ART OF AFRICA

INSPIRED BY THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE LAND AND THE TRAUMAS OF THE APARTHEID ERA, CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS, SAYS **BEN LEWIS**, HAVE CREATED THEIR OWN CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED SCHOOL

LIONEL SMIT The inspiration for this artist's large-scale portraits comes from everyday people, re-interpreted to reflect the 'turmoils, beauty and the energy that South Africa radiates', as this portrait 'Malay Girl' shows

STEVE CORNER

DYLAN LEWIS Four years studying taxidermy and museum display in the Eighties helped Lewis master his understanding of structural anatomy. He creates his archetypal animal forms from his studio in Stellenbosch

In the last 20 years – amid the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, the spread of free-market economies to new parts of the world and growth of globalisation – new contemporary art cultures have taken shape where before little was visible. The new globalised contemporary art world now embraces Asia, India, the Middle East and South America. The movement has its own international language, of minimalist grids, conceptual neon epigrams, large-format architectural photography, Pop Art paintings and one-take documentary films, not to mention art fairs, biennales and private collections.

But there are also differences between places and – unfashionable and simplifying as it is to say it – there are sometimes collective activities that resemble national schools. Thus Polish artists are often distinguished by their nostalgic engagement with modernism; East Germany is notable for its allegorical paintings; the Chinese for their communist-styled Pop Art.

South Africa has participated in this dramatic and expansive opening up of the field of contemporary art since 1989: the end of Apartheid followed the fall of the Wall. And among the

PASSIONATE FIGURATION IS ARTICULATED WITH SURREAL, EXPRESSIONIST STYLE

diversity of South African art today, the traces of a distinctive national school can be discerned among some artists. There is a traditional but passionate figuration, articulated in a classic 20th-century stylistic fusion of expressionism and surrealism. There is an interest in the primitive, the mythological and the dreamworld. The richly textured brushwork, sculptures and prints hark back to the spontaneity of the late 19th-century oil sketch or clay study, but it also sometimes takes on a modern technological form such as animation. Works by some of the South African artists who represent this school are now on show at the Delaire Graff Estate, among them Deborah Bell, Dylan Lewis, Lionel Smit and William Kentridge, the most internationally renowned of all South African artists.

Born in 1957, Deborah Bell, one of Johannesburg's leading artists, works in painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics and – like William Kentridge – in animation. Bell has collaborated with Kentridge on several projects, including the play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. Her paintings and prints are populated by lions, eagles and mythological creatures, distributed in spaces that

seem at once mystical and diagrammatic: surrealist rooms filled with strange objects, linked by over-painted networks of lines, notations and words.

Like many contemporary South African artists, her work has little to do with the minimalist and conceptual ideas that are so popular in the international contemporary art scene; instead she looks back to much older traditions. Her sculptures are inspired by the artefacts, figurines and vessels found in ancient tombs and archeological sites.

Mesopotamia? Sumer? Egypt? Benin? Bell's artefacts recall – 'syncretise', an art historian might say – all these ancient civilisations at once, as symbols of a long-dormant notion of art. 'I have numerous notebooks filled with recordings of images that have drawn my attention,' she explains. 'In my travelling I devote a lot of my time to visiting museums and making quick visual notations from objects that "spark" for me. I am not interested in their historical context, or even where they come from. Often, a page in my notebook will be filled with an overlapping of different images, that in turn will suggest a poetic metaphor which will lead to a new work. Often the resulting work has very little to do with the original sketch, and even less to do with the source of the sketch.'

For 20 years, Bell has been concerned with a return to an ancient definition of art as something that contains spiritual power or plays a part in religious ritual, like talismans and totems. 'In the late Eighties, I was making large paintings in oil, using the themes of interactions between men and women as a way of exploring power and the politics of apartheid,' she recalls. 'I still remember being in an exhibition of lots of large important "political" work, which dealt with irony and resistance, and wandering into another room where the permanent collection of African artefacts was being displayed. For some reason I really looked at those works, and saw them in a new way. I became aware that each small carving was imbued with a power that the large, self-important paintings in the other room did not possess. It has taken me many years to explore this further. Here, in South Africa, we still have a sense and connection with the use of such power; we work with sangomas – our word for shamans. It is part of the culture. Since that time, I have also embarked on a spiritual journey and esoteric study of the ancient mysteries.'

'WE WORK WITH SANGOMAS, OUR WORD FOR SHAMANS. IT IS PART OF THE CULTURE'

South African artists' commitment to figuration finds another form in the work of Dylan Lewis, 46, whose studio is in Stellenbosch. Born into a family with generations of artists, Lewis studied fine art at Cape Technikon in Cape Town and then spent four years working at Rondevlei Nature Reserve in the Eighties, studying taxidermy and museum display. His rough-hewn bronzes of cheetahs, springboks and other animals, frozen in dynamic movements, look like they have just leapt out of a South African wildlife reserve, and are symbols of a pre-historic mode of human existence.

'I'm not an urban person,' Lewis told me. 'I spend a lot of time in the wilderness, in primitive spaces in South Africa and internationally. I am drawn to the animals that inhabit this landscape as the subject matter for my art. I settled on the big cats as archetypal symbols of wilderness space because, in mythological terms, they are the guardians of wilderness. The tiger is guardian of the jungle and the lion of the savannah. When I go into a wilderness area, I find that a sense of clarity in my life emerges – a quality of timelessness, of feeling relaxed. What I put that down to in my own personal story is that for millions of years, this is where I have lived. Although I have lived all my life in a semi-urban environment, my genetic life is in those places. For me it's about acknowledging that something has been lost. We can't go back. But equally, if we follow the path we are on, we might end it all. We are in a very complex and perplexing space as a species.'

