

THE LAYERED HORIZON OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE

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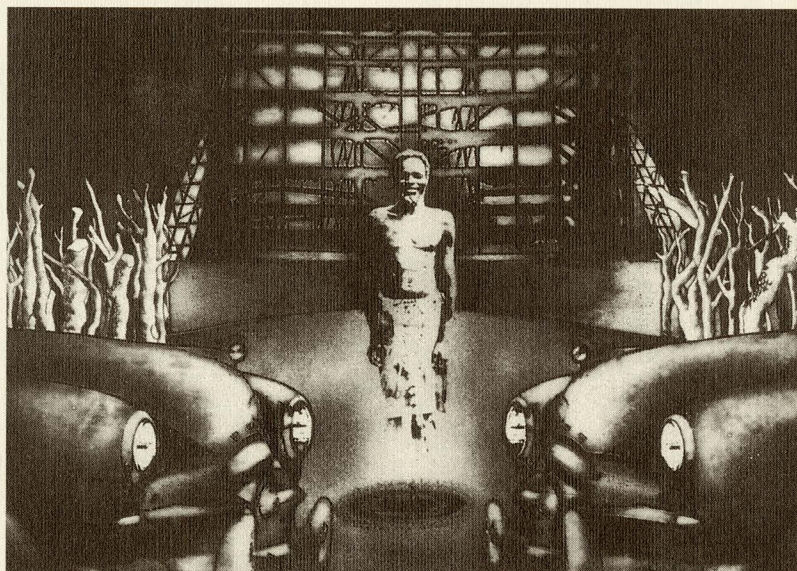
● As South African graphic design strives to establish an indigenous character, designers would do well to draw inspiration from the work of artist **John Clarke**. A recent retrospective exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum confirmed Clarke's status as a major South African artist, whose work moves beyond superficial African imagery, to portraying a synthesis of cultures unique to the South African milieu.

The work of John Clarke is a direct reflection of his affinity with the African continent where he was born and grew up. In the African landscape lies his deepest sense of consciousness, and his identification with this continent remains all consuming, visually and spiritually.

Although Clarke focuses on certain objects which can be called African, his work does not reflect a trite nostalgia towards Africa. In South African art of the past two or three decades, artists have sometimes worked with a so-called 'African motif' and produced a rather superficial image. Clarke's interest in African imagery is indicative of his deep-rooted consciousness of the African environment which has formed him. In his work he acknowledges the primal nature of this continent.

Here long-forgotten as well as contemporary cultures have marked, reworked and re-formed the landscape, layer upon layer, both vertically and horizontally. Clarke's early exposure as a child to the Transvaal Lowveld, archaeology and botany contributed to the formation of his unique vision of the landscape.

Clarke's parents lived in Barberton in the fifties where his father worked as an agronomist. His mother, Brenda Clarke, is a botanist and a well-known botanical artist. The family often made field trips into the veld and mountains surrounding Barberton. As a child Clarke also spent many holidays on the flower farm of his grandparents outside Pretoria. He travelled many times from Barberton to Pretoria and these journeys had a



● *Drive-In Series XI*

1982

Aquatint, line and
photo etching

44,5 x 62,7

(Courtesy of the artist)

lasting impact on his subsequent visual manifestation of the landscape.

Although Clarke hardly ever portrays people, his landscapes suggest the presence of people, their departure and their legacy. He travels by vehicle and by foot through Southern Africa, documenting the vernacular architecture and the way in which mankind plans and structures its world - a house or front garden - so as to demarcate or re-fashion nature. He looks consciously at historical and contemporary structures, beacons and modern day icons as they appear in the landscape.

For the artist these journeys through the landscape

become an almost compelling ritual: a search without end for a landscape of which he can become part. Clarke is not necessarily interested in the scenic elements of the landscape. His interest lies in the ways in which mankind constantly re-arranges nature and restructures organic forms such as stones, branches and tree trunks to adopt new meaning within the landscape. He is concerned with how these structures are used as bomas and totem poles, reminding one of long-forgotten rituals. Clarke also looks at the ways in which man controls the landscape through the use of boundaries, gateways and entrances. Structures such as these are assimilated by his creative eye and intellect to become spiritually and conceptually meaningful.

