

Re-envisioning the Anglo-Boer (South African) War¹

An exhibition of selected artworks from the permanent collection of the War Museum of the Boer Republics

This exhibition is comprised of a selection of recently donated artworks by contemporary artists to the War Museum of the Boer Republics, to commemorate the centenary of the museum in 2013. The museum's permanent art collection consists mainly of military portraiture, battle scenes and public sculpture honoring heroes and soldiers in the war, ranging from 1899 to the 1980s. The iconic sculpture *Die vroue beeldegroep* (The female sculpture group), created by Anton van Wouw, and W.H. Coetzer's large-scale painting *Triptiek* (Triptych) rejected an outright military worldview and shifted the focus to the shocking fate of white women and children in concentration camps during the war. Van Wouw and Coetzer have influenced the trope of representing vulnerable Afrikaner women and children whose fates were determined by patriarchal systems. In recent years the museum has expanded its mandate and focused on informing visitors of the previously ignored vulnerable positions of black and coloured peoples during the war. Representations include painted portraits of the Mafeking siege diarist, Solomon T. Plaatje; the newly installed public sculpture of *Die agterryer* (The attendant) by Phil Minnaar, as well as other representations of the many men in logistical support services, individuals, families and whole communities forcibly placed in either 'white' concentration camps or pocketed together in the dreadful, unbarred 'black' concentration camps on the open planes. The inclusion of the newly donated artwork (which for the purpose of clarification in this essay is referred to as the new collection) exposes an artistic gap between the distinct body of canonized artwork and the newly donated artwork.

The artworks selected for this exhibition re-evaluate and re-interpret the war from current perspectives. They provide multi-perspective views that address historical contexts, speak to post-apartheid discourses and, at times, offer fresh insights on the formation of the South African nation. A pertinent issue addressed, for example, is

¹The "Anglo-Boer War" is also known as the "South African War", the "Transvaal War" and the "Second War of Freedom", amongst others. As the historian Frans Johan Pretorius (2009) suggests, not one of these names is fully acceptable to the exclusion of all others, not even "the Anglo-Boer War" used in this catalogue. As has been argued by Pretorius, "South African War" is not a new term, but was in use at the time of the war, and has only in recent decades been "re-invented by British and English-speaking South African historians". He indicates, "There is some merit in this name. Not only does it tell us where the war was fought, but it also recognizes that the entire South African population was affected by the war. In this sense it was indeed a true South African War, a civil war. In the past, mistakenly, the war was seen as a clash that only involved the Boers and the British. Now we recognize that black [and coloured] people[s] played an important part in this war and that they were deeply affected by it." Unfortunately, as Pretorius admits, "[this name] does not acknowledge the involvement of the party that had the major share in causing it—Great Britain." Somebody once suggested to Pretorius that since the Vietnam War is recognized by this name, why not similarly accept the name "South African War". He answered that the Vietnamese do not call the war the Vietnam War, instead they refer to it, at times, as "The war of resistance against the Americans".

how the war and its traumatic effects have contributed to apartheid and post-apartheid concerns. Contemporary art has undergone fundamental changes due to the influence of current image philosophies, digital art processes, and the way media shapes political communication and society. Thus, some artists represented in the exhibition made art in response to the canon of Anglo-Boer artwork, war photography and/or cartoon culture.²

These artworks demonstrate a deep commitment to the tragic effects of war and violence. Artworks as quasi-subjects disclose much about the artists' worldview. This exhibition evokes a sense that the war is deeply engrained in the artists' psyches. Some of these artworks provoke an awareness that war is a continuous cycle of violence, spurred on by destructive ideologies.

In this text, four main structures of creative thought prevalent to the art on exhibition are discussed: the fundamental narcissism in power games; material as means to explore women and children suppressed by emasculated ideologies and 'war' images representing violence as universal; ruination as nostalgia versus ruination as a metanarrative for lost histories and ideals; and how animals have carried the consequences of human war. In many of the works these structures are treated as intersectional and therefore should be connectively reflected upon.

Power games³

Politicized and mediatized ideologies have installed the well-known world of human players against narcissistic gamesters. The media shower of photographs and video footage of the dramatic falls from grace and deaths of previous long-standing political leaders has raised a grave awareness of the transience of power. Humans (and human playing) are fraught with destructive ideologies indicative of a narcissistic, materialistic and technological worldview operating in instrumental rationality. Dina Grobler's chair sculpture, *Stoele van die Magtiges* (Chairs for the mighty), with a carved out apparition of the British kingpin Cecil John Rhodes, questions whether power is ever truly gained. The names of the dead women and children from the concentration camps are written on the chair's cushion, suggesting the dire consequences of the war. The empty chair predicts the dethronement of power and the later gamut of new sitters to come. However, it is all the more difficult to identify who these new power mongers are as they hide in 'light capitalist' global systems. Willem Boshoff's installation, *32 000 Darling little nuisances*, subverts power by visually reversing the never apologizing British royal family in favour of the number of belittled children and women who died in the camps. Markus Steinmann's installation, *Onbeslis* (Inconclusive), argues that power games remain indeterminable. The effects of war and the unpredictability of future political events thwart the 'winner'.

