

Land-based Imagery in Contemporary South African Photography

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My research looks at the uses of land-based imagery by contemporary South African photographers, and the connections between works of this genre and the prominent documentary tradition of the 1980s and early 1990s in South Africa. Young photographers are now using land-based subject matter to address a range of social, economic, and environmental issues played out on the landscape, and that represent a new front in the struggle for social equity in democratic South Africa.

Prior to the end of apartheid in 1994, documentary photographs dominated photographic practice in South Africa. During this time so called ‘struggle photographers’ emphasized the social role of the photographer, and promoted photography as a tool of public awareness. This history has made photography a powerful medium in South Africa today, even as documentary images remain closely associated with a particular era. Indeed, few contemporary photographers work in a documentary style, but the distinctive social ethic struggle photographers brought to their practice has continued to influence arts institutions and contemporary

photographers in South Africa.

This influence is most closely observed among a new generation of South African photographers who work with land-based imagery. These photographers work primarily in color, avoid explicit narratives in their photographs, and make use of pictorial strategies more closely aligned with fine art photographs. Nonetheless, their intended audience, and methods of documenting urban and rural spaces links their practice to that of their documentary predecessors, as does the selection of land-based content, which draws attention to the visual legacies of apartheid, economic inequality, and the social effects of environmental degradation.

In summer 2012, I spent six weeks in South Africa conducting preliminary research for my dissertation project. During this time I visited a number of photographers, archives, galleries, and arts institutions

in six different cities. I spent most of this period in Johannesburg and Cape Town, where I interviewed a number of prominent South African photographers, such as Jo Ractliffe, Lien Botha, and Paul Weinberg, as well as others who are at the beginning stages of their careers, such as Daniel Naudé, Thabiso Sekgala, and Vincent Bezeidenhout. I benefited greatly from meetings with art historians and curators such as with Michael Godby and Rory Bester. I also spent time working with archival materials at the Centre for Curating the Archive at the University of Cape Town, which contains over 50,000 print and digital images from prominent South African photographers from the past century.

I hope to return to South Africa next year to continue my research, and learn more about how and why contemporary photographers are working with land-based imagery. I plan to spend more time at the archives I visited to establish a broader context for the link between documentary photography and the new landscape tradition in South Africa. I also plan to spend time at art institutions and workshops, such as the Market Photography Workshop, so that I may become familiar with work by photographers whose work may not be circulating in a gallery context.

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