

Distance

by Sarah Biggs & Kirsten Lilford

How far do you travel before you can't go back?

By Natasha Norman

“The reader, “ observes Charles Simic, the American poet, “identifies with the work of literature, the critic keeps a distance in order to see the shape it makes. The reader is after pleasure, the critic wants to understand how it works.”[1]

I can't help thinking this observation of Simic's, despite being in relation to literature, has a particular pertinence in a reading of Biggs and Lilford's latest paintings, loosely grouped under the theme of 'distance.' Simic's identification of the amount of distance being relative to pleasure - where the more distance one experiences, the less pleasure one derives - is sometimes inverted, sometimes acknowledged but always converted into a conundrum in these works. In both Biggs' and Lilford's paintings, the idea of distance is, ironic to Simic, the theme of the viewer's pleasure.

For Biggs, distance emerges as a means of measuring or quantifying the landscape or field. Her little figures with their measuring yarn, backpacks and sun hats reference a rather romantic idea of the scientist with the butterfly net, out in the field doing research. She notes the poetry of such a seemingly analogue activity given the wealth of now digitally generated information and research methods. This figure in each of Biggs' landscapes can be read as a self-portrait of the artist, engaging in the research of a painted field. The visual references for Biggs' landscapes are almost all photographs, found images, reimagined in the context of paint. As such, there is a sense that the artist is looking at the painted surface from a particular critical distance in order to understand 'how it works.' But this critical gaze is also made pleasurable in terms of the intimate reading of the surface of paint that subverts the logic of a critical distance to a distance made pleasurable through paint. Reading Biggs' works, I am left with the impression of a painted space that is identified as the fieldwork of the artist: a place of colour but also uncertainty and solitude.

Lilford returns to her subject matter of white middle-class suburbia but employs her theme of distance to a new critical seam that sees the figure of the white middle-class enter a new alienation to their environment. Lilford seems to be exploring how far the figures can be moved from their signifiers of a particular kind of white suburbia (associated in her earlier work with vibracrete walls and sun umbrellas). She seems to beg the question about whether these subjects can ever escape their suburban reality? For even the image of a non-descript family by the river on a boating holiday seems to suggest the same socio-economic (and hence in the South African context, racial) reality as her earlier works about the weekend braai by the swimming pool. It is the very fact of their leisure that so firmly identifies their class. Despite a blurring of faces, these figures retain their identity in their postures of the bourgeoisie – the very same subject of the Impressionist painters. Taking the figure into new contexts appears to be Lilford's way of distancing her subject from the trappings of their class, but her explorations only serve to reveal their identity again in a new way.

Concurrently it is the move to solitude that unites the figures in Biggs' and Lilford's works. Perhaps it is here as Roy Robins notes in an observation of the Cape Townian poet, Stephan Watson's work, that: “Solitude invites reflection, and reflection takes its form in division and self doubt. Only the landscape is permanent, and sometimes not even that.” [2]

1. Charles Simic in Stephen Watson 2010 *The Music in the Ice: On Writers, Writing and Other Things* Penguin Books: South Africa, xiv.
2. Roy Robins 2011 'Stephen Watson' on *Poetry International* Website <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/19041/10/Stephen-Watson> [Accessed 10 September 2014].

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