

PIERRE VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: PRINTMAKER

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In Pierre van der Westhuizen's lino cuts, a conglomeration of form intrigues the eye. Upon closer inspection a multi-layered revelation of the human condition unfolds.



In recent years accepted distinctions between the different art forms have begun to fade: design, installation, painting, sculpture, graphics and video art have all moved closer. It is in this light that the work of Pierre van der Westhuizen may be viewed as a tour de force of visual design, pushing the possibilities of working with positive and negative space to their logical (and illogical) ends.

Ex-Zimbabwean and graduate of Unisa's Fine Arts Department, Van der Westhuizen is strongly influenced by his long time tutor John Clarke. Both artists share the same enthusiasm for the characteristic tonality of the African landscape, although Van der Westhuizen's work does not centre as obviously as Clarke's on the landscape as topic.

Van der Westhuizen identifies two other major influences on his work: the Zimbabwean landscape, particularly the Zimbabwe Ruins and interesting rock formations of the Njoni hills, and Venda

culture. He mentions his army training in Venda in 1983, during which he was intensively exposed to Venda culture while documenting information on the tribe.

Personal contact with Nelson Mukhuba during this period may have had an influence on the artist's early articulation of form. The visual richness of the Inca heritage and Egyptian hieroglyphs also influenced his early work. While some of his symbols have the same appearance as Inca and Egyptian motifs, he does not borrow specific symbols from them.



Detail: **BATTLE OF THE ORGANISMS AND EVERYTHING ELSE UNDER THE SUN**
(Lino cut 1991)





Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic features are displayed in this work: the ladder figures show human and other characteristics, while the transformed flower petals take on human, serpentine and other shapes.

(Detail: **FLORA EXOTICA AND OTHER DELIGHTS**)



Van der Westhuizen's lino cuts reflect inclinations in current design thinking, where recent trends demonstrate a movement towards a closer relationship between technology and craft (Burkhardt 1988).

In an increasingly synthetic and de-natured world, there is a need for products which are more sympathetic to our emotional and sensual needs (Thackara 1986: 10). Claudia Donà, in her essay *Invisible Design*, refers to this move towards the humane in design as a more 'feminine' approach. She states:

New post-industrial society ... can offer objects of greater personal intimacy, and stands ready to respond to the silence of the computer with a more primitive and primordial language (Donà 1988: 155).

The modernistic ideal of the machine and functionality in combination with a more sensuous post-modern approach, reveals the dynamics of much contemporary design. Van der Westhuizen endorses this trend. The artist states:

In a time of advanced technologies, mass production and commercialism, I believe in craftsmanship, precision and permeability ... I work towards the formulation of a systematic vocabulary to present an alternative reality where images are as flexible in meaning as they are in shape. My images constitute an alphabet from which I assemble my pictures (Van der Westhuizen 1993).

Technically his work is 'machine-like' in its accuracy and precision. His images are stylized and cleverly thought through. They impress with their visual clarity even when seen from a distance. On the surface pleasing tonalities of black and white are formed, constructed so that the principles of harmony and pattern are followed and applied.

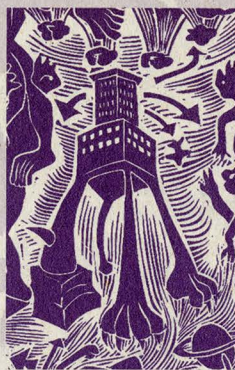


FLORA EXOTICA AND OTHER DELIGHTS
(Lino cut 1989)

The violence and decadence of society are reflected by this figure, constructed from disparate elements, resulting in a nightmarish vision of an urban Rambo.

(Detail: **SEE, LOVE AND DIE**)

On closer inspection the human tale unfolds in the shape of tormented little figures, often crucified and entwined with animal and plant forms. A whole new microcosm is unveiled when shapes that read as closed and contained in themselves from a distance, start dissolving and assuming animated identities when seen from nearby.



Personal schemata form the basis of Van der Westhuizen's work. Symbols which recur include aeroplanes, spermatozoa, motor cars, light bulbs, flowers and various anthropomorphic figures which fill up the picture plane in a never-ending pattern of black and white.



The combination of two- and three dimensional form contributes to the complexity of his images. An example of this is the recurrent use of a realistic three-dimensional, photographically derived human portrait, which the artist places amongst his invented creatures. This introduces an ominous quality into his work, as can be seen in *Flora Exotica and Other Delights*.

The artist's combination of primitive motifs with highly modernized ones creates an inherent tension. An ancient creature exists happily next to an architectural construction, and sometimes the logical division between

architecture and animal or living being is suspended, when the architectural construction becomes a walking entity, as in *See, Love and Die*. The distinction between living and dead objects is vague, and all Van der Westhuizen's objects seem capable of having a life of their own. They exist on the picture plane according to a logic of their own, often relating to one another

in new contexts and creating dynamic interactions.

Two main concepts spring to mind when describing the work: decorative and decadent. While both serve to spontaneously delight the viewer, they reflect the artist's disturbing vision of society and the human condition.

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SEE, LOVE AND DIE
(Lino cut 1998)