² The Anglo-Boer War was extensively photographed. The art critic Richard Lacayo (2012) fairly states that conflict photography easily loses meaning because of an image overload due to the magnitude of dire war imagery being circulated through media technology.

³ See artworks by Willem Boshoff, Dina Grobler, Markus Steinmann, Julie Lovelace, Lionel Smit, Hanneke Benadé and Retha Buitendach.

Retha Buitendach's captivating print of Nonnie de La Rey and Hanneke Benadé's pastel painting of Johannes Cornelius Lötter explore two different gender based figures in the war who chose to rebel against their assumed roles: De La Rey and her family heroically escaped the camps by playing a timeless cat and mouse game with British regiments and Lötter became a traitor to the British when he joined Boer forces fighting in the colonies. The cutting gazes of these two heroic figures raises questions and discussions about the 'pain for gain' mentality often perceived in war and freedom fighting. Lionel Smit's compelling painting, *Overlay*, of a female portrait embedded in a blue-and-red ink splashed Union Jack flag, voices a longstanding contempt for British imperialism and their intervention in Africa. The blue paint, recalling the blue southern African sky, appears entrenched in the high velocity bloodlike red spatter completing the rest of the Union Jack.

Material matters⁴

The materials used in artworks often embody the fabrics of their own conceptualization. Jan van der Merwe's sculpture, *Monument*, a ball of yarned barbed wire with a pair of red knitting needles wedged into it, is closely tied to weaving crafts traditionally practiced by Afrikaans woman. Weaving crafts, like knitting, shaped female identity during, and after, the war. After the war welfare campaigner Emily Hobhouse started spinning, weaving and lacemaking workshops in many towns to alleviate the consequential poverty amongst Afrikaans woman. Stefan Rossouw painted a veiled portrait of Hobhouse, entitled *Die Engelse Roos* (The English rose), with a crown of bleak roses on her head. Rossouw imagines Hobhouse's experiences and the ethical weight she must have carried in turning against her homeland and its military leaders.

Images, in particular conflict photography, point to universalities, as seen in Janine Allen's *See Emily play*, Ben Botma's *War games* and Gerrit Hattingh's *Before and after Hector*. Images are visual texts and they can be interwoven in the same way as written texts. Unraveling these images reveals the creative methods of how visual texts or artworks are fabricated. In *See Emily play*, Allen uses weaving as a metaphor for the interweaving of visual and written texts; both "weaving" and "text" share the same Latin root word, *texere*. The weaving metaphor indicates that thought is a thread and that a storyteller is the spinner of yarns. In *See Emily play*, Allen adds re-appropriated weaving and conflict photographs to the 2003 Anglo-Boer War photographic publication, the *Suffering of war*. Viewer-participants contribute by writing and rewriting texts. This dynamic process creates fresh insights into war, violence and morality.

Ben Botma's etched and acidified prints on steel derive from photographs of child soldiers, of both then and now. He juxtaposes these with images of children playing marbles in the war and contemporary African children playing soccer. Child soldiers 'compete' in real-life war games, while the representations of children playing

⁴ See artworks by Helena da Waal, Stefan Rossouw, Jan van der Merwe, Janine Allen, Ben Botma, Bertie du Plessis and Gerrit Hattingh

childhood games nostalgically recall authentic human playing. Human playing is easily compromised by capitalist ideology and mass media, such as playing marbles as a money gambling game or by playing professional soccer, which is a mediatized sport.

Gerrit Hattingh's performative photograph, *Before and after Hector*, appropriates the iconic photograph taken by Sam Nzima of the dying Hector Pieterse. Hattingh imaginatively transports this iconic image to the Anglo-Boer War and points to an abyss in our collective memory. This is caused by the lack of stories about innocent black individuals, in particular individual children, who were atrociously killed in the war. Hattingh artistically interweaves the war and apartheid contexts (*con-texere* in Latin) to tell untold stories.

Ruination⁵

British photographers captured burning and ruined Boer farmhouses and other buildings during and after the 'scorched earth' period. These images, like most early twentieth century war photographs of burnt or bombed structures, display an underlying romantic or "chocolate-box" view of ruins. This view was firmly embedded in English Romanticist painting because ruins evoke a nostalgic feel about eternal ideals. Ruins were deliberately constructed in English gardens. Brisbane art academic Naomi Stead (2012) writes that the Nazi architect and member of Hitler's inner circle, Albert Speer, designed buildings (for example the *Cathedral of Light*) that would eventually ruin in an aesthetically pleasing way. Pauline Gutter's strange 'romantic' painting of a ruin, *Gewetensmonument* (Conscience monument), depicts a captivating story about an Egyptian style semi-built monument near the town Bethulie. The monument, initiated by a short-lived British liberal government just after the war, was supposed to commemorate the women and children of the Bethulie concentration camp. Left incomplete and forgotten on the plane where the camp once stood, the story and Gutter's painting provoke a tragic nostalgia. The ruin is ironically called the 'conscience monument'. It sadly tells of a reconciling opportunity never met by both parties. Do sepulchers embedded in the exact spaces of trauma function effectively as spaces of memory and reconciliation? Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's (2012) argues that we need to share in authentic interactive moments that embody real human empathy rather than erect commemorative plaques.

