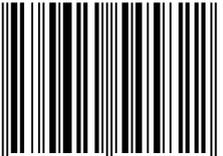


FRAGILE HISTORIES FUGITIVE LIVES

BRUNDYN +
GONSALVES

ISBN 978-0-620-54582-2



9 780620 545822 >

Keith Dietrich & Elizabeth Gunter
BRUNDYN+GONSALVES
Catalogue no. 17

fragile
histories

—

fugitive
lives

Contents

Keith Dietrich *Fragile Histories*

Lize van Robbroeck 4

Image Pages 8

Elizabeth Gunter *Fugitive Lives*

Image Pages 16

Stella Viljoen 28

Biographies 34

Acknowledgements 35

Keith Dietrich's Fragile Histories

Lize van Robbroeck

Fragile Histories is Keith Dietrich's latest in a series of photographic book projects that chronicle South Africa's colonial encounter and its rich but unstable heritage in South Africa.

In the first project, *Horizons of Babel*, Dietrich created an artists' book that charted the expanding horizons of knowledge as represented by successive cartographic conventions. It explored how mapping could be seen as symptomatic of a quintessentially modernist compulsion to describe, name, control, systematise and ultimately subordinate nature to the superior rationality of culture. The corner of the Western Cape that was investigated here is not only the womb of some of the most ancient human populations, but also represents the earliest contact zones between colonizer and colonized. As such it constitutes a rich historical and archaeological arena in which successive power struggles played themselves out. This focus on mapping introduced an interest in geography, meaning-making and cultural contact zones that would inform Dietrich's following three projects.

The second book, *Fourteen stations of the Cross*, investigated the colonial encounter via one of its most historically charged and morally ambivalent manifestations: the missionary station. In this three-part book, the earliest missionary settlements in Southern Africa were represented as crucibles in which the complex heterogeneity of the future South African nation were forged - a baptism of fire from which, alchemically, the gold of redemption and reconciliation is eventually extracted.

Many Rivers to Cross again dealt with geography and photography (particularly aerial photography) as site of knowledge-production. Here,

Dietrich focused on the great rivers of Southern Africa: their confluences, tributaries, estuaries and the vital role these played in the history of colonial expansion and local resistance. More ambiguously, these rivers serve as metaphors not only of violence and conflict, but also of liminality, connection and potential healing. Dietrich's superimposition of nineteenth century engravings of human organs over images of rivers foregrounded the body as an object of knowledge and power, which recalls the importance of bio-politics in South Africa's history. More potently, however, these beautifully detailed copperplate engravings remind of the hidden complexity that underlies the seeming wholeness of the human skin. The penetration of boundaries between inside and outside, between seen and unseen, between violence and healing, and between human bodies and the territories they inhabit is further elaborated in this current project, *Fragile Histories*.

Fragile Histories recounts, via photography and collage, the bio-political control of subjects in the Cape during the 1700s. Based on Hans Heese's book *Reg en Onreg: Kaapse Regspraak in die Agtiende Eeu*¹, this book comprises a shocking litany of torture, humiliation and death inflicted on errant bodies by the VOC. Dietrich superimposes Heese's grisly bureaucracy of names, places of origin, transgression and punishment over photographs of contemporary residents of the Western Cape, who collectively represent the diversity of the Cape's populations during the early modern period, each standing for a broad segment of the population and the kinds of punishments meted out to that particular group. Each full-length portrait thus correspond to an ancestral class of Western Cape resident: indigenous (Khoi-San); female (broadly inclusive); burgher (white) and 'bastaard' (manifestly hybrid ancestry).

The body is the most immediate site of South Africa's traumatic history. If race was invented to legitimate the creation of an underclass

¹ *Justice and Injustice: Cape Judgement in the Eighteenth Century*, 1994, University of the Western Cape.

of workers and slaves during the colonial and apartheid eras, its corollary was a regime of physical punishment to keep those bodies obedient. Although race, that most fateful and unfortunate of modern inventions, is a discursive construction, it is experienced, first and foremost, as a physical reality inscribed on the intimate surface of the body.

In his seminal book, *Discipline and Punish*, French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault chronicles the role of physical punishment in the medieval and early modern epochs, and analyses how spectacular public displays of physical torture and execution served to keep potentially unruly subjects obedient and docile. *Fragile Histories* chronicles this appalling crucible of pain in which the body-politic of a future South Africa was forged. The Cape's history is also a history of fragile bodies being branded with hot irons, being dismembered, riveted in shackles, having flesh torn off, having the Achilles tendon severed, being hanged, stretched on a rack, broken alive on a wheel or cross, drawn and quartered, impaled and roasted alive, garotted, burnt at the stake... the list of tortures goes on and on, delivering testimony both of our species ingenuity and our excruciating capacity for cruelty.

