

DISLOCATION AND COLLABORATION: RECENT PRINTS BY KIM BERMAN

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Throughout her oeuvre Kim Berman has sought to witness and process South Africa's traumas through landscape, suggests Pamela Allara.

'The landscapes Berman created in response to xenophobia in South Africa are sterile with whited dislocation and regimented emptiness.'

Kim Berman's series of prints from 2009, *Dislocated Landscapes* are deeply felt responses to the violent xenophobic outbreaks in May 2008 that shook South African society to its core. As Berman commented in the exhibition brochure, "This period seemed to betray many of the fundamental values of community, inclusion, participation and *ubuntu*, and took South Africans further away from the democratic society we imagined for ourselves when the constitution was written in the 1990s." Characterized by stark renderings of the white United Nations tents in the hastily organized 'refugee' camps outside of Johannesburg, the prints speak to the victims' devastating losses and isolation, as well as to memories of past injustices.

In contrast to these images of physical and psychological dislocation, the collaboration in the fall of 2009 among three Boston-based organizations on a project involving two exhibitions and a major lecture engaging Berman's work demonstrated the

many benefits of creative cooperation, both institutional and artistic. The tripartite program consisted of: "Proof + Legacy" in the Sandra and Philip Gordon Gallery at the Boston Arts Academy, an exhibit of prints by members of the Artist Proof Studio; the Beckwith lecture by Berman, "Artists as Activists" at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts; and Berman's solo exhibition "Dislocated Landscapes" in the President's Gallery at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

Although the collaboration among these institutions was sparked by Berman's close connections to Boston, it paralleled her own working methods as well, for her artwork is inseparable from her activism, teaching and scholarship. In the outreach projects she has founded over the past decade and a half (Artist Proof Studio, founded in 1991; Paper Prayers for AIDS Awareness, initiated in 1998; and

Phumani Paper, handmade paper for poverty alleviation, from 2000), Berman has demonstrated that her belief in the power of creative thought and processes to transform lives is justified. A substantial number of the graduates of Artist Proof Studio, including Nelson Makamo, Molefe Thwala and Philemon Hlungwani now have successful careers, and increasingly the predominately female members of the Phumani Paper small craft enterprises are beginning to provide support for themselves and their families. But the programs' real successes are more intangible, and lie in the increased confidence and empowerment of all of the participants, whether or not they also reap substantial financial rewards.

Yet Berman's own art work, even when collaborative, avoids depicting or representing her involvement with the enterprises that have required so much of her attention and energy. Rather, although



Dislocated Landscapes I, 2009.

Etching on Steel, 11.8 x 35.4

Courtesy Kim Berman © Private collection

grounded in direct observation, her work serves as a vehicle to ruminate more broadly on the emotional temperature, so to speak, of her country as a whole. For Berman, history and culture are rooted in the locus of human habitation: the landscape, and specifically the broad, sparsely-vegetated plains, the highveld, on which Johannesburg is located, provides the terrain from which to assess the nation's struggles with its ongoing challenges and traumas. In all of her work, Berman begins with a literal source, the photographs she took while traveling outside of Johannesburg, and then expands those initial notes into a theme that is explored through a suite of prints. Just as prints are a multiple medium, so is Berman's use of multiple images on a single theme a means to investigate her chosen metaphors, and to avoid simplistic or didactic statements.

Landscape as a genre in the history of western art can be said to coincide with the history of colonial intrusion into South Africa, beginning with the Dutch in the mid-17th century. For her part, Berman's engagement with the South African landscape could be said to have its stylistic origins in the French romantic-realist tradition of Courbet and Millet. For example, in "Women of Madibogopane" (1993), Berman reference Millet's field hands in order to represent rural women envisioning a route out of poverty during South Africa's transition to democracy. Stripping the residual sentimentality from Millet's 'peasant' trope, and substituting for it a small group of woman with the central figure raising her arm as if saluting a flag, Berman presents an unambiguous picture of a country looking forward to its future. In this early work, created during her employment with the Boston-based foundation, Fund for a Free South Africa (now the South Africa Development Fund), the use



The Women of Madibogopane, 1993.
Collograph and drypoint, 18" x 26"
Courtesy Kim Berman © Private collection

of collograph, essentially the printmaking version of frottage, provides a highly textured foreground that contrasts with the generalized silhouettes of these soon-to-be citizens.

