

JOHN WALTERS

After Baines

AFTER BAINES

The opening speech delivered by Emeritus Professor Paul Walters, for the showing of the work in Grahamstown, November 2010.

All the works in this exhibition reference the life and work of Thomas Baines (1820-1875) in a multiplicity of ways – as a careful perusal will reveal. Having been created between 2008 and 2010, they are obviously “after” Baines in the chronological sense, but are also “after” Baines in the sense used by engravers of masterpieces (those early producers of multiple copies). The works, however, are “after” Baines in even more complex senses in that they consciously and deliberately quote, play with, juxtapose and even reinvent both the works and the figure of Thomas Baines.

Walters’ work was conceived as a painterly way for a young white artist of British descent, working in the Eastern Cape in the 21st century, to interrogate and critically reflect on what it means to be so situated and so identified.

Walters sees himself as very much within the “culture of painting”, a culture where artists freely reference (“imitate”) the work of other artists. A long-standing interest of his has been history painting, especially the work of Jacques-Louis David and Caravaggio. Referencing, however, is not “copying” in a mechanical sense: it involves a deep understanding of the artist’s work and technique, and the re-presenting them in a new and different artistic context which may often involve an element of profound parody or intertextuality (if one regards paintings as “texts”).

The exhibition consists of three suites of canvases: *Before*, *Genesis*, and *Tableau*.

Tableau, was first in order of creation, and consists of three large canvases in which Walters has approached and re-presented both “the figure of Baines” – picking up from photographs ways in which Baines wished himself to be represented – and the work of Baines: three well-known representations of Grahamstown. Given that *After Baines* was first hung in a gallery situated within the Albany History Museum, where the original Baines paintings

are kept, there was an element of “installation art” about this first public context – as Ms Christine Dixie, Walters’ Masters supervisor, pointed out. Ms Dixie also pointed out that, given the scale of the figures in *Tableau*, there was also an element of “performance art” about these canvases as viewers and painted figures seem to interact with one another.

When confronted by the three canvases in *Tableau*, we are able to see creator and creation bracketed in new and challenging ways, but we also see the familiar Baines paintings through a veil of colour – a colour carefully mixed so as to reference the colour most frequently used to represent the skin of “white” people. (This colour is still marketed by some manufacturers as “flesh tone”!) Thus these canvases raise such questions as “How did Baines ‘see’ Grahamstown?” “How did Baines ‘see’ himself in Grahamstown?”

Let us now turn to the ten canvases in the suite entitled *Before*. The status of these canvases is deliberately ambiguous in order to foreground several of the ambiguities/ambivalences which necessarily surround Baines’s (and – by extension – the Imperial) project. While giving the impression of – or masquerading as – sketches on paper, these works are in fact digital inkjet prints on canvas. Only two of the 10 panels reference Baines directly: *Panel Two*, which draws on Baines’s *Self-portrait at the age of 38*, and *Panel Four*, which draws on an undated Baines sketch of Table Mountain. Together with the other 8 panels, however, *Before* attempts to represent a figure of Baines, albeit one in which the artist’s imagination is given full play. As a whole, the series attempts to foreground several ambiguities around the figure of Baines:

1. Trained originally as a coach painter, Baines considered his sketches, watercolours and paintings to be objective records of reality – much as we today might regard photographs (before the advent of Photoshop). Artists, however, even while seeming to represent reality, are capable of offering landscapes which – however realistic they appear to be – exist only in their imaginations or on their canvases. A well known example would be the popular Eighteenth-Century genre of Capriccios in which artists arranged classical ruins in wholly invented juxtapositions and localities in order to produce an aesthetically pleasing composition which defied their real settings. Thus, too, Baines the “realist”, could lecture at the London Polytechnic on Abyssinia – without ever having set foot there. Baines’ landscapes are discernibly influenced by the style and subject matter favoured by the Romantic

movement, and are “full of wild scenery” which is often at odds with the actual topography of the putative site, and so raise the ambiguities which surround the interplay of subjective and objective when one begins to ask “where” Baines’ landscapes actually exist/ed.