●
Acropolis

1982

Line etching and aquatint

50 x 63,3

(Courtesy of the artist)



Big city forms do not interest him. His concerns lie more in the everyday indigenous structures - the ordinary, inconspicuous small town house or shop, or old neighbourhoods, such as Marabastad which has been forced to the edge of Pretoria. Branded as a slum, it is a place where people still go about their daily routine and where dwellings are restructured out of consumer waste and assume a new function.

Pierneef's drawings were formative in influencing Clarke's concept of the ordinary or commonplace. A Pretorian, Pierneef focused on old houses and other landmarks in and around the city. Battiss also influenced Clarke's vision through his interest in Rock Art and his photographic documentation of old Pretoria buildings.

Clarke, likewise, looks at the developing city when he travels through the older suburbs of Pretoria with camera in hand, searching for old houses and other landmarks awaiting demolition.

The current tendency in contemporary architectural practice to revitalise old buildings draws his attention, but when a restored or partially rebuilt building assumes a new function, as a shopping centre for example, Clarke searches for the original use of the structure, be it tram shed, barn or mine house. He then recreates these structures, placing them within a fantastical landscape.

Another issue which attracts his notice is the way in which a European style such as that which was introduced to this

country by the Dutch East India Company, is transformed and adapted to take on an uniquely indigenous character. By means of a synthesis of cultures, a new reality and unity are formed.

As a student in the sixties, Clarke was influenced by Pop Art and this can be linked to the notion of the layering of cultures. So, too, can his acknowledgement of the work of American artist Edward Hopper, who depicts everyday cityscapes and the consumer culture. As is the case with the Southern African palimpsest, a certain overlap of cultures occurs within American society where rural culture is overlaid by the dominant consumer culture.

Another aspect of Pop Art which interests Clarke is the use of collage. Pop artists utilised consumer waste in a meaningful and creative way to transform fragments of junk into aesthetically functional objects. Pop Art also established photography as a creative medium in line with mainstream fine art media. Printmaking processes were revolutionised through photographic printing techniques as well as other industrial printing techniques.

Clarke is concerned with the way in which mankind mines the earth to expose rocks concealed under the surface of the earth's crust. Shafts and mine dumps which rise as totemic structures to become the scars of mankind's on-going re-arrangement of the landscape can be seen in Clarke's early work. Remnants can also be seen in his series of etchings on battlefields and monuments, where cairns and crosses to the fallen are the only reminders of human combat. Situated in the landscape, drive-in theatres and advertising boards on which contemporary icons are portrayed have an effect on their surroundings and Clarke uses this imagery as signs of an on-going metamorphosis of the landscape at the hands of mankind.



Untitled

1989

Pastel on paper

75 x 105

(Courtesy of Oliewenhuis Art

Museum, Bloemfontein)

Certain themes are repeated as a *Leitmotif* in the artist's work; the leopard, seen in his *Leopard Stone* series, has many associations for him with the landscape. The initial inspiration for this series was a tourist postcard depicting a leopard. Much later the spotted patterns of the leopard skin were transposed over a collection of pebbles with similar patterning which the artist had collected whilst travelling through the Karoo. To Clarke the leopard became the symbol of natural energy in contrast to the contained energy of the spotted pebbles.

This theme evolved further after his co-incidental discovery of a hill slope in the vicinity of Barberton where stones had been intentionally re-arranged and painted. After closer investigation Clarke traced the creator of this rock garden, Nukain Mabusa, who deliberately and without outside influences, transformed his living-space into structures which provided him a secure sanctuary.

