



Hodgins, Robert Griffiths (1920-); "Family in a Barren Field"; Oil on Canvas; 91.5 x 121.5cm; Signed: "Hodgins" (Versa); Dated: 2003

South African Modern Art

No Longer Hidden in Plain Sight

The market for South African 20th Century art has increased dramatically in the past few years, with record prices being paid both locally and abroad for works by artists such as Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, Gerard Sekoto and JH Pierneef. While works by these and other South African modern artists have always been prized by local collectors, the sharp escalation in the prices of their work internationally is attributable to several key factors.

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Villa, Edoardo (1915-); "Mother and Child"; Bronze; 298 x 80 x 50cm; Signed: "Villa" (Left/Side); Dated: 1983 (Cast: 2004)

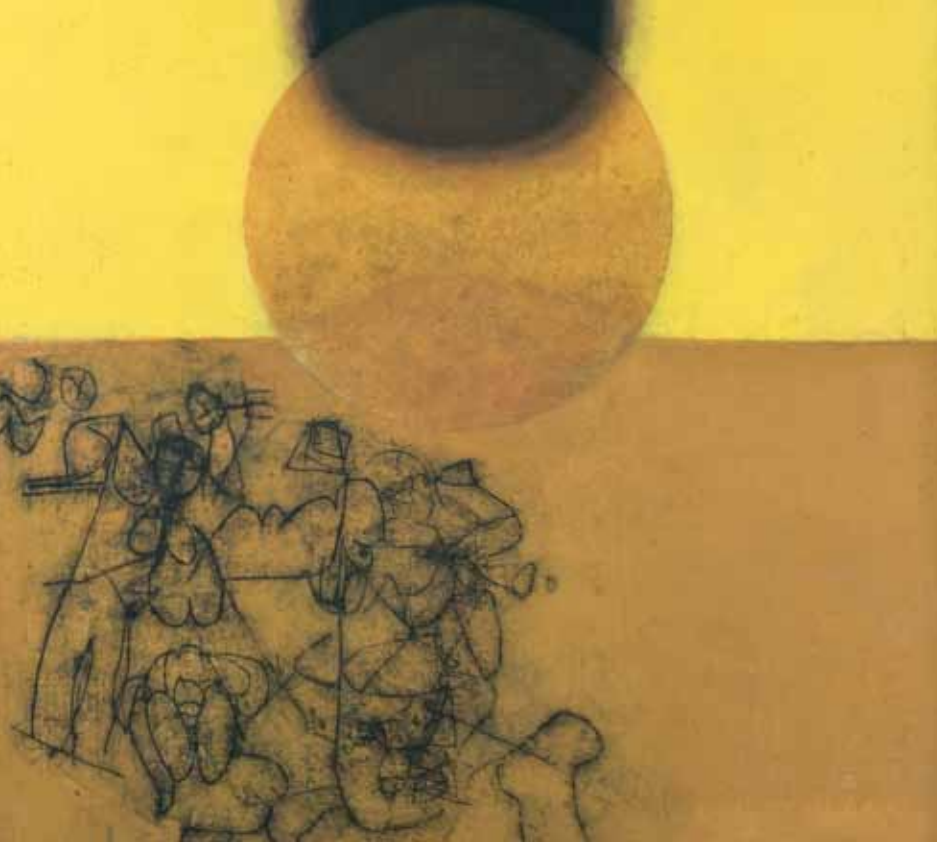
South African modern art was, for a long time, hidden in plain sight. The country's remote location, later coupled with political isolation, meant that while the art developed its own exceptional character, this was largely invisible to the international market. The increasing interest in South African modern art has drawn attention to the myriad expressions of style and subject – from Impressionist Landscapes to Abstract Expressionist "colour field" paintings, which we associate with local modern art. This interest enabled us to focus attention on the ways in which local modern artists responded to the challenges of the 20th Century's artistic reinvention of form, colour and surface for its own sake.

