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DIANE VICTOR:
ASHES TO ASHES

Although “ashes to ashes” is a familiar phrase, its source in the Anglican Church burial service, as codified in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, is culturally remote today:

Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God in his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ...¹

In her *Transcend* (2010) and *Lost Words* (2011) portraits of old age pensioners, Diane Victor was concerned with “the loss of accumulated information, wisdom and narrative that occurs when someone dies,”² (and the *Book of Common Prayer* might be considered one such example). She therefore made the quite radical decision to create the images from the ashes of books that had been important to them. Rather than offering the ‘certain hope of...eternal life,’ the portraits ask us to reflect on the “ephemeral and transient aspects of human mortality”—and South African cultural history in general.

Most of the ‘sitters’ are white males, whose status in a democratic South Africa of black majority-rule has become increasingly unstable since 1994. Many white males who enjoyed secure employment during the National Party era have been made ‘redundant.’ That is, made to retire at age 60 and left in a nether world of long-term unemployment. This limbo is expressed by the isolation of the figures, many of whom appear to be floating. For example, one of the two women from the *Transcend* series, *Liz*, hovers before us, tipping slightly forward and to the side, as if she has lost her balance, (fig. 1.1). Her instability results from her ‘standing’ tip-toe on bunioned feet, and given her apparent advanced age, she by extension appears balanced equally precariously between life and death. Although her confident facial expression shows no evidence of shame or embarrassment, a scar from a mastectomy starkly reveals that she has had a previous brush with death. In addition, her knees and ankles are bound, and her nether regions are garbed in hospital-issue underpants, as if the process of wrapping the body in winding sheets has begun even before death. She is present, but constructed from ash, to which her flesh will likely soon return.

The portrait of this gangly, vulnerable woman has generated a remote connection: it reminds me of a poignant Dorothea Lange photograph from 1930s dust bowl America. The full title of the work is: *Woman of the High Plains: “If You*

FIGURE 1.1 Diane Victor, *Transcend* (*Liz*)



Die, You're Dead—that's all." *Texas Panhandle, 1938.*³ Skinny, dressed in burlap, and shielding her eyes from a blinding sun, the woman's desperation has produced a deep pessimism quite at odds with the *Book of Common Prayer* quoted above. Unlike *Liz*, she lacks even the comfort of a nursing home, and comments bitterly on the isolation of poverty: "This county's a hard county. They won't help bury you here." With respect to the topic of the University of Houston conference, my own interest is less in death than in dying, and what is involved in facing it. How do societies deal with dying---what are the social values that will frame how society decides to treat its aging population? Victor's specters remind us that the issue of elderly care has to be faced.

Apart from our initial discomfort, how do we as viewers, of any age, respond to “...that tattered coat upon a stick, the ageing body?”⁴ The fact that we dress corpses before burial is surely in part to deny the unbearable vulnerability we see expressed in Liz’s body. As sociologist Julia Twigg has written, “Culture provides us with almost no images of the aging body unclothed, so when we do encounter the reality of such, it comes as a visual shock...Older people thus experience their bodies in the context of a profound cultural silence.”⁵ In contemporary culture, images form and often impose our identities by providing models from which we attempt to mould ourselves. The clichéd advertising image of the elderly is of healthy, active, heterosexual couples enjoying a fulfilling retirement. The figures in the *Transcend* and *Lost Words* series, on the other hand, are stripped, not just of clothing, but of context: the network of family, friends and colleagues that support a sense of self and weave the fabric of identity. This paper argues that Victor’s effort is a rare example of presenting that reality publicly. Although as both the angel of the hearth, preserving morality,⁶ and, in addition, the official mourner of death,⁷ Victor assumes roles traditionally assigned to women, she strips these conventional Victorian tasks bare of clichés and reinvents them.

In contemporary societies, where a capitalist culture of consumption and youth predominates, we are expected to push the terror of our inevitable end as far into the future as possible. Not that this is a new phenomenon. As psychologist William James noted in the late 19th century, death is “the ‘worm at the core’ of man’s pretensions to happiness.”⁸ On a superficial level, death is the reason for health clubs, for plastic surgery, for all of the strenuous, often extreme efforts people of means endure to avoid even the appearance of aging. This illusion has been supported by the removal of death from everyday life, as the aged are moved by those who can afford it into ‘retirement’ and ‘frail care’ ‘homes.’ There, they are expected to accept invisibility gracefully, and not to enact their decline in a public space. To quote art-

ist Vera Klement, “Death as a thread woven in to the social tapestry has vanished.”⁹

