

***Erna Bodenstein:*** PORTRAITS FROM BEYOND  
An Exhibition

Fried Contemporary Art Gallery & Studio  
Pretoria, 14 April - 5 May 2007

I first encountered Erna Bodenstein-Ferreira's work when I first entered Prof Anton Ferreira's office at the SBL in 2002. My recollection is that I was struck by the bold colours, perceptive features and re-presentations of the natural world and landscapes as well as portraits. I made an immediate enquiry, and in a matter-of-fact manner Anton replied that his wife was an artist. Over the years, I have noticed the hand of Erna as I have been surrounded by her work at the SDBL Boardroom to this day.

What strikes me though about the work on exhibition here compared to the one that remains etched in my memory to this day, is that here we have a very different artistry from Erna Bodenstein.

Although I am not qualified to ascribe labels it appears that Erna Bodenstein's latest work has the characteristics of surrealism as a tool of interpretation that explores the human imagination in a world of difference, uncertainty, ambiguity, a world where all is provisional and nothing the ultimate truth. Significantly, we find in this work Erna Bodenstein at her best experimental, with various media, shapes and textures, light and colours.

The strength of the work, I venture to suggest though, is in the capacity to open up the world of the unconscious to a future yet unborn and, maybe, never to be seen or experienced, in which, as Paul Widman puts it, 'the future' is placed in the personal discourse that values our inner knowledge or 'gnosis' instead of the usual expert discourse that uniquely values externality, the obvious, the taken-for-granted. Bodenstein explores the inner self, in a

mystical manner, looks at the world beyond that is unreachable but can be imagined. It can be examined with feelings and with an inner eye. From a perspective of African indigenous religions (or ATR), we can see here a holistic view of human experience that celebrates the connection between the world beyond, and the world of experience. Where “subjective values are just as important as their objective considerations, we are transported here to our inner feelings, our world of fear, horror, suspicion, apprehension; of courage in the face of adversity, of rebellion that challenges human depravity.

The immediate inspiration for the works, Erna Bodenstein tells us, is the images and memories of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Essentially, they have become celebrations of the female *gnosis* – the ability to understand symbolically with our hearts and heads, insight, intuitive knowledge, that in Erna Bodenstein's creative imagination and interpretation, uniquely describes the women of Auschwitz. She has managed to help us see the aesthetic beauty behind the tortured veneer of a gypsy woman, or the beautiful expressions of pain and sometimes anger that we see in the eyes of so many of the women (what in a previous exhibition she calls, “The Feminine Gaze”), and she has not been shy to depict the sadness that predictably such situations must generate. Deep down though it is the human spirit that we are constantly brought back to celebrate beyond the human frailty, transience and mortality.

There is, of course, a political message here which we South Africans can hardly be unmindful of. Many will recall the story of the death of Sizwe Kondile, a young man who was lured/abducted by the security police from Lesotho, tortured until he died and suffered an agonising death. The security police, among them the infamous Niewoudt, then lit a braai fire, and burnt his body. While waiting for the cremation to be complete, they sat, had jollification, had their own braai and beers! One may look at this differently, that in the midst of the Hitler holocaust, the appreciation of exquisite and sentimental classical music was ever present. The aesthete was also the

inhuman! The images from Auschwitz, lest we forget, were not just those of 6m Jews, but also homosexuals, gypsies, black people – any who were considered social misfits in the scheme of human nature according to Nazi ideology.

Walking along these passages and interacting with the exhibits, please let your own feelings free to engage and interact. In the process you will be in touch with your innermost feelings of horror and revulsion, of pain and empathy, but I do not believe that that is where these Bodenstein portraits leave you. I suggest that they transport you to a world of belonging and identification; a world of relationship, the invocation of love, searching for the authentic human spirit. Somehow, almost in spite of ourselves, we come to realise that there are no heroes here, neither are there mere victims. There are people to whom we are intrinsically related or linked by a span of history, and who have become a part of our reality. Although we may not have the ultimate answers, yet we know that we are part of that future that is being constructed. We have the choice.

I heartily congratulate Erna Bodenstein-Ferreira for this exhibition, *Portraits from Beyond* and I wish her well throughout the exhibition. I have no doubt that she has poured out her inner feelings into this work. Personally, I take very deeply spiritual, almost mystical feelings about human nature and the ambiguities of human existence, and God, and God's own being who indwells the universe. Thank you, Erna, for opening the world beyond to so many of us.

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