Although the works in the *Dislocated Landscapes* series do not employ collograph, all of them have a pronounced foreground texture, a device that serves two opposing purposes: on the one hand it provides a grounding for the viewer, who enjoys the momentary illusion of standing in the space. On the other hand, because the brown-ochre reeds and leaves are frequently uprooted and unidentifiable, the illusion is abruptly broken. The view is made unfamiliar, and the viewer disabused of any genuine sense of belonging.

The *Dislocated Landscapes* employ this dialogue of belonging/distancing to respond to May 2008 xenophobic attacks on immigrants by those 'citizens' who deemed themselves 'real' South Africans, no matter how recently they had arrived. "Go Home or Die Here", the terrifying threat shouted at im-

migrants during the horrific episodes of violence, was hardly a viable option for the people who were uprooted and displaced. There was no home to go to those who were raped, beaten or murdered during the outbreaks, nor for the nearly 80,000 ejected from their vulnerable flats or 'informal settlements'. These former domiciles were located not only in Alexandra township in Johannesburg where the uprisings began, but also in Diepsloot and the East Rand in Gauteng, and other provinces: KwaZulu Natal, the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape.

In his contribution to a very revealing volume on the violence titled *Go Home or Die Here*, Eric Worby notes that the xenophobia constituted a vehement rejection of the Constitution's declaration that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it", the 'Rainbow Nation' appeared suddenly to dissolve, and "the supposedly slain beast of ethnic nationalism [was] resurrected in the fertile terrain of poverty and inequality." The ongoing poverty and deprivation of the South African black majority in the 'new' South Africa had precipitated a masculinist response: [young] men struck out at those who were not responsible for their situation out of frustration and anger at those who were. Those former neighbors were no longer humans: they were now *amakwerekwere*, aliens.

[The encampments were non-places, uncanny in their utter distance from anything that could be identified as home.](#)

Many thousands of the displaced, whether they were legal or illegal immigrants, or even South African citizens who did not happen to know the isi-Zulu word for 'elbow', were taxied from their former



Members of Artist Proof Studio, *Xenophobia*, 2008. Mural, 1 m. x 40m., Noord Street Taxi Rank, Newtown

homes to overcrowded churches and civic centres, and from there to hastily organized UNHRC (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) tent cities, away from danger, and equally removed from any possibility of recovering their former livelihoods. The encampments were non-places, uncanny in their utter distance from anything that could be identified as home. After the violence had subsided somewhat, and the displaced had been dispatched to these temporary internment camps, NGO's, including the Centre for the Study of Violence and the Art Therapy Center in Johannesburg, set up support services in the UN's shelters. Shortly thereafter, artists from Artist Proof Studio provided additional help for refugee children by holding art classes in

two of the centres near Johannesburg: in the town of Boksburg and at the Rifle Range at Roodeport. Kim Berman organized and coordinated these efforts, and, significantly, the *Dislocated Landscapes* series resulted not from secondhand news reports, but from the firsthand interventions that Berman facilitated and to which she traveled.

Similarly, the Artist Proof Studio volunteers were themselves motivated by the Studio's direct experience with xenophobia. A studio graduate, John Taouss, originally from Rwanda, was one of the displaced: his apartment was set alight and all of his belongings destroyed. While some of the Artist Proof Studio artists worked with displaced children, others worked with Taouss to develop and execute

JOHN'S STORY

as told by Kim Berman

John survived the genocide in Rwanda. He and his sister managed to escape by stepping over the dead bodies of his family and others in the killing fields. John crossed through the countries of Tanzania, Malawi, and Mozambique and trekked through South Africa's Kruger National Park into the province of Mpumalanga. He was working on a building crew in the town of White River, building the new Artist Press Print workshop, when he met the artist Judith Mason. One day John found the courage to show Judy his sketches. She was impressed, and every day after building, John worked with her. When the building contract was complete Judy called me to let me know that she wanted to sponsor John to study at Artist Proof Studio. He completed his third year at the Studio in 2007, and managed to sell much of the work on his final-year exhibition. A few months later John became a victim of xenophobic attacks on his home in the Pretoria township of Mamelodi. All his belongings, along with the stock for his clothing business were destroyed. His dream was shattered. I invited John to share his story with the incoming Artist Proof Studio students. They were deeply moved, and for the next two weeks John facilitated the making of a communal visual narrative of his story. He worked with groups of students to produce eight drawn panels that narrated his journey. On the 10th of December 2008, Human Rights Day, the visual expression of John's story was launched on a 40 meter long public mural outside the Johannesburg Art Gallery in the busy Noord Street taxi rank.



