

Commentary: Professor Stella Viljoen, University of Stellenbosch

I'd like to begin by just reminding you of the story of Plato's Cave, published in *Republic*. It is written as a dialogue between Plato's brother and his mentor Socrates, narrated by the latter. Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine a cave where people have been imprisoned from childhood. These prisoners are chained so that their legs and necks are fixed, forcing them to all face the wall in front of them as if it is a movie screen. Behind the prisoners is a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway where people walk carrying objects and puppets that cast shadows for the prisoners to see. But, so the story goes, the shadows are exaggerated – they are distortions that turn the real objects into monsters so that the prisoners live in constant fear.

Socrates explains how the philosopher is like a prisoner who is freed from the cave and comes to understand that the shadows on the wall are actually not the direct source of the images and are, of course, a misrepresentation. The philosopher goes back into the cave to explain the actual state of affairs to the prisoners, but the inmates of the cave refuse to believe him and do not even desire to leave their prison, for they know no better life.

The point is that those who have experienced some kind of philosophical enlightenment, those who have been down the rabbit hole and lived to tell of the Wonderland, those who have seen through the Matrix, if you'll forgive my heavy-handed references to the various allegories of this ilk, are burdened with the difficult task of trying to convince the enslaved of reality. Is it the task of the artist to do this? Is it the role of the philosopher-creative to tell us about the way the world really is? And most importantly, can they explain reality in a way that is convincing?

The French philosopher Roland Barthes famously differentiated between what he called readerly and writerly texts. Readerly texts are enjoyed passively. You can simply relax in front of a soap opera and let the one predictable plot unfold after the other. You need not actively engage. Conversely, writerly texts require that you the reader-observer must fill in the gaps, co-author a text that requires deciphering and active interpretation. When you read the Economist or Dostoyevsky you need to participate in the meaning-making and thus these texts are writerly.

So what does all this have to do with Elfriede Dreyer's powerful exhibition? My sense is that Dreyer is an escapee, a philosopher trying to tell us something about the true nature of the world around us. She does this by pointing to the work of other escapee-philosophers whose writings function like eye-witness accounts but whose ideas are so difficult, so complex as to be almost incomprehensible in their writerly-ness. Hers is not a dumbing down of these ideas, but an account that digests and visualises so that we too can see the wood for the trees. Her politics is specifically designed to disrupt the distinctions between the writerly and readerly. Her art is not highbrow or lowbrow, it is nobrow, which is to say that it refuses easy classification. But it nevertheless assuages our fears about the distorted shadows against the wall and allows us to recognise the puppets for what they are ... mere chimeras of the imagination.

At the same time, her art and writing warns us of the things we are right to fear. Has man exploited and pillaged the earth to the point of no return? Dreyer provides hope in the very act of naming the dominations and erasures that plague this current moment. She is concerned but undeterred and in this provides us with an art that does not require exposition, but ironically speaks even in the absence of discursive rhetoric. It is the textures, the drawing in paint and the visceral presence of the artist's hand that is most eloquent. This is the true witness.

I'll end by briefly referring to a work made this year and the story behind it...because although the stories aren't needed, they are so much fun. In *Ships of Neurath*, Dreyer creates a dystopian seascape in which ships float on the tides of change. The metaphor contained in the work refers to the ship of the mythic Theseus, king of Athens, who rescued the children of Athens from king Minos and sailed away with them on a ship to Delos. In order to stay seaworthy, the ship required that the people of Athens, in an act of support and acknowledgement of his heroism, restored the ship to its former glory by replacing rotting planks with new timber. Dreyer, following the philosopher Otto Neurath, poses the question of whether a paradigm is still the same after new ideas have been grafted into the old. Almost as if in answer to this question, the exhibition before you becomes the new wood that makes old ideas seaworthy. It is not just that Dreyer breathes new life into them, but that her visualisations make staid philosophical arguments feel buoyant. Her eloquent interpretations tell us of reality but do it in a way that feels light and easy. These are not the thoughts of an artist, philosopher or activist ... these are the thoughts of a jubilant escapee.