The role of the visible in this bio-political tactic of power and control cannot be overestimated. Throughout the ages, the body was made to signify social status and bear visible traces of subjugation, objectification and power. Not only does the individual body carry a life's physical trauma in scars, burns, wrinkles and limps, but every body also carries the traces of complex ancestral networks of contact and conflict. Nowhere is it clearer that the history of modernity is also a history of globalisation and violent cultural exchange than in the archives of the Western Cape. The names and designations of the unfortunate recipients of the VOC's system of punishments and controls reveal the extraordinary diversity of the inhabitants of the Western Cape in the seventeenth century. Apart from the indigenous San hunters and Khoi pastoralists with their

names that sing a forgotten poetry (Goringhaiqua, Attaqua, Outeniqua, Hanunqua...), and the burghers who came from European territories as far afield as Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Great Britain and, of course, the Netherlands, there were the large contingent of slaves and convicts from the Indian Ocean world, including the Dutch East Indies (Indonesian archipelago), Madagascar, Mozambique, Angola, Mauritius, Bourbon (Réunion), Siam (Thailand), Persia (Iran), but also the Spanish West Indies, Bantang (China), Malabar (India), Ceylon (Sri-Lanka) - the list goes on and on. Ultimately there were the products of this rich diversity, hybrid offspring born in the Cape and bred by its diverse exiled peoples – the ‘bastaards’. Nowhere is it clearer that the discourse of purity and blood essences invariably accompany the most liberal of cultural and biological exchanges and intermixing.

The ingredients of the Western Cape’s rich, layered ancestry are still visible in the bodies of today’s inhabitants. The woman in Dietrich’s one portrait, for instance, not only has facial features that encode typological signs of her eastern ancestry - dark, almond eyes, high cheekbones and a smooth, toffee skin - but she also wears a Muslim headscarf that signals religious diversity as the product of this forced exchange.

These marvellous full-length portraits, with their moody, de-saturated tones and minute physical detail, confront us with the literal presence of the past and remind us, at this fraught present moment in our country’s history, of our own fragility. The superimposition over the solar plexus of each figure of a vital organ (heart, lungs, liver etc) surrounded by a rosette of names and punishments, renders the individual intimate body porous and painfully vulnerable. These are sublime portraits, evoking in equal measure breathtaking beauty and awesome terror.

Lize van Robbroeck is Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts, Stellenbosch University.



Above, Detail from *Fragile Histories: Book One* (2012)
Archival print on cotton paper,
tracing paper and pins
Centre panel - 186.5 x 86.5 cm
Side panels - 86.5 x 86.5 cm each



Fragile Histories: Book Two (2012)
Archival print on cotton paper,
tracing paper and pins
Centre panel - 186.5 x 86.5 cm
Side panels - 86.5 x 86.5 cm each



Fragile Histories: Book Three (2012)
Archival print on cotton paper, tracing paper and pins
Centre panel - 186.5 x 86.5 cm
Side panels - 86.5 x 86.5 cm each





Fragile Histories: Book Four (2012)
Archival print on cotton paper, tracing paper and pins
Centre panel - 186.5 x 86.5 cm
Side panels - 86.5 x 86.5 cm each