Dislocated Landscapes #4

Etching with Monoprint, 15.75" x 38.5"

Courtesy the Kim Berman ©

a 40 meter-long public mural about his devastating experience. Titled “Xenophobia” the mural is located at the taxi rank across the street from the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Thus Berman’s *Dislocated Landscapes* are a distillation of her experiences in working collaboratively to help alleviate the crisis, as well as her private reflections on the broader implications of those traumatic events. Some way outside Johannesburg, the earth around the two encampments appears especially fallow and arid, and the inhabitants of the tents look like incorporeal shadows.

Several months earlier, Berman had traveled to White River in Mpumalanga with a former student, Thabang Lehoybe, to record the damage caused by the devastating forest fires in the region. Together, they produced a suite of prints, *Through the Forest Fires: An Mpumalanga Journey* (2008).

Returning to the region alone in June 2008, the burnt fields evoked the camps Berman had recently

witnessed and inspired the second part of the *Dislocated Landscapes* series. Both the vacant tents and the burnt trees are metaphors for Berman’s initial reaction to the camps: the absence of any sense of what the notion of ‘home’ usually implies (stability, safety, belonging) for the immigrants in their new status as refugees. Seen together, these works speak to and of a country whose ideals have been ripped apart to reveal the quotidian desperation of its inhabitants.

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As a group, the *Dislocated Landscapes* are characterized by barren, isolated ‘no-man’s-lands’, often hemmed in with barbed wire fences that claim ownership by faceless authorities, all the while enclosing emptiness. Whether the viewer is confronted by

rows of white refugee tents, or by tree stumps painted with white lime, the land itself is consistently split apart -- bifurcated into rocky slopes on one side and by low, dry brush on the other. For example, the rows of tubular white tents in the panoramic “Dislocated Landscapes I” are clamped into the ground at the left edge of the visual field, where they remain static and marginalized. In the distance, the fragile laundry lines are indications of the near futility of establishing a foothold in this barren realm. The divided, desiccated fields and hollow tents convey unrelieved desolation and hopelessness. Unable to adequately sustain life, the tents, in the end, more closely resemble burial shrouds than they do shelters.

Indeed, according to United Nations’s Refworld website, the people deposited in the camps complained that the winter cold and inadequate food and water were causing illness, and they tried to warn others not to consent to come there. Even worse, when the camps began to be dismantled in October 2008, Amnesty International stated on this website that little action had been taken to assure the safe reintegration of the refugees into their former residences, noting that “violence against displaced persons attempting to return to local South African communities continues, in particular against Somali nationals, with police failing to accept that these crimes are part of a continuing pattern of xenophobic attacks.”

At first blush, Berman’s virtuoso draftsmanship and use of stark, nearly monochrome vistas recall William Kentridge’s gestural charcoal drawings, as both are firmly rooted in the European expressionist tradition. Of course, both artists, having been born in and continuing to live in Johannesburg, know the



Kim Berman and Thabang Lehoybe, *Through the Forest Fires: An Mpumalanga Journey V*, 2008.
Drypoint with monoprint, 15.4 x 33”
Courtesy Kim Berman © Private collection

highveld well and employ it as a main protagonist in their work. But apart from a self-consciously ‘European’ approach to the subject that is expressive of the difficulties of representation in the South African context, for both artists the landscape is without question a metaphor across which a traumatic history has been endlessly written, rewritten, buried and exhumed. As such, it is a landscape that refuses to open itself to the ‘pathetic fallacy’ of spiritual solace.

