

The interface of text and image

Breytenbach's

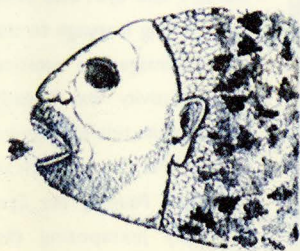
Marilet Sienaert

At the occasion of Breyten Breytenbach's exhibition entitled *Portraits, Prints and Paper* at the Durban Art Gallery from 3 - 25 May 1998, I was asked to conduct a walkabout attended by art critics, lecturers and students as well as members from the general public. This encounter generated very specific questions around the exhibition, which I tried to address from the vantage point of my particular field of interest, namely the interface of art and literature. It was generally agreed that the works on show - many of which explicitly integrate image and text - invite analysis of the way Breytenbach's work as painter-poet exploits the relation between visual art and language. Using this particular perspective, and guided by the three elements which constitute the exhibition title - *Portraits, Prints and Paper* - I here offer a brief overview of the main issues raised by the exhibition.

PORTRAITS

For those familiar with Breytenbach's work, the numerous self-portraits (mostly portrayals of himself in various stages of physical transformation) as well as recurring images of mirrors and masks come as no surprise. As elsewhere in both his art and writing, the question of identity is persistently foregrounded by these images of interchangeability and metamorphosis. According to the Buddhist philosophy which has long informed Breytenbach's thinking, the notion of a shifting or constantly transforming identity can be understood in terms of compassionate projection of the self into the other, thence the claim that 'every portrait - landscape or other depiction - is a self-portrait' (Breytenbach 1991:76). Such (Buddhist) dissolution of ego and subsequent fusion with the depicted object as *other*, are playfully expressed in the many images of half man, half beast (cf. the fish with human face in *homage au pinceau décédé*), as well as the copulating or numerous androgynous figures which absorb and dissolve the notion of opposites contained in *I* and *other*. (Confer the series of *mirror angels*). Although such blurring of conventional self-*other* boundaries and the associated notion of a fluid identity invite readings in terms of Buddhist selflessness, the shifting 'I' also clearly emerges, in true Postmodernist fashion, as a construct within the discursive practice of writing or painting (cf. Sienaert 1997:41-50).

Of interest however in this particular array of self-portraits, is the purposeful interplay of image and text as regards representation of self. The recurring image of the mirror used in conjunction with mirror-writing is exemplary in this regard. The notion of mirroring is essential to Breytenbach's perception of creative practice: In both writing and painting, whatever you depict or describe becomes a mirror of the self, it reflects who and what you are, that which you have consciously recognized and assimilated (Breytenbach 1991a:76f). Like the recurring image of the mask, the mirror persistently problematises the question of identity as it arises through art practice; it is an image which evokes the ultimate mysteriousness of being as well as the absurdity of trying to establish the sense of a fixed 'I'.



