

Promised Land

Promised Land addresses a tender node somewhere between the endlessly enduring human pre-occupation with place in life, and the inescapability of our material return to soil after death. The question I raised in previous works was, ...What bond of blood or history produces in us that mythical sense of lifelong attachment to a place, even one we have never visited? Now, it is an attempt to understand the nature of our desire for that connection to place?

We seem to have a need for connection with place, no matter how we may choose to explain it. We may find an explanation for our primitive need for place in essential modern writings about early psychological development, in the need of the infant to experience the world through the mediating presence of its mother. She provides a larger presence who "predigests" and interprets reality; a friendly entity with which the baby may relate in order to exist and develop into itself.

We are anything but rational about place. Particularly around issues of birth and death, our responses do seem primitive. We make decisions about place most decisively and adamantly at a time when it may seem to matter the least. Suddenly, even jaded Western agnostics are concerned with the power of the symbolic joining forever of an individual life with a specific place. If we have the choice, and if tradition does not prescribe, we decide, as if it were a crucial practical necessity, where we want our children born and where we want to die and have our remains deposited "for eternity". Thereafter, so we believe, we may forever lay claim to that place. We will belong there and it will be there that our memory is most vividly evoked in the future.

Even if we have never done so previously, we succumb then to utopia.

But surely utopia is less about place than it is about our wish for it, and indeed, the folly of aspiring to it, since it cannot exist. Inherent in our use of the word is our acceptance of its impossibility. It was certainly true for Thomas More who coined the term in 1516 in his book, *Utopia*, and for whom the notion of "non-place" was a crucial one and a vital component of this place name*.

Our attachment to utopia is perhaps better understood if we recognise that what we look for in a heaven is not place but a state of being – the restoration to wholeness after death. We cannot abide the notion of our atomization at the end of life and we seek to be somehow reconstituted.

We choose distance from the physical remains of loved ones, but insist that it matters where their (and our own) remains end up. We are utterly amazed – horrified and awed – by the routine willingness of Tibetan Buddhists to commit the remains of their dead to vultures; because in this we recognize, and fail to relate to, the absolute commitment to, and complete acceptance of, transience in the physical. Even if we accept the transience of flesh, we continue to seek some kind of permanence in place.

My new collection of works alludes to death but does not fetishise it in mourning and loss. It does not pretend away the ash and dust of death – so sweetly spoken in defiance of desiccation and crushed bone – which sprinkle through the work in counter-defiance.

Considering that all life is transient and that there is no easy way to live mindfully of this fact, it seems necessary to credit death with a positive value rather than focus only on the empty space it leaves behind it?

This becomes enormously more difficult when death is premature, violent or of epidemic frequency. However, without putting too distant or cold an eye on death, I have attempted to separate death momentarily from grief and to give it another kind of weight. That of something completed ... the end of a rugged and trying task ... closing the circle ... completing a chapter ... lowering the curtain ... Retiring to Utopia.

*This name, [of the island in More's book] derived from the Greek *topos* ("place"), is qualified by the prefix *U-*, understood by More as the contraction of the negating *ou-*, ("non-place") and as the adjective *eu-* ("good-" or "right-place"). Françoise Choay, "Utopia and the Philosophical Status of Constructed Space" in *Utopia – The Search for the Ideal society in the Western World*, The New York Public Library/Oxford University Press, 2000.

A Conversation Between Karen Lazar & Anne McIlleron, November 2004

- K.. Let's try and touch on how we experience the salient aspects of the exhibition and how they relate. I see a persistent tension between the focus on ephemerality and that on mortality and all its associated images – such as the ash – on the one hand, and a utopian pull on the other.
- A.. There's a clear materiality to the work and all the objects it incorporates – washboards, chairs, a curtain, a table – this substantiality and solidness to the work; and then there's the intense awareness of ephemerality and transience. So there is that tension. The ash seems to embody that sense of transience more explicitly, and Bonita needs to enclose it and to keep the ash from floating away, from dispersing.
- K.. Do you pick up on her utopian impulse?
- A.. She starts out explaining a trajectory in her work, from a concern with place, and in recent work it