For example, in Berman’s large monoprint “Rifle Range I, Roodeport” [fig. 6] the roiling sky and motionless tents contrast the stasis of a world without options with the turbulence that has led to this endpoint. Moreover, the title ensures that it is impossible to miss the irony of setting up a refugee camp for the targets of violence in a former military rifle range, while the smoldering log makes a similarly clear point about the aftermath of the violence. In an interview about her almost editorial approach in this work, Berman expressed her admiration for the unblinking landscape photographs of David Goldblatt. Although Berman’s style could hardly be termed photographic, because she begins with the photographs she takes on location, her works do reference



Rifle Range I, Roodeport. 2009.
Monotype, 31.25 x 42.5”
Courtesy the Kim Berman ©

South Africa’s important documentary photographic tradition, with its emphasis on witnessing. Her debt to the photographers who recorded the extent of the National Party’s crimes against humanity during the Apartheid era is apparent when comparing the Roodeport landscape with early works by Goldblatt such as “The place to which the government wanted the people of Oukasie to move: Lethabile Removal Camp, Transvaal, 30 November 1986”. As in Berman’s etchings and monoprints, the black lines of electrical wires in Goldblatt’s image arbitrarily score the space like knife blades; while a blank, sunless sky dwarfs the shacks lining the empty road, which cuts a diagonal swath through the composition. In referencing such symbolic devices in the *Dislocated Landscapes* series, Berman deliberately parallels the xenophobia crisis with the forced removals of the past, a subject Berman addressed in her own work at that time.

In all of the *Dislocated Landscapes*, white is sug-



The place to which the government wanted the people of Oukasie to move: Lethabile Removal Camp, Transvaal, 30 November 1986. Black and white photograph.
Photo: Courtesy David Goldblatt ©

gestive of the prospect of death. After the 2008 fires in Mpumalanga that annihilated the source of much of the country’s fresh fruit produce, the farmers limed the stumps of the burnt fruit trees to protect the exposed bark and permit new growth. For Berman the amputated white trees were a visual metaphor for the alien. The gesticulating boughs in the monotype *Alien Landscapes: White River II* bring to mind Goya’s “Disasters of War” (1810-1820), in which tree limbs and mutilated bodies are intertwined. Berman’s bone yards are condensed, bitter depictions of the aftermath of pain, the cries of the dispossessed literally erupting from the soil and freezing into surface gestures. Spilling awkwardly toward the viewer, the stumps are like grave markers in an abandoned cemetery, literal dead zones.

Among the most affecting of the *Dislocated Landscapes* works in the President’s Gallery at Mass



After the Removals, Dobsonville, 1994.
Drypoint with collograph, 35 x 29 "
Courtesy the Kim Berman ©

Art was the nearly abstract monoprint "Purged I". Gone are the bone-like trees, the shroud-like tents, the spiked barbed wire and the darkened skies: all of the symbols of dispossession. Rather, the vista provides evidence only of the human activity of clearing the land: two fields of felled branches sweep back to a stand of what could be either leafless bushes or a line of saplings, their delicate limbs lit by a rosy late afternoon or early morning sky. Are the frail saplings a rebirth of the resolute stance of the "Women of Madibogopane?" Or, is the cut and piled undergrowth a metaphor for the dismantled camps, which left the refugees with nowhere to go? Berman's actions as well as her words (see her article in this volume) would favor the optimistic interpretation,

despite the bitter, sorrowful tone of the series as a whole.

But this series cannot be understood simply as a linear narrative ending on a note of hope. Berman's metaphors for the powerful emotions elicited by the events of May 2008 and afterwards are not reducible to any one interpretation or argument. Because these landscapes do reference a specific moment of political crisis, they require the viewer to contemplate how they relate to what has come before and to imagine their implications for the future. That future need not be characterized by the descriptive terms I have used here for the *Dislocated Landscapes*. The vistas depicted in this series are stark and barren, to be sure, but they are also beautiful: the expansive spaces and broad horizons provide the viewer with the room to connect mentally with past violence as well as with future restitution. In her Beckwith lecture at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts on September 23, 2009, Berman quoted the following challenge from Maphela Ramphele's 2008 book *Laying Ghosts to Rest*: "The question each one of us must ask every day is whether we are giving the best we can to enable our society to transcend the present and become its envisaged self." The ghostly inhabitants of *Dislocated Landscapes* are far from laid to rest, but if they do not offer transcendence, they do demand from each of us a felt response that potentially may lead to action.

[This essay is edited and excerpted from a longer review submitted to the journal *African Arts*.](#)



Alien Landscapes, White River II, 2009.
Etching, 20 x 24"
Courtesy Kim Berman ©



Purged I, 2009.
Monotype, 31.25 x 42.5"
Courtesy Kim Berman © Private collection