Detail from Book Two



Elizabeth Gunter
Final Term (2012)
Silicone, 36 pieces
11.5 x 9 x 5 cm each





Detail from *Lost light I* (2012)
Charcoal dust on paper
100 x 145 cm





Look away I (2012)
Charcoal dust on paper
100 x 145 cm





Twin I (2012)
Charcoal dust on paper
100 x 145 cm





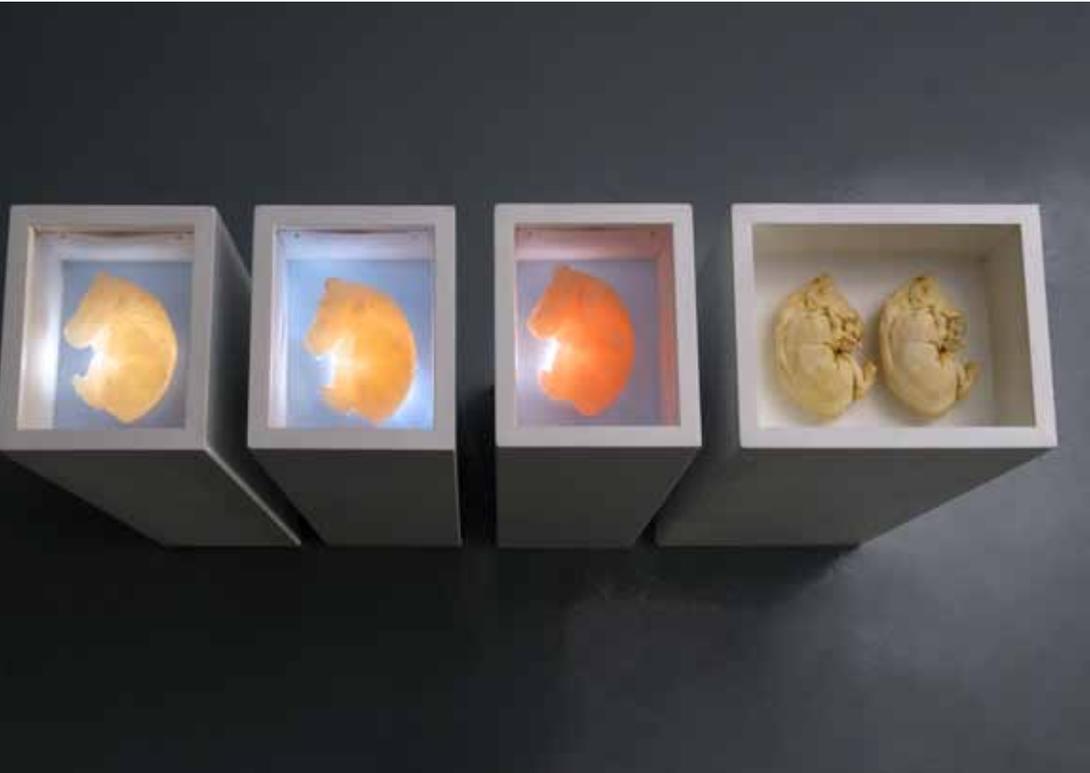
Lost light (Term 1; 2; 3; Lost, lost light) (2012)

Wood, paper, glass, wax and silicone

Term 1, 2, 3 - 19 x 15 x 70 cm each

Lost, lost light - 25 x 19 x 70 cm





Look away I (Term 1; 2; 3; Look away, look away) (2012)

Wood, paper, glass and silicone

Term 1, 2, 3 - 19 x 15 x 70 cm each

Look away, look away - 25 x 19 x 70 cm



Detail From: *Look away II (Term 1; 2; 3)* (2012)
Wood, paper, glass and silicone
19 x 15 x 70 cm each



fig 1.

It's fleece was white as snow

Stella Viljoen

Elizabeth Gunter grew up on a farm called Rhenosterfontein in the Southern Cape. Her father studied to become an electrical engineer, but turned farmer. Her mother was a nurse who became a farmer's wife. Their farm had different kinds of livestock including Merino sheep, a breed known for their beautiful wool but frail bodies. Gunter says the Merino lambs died by the hundreds every year so her father bought a herd of Dorper sheep, a more robust breed with black heads, which he hoped to cross with the Merinos. Around the time Gunter was four or five, the first new lambs were born and her father gave her an orphan to rear by hand. Early every morning, while her family slept, Gunter would open the front door, walk to the enclosure next to the house and bring her lamb back through the house with her (its feet clicking on the floor behind her) and tuck it into bed next to her. Before the household would wake she would return the lamb to its camp, unaware that her parents were listening. In the 1800s the nursery rhyme, *Mary had a little lamb*, was used to teach children the reciprocal nature of love ("for everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go"). When the school children in the rhyme ask their teacher "why does the lamb love Mary so?", the teacher replies "for Mary loves the lamb, you know."

With *Fugitive Lives*, Gunter brings to term a fascination with animals that may have started as a clandestine relationship with a lamb but has developed into a lifelong commitment to exploring the perils of being in relationships in a much broader sense. She uses animals as a visual lexicon that affords her the possibility of intimacy and distance, the