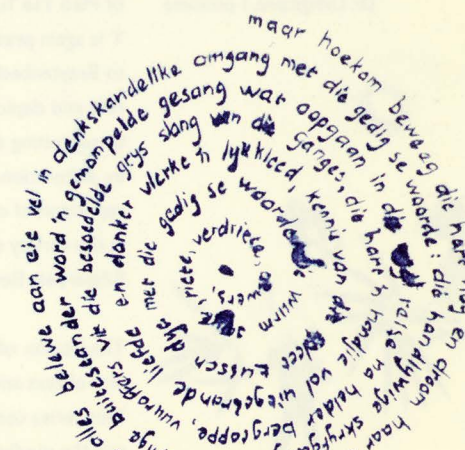
Detail from
homage au pinceau décédé

Durban exhibition *PORTRAITS, PRINTS AND PAPER*

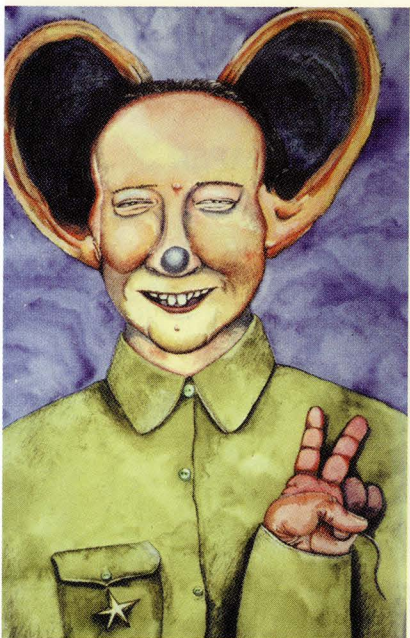


mirror angel series

In similar vein *self times six* is divided by lines of mirror-writing into two equal parts, each containing three separate and non-identical self-portraits. The side view of a bird head in the top left corner is clearly self-referential as it not only caricatures Breytenbach's own profile but also evokes the 'Mr. Bird' he often uses to refer to himself. As such it explicates the numerous depictions of birds elsewhere in this exhibition of (self)portraits. The lines of mirror-writing in this work replace the pictorial image of the looking-glass; they literally function as a mirror to reflect the various portrayals of self to each other. Similarly, in this context of an 'exhibition of selves', the integration of text with pictorial image in *head fish* evokes the act of mirroring: A poem written in circular form recalls the shape of both a hand-held mirror and a fingerprint, thus posing the question of identity to the poet-as-artist and also to the viewer.



Detail from *head fish*



M. Maose

Dr. Livingstone, I presume



Lacan's 'mirror stage' (cf. Easthope 1983:40) in the constitution of identity comes to mind: As when claiming an identity on recognition of one's image in a mirror, the act of mirror-writing evokes the way in which the self is positioned within language, similar to the way in which painting or any other form of 'mark-making' positions the self in a system of the symbolic order. Identity is defined as a process, it only comes into being through interaction between subject and object. The mirror then, is the *Don Espejuelo* of *True confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (Breytenbach 1984), it is not only a necessary *alter ego* in the constitution of the 'I' but also an essential instrument in the creation of awareness. In Lacanian terms the mirroring process is emblematic of the way in which both language and the visual arts offer a space for the (mis)recognition of self (Lacan 1977: 307) and its prominence here indeed suggests that the whole exhibition acts as mirror to the way in which the viewer positions himself within the symbolic order. As meaning unfolds for each individual confronted with the work, he or she is effectively positioned within the discursive practice at hand.

The interplay of image and text as regards the representation of self also extends to the relation between title and depiction elsewhere in the exhibition. As in the wordplay typical of his poetry, the artist cannot resist reflecting the visual interplay of Mickey Mouse and Mao Tse Tung in the title of the work *M. Maose*. Beyond obvious linking of East and West in this portrait of Mao Tse Tung featuring enormous Mickey Mouse ears, the 'I' is again present in the pertinent portrayal of a mole - similar to Breytenbach's own - between the eyebrows. The interplay of title and depicted image clearly posits the question of identity by suggesting a fusion of selves; an interrelatedness underpinned by alliteration of the letter M. in *M. Maose*, which recalls the repetition of consonants in Breytenbach's own name as well as in the variety of pseudonyms (Breyten Breytenpag, Bangai Bird, Bibberbek, Bewebors) he often adopts to refer to himself.

The notion of a transposable identity is pursued in the interplay of text and image in the *king breyten* series of five portraits. This series constitutes a unit on account of the similarity of size and the medium used (water-colour on cardboard), but as suggested by the portrayal of masks elsewhere in the exhibition,

the different headgear worn in each portrait underlines the idea of a shifting persona, or the way in which identity can be assumed and then again discarded. Although all five portraits carry the same title, none of the facial features portrayed here are recognisably those of the artist. The words 'king breyten' consequently question not only the 'who' of the Breyten persona but also the signification of 'king'. By foregrounding the constantly transforming nature of the artist's identity, a mockery is simultaneously made - in true Postmodernist fashion - of the unilateral link between the signifier 'king' and its signified: If the signifier 'breyten' refers to a variety of personae as suggested by the five different portraits, the signifier 'king' also swells out with potential plurality of meaning. The interplay between the title and pictorial image thus becomes a visual portrayal of Derrida's understanding (cf. Easthope 1983:15-16) of language and the polyvalence of words; it provokes confrontation with the 'gap' between signifier and signified, between word or image and the potential plurality of meaning it contains.