2. Further ambiguities posed by the *Before* suite include generic ones inherent in the problematic “Imperial gaze” directed towards new potential colonies, and the trope of “Africa as Eden”.

The series *Genesis* uses the Biblical narrative of the seven days of Creation as a conceptual framework in which to present seven “events” imagined as occurring in the course of the British colonisation of the Eastern Cape – events which played no small part in the shaping (or notional “genesis”) of a white African identity. Five paintings directly reference pictures by Baines; all are uniformly rendered in a single diluted “white-flesh” tone. Observing literally the idea of “day”, the artist limited himself to 24 hours to the actual production of each canvas.

The first five panels of *Genesis* are quotations from Baines paintings. Though not all are set in South Africa: *Day 3* is set in Australia (which Baines actually visited), and *Day Four* in Mashonaland and is entitled *The Discovery of Gold*. The figure of Baines in *Day 6* is taken from a photograph of Baines entitled *The Shadowless Man at Noon*, where Baines the Explorer is represented as the colonised-object, and the present artist as the colonising subject. This panel foregrounds the problems of presentation and representation – the so-called “politics of painting”. The seventh and final panel, with its deliberate interplay of the “muddy flesh-tone” and “black-and white” plays with and leads on to the first panel of *Tableau*.



Day 1, Day 2, Day 3 from Genesis
2010, oil on canvas, series of seven panels
Each panel: 50 x 78.5cm



Day 4 from Genesis
2010, oil on canvas, series of seven panels
Each panel: 50 x 78.5cm



Day 5 from Genesis
2010, oil on canvas, series of seven panels
Each panel: 50 x 78.5cm



Day 6 from Genesis
2010, oil on canvas, series of seven panels
Each panel: 50 x 78.5cm



Day 7 from Genesis
2010, oil on canvas, series of seven panels
Each panel: 50 x 78.5cm

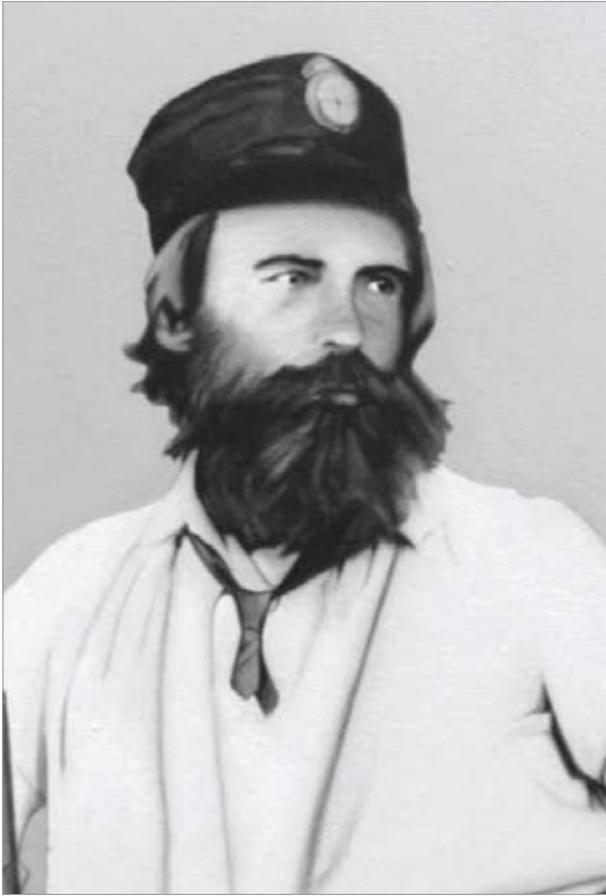


Tableau
2010, oil on canvas, triptych
Each panel: 175 x 275 cm





Details from *Tableau*





1



2



3

THIS PAGE AND NEXT PAGE

Before

2010, archival Giclée print on canvas, series of ten panels

Each panel: 38.5 x 51 cm

4



7



5



8



6



9





QUOTATIONS

A selection of quotations taken from readings relevant in the compilation of Walters' Masters thesis.