domestic and civic. The collection of drawings and sculptural objects is centred on three different animals: rhinoceros, elephant and buffalo. In the object series entitled, *Look Away*, three rhinoceros infants or foetuses lie in separate plinths. Each is sunken into a paper-lined nest and illuminated from below. Their pink, silicon flesh grows progressively darker and less transparent with each 'term'. The fourth and last plinth holds two ivory-like babes, graven images placed neatly side by side. No longer alone, their petrified bodies attest to the stubbornness with which they were prematurely left for dead by the artist. In a second rhinoceros series the calves lie with their feet tucked upward in the air, one of which has a bruised blue colour, an accident that Gunter thinks is revealing of the process of 'making' as an interplay between control and resignation. In *Final Term* infants are boxed in 'carton' punnets and installed in rows against the wall and floor. The plastic figurines perhaps warn that the pleasure we take in our own grief, the packaging thereof as an aesthetic experience, robs us of the ability to heal from our loss. The repetitive force of the packages begs the question of whether one must be dead to be seen. Drawing is an obvious inscription of the artist's hand, but less obvious is the autographic mark-making that connects the sculptural object to the artist in an almost existential way. The inclusion of Gunter's cut hair in some of the animal bodies resembles fine charcoal hatching on the skin and serves to bind the drawings and objects together. Some of the animals are cast in wax, others in silicone or glass, materials used with sardonic irony to suggest the aesthetic posturing prevalent in morally laden art and which the artist herself is guilty of. But the choice of material also makes poetic reference to the literal stages of completion of the animals as they are made and grow, the fatal effects of learning, knowing and becoming.

The power of the artist to give life and body to an abstract conception is more immediately obvious in objects made by hand

than an image drawn which is perhaps why Gunter felt the need to materially embody her animal-subjects. But the drawings she has made for this series vaunt an ability to 'embody' that though hidden from view is intuitively felt by the viewer. The generative act so openly confessed in the sculptures is now concealed by the artist's desire to brazenly perfect, a need pulled over the flesh of her creation like a skin. In the drawings of animals (especially dogs) for which Gunter has previously garnered acclaim, the bodies of the animals are made real and tangible through the knowing precision of her gaze. In a drawing of her dog, made in 2003 and entitled *Rou* ('Mourning'), for instance, the fact of the dog's physical presence in the artist's space is a primary awareness in the mind of the viewer as he or she contemplates the being depicted. We are impressed with Gunter's ability to know this animal and its body so intimately and render what she sees with what Deborah describes as a "palpable pulse of life".¹ The drawings in *Fugitive Lives* demonstrate a different kind of knowing since the artist has no infant buffalo or elephant from which to work. Instead, and this is where the mystery and alchemy of the creative process lies, she has built the bodies of these animals from the bone up. In the absence of live references Gunter relied on a photograph of a rhino skeleton found on the internet (fig 1). Her physical enfleshment of each animal, like that of a forensic artist, implies fabrication but also recollection so that the gestures, proportions and postures of each foetus are her own. The artist explains how she would touch her own shoulder blade or elbow whilst drawing the anatomy of animals. As viewer, I wonder at the intuitive force of Gunter's imagination in engineering such life-like animals that I feel like I am with the infant buffalo, watching it learn to stand. The visual reference that inspired the buffalo in *Twin I*, the first drawing in the series, was a photograph of a still born buffalo, deceased because of its overly long and deformed limbs.

¹ Posel, D. 2007. Vulnerabilities, In *Spier Contemporary Catalogue*, edited by J Pather. Cape Town: Africa Centre:25-27.

Whereas the two buffalo calves in *Twin I* are merely cohabiting the same page, in *Twin II* they are truly together. Again a posture Gunter felt rather than saw. Instead of evading the sentimentality a cynical viewer will read in this rendering of sensation, Gunter embalms her calves in cuteness. The baby elephant in *Lost light I* exudes the cuddly familiarity of a Beatrix Potter character but the drawing assuages the impotence of picture-book anthropomorphism with an affecting embodiment of vulnerability, a rhetorical strategy more *Animal Farm* than *Peter Rabbit*.

Gunter's enduring engagement with discourses of animal and human power relations, the conflict as well as the tenderness and identification at the heart of this, plays out in an intensely personal way but she clearly also situates this discussion in a distinctly African arena. Though removed from the clichéd syntax of dystopian tableaux and overstatements about class, her work is political, an attribute most evident in what she omits from view. The images include none of the frantic signalling that typically accompany 'political' art. Gunter, in fact, seems to deliberately exclude references to the violence committed against these animals, a sign of her sensitivity to the power of this rhetoric to render its subjects more precarious. Yet, this body of work does more than charm the eyes, to paraphrase Denis Diderot, it has the power to "move me, astonish me, rend me; make me shudder, weep, tremble; fill me with indignation"² at the impotence of government. The claustrophobic detail of each drawing and sculpture stresses, by contrast, the neglect of those with power. With threatening clarity Gunter sheds light on the inequality at the core of animal-human interaction.