Victor created the six life-sized portraits in the *Transcend* series from residents in a frail care facility in the Johannesburg suburb of Turfontein, working from photographs she made “after much negotiation.”¹⁰ The images, which threaten to blow off their paper supports at the slightest movement of the surrounding air, give visibility to a rapidly-growing demographic. Because the legislated early retirement age in South Africa, the waiting lists for retirement villages and frail care homes, are long. The last of these, frail care, is for those who require full-time nursing care, and the place from which Victor drew her subjects. Viewed as a group, the images in *Transcend* explode a number of stereotypes into which society has confined the elderly. Each remains an individual, and exhibits a range of personalities, as expressed through their very specific physiognomies and body types. Jan is strong and vigorous, whereas Norman turns his back on the viewer and metaphorically to life itself (fig. 1.2). Finally, Granny Ray (fig. 1.3), appears to be floating upwards—and the religious references to suffering, death and resurrection are inescapable. Victor has noted that she was thinking of Grünewald’s *Crucifixion from the Isenheim altarpiece* (1515) as she was drawing Granny Ray’s feet. Again, the reference here is not to the ‘promise of eternal life,’ but to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of physical decline and pain. Hence the series title: *Transcend*.

The material used to create these images is essential to their interpretation. The drawings are made from the ashes of books that had personal significance for the sitters and that Victor purchased and burned. In the case of Granny Ray, Victor has recounted that she was an artist’s model who also worked in a bookshop. She has commented that “We often had long talks about books while waiting for the students to return from break- she stark naked.”¹¹ In addition to the accumulated knowledge and wisdom to which she refers, is there an implication here that the traditional academic standard of literacy, based on the

FIGURE 1.2
Diane Victor, *Transcend* (Norman)



FIGURE 1.3
Diane Victor, *Transcend* (Granny Ray)



knowledge acquired through the ‘Great Books’ of western civilization, is dying with the generation depicted in *Transcend*? Both the books and the bodies contain histories—but when they are discarded, how will those histories be passed on?

Despite the fact that the represented bodies in the *Transcend* series are created from blackened materials--ash and charcoal dust--they all appear to be unmistakably of European heritage, nominally representative of the Western tradition enshrined in the literature they themselves have cited: *Ulysses*, *War and Peace*, or *Great Expectations*. One clue to affirming their racial identification may simply be the fact that they are in institutions, as relatively few black South African families can afford such care. As she has said, “I did try extensively to persuade Black elderly people to

pose-- all refused absolutely.” (The reasons are obvious).¹²

Nonetheless, the use of ash and charcoal raises the question of the changing meanings of whiteness, as white skin is no longer synonymous with status, privilege and unilateral power in South Africa. Even though many South African whites do, in fact, retain considerable social status and economic privilege, these images suggest some of the narratives of loss that according to Melissa Steyn, whites have told themselves subsequent to the change to democratic rule in 1994, including loss of control, loss of guaranteed legitimacy, and loss of face.¹³ In South Africa today, even though both race and gender are now fluid categories, these identities remained contained socially within rigid boxes, to be checked off to con-

firm one's eligibility for various benefits of citizenship or employment, in an ironic echo of the apartheid era.

Obviously, Victor is not using these portraits simply to editorialize about the current status of whites, but at least in part is presenting these bodies as *memento mori* with which to reflect on colonial history and its complex legacies. The burned books from which their flesh is made does not suggest that these figures represent some wholesale 'decline of western civilization,' but rather, like concepts of race and gender, that a former standard of literacy, rooted in European culture, rapidly changing, in South Africa and globally. The disconcerting initial stage of Victor's drawing process, book burning, with all of its negative connotations, dramatically re-enacts this cultural flux.

FIGURE 1.4 Diane Victor, *Lost Words (Adolf)*



FIGURE 1.5 Diane Victor, *Lost Words*



The *Lost Words* series addresses this point directly. According to the artist, the four men in the series are "all ex-academics and Afrikaners and the books burned all Afrikaans...my aim was to try to source texts they had written as source ash [for my portraits]..."¹⁴ The life of the mind these former colleagues have lived in their professional careers is now visibly absent, as is the authority they exercised in a male-dominated profession. The brain of *Adolf* (Prof. Adolf Theron, former Director of the Pro Arte School at University of South Africa, appears to explode from his head ([fig. 1.4](#)). A former professor of industrial psychology, Ricky Mauer, ([fig. 1.5](#)) scratches his head in confusion while an alert-looking face, the self of a moment ago, hovers behind him: he has forgotten what he was going to say or do. In contrast with the drawings in *Transcend*, the two men do not represent physical loss so much as the decline of mental capacity. The body-mind duality, however surpassed in current theory, is brought here into sharp relief: the 'tattered coat' of the body is

insignificant in comparison to the shattered mind.