Both ruins and rubble leave traces of ideological powers and their contexts provoke brutal political complexities. Eternal ideals projected by ruins veil the transience of power. Rubble used in art has the potential to become allegorical, indicating to the outside of itself. It reminds viewers of sudden changes brought about by man-made catastrophes. The concept of ruin can be embodied outside actual ruins as seen, for example, in Guy du Toit's inscribed bronze sculpture of a skull. The skull embodies the fate of the many black and coloured peoples in the war. A butcher's bill is engraved on the head of the skull. This refers to history's own ruins too, as this

⁵ See artworks by Helena Hugo, Pauline Gutter, Guy du Toit and Angus Taylor.

previously overlooked fact is still under-represented. Thus ruin and rubble concepts convey meta-qualities, which are accentuated in Angus Taylor's allegorical work *Bloedgrond* (Blood ground). This strange chthonic sculpture is a section of a ruinscape. The soil and covered grass encased in glass are like an excavated sample of land whose violent histories can be scrutinized through its previously hidden bloodied layers. The soil indicates the historic leftovers; the rubble of violent acts concealed underground. Gobodo-Madikizela (2012) questions why this war's atrocities have not been addressed with as much zeal as the atrocities of the Second World War. Entombed in a neatly packaged transparent case, Taylor's provocative sculpture provokes an idea that violence as an eternal occurrence is hidden from view. An exploration of violent histories takes place from disembodied positions.

How animals count among the consequences⁶

Hordes of animals were slaughtered during the 'scorched earth' period. This included the mass-killings of sheep and cattle. Although Wilma Cruise's ceramic sculpture, *Agnus Dei*, of a stiff reclining ceramic sheep addresses the issue of animal welfare, it simultaneously evokes a commentary on the blind following of ferocious leaders. Thus it complements the phrase of 'being like sheep driven to the knacker's yard'. A war photograph of a soldier shooting his much-loved injured horse in a battlefield inspired many artworks in the new collection. Collin Cole's print, *Shooting a horse and the history lesson*, ultimately teaches people that if we get taught anything about conflict, it will be of gaining nothing in war, except losing that which we most treasure. Nicolene Swanepoel's ceramic ox head sculpture with blue inked colonial images ties its material relationship with land acquisition. Cattle were one of the main objects used in partial systems of exchange and extortion in colonial history. They form part of the diehard masculine systems of imperialism. It is ubiquitous in images and texts referencing the early colonialist dealings of Portuguese traders in the Cape and of the powerful Dutch East India Company. The bull still stands as a symbol of upward market trends in the over-confident light capitalist bull markets of current fluid globalism.

The idea of finality

In an interview with the war historian, Bernard Mbenga (on 18 July 2013), he tells of the starved black civilians who became soldiers and fought in regiments against the Boers during the famous siege of Mafeking. It was never just a white man's war. The engrained memories of the Anglo-Boer War differ in cultural groups due to a biased media and apartheid ideology. How many descendants of black and coloured peoples remember stories told about their families in the war? Bernard Mbenga knows of some. White South Africans comment upon the war in extremely fluctuating ways, from being sentimental to cynical. The British royal family denies the trauma (like Boshoff's *32 000 Darling little nuisances* represents) as do many British historians, but in the Afrikaner psyche it is experienced as a much closer (more personal) event than, for example, the Second World War. The trauma of the

⁶ See artworks by Wilma Cruise, Nicolene Swanepoel, Collin Cole, Paul Roux and Johann Louw.

war has transcended its own time period in history. So will the debilitating trauma of apartheid. Trauma cannot be remediated if destructive ideologies and violence as eternal occurrence are not addressed. Artists like these presented in the exhibition partake in a never-ending endgame. Some things end and some things don't.

Janine Allen
(Guest curator)

Angela de Jesus
(Curator)

Shortened list of sources

Pretorius, F. 2009. *Historical dictionary of the Anglo-Boer War*. Scarecrow Press, Maryland, USA.
Gobodo-Madikizela, P. 2012. What we must remember. *Sunday Times*. 25 March 2012.
Lacayo, R. This means war. A look at conflict photography. *Time Magazine*. November, 19. 2012.
Stead, N. The value of ruins: Allegories of destruction in Benjamin and Speer *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment*, no. 6, October 2003, pp. 51-64, Retrieved 26 July 2012. http://naomistead.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/stead_value_of_ruins_2003.pdf

Janine Allen is an artist and senior lecturer at the Department of Fine Arts, University of the Free State.

Angela de Jesus is an artist and the art curator at the University of the Free State.