

Trenches in a childhood land

Berliner Zeitung Feuilleton 13th June 2003

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New Works by South African Liz Crossley in Berlin's Herrmann Gallery

Liz Crossley seems to be digging through the land of her childhood with brush and pencil. At her exhibition in Peter Herrmann's Berlin gallery, large-format acrylic paintings and many small ink drawings document this archaeological excavation by means of painting and drawing. The artist, who has been living in Berlin for the last 18 years, searches her distant homeland for the spoor of things past. Heads and figures call to mind cave paintings, or the early figure drawings with which Joseph Beuys traced his way back to archaic forms. The earth is loam red, coal black and ochre, weathered, bleached, dried out and baked by a ruthless sun.

Liz Crossley comes from Kimberley, near the Kalahari Desert. It was there that the artist, now 52, made her first rubbings of the Stone Age engravings of the San, those mysterious Bushmen of whom so few remain today and who, made shy by a fear of persecution, remain in remote places. The land of these bush people is buried deep in the visual memory of this descendant of British colonials – a land with red earth, whose original inhabitants left enigmatic engravings on the stones, a land marked first by animal hooves then overlain by thorn-bush forests. These colours, these marks cover the artist's canvases and paper.

"Looking for Diamonds", for example, is a series of ink drawings depicting naked, seemingly outcast, androgynous figures, crawling on all fours, pulling themselves forward with their arms. The systematic searching and turning of the earth is transformed by these diamond hunters into a symbol for human exploitation of the earth's resources. The African earth in the large painting "This Was A City" (2001) burns red all the way to the horizon. Dark marks between the dry sods indicate that something must have been in these spaces before, something that has vanished since colonial times: the encampments of the Bush people perhaps, or the villages of the Tswana and Khoi, exterminated, driven out by the white man. Or perhaps a city, a ghost town, destroyed by diamond mining.

These images draw us into their spell through the force of colour and their enigmatic quality, as if, just under the layers of paint, something lies hidden, something that one cannot know, but only sense: a deep, painful feeling provoked by a bond with nature. For Liz Crossley, though, nature is nothing to be idealised, as it too often is in the work of Europeans. These South African landscapes offer no projection screen for romantics, no anchorage for sentimentality.