ON THE PICTURESQUE

Gilpin enlarged Burke's category of beauty to include the species 'picturesque' in addition to the 'beautiful'. "Disputes about beauty might perhaps be involved in less confusion, if a distinction were established, which certainly exists, between such objects as are beautiful and such as are picturesque – between those, which please the eye in their natural state; and those, which please from some quality, capable of being illustrated by painting." By virtue of their roughness, irregularity, and variousness, picturesque objects were better suited for painting than beautiful ones, whose smooth, neat qualities lacked pictorial definition. To illustrate this rule, Gilpin compared a landscape drawn on Burke's principles of the beautiful with the same landscape enriched with irregular mountains, shaggy trees and a zigzagging road. Gilpin's point was that a beautiful scene, to be represented in painting, must be mixed with elements of the picturesque – formally derived from Claude and Gainsborough.

Ann Bermingham. 1986 (pp.63-64). Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860. California: University of California Press.

RIGHT

Examples of work by The Reverend William Gilpin, an English artist, clergyman, schoolmaster, and author, best known as one of the originators of the idea of the picturesque. Walters has directly referenced these images in the last panel of the series *Before*.



ON WHITENESS

In order to expose historical fictions, one has to confront them head-on and this inevitably involves some complicity.

Penny Siopis. 1999 (p.225). 'Dissenting detail: Another story of art and politics in South Africa', in B. Atkinson & C. Brietz (eds.) Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art. Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill Press, pp.245-266.

White people, you might say, all suffer from snow blindness. But I, too, am 'white.' Before I could write those chapters on white objectivity, before I could think them, I had to escape the mind-numbing assumptions that had shaped my own generic identity for five decades. By definition, I could not do that by myself. To see ourselves we need something or someone outside ourselves. To glimpse the outlines of my whitehood I needed the perspective of someone who was not white.

Gary Taylor. 2005 (p.14). Buying Whiteness: Race, Culture, and Identity from Columbus to Hip-Hop. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

ON BEFORE

[The] idea of a pre-European Africa of innocence is firstly false and more importantly it obscures the strange contradictory relationship between Western conquest and the tribalism that still endures. This utopian Africa of mysticism, spiritual healing, untamed nature, is not unlike the Africa as Eden in the paintings of the famous South African landscape artists.

William Kentridge. 2003 (p.108). 'Artist's Writings' in William Kentridge. London: Phaidon, pp.102-143.

ON TABLEAU

tableau, *n.*

1. A vivid or picturesque scene or description; (also) a picture, a painting.
2. a. A group of people or objects positioned so as to form a vivid or picturesque scene.
2. b. *Theatre*. A representation of the action at some stage in a play (esp. a critical one), created by the actors suddenly holding their positions. Also a stage direction; hence (in extended use) as int., drawing attention to a dramatic scene or situation.

Entry from the Oxford English Dictionary Online (2010) at <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

And in our own day the 'history' picture has become a tableau [...] (Levey 1981: 65)

Levey, M. 1981 (p.65). The Painter Depicted: Painters as Subject Matter in Painting. Hampshire: Thames and Hudson.

ON GENESIS

genesis, *n.*

1. With capital initial. (The name of) the first book of the Bible, which includes the stories of the creation of the world [...]
- 3.a. The action of building up from simple or basic elements to more complex ones; composition.
4. The origin or mode of formation of something. In early use chiefly with allusion to sense 1.

Entry from the Oxford English Dictionary Online (2010) at <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1983 in Grahamstown, John Walters has recently graduated with a Master of Fine Art degree from Rhodes University, supervised by critically acclaimed South African artist Christine Dixie. Throughout Walters' outstanding academic career he has been awarded numerous bursaries and awards. Walters lives and works in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

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