This notion is taken a step further in *Dr. Livingstone, I presume*. As suggested by the dialectic between the words 'king' and 'breyten', pictorial images relate to each other through the difference between them (cf. Easthope 1983:36). In this way they act as signifiers, similar to the way in which words in language offset each other through differentiation. With Breytenbach, self-representation exploits this process in order to question the way in which self relates to other. In *Dr. Livingstone, I presume*, opposition between the two figures facing each other is pre-empted by the fact that both are half-white and half-black (and hairy), thus each containing a part of the other. The white mask on the black face and the 'savage' darker mask on the white face stress the same point: 'I' am contained in the other, similar to the way in which the moon is contained within the sun floating above the two figures. In Breytenbach's work, cognition has always required this play of opposites, the other acts as the necessary opposite through which I can know myself. The mirror-writing in the lower half of the work underscores the understanding that in the constitution of self we are not only mirrors of each other but also act as mirrors for each other: 'To be means to be for the other, and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary; looking within himself, he looks into the eyes of the other or through the eyes of the other' (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:96). We constitute each other and the world, no single person is an autonomous entity.

In the context of the exhibition's self-portraits, the numerous depictions of displaced or dislocated eyes throughout the works (cf. *hommage au pinceau décédé*, and *Gorée memory*) foreground

the homophonic play of the words 'I' and 'eye', thus once again linking language to the pictorial image. The question of subjectivity was already posed by the title of Breytenbach's first South African exhibition *Painting the Eye*. Explicitly juxtaposing the

king breyten series

subject and the object (or viewer versus the depicted object), it is a phrase which encapsulates the dialectic portrayed in *Dr. Livingstone, I presume* - namely the oscillation of subject position (cf. Lacan 1966:800-802) inherent in the act of looking, and of being looked at.

PRINTS

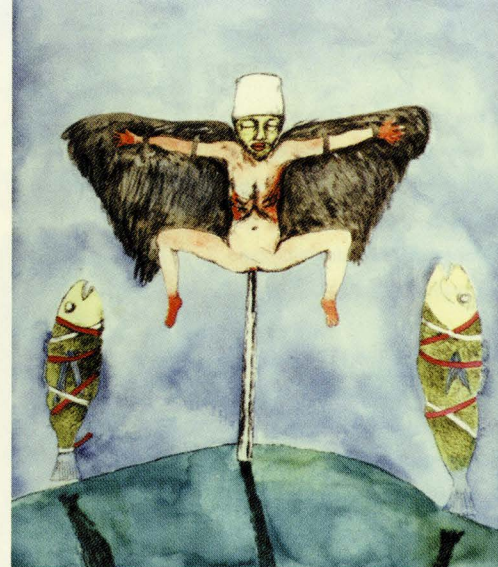
In context of the numerous instances where text is integral to the pictorial image, the very nature of graphic works - which predominate in the exhibition - not only evokes the printing process of published writing but also lends itself to repetition and interplay of images. In published writing, words or signifiers are inevitably repeated within the framework of the printed page, they combine in different ways to create meaning. The exhibition echoes this process for example through repetition of one and the same print which becomes a kind of master text and evolves in different ways, (cf. the series of three lithographs based on *mirror angel*). As metaphorical palimpsest, the repetition of images throughout the exhibition as a whole recalls Kristeva's use of the term intertextuality (1980:36): A fresh putting together (and therefore transformation) of already existing 'texts'. Although most obvious in the explicit repetition of specific images, the idea of such intertextuality is also evident in the recall of familiar compositions from European art, as in *bird* where the composition of the impaled figure and its two hill-side companions suggests a visual dialogue with the composition of early Christian works on the crucifixion. The tension between such associated compositions or images, sometimes even within one, single frame (cf. *Gorée memory* with its recurring winged figure and boat with palm trees), echo each other to create resonance within the framed space, similar to sound or textual patterns in a poem. The repetition of images or tropes such as mirror-writing also creates a sense of movement, it constitutes a kind of rhythm which is sustained by the many cross-references of image and text in the exhibition as a whole. (Cf. for example the repetition of identical images in *hommage au pinceau décédé* and *self times six* or simply the prolif-

eration of mirror-writing and images of flies, fish, dislocated eyes etc. strewn across the whole exhibition like a *leitmotif* of words throughout a book). For Breytenbach, this notion of movement has always been essential in sustaining the creative act: 'by moving, I make' (Breytenbach 1996:17). As in a text where the pattern of inevitably recurring signifiers constitute the meaning of the page, it is precisely the movement sustained by the visual interaction between already familiar images which - for Breytenbach - triggers the awareness-making process generated by '(w)riting poetry, or painting a picture: (it) is a process of creating consciousness' (Breytenbach 1996:9).