Lewis's sculptures have their roots within the 19th-century tradition of the 'animaliers', that is, artists who specialise in depicting animals: among them Antoine-Louis Barye and Sir Edwin Landseer. However, in Lewis's hands, this tradition re-emerges in a highly modern idiom. His sculptures have a spontaneity and roughness that is redolent of Rodin and evocative of Epstein.

'From a distance, my sculptures of animals appear to be literal and classical in their forms,' Lewis says. 'But I transform the surfaces – the skin of the animals – like abstract landscapes. The surfaces of my sculptures are a response to the feeling of what it's like to be in a wild landscape. They echo the fissures of rock, overhangs, the textures of grass, wood and stone. I also leave my handprints in the surface of the clay. For me that has an aesthetic quality – the human handprint is in itself a very ancient art form.'

Lewis's sculptures take the form not only of full figures but as fragments of the body, like heads and torsos. 'The fragmented form interests me in an aesthetic sense. It is an unusual way of treating animal forms. I think it has something to do with the landscape, particularly broken rock forms.' In recent years he has also been making equally vigorous human figures whose classical poses link him once again to other mythologically

ROBIN GLANVILLE

LEWIS AND BELL 'Sitting Cheetahs', **top**, by Dylan Lewis, is now housed in the grounds of the Delaire Graff Estate. Deborah Bell, **above**, finds inspiration in the spiritual themes of Africa

KENTRIDGE AND SMIT William Kentridge's untitled head, **top**, uses charcoals with block colour, typical of the artist. The piece hangs in the restaurant at Delaire. Smit's 'African Woman', **above**, hangs in the wine lounge

orientated contemporary South African artists. An artist with little time for swiftly changing trends in contemporary art, he says: 'I aspire to sculpt in the way Beethoven, Bach or Rachmaninov composed and played, with passion, skill, beauty and a masterful understanding of their craft. These qualities are not fashionable in the art world of today, but then I've never been a slave of fashion.'

South African art is now firmly established as part of the international art market, but few artists have done as phenomenally well as Dylan Lewis. In 2007, a year before Damien Hirst, Lewis held a solo auction of his work at Christie's in London. Seventy-five of his trademark energetic bronzes of wild animals sold for a total value of $3.7m in just 90 minutes.

Born in 1982, Cape Town-based Lionel Smit is known for his huge portraits of black African men and women. As Smit describes, 'I am being confronted with the fact that I live in Africa, and I draw from the people I see in my daily life. The women give me the subtle but strong imagery that I subconsciously seek in my subjects. These are regular people that I have selected to become part of my process. It might be that they start to change into imaginary images, but the story is definitely part of a bigger idea or concept of the human condition.'

KENTRIDGE HAS VIRTUALLY INVENTED HIS OWN GENRE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Magnified several times bigger than life size, like a massive image on a billboard, Smit's faces are constructed from large but deftly placed brushstrokes and a bold palette that immediately recalls an enlarged version of early 20th-century artists such as Kokoschka and Schmidt-Rottluff. Close up, these human-height portraits dissolve into an array of gestural brushwork – they are at once figurative and abstract.

'The scale is part of the viewer's experience while investigating the work,' Smit explains. 'It allows me to engage the viewer with the surface area up close, as he or she investigates the drips and swathes of paint. I want them to see that it is only paint, then discover that image and the power of the portait as they step away.'

In these iconic and heroic images of post-apartheid South Africa, the faces display a mixture of pride, stoicism, fortitude with the tribulations of oppression and struggle. 'The people I paint are part of the turmoil, beauty and the energy South Africa radiates,' says Smit. Not just an enthusiastic collector, Laurence Graff has played a part in placing artists like Smit in the heart of the international art market. In October 2009, coinciding with the Frieze Art Fair week in London, he invited Smit to contribute a new painting for an auction in aid of his own African charity, FACET, at Christie's.

But, of all contemporary South African artists, one is perhaps better known than all the rest. William Kentridge was named last year in *Time* magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world, and is the subject of numerous exhibitions at museums in Europe and America.

Fifty-five-year-old Kentridge exemplifies South African artists' ability to command international critical acclaim, making resolutely classical work in modern idioms. A brilliant printer and draughtsman, Kentridge has virtually invented his own genre of contemporary art, in the form of multi-screen installations of drawn animations. Typically, he will film a drawing, erase and redraw parts, and film it again to create his animations. They are executed in a sombre palette, almost exclusively black and white, always using charcoal and pastel. Political and psychological, his works on paper and film are often set in an ecologically and politically traumatised – or in the words of Cape Town-born author JM Coetzee, 'devastated' – landscape around Johannesburg, with its 'dumps and slime dams; pylons and power cables; roads and tracks that lead from nowhere to nowhere,' he concludes. A swiftly changing array of images – from suburban swimming pools, skyscrapers and security apparatus to townships, displaced and dispossessed crowds, colonial engravings, hospital paraphernalia, maps and anatomical dissections, botanical drawings are sketched in, erased and over-drawn in the artist's dream-like (did I use that expression again in the context of describing South African art?) representation of contemporary South Africa.

Kentridge's humanist depiction of South Africa may be bleak, but it is not hopeless – there is an enormous amount of determination, nobility and honesty to be found in the struggling characters that fill his works. Whether it is the personificiation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the character of Soho Eckstein in 'History of the Main Complaint' (1996), or the typological exodus of 'Shadow Procession' (1999) in which cardboard silhouettes of oppressed black South Africans trudge their way slowly across the screen, these qualities are intrinsic within Kentridge's work.

All these South African artists celebrate the heritage of their country – its magnificent landscape and multiculturalism – and all mark the distance it has travelled since the end of apartheid. But all also indicate, in different ways, the long road that still lies ahead.