

THIS WAS A CITY

William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley, 4 March 2004

Opening speech by David Morris

Liz Crossley, who is Kimberley-born but has lived in Europe for three decades, nearly two of them in Berlin, returns to Kimberley, with these works, this exhibition and installation, and the associated events, and in a sense she knows this place for the first time. In making this statement I allude to T.S. Eliot's great poem about human experience and renewal, entitled *Little Gidding*, which suggests that:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

The arriving back has been a process begun in the early 1990s when Liz, with her husband Jenz-Peter, sought to reconnect with the land and the place of her birth and her early life. The landscapes and history of Kimberley and of South Africa have since infused and informed her work in Berlin (as can be seen here this evening); and now, for a time, her work is brought to be part of Kimberley's landscape, at this gallery.

I am personally grateful to have known Liz since 1992, which was when the San rock engravings of this region (which happen to be my professional interest) seized her attention as part of her re-linking with Kimberley and South Africa. She has since visited the museum, and local sites, many times, and we have kept up a conversation and a flow of ideas, stepping, literally and figuratively, over much ground. My work on rock art and much else has been enriched immeasurably by this thinking and re-thinking especially around landscapes and places, and people within them.

There is nothing new, of course, in landscapes infusing an artist's work, but what art critics have remarked upon in Liz's treatment of landscape is that it resists romaniticisation and, in Ingeborg Ruthe's phrase, it provides "no anchorage for sentimentality". It is obvious at first sight that her art expresses a totally different attitude and relationship towards the land than is commonly encountered in the more or less objective purview of the prevailing western art tradition (if I may be allowed to stereotype for a moment). Her mode of presentation itself challenges the conventions of exhibitions, the way we tend to hang art, in a gallery, in steady relation to the bodies that move through, viewing it. Again I would be setting up a straw man if I suggested that we tend to see the gallery walls as a neutral background against which each painting, in its frame, speaks entirely of and for itself, whereas in fact the bringing together of works within these spaces can and does routinely set up stimulating dialogues. However, Liz Crossley's mode of presentation does not simply stand still; it unsettles the comfortable view of galleries being mere background or stage - and this is precisely also her attitude towards the land and landscapes. Her art is concerned not exclusively with products, but centrally also with processes, and her installations and uses of gallery and outside spaces become events into which she also draws other people and other creative forces. The surroundings become implicated, both physically and socially, the exhibition is open-ended, even unpredictable, and in a sense the artwork is active and never entirely complete - or repeatable - in the conventional view of the art product.

Liz Crossley develops certain quite specific threads in her work, but she is also eclectic in drawing in a multi-disciplinary and cross cultural mix – it was not for nothing that she was once described as Cross-Cultural Crossley. Part of this mix, also of different media, is her clever use of texts to help us get walking along the same path, if not in step – and indeed to make our own texts and so be caught up as participants and fellow explorers of the issues she raises.

Amongst the key subtexts to her work is the ancient Khoe-San legend of the moon and the hare, and her interpretation of the hare as artist and subjective communicator; the communicator who does not necessarily always get it right. The hare is fallible, as are people.

We live in a world where the demand for instant certainty is all around us – a desire and expectation which Bertrand Russell once described as an intellectual vice. Liz Crossley's recognition of subjective fallibility is important, whatever the quest, be it art, history or even science.

History is another of the pervasive themes in Liz Crossley's work. Along with the legend of the hare, she uses it as a vehicle for working through and rethinking her feelings of ambivalence as a white South African, a global citizen, and a human being. History is only apparently contradicted in one of her drawings which is accompanied by a Joyce Grenfell quote, that "There is no such thing as time – only this very minute and I'm in it. Thank the Lord." Because, even though history is *about* the past and based on surviving traces *of* the past, one should always be aware that the history narratives we construct are thought up *in the present*, written in the present, displayed in the present – indeed in this very minute. Relevant here are those thoughts cited in Liz's invitation, for instance about landscapes being "the most solid appearance in which a history can declare itself. It is not background, nor is it a stage – there it is, the past in the present, constantly changing and renewing itself as the present rewrites the past".

And so indeed Liz Crossley links history into landscape, and it is apposite that Ingeborg Ruthe uses an archaeological metaphor when she says "Liz Crossley digs herself into and through the land of her childhood": because history is not just written records, nor just oral history and memories, but also material traces and impressions on the land.

Not ceasing from exploration, her recent works draw us ever onward in their imagery, searching, walking, sometimes running, figures listening to the earth, even crawling on all fours, turning the earth, in a search ultimately for meaning. Many of these images raise critical questions around exploitation – in the Kimberley setting, around the pursuit of wealth where we have left wounds and scars on the landscape by mining; and she alludes to the demands of early mining on fuel resources, specifically wood.

Almost aerial views show the land scratched across by fences.

While fleeing and surviving have been themes of older works, some of the newest images here show feet emphatically planted and at rest, with reference to the words of Martin Luther that "Here I stand. I can no other". And so these images convey meanings and truths borne of personal and historical experience that are, in various ways, socially significant. Liz Crossley has written of her own "stubborn belief in the power of small daily acts and statements which push the process of developing a decent world forward centimetre by centimetre".

These messages are relevant in Kimberley and in South Africa, but what is specially interesting is the way she has taken the ideas into a German situation. The art historian Irene Below has

written of the way Liz Crossley has thereby pioneered, in some senses, the insertion of South African issues into European contexts - matters such as race and identity construction, poverty, and issues around migrants and refugees. The fall of the wall and the advent of democracy here make for certain parallels. The evidence of this cross-cultural and south-north interaction is to be seen in some of the installations here this evening. Liz Crossley has in addition set up cultural exchange programmes involving young or developing artists from these respective countries. She actively pursues opportunities for spin-offs and interaction.

For instance, right now, and linking into this exhibition, there is an oral history project, called Remembering Malay Camp, being run jointly with the McGregor Museum and with community members such as Mr Mallett. This gallery is of course on the site of part of the Malay Camp which was once home to many Kimberley residents. Our memories are our history. The Museum Mobile Unit will be stationed here and elsewhere at various times in the next few weeks, with a professional oral historian - so anyone who has memories of Malay Camp, please do share them. Watch out for special signs on times and places: Malay Camp signs and history signs that form adjuncts to this exhibition.

For all of this, and for the proceedings that will follow, to Liz Crossley, we say *Fielen Dank! Ke a /eboga!*

In declaring this exhibition open, let us not cease from exploration; and through our exploring arrive, and know our place anew.

David Morris
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