being in a place that we feel safe in and not forced to move on, we should not forget those who are at present in need of refuge. There is room for all of us.

I wrote this early in 2007, at the request of Anne Pretorius of the William Humphries Art Gallery, Kimberley, which has part of the series "When People Run Like Buck". The city art gallery bought one of the series of Migration Mutation Maps in February 2008. Now, in May 2008, struck by the terrible murders of people from other parts of Africa, I have had to start working on similar figures trying to flee but burning. I can not ignore this negative manifestation related to migration while some people in my country of origin are laughing as they murder others. That xenophobia is not limited to South Africa hardly needs saying and the examples all over the world at the present moment, as well as throughout history are evidence of it's strength and persistence. But as Chinua Achebe says, „We have a responsibility to our own peculiar place and its story.“ and I see it as my responsibility to try to understand what it is that is happening and why it is happening, with as little blaming and as much empathy with the victims, as well as the perpetrators, as I can muster. And I think and feel through making images as well as linking words.

It is often said that there would not be such extreme expression of xenophobia, if people could live in reasonable conditions and have the hope of a peaceful and decent life for themselves and their children. True, the work of improving conditions for all human beings must continue and be intensified. What must also be said, is that there are more and more examples in South Africa of how the dreadful, deep damage to the fabric of humanity done by Apartheid is now surfacing. There are other countries where large numbers of people are poverty stricken and have little hope of improving their situation, but the extreme levels of violence in South Africa point to a degree of damage, which seems to have few parallels. Sadly though, even people who are living well, also express xenophobia, though not in the extreme form we have seen in recent days. At the same time, examples of intense humanity and acceptance of others and other ways of life are also bountiful in South Africa.

How can the healing process which was started after the end of Apartheid continue?
How can those who have had little or no benefit from the change of government, begin to have real, tangible improvement in their lives?
How can the process of learning to trust ourselves and each other be accelerated?
How can we focus on what needs to be done for change, instead of blaming those new in the society?
What can individual people and groups of people do, so that one is not always calling for the government to do this and that?
How can the democratic processes become an integral part of daily life, so that people can and do demand change in appropriate ways?
How does one become more of a human being even in extremely difficult circumstances?

Lots of questions, but I know it *is* possible, and that it requires continuous and huge group effort.

The daily work of slowly developing self-confidence and acceptance of others...co-operation and the experience that most people are pleased to help, are partners, not competition, or enemies. And each time there is reversion to discrimination and hate, one has to return to the point before that and reiterate loudly, clearly and joyfully that there is space for all of us. Start again, and again, and again.
Never give up!