The way in which the proliferation of recurring images operate within the exhibition as a whole is thus meant to recall the way words function as signs within a text. In *die skilder en sy motiewe* for example, Breytenbach consciously exploits the parallel between writing and painting by framing totally disparate images within a single space. The frame contains all the artist's 'familiar' from earlier works: the severed head and weeping bird feature once again, as do the winged figure, the artist with paintbrush in hand, the mask and the flaming hat. Reminiscent of the idiosyncratic imagery of Breytenbach's poetry, they become the signifiers of his pictorial text; the repeated images which constitute the greater part of his by now familiar 'visual vocabulary'.

However, in their turn, words can also be treated as *visual* signifiers. When the plastic or material quality of the sign is foregrounded by the three-dimensional depiction of its graphic form, the conventional borders between the graphic (i.e. 'written') and the visual collapse to trigger a fresh response. Thence the rebus quality of words incorporated into some of the works, as in *the sky is the limit*, where the entire sky is constituted by three-dimensional depiction of the title words.

Even when used as recurring signs, signifiers are not mere neutral conveyers of (fixed) meaning as might be suggested by foregrounding their material quality in



bird

hommage au pinceau décédé



Detail from Gorée memory



such treatment of the graphic word. Although words - like images - are to some extent denotative and part of a fixed convention based on the assumed Saussurean link between signifier and signified, the Derridean notion of *différance* which allows for a variety of interpretations - as seen in the *king breyten* series - has indeed permanently disrupted the comfort zone of fixed signification. Words, like images, are coloured by the viewer or reader's position in the discourse at hand, and remain essentially open-ended, with every fresh encounter detonating a variety of associations that fall within the current network of social, political and aesthetic discursive practices.

The way in which Breytenbach insists on parodying the fixed parameters of signification is distinctly evident in the integration of text into the work entitled *in dog we thrust*. The grid on the table in which the words of the title are arranged offers a powerful visual image of the way words in a Saussurean model of language attempt to serve as 'containers' of meaning, and recalls Breytenbach's 'word prison' (1983) of language from which poetry is meant to escape. However, as has been shown, meaning cannot be fixed or contained, thence the bird images in this work which, in conjunction with their 'empty' stenciled shapes, effectively illustrate the Post-modernist notion of relentless 'deferment' (Derrida 1976:xix) of meaning: Images - like words - are nothing but the (visible or audible) trace of an always transforming reality. Like the severed heads elsewhere which invoke the immobility of an empty corpse; they suggest identity-as-trace; the material reminder or sign of a presence which has already moved on along a never-ending chain of signification.

S.A. *Angel* too, visually renders the way in which signifiers - be they words or images - escape the rigid confines of denotative meaning. The open pages of a book in the foreground contain a single line of writing - 'here over the' - repeated three times. The fourth time however, the words overflow and extend beyond the edges of

the written page to now read 'somewhere over the rainbow'. The next two lines again appear within the framework of the page but the transgression has triggered a process of transformation: The borders between words now also dissolve so that the same letters can re-assemble to create 'where ovaries', which in turn transforms to read 'hero warrior'. This play with words is evocative of the surrealist game *cadavre exquis*, it is a transgression of the view that signifiers - be they words or pictorial images - are the neutral conveyers of fixed signification. They seem to have a life of their own and an ability to perpetually renew themselves, hence the visual metaphor of transformation im-



Die skilder en sy motiewe

plied by overstepping the confines of their allocated space on the page. In the context of this particular work with its brutal images of decapitated heads and weeping central 'S.A. angel', (and this in the time of the new

South Africa!), the word-game also portrays the *leitmotif* in Breytenbach's art and writing of relentless transgression of the familiar and the expected, in order to suggest the unfolding of a constantly transforming (and transformative) reality.