Working in total isolation, Mabusa had no ulterior motives when he decorated the hillside; it was done only for his own satisfaction. Through identifying with and decorating his immediate surroundings he demarcated his own sanctuary. This colourful hillside eventually became a tourist attraction for travellers to the Kruger National Park, and it is known that Mabusa took interested visitors on 'guided tours' through his sanctuary.

The energy and dedication with which Mabusa tackled his life's work, is indicative of the fact that what he was creating was of utmost importance to him, even if it was to wear away and form part of the earth again. Mabusa's life work can be associated with a world-wide phenomenon where individuals, very often without any formal training or knowledge, build structures or

sanctuaries which are decorated and often serve as dwellings. Helen Martins' 'Owl House' and Jackson Hlungwane's 'New Jerusalem' are examples of this phenomenon.

Mabusa died some years ago and nature will gradually reclaim this recreated environment. Clarke, however, could utilise this imagery for as long as he wanted through his personalised view of the landscape and his creative translation of it into a different idiom.



Dryfontein

1990

Pastel on paper

75 x 100

(Courtesy of the artist)



Gable

1991

Pastel on paper

75 x 105

(Courtesy of the artist)

Clarke with his creative consciousness was destined to discover Mabusu's rock garden, and Mabusu's stones, serving as a catalyst, gave Clarke a point of identification with the land which has served as on-going inspiration.

Stylistically Clarke's work is essentially linear with strong tonal contrasts of black and white, which, for him, become the vehicles of the spirit of place in this continent. Symbolically, black can be broadly interpreted as signifying the origin of all processes, as is the case in alchemy. In this regard Jung pointed out that carbon, the dominant chemical component in the human body, is as black as charcoal and graphite - media which are extensively used by Clarke - in which it is found. The crystal clear diamond (crystallised carbon) also springs from this source.

According to Cirlot (1983:57) black often symbolises Time in contrast to white which represents Timelessness. It

is unlikely that Clarke intentionally acknowledges the deeper meaning of black and white or the associations of graphite and charcoal in his work, but he does consciously capture a quality of light through his use of strong tonal contrasts. This light which envelops sensual forms within the landscape, creating dark shadows and wide open spaces, has an intensity peculiar to the African continent.

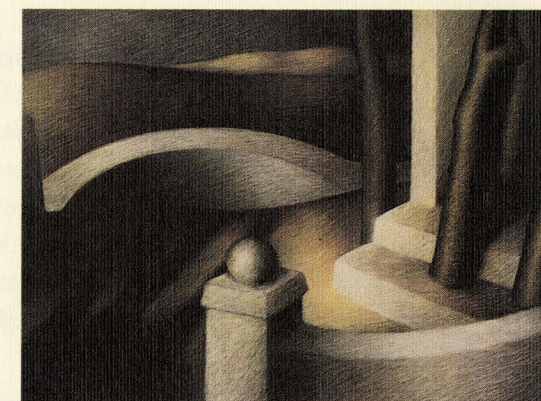
Clarke creates intaglio prints of both large and small format utilising the techniques of aquatint, line and photo-etchings. He has also worked on large format, monochromatic pastel drawings, and in his most recent drawings has begun to utilise earth colours. Stockades, a water well and stones, devoid of any detail and additional visual information, are magnified in relation to the scale of the altered landscape. On a two-dimensional plane Clarke creates an illusion of space as it appears in the infinite African landscape. Through his skilled handling of tonal contrast, his subtle underlying linearity and textures, he conjures up a world of archetypal purity and unimpaired beauty. But his world reminds the viewer throughout of mankind's presence, of the process of exploitation and restructuring, and of a human legacy which will again in time, become part of nature.

Man's relationship towards nature and manifestations of the way in which he restructures the earth to suit his

functional, aesthetic and mythical needs are continually sought by Clarke. In his work, earth, structure and space are unified. Diverse cultures are subtly blended into a balanced whole which unmistakably evokes the rhythms and colour of Africa.

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View from the Stoep

1990

Pastel on paper

75 x 105

(Courtesy of Wooltru Limited, Cape Town)