Indeed, the interest in surface and the ways in which this can be manipulated to articulate the variety of ways in which the South African experience of modernity is envisioned, is perhaps one of the most salient factors of our modern art. In effect it suggests that what one might call a modern palimpsest; an interest in the expressive surface as much – in true modernist fashion – for its own sake, as for the extent to which it provides an insight into the layered complexities and contradictions of what it means to be a 20th Century South African artist. From the lustrous impasto of JEA Volschenk and Ruth Prowse to the

restrained austerity of JH Pierneef, the measured formalism of Douglas Portway and Edoardo Villa to the startling boldness of Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser: 20th Century South African art is a compelling record of the pursuit of an unmistakably South African vision. Taken collectively, their multiple surfaces, with all their varieties of form, subject, intention and effect, constitute a palimpsest as diverse and multi-layered as our society itself, and are a compelling evocation of WJT Mitchell's assertion that "we can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen."

In effect, these artworks challenge us, with Mitchell, to recognise that they have significance beyond their beguiling materiality; that their meanings are not necessarily to be found in intention or appearance but in the ways that they provoke us to think beyond their surfaces. This is as true of figurative painting, which invites us to willingly suspend disbelief and to experience vicariously a parallel universe of people, places and things, as it is of the abstract works with their infinite potential to express the otherwise inexpressible.

On the one hand, South African modern art is a microcosm of modernist movements: the fragmented brush strokes, spontaneity of form and interest in effects of light and shade of the late-blooming Impressionism that held sway over many of our artists in the early decades of the 20th Century are well represented in the work of Gwelo Goodman, Nita Spilhaus, Maud Sumner, and Ruth Prowse, among others. The aesthetic experimentation of the early 20th Century European avant-garde, with its bold arbitrariness of colour, distortions of form and utopian evocations of the "primitive," is the animating force behind the Expressionist style of Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, while the significance of form over content of mid-century High Modernism is masterfully evoked in Douglas Portway's elegiac colour fields and Edoardo Villa's elegantly refined steel sculptures. The trajectory is completed by the wryly Neo-



Portway, Douglas Owen (1922 - 1993); "Yellow Sun"; Oil on Canvas; 127 x 126.7cm; Signed: "Portway" (Lower/Left); Dated: 1969

Expressionist works of Robert Hodgins and Simon Stone with their ironic, post-modern reappraisal of the formal and contextual implications of these trends.

On the other hand, the overlapping histories that underscore these styles intertwine in a body of work that seems to speak – like great art everywhere – of one’s imagining of oneself in the world and one’s relationship to it. In the South African context, the inevitable corollaries of this imagining devolve around the implicit questions about self and other, power and belonging, memory

and history that lie under the surfaces of these works. Thus, the pale, subdued palette of JH Pierneef’s characteristically monumental and silent landscapes celebrates the majestic beauty of the pristine bushveld, while serving also to establish a regional style that is powerfully animated by deeply felt notions of identity and nationhood. The raw sensuality of Irma Stern’s lustrous images of the “exotic” are as compellingly beautiful as they are somehow deeply unsettling in their uncritical construction of otherness, while Maggie Laubser’s sensitive

Stern, Irma (1894 - 1966); "Cape Town Harbour"; Oil on Canvas; 69 x 87cm; Signed: "Irma Stern" (Lower/Left); Dated: 1959



meditations on notions of prelapsarian innocence in her portraits of young women also raise uncomfortable questions about racial stereotypes. The charming naïveté of Gladys Mgudlandlu’s style belies a deeply felt affirmation of anti-colonialist identity, and George Pemba’s figures are at once intensely intimate and personal while also bearing stark witness to the shared experience of black South Africans under Apartheid.

We simply cannot assume that the non-figurative works are purely academic essays in abstraction. In their subtle synthesis of European and African forms, Edoardo Villa’s elegantly stylized sculptures remind us that culture is never static, nor is it the exclusive preserve of one worldview. Beyond the surface of Douglas Portway’s seemingly empty fields of colour lie profound existential meditations on the anxieties and instabilities of post-Second World War life. Indeed, something about the tightly focused introspection of these works conveys a similar sense of what the American Abstract Expressionists Mark Rothko, Adolf Gottlieb and Barnett Newman described in 1943 as the only valid subject matter of art, namely that which is “tragic and timeless.” Thus, even in their self-conscious celebration of the seductive possibilities of form exploited for its sake, these artists recognise that the surface, no matter how seemingly complete, is always contingent – it cannot help but summon what lies beneath.

“We live amid surfaces,” Ralph Waldo Emerson tells us, “and the true art of life is to skate well on them.” Long hidden in plain sight, South African modern art, with its complex layering of intertwined histories and overlapping identities, now provides a compelling argument for the opposite view.

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