What one critic (Cook 1998:12) called the 'willful obscenity' of the exhibition is similarly related to this process. The title *in dog we thrust* as deliberate play on the familiar phrase 'In God we trust' here serves as example, as does the impact of the perverse-ly disemboweled figures and angels impaled through the anus elsewhere in the exhibition. As in the case of Breytenbach's writing, these works exhibit his constant desire to push the limits of the conventional and the socially acceptable. The restriction of meaning suggested by the box-like containers of words depicted on the table in *In dog we thrust* seems intolerable, and is exorcised by the startling combination of images - be they visual or linguistic - which trigger a mass of associations and variety of responses to the exhibition as a whole.

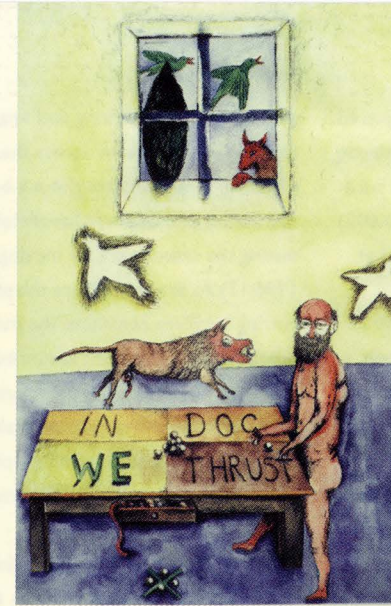
As Breytenbach's writing, an image placed into an unfamiliar context (cf. also the many instances of *objets trouvés* integrated with collage) clearly acts as a powerful incentive for the viewer or reader to engage with the work and participate in the creative process. One is tempted to subscribe the way in which Breytenbach visually exploits the plurality of signification through use of the unexpected, to his *métier* as word-artist: poetry by its very nature undermines the conventional link between signifier and signified. In his art-work it is evident that transgression of the norm serves to similarly pro-



S.A. Angel

voke the viewer into moving beyond the conventions ascribed to 'signs', whether linguistic or pictorial.

By provoking the viewer with this transgression of the familiar, deliberate stress is placed on the 'making' or fabrication process. An expressed awareness of their own fabrication is therefore a predominant feature of many of the works, as in the depiction of the artist holding paintbrush in hand (*die skilder en sy motiewe*), the picture within the picture or frame within the frame (*Gorée memory* and again *In dog we thrust*), as well as the artist utensil incorporated as *objet trouvé* into *hommage au pinceau décédé*. In Breytenbach's poetry this meta-quality can be traced to his earliest poems (see Van der Merwe 1980:115-120), with perhaps the most obvious examples of the writing process and the nature of language being explicitly foregrounded in poems dating from the prison period, such as *mahala* (1983:8) and *nekra* (1983:43f).



In dog we thrust

Apart from the obvious Postmodernism of such metatextuality, these examples of self-conscious interaction with words and images denote art and writing as a transformative process - a transformation of the 'real' but also of the energy which brings it into being. It is the active participation of the reader or viewer which constitutes this energy, thence Breytenbach's fond reference to Beckett's statement that 'the work which is not submitted to the appraisal of others will pass away in horrible agony' (Breytenbach 1991b:2).

PAPER

To conclude, the accent on paper as medium and as component of the exhibition's name again links language to pictorial image. Not only commonly associated with writing and the publication of written texts, paper also lends itself to the deliberate play with pictorial conventions, as in the intertextual mix of images or other such collage type 'interferences' already referred to. *Gorée memory*, for example, with its collage of

photocopied images which are slightly modified each time to create a sense of movement and transformation, is conceived as a kind of journal or photo album. Choosing paper as medium to recall a cherished journey to Gorée island seems deliberate; it is reminiscent of (writing in) a diary; you can travel while working on paper, whereas canvas is conventionally associated with the use of a studio.

As a result of the artist's deliberate and persistent play on the interface of text and image in this exhibition, the transformative (and always transforming) power or *poiesis* of art practice is strongly brought to the fore. This is not about *mimesis*; but on the contrary about 'all writing, all composition, (being) construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it' (Scholes 1975:7).

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