

NICO ROOS - Painter of landscape's living tissue

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One of Nico Roos' former students once told me that the most important thing Roos had taught him was that the painter had to pay minute attention to every single square centimetre of the canvas. No part of the canvas, however far removed from the focus of attention, should be neglected or treated carelessly. The whole surface had to signify the care and attention of the artist.

Namib; oil on canvas, 600 x 800mm.



Looking at Roos' own mature work it is exactly this aspect which forces itself on the attention of the viewer. Even the furthest corners of his canvasses are alive. As so often when he visualises the stark and barren stretches of land of his beloved Namibia, the surfaces are vibrant: rich in detail, teeming with contrasts, nuances of colour and a variety of painterly marks. It is not surprising that Melanie Grobler titled her M.A. study of his work *Kalligrafie op Geografie* (*Calligraphy on Geography*).

The basic contrast inherent in Roos' work is between the barrenness of the land and the way in which his vision contradicts this 'emptiness' with every brush stroke. Here lies the essence of his creativity: populating the desert void with seething, animated surfaces. The formal structuring of his compositions and the abstract rendering of the landscape emphasise his vision of the concreteness and vitality which is hidden in the arid landscape.

It is interesting to compare his work with that of other South African painters of the landscape. Maud Sumner summarised landscape. She generalised the features of the landscape to arrive at an essential vision which, at the same time, was an expression of a mystical union. Roos, on the other hand, does not generalise. The point of his art is exactly the opposite: bringing forth a cornucopia of detail which spills across the canvas in the chaotic exuberance which is the essence of life itself. The fact that he so often uses the deserts and semideserts of Namibia as a counterfoil, accentuates the celebration of detail.



Untitled; ink on paper, 210 x 297mm.

Roos is a painter of textures, of surfaces. Unlike Anna Vorster who painted the skeleton of the landscape, bereft of all flesh, bared to the bones, Roos is a painter of the skin. Even when he uses the motif of the shaft, the effect is not that of drilling down to the skeleton, but of uncovering, in cross sectional layers, skin.

A second contrast which invigorates Roos' landscapes, in addition to that of desert void and animated surface, is the contrast between the minute attention paid to the surface and the elevated, 'global' viewpoint from which so many of his landscapes are seen.

Often the horizons of his landscapes are curved, as they would be if viewed from considerable height, for instance from an aeroplane in flight. The curvature



Wind-torn Land; acrylic on paper, 550 x 715mm.

also suggests a camera's fish eye lens, implying that the artist is trying to get a comprehensive view of the terrain. His choice of subject matter, however, is not the intimate nooks and crannies of nature, but exactly those vast expanses which elude the observer's easy grasp.

One of the essential issues in landscape painting is the relationship of the human observer to nature. Roos' landscapes do not involve the human observer. They do not mirror human emotions or evoke symbols of human aspiration. They are not (as with Clive van den Berg) the apocalyptic arena of human endeavour, they are simply disinterested in humanity. Only occasionally do they show signs of human interventions in the landscape, but even then it is as if these have been absorbed and

assimilated by the living skin of nature. The scars left by man on nature's skin become in themselves the source for new and interesting marks on the surface, invigorating the tissue with new life.

These landscapes show a world which is not always ignorant of human existence, but which simply chooses to ignore it. In the Namib-scapes of Keith Alexander, a contest between man and nature must inevitably end in man's defeat. This is not at the basis of Nico Roos' vision. He goes even further than that. His world is one which is simply not interested in humanity. It is most emphatically not an 'environment', but an entity that marginalises human existence from sight, conveying that human existence can never offer a real contest to nature.

This does not mean that his work is aloof or unemotional. The emotional impact is focused by

Roos' treatment of colour. If his vantage point is often that of the bird's eye view and his creation of dense, textured detail represents a reaching out across vast spaces to the tactile presence of the land, then his colour represents the intense reaction elicited by the landscape.

If one compares Roos' use of colour with that of Jentsch, for instance, or with photographs of the areas he so often paints, or with the 'reality itself', then it is the saturation of colour which draws the attention. In opposition to the abstraction of his rendering in form and line, the colour is an *extract*.

It is the purity and intensity of this extract which signifies the emotional intensity of the observer-painter. As the richness of texture belies the superficial perception of an arid and barren world, so the rich colours express the same vision of vitality.



African Atlas; acrylic on paper, 510 x 715mm.



Red Desert; acrylic on paper, 500 x 705mm.

Roos' work has come a long way since his initial naturalistic landscapes. He has absorbed the forces and influences of modernity and married them to the primeval non-human, to create a vision of nature as a living organism following its own trajectory through time, only occasionally touching that of man, but then moving the human observer profoundly. One waits to see if he will eventually also incorporate some of the notions of postmodernity in his vision of landscape.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Study for a Green Mountain; acrylic on board, 565 x 475mm.