The unsettled status of whites under majority rule in South Africa is especially acute in the case of Afrikaners, those who instituted apartheid and administered its resulting crimes against humanity. If the requirement to teach all classes for secondary students in Afrikaans led to the 1976 Soweto uprisings, “...in 2002 the government decided that no university may teach only in Afrikaans.”¹⁵ Ironically, ‘the language of the oppressor’ is now spoken predominantly by coloureds, and the dominant language—“the symbol of prestige, advancement [and] the medium of business, finance, science and the internet...of government, education, broadcasting and the press,” is English, “the mother tongue of just 8% of the [South African] people.”¹⁶ If the *Transcend* series appears to embody a declining tradition of the transmission of culture through the written word, the *Lost Words* series suggests that Afrikaner culture specifically is in jeopardy. Language structures thought, and in a country where a top priority is the education of previously disadvantaged citizens, education in English could be considered a form of neo-colonialism. To quote Antjie Krog, who writes in both her native Afrikaans and in English: “English has become the language that confirms and judges our existence...But...this is absolutely the problem: English cannot tell the truth of South Africa...”¹⁷ According to South African art historian Karen von Veh, “A similar series of aging white South African men, entitled *Fader*, (fig. 1.6), refers to both the Afrikaans word for Father (denoting a strong patriarchal figure) and, again, the incremental fading away of relevance and status. Braai ash is also an appropriate medium in this context as the braai, [or barbeque] is traditionally the recreational domain of the white Afrikaans male.”¹⁸

The insistence that a population rarely proficient in English when entering the educational system, not only speak but write standard English in order to obtain an academic degree exemplifies an impregnable bastion of white power—to which the

FIGURE 1.6 Diane Victor, *Fader*



‘other whites’, the Afrikaners, and indeed the entire 92% of South Africans, are subject. The ‘Lost Words’ of the Afrikaners, or ‘Afrikaanses’ (whites + coloureds), like those of the nine official tribal languages, are vanishing into the ‘Anglosphere.’ The *Lost Words* may be truly their last words. On the other hand, with the passing of the Apartheid generation and the authority of written Afrikaans, the language is being parodied and re-written through visual art and popular culture, from the Bitterkomix of Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes to the raucous, online performances of the rock duo, Die Antwoord. Puerile and stereotyped as these works can seem to be, perhaps they are clearing the ground for a revival of the language, freed from former cultural baggage.

In conclusion, the specters in the *Transcend* and *Lost Words* series confront us with urgent questions: how will society care for its elderly

and/or infirm? What is lost with their passing? What will we, the residents of a global, electronic culture, retain from the ideas and values that have shaped their lives? Although I have argued that Victor's images pose these questions, they make no attempt to answer them; in that sense, they are not 'activist' artworks. However, these images do speak to the role of memory in narrating history. As poet Mongane Wally Serote has argued, the task for the present generation is the recuperation and reconstruction of South African history, one that can reconcile conflicting historical narratives that exist only in parallel at present.¹⁹ And this is true not only for South Africa, but for the United States as well.

Notes

1 <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/ashes-to-ashes.html> accessed 6/5/2011

2 Victor, Diane. Email to the author, 12/16/2010.

3 Image available at http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=56483. It was originally published in Lange, D. and P. Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*. New York, 1939.

4 Waters, M. 1978. *The Nude Male: A New Perspective*. New York and London: Paddington Press. Cited in Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and popular culture*, 1999. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 138.

5 Twigg, J. 2000. *Bathing: The Body and Community Care*. London: Routledge, 46. Cited in Christopher A. Faircloth, ed. 2003. *Aging bodies: Images and Everyday Experience*. Walnut Creek: Alta-Mira Press, 115.

6 Dijkstra, B. 1986. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, Ch. 1: "The Cult of the Household Nun".

7 Havelock, C.M. 1982. "Mourners on Greek Vases: Remarks on the Social History of Women," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*. Eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 52.

8 Quoted in Becker, E. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1.

9 Klement, V. 1994. "An Artist's Notes on Aging and Death," *Art Journal* 53/1, "Art and Old Age," 73.

10 email to the author, 12/16/2010

11 email to the author, 1/3/2011

12 email to the author, 12/16/2010

13 Steyn, M. 2001. *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be*. Albany: State University of New York, 155-160.

14 email to the author, 1/3/2011. Victor taught drawing and printmaking at the University of Pretoria from 1991-2007. These men are her former colleagues, several of whom she knew personally.

15 Giliomee, H. 2004. "The Rise and Possible Demise of Afrikaans as a Public Language," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10/1, 50.

16 "Tongues Under Threat," *The Economist*, 22 January 2011, 58

17 Krog, A. 2009. *Begging to Be Black*. Cape Town: Random House Struik, Ltd., 101.

18 Von Veh, K. 2012. *Diane Victor: Burning the Candle at Both Ends*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 31.

19 Serote, M. "Post-Sharpeville Poetry: A Poet's View," quoted in Colin Richards, "About Face: Aspects of Art, History and Identity in South African Visual Culture," (1991), reprinted in *Reading The Contemporary: African Art from Theory to Marketplace*. Oguibe, O. and Enwezor, O. eds. 1999. London: InIVA, 354.

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