As John Berger explains in his 1977 essay, *Why look at animals?*, prior to the nineteenth century families of different classes kept domestic animals for their useful contribution to daily life, whether as

² See Rosenblum, J. 2006. Denis Diderot. In *Great Lives from History: The 18th Century*, edited by J Powell. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press. Available: <http://bit.ly/PD0qH1>

guard dogs, hunting dogs or mice-killing cats. The keeping of animals for sentimental rather than practical reasons, at least on the scale that it is done today, is a modern occurrence according to Berger. He relates the popularity of such 'pets' to a "universal but personal withdrawal into the private small family unit, decorated or furnished with mementos from the outside world".³ *Fugitive Lives* breaks with Gunter's prior interest in literal pets and moves the viewer on a more public terrain. And yet, even these wild animals feel like pets, only useful in a cloying metaphoric way.

Berger comments, "a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man."⁴

Stella Viljoen is a senior lecturer in the Department of Visual Arts, Stellenbosch University

³ In Berger, J. 1980. *About Looking*. New York: Pantheon: 14.

⁴ *Ibid*: 5.

Biographies

Keith Dietrich (born in Johannesburg, 1950) studied graphic design at Stellenbosch University where he graduated with a BA degree in Visual Arts in 1974. Between 1975 and 1977 he studied painting at the National Higher Institute for Fine Arts in Antwerp, Belgium. He obtained his MA in Fine Arts (cum laude) in 1983 and his D Litt et Phil in Art History in 1993, both at the University of South Africa (Unisa). He has lectured at the University of Pretoria and Unisa, and is currently Chair of the Department of Visual Arts and Director of the Centre for Comic, Illustrative and Book Arts (CCIBA) at Stellenbosch University. Dietrich has participated in over thirty community interaction projects in southern Africa and has received a number of awards, in South Africa and abroad, for both his creative and his academic work. He has participated in over 70 group exhibitions and biennials in Belgium, Botswana, Chile, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Namibia, the Netherlands, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the USA, and has held 20 solo exhibitions in South Africa. His work is represented in 37 corporate and public collections in South Africa and abroad.

Elizabeth Gunter (born 1957) studied Fine Art at Stellenbosch University, where she graduated with a BA degree in Visual Arts in 1978. She obtained Honours (1980) and Masters (1984) degrees in Fine Arts and a PhD degree in Visual Arts (2011) from the same university. She has lectured art at various institutions and is currently at the Visual Arts Department at Stellenbosch University, where she founded the DeCentre Drawing Project. She has had several solo exhibitions in the Western Cape, and has participated in numerous group exhibitions. Her work is represented in private, corporate, and public collections both in South Africa and abroad.

Acknowledgements

Keith Dietrich:

I wish to acknowledge the following people for their contributions to this body of work. Firstly, many thanks to Prof Hans Heese for allowing me to use the material he researched for his publication *Reg en Onreg: Kaapse Regspraak in die Agtiende Eeu* (Justice and Injustice: Administration of Justice at the Cape in the Eighteenth Century) published in 1994 by the University of the Western Cape. A very special thanks to Peter-John Freeman for assisting me with the photography, Hélène van Aswegen and Gussie van der Merwe for helping to assemble the artworks, and to Hélène for her astute advice and support, and for binding the books. I am also grateful to my wife Linde and Francois Tredoux for proofreading the material for the artworks and book, and to Lize van Robbroeck for the article she wrote for this catalogue. Lastly, thanks to Marlene van Niekerk and Elizabeth Gunter for their critical advice and support, and to Gavin Davids, Yumna Williams, Neil le Roux and Lukas Goeieman who kindly modelled for the photographs.

Elizabeth Gunter:

I am grateful to Mr Patrick Esterhuizen for building the plinths, to Keith Dietrich for his unflagging generosity and patience, to Verna Jooste for practical advice and boundless support, to Dr Stella Viljoen for her thoughtful insight and understanding, and to Frans Badenhorst for a secret confidence.

Specials thanks to:

Fiona Mauchan and the BRUNDYN+GONSALVES gallery.

Catalogue no.17

Fragile Histories | Fugitive Lives
10 October - 21 November 2012
Kieth Dietrich and Elizabeth Gunter

Essays by Lize van Robbroek and Stella Viljoen

Design by James William King

Photo Credits
Pages 8 - 15: Keith Dietrich
Pages 16 - 27: Mike Hall

Published by:
BRUNDYN + GONSALVES
71 Loop Street, Cape Town 8001
www.brundyngonsalves.com
info@brundyngonsalves.com

Printed by Hansa Print in Cape Town
© 2012, BRUNDYN + GONSALVES and the authors
No text can be reprinted without the written permission of the authors.

Printed on Munken Pure
Typeset in Avenir

ISBN: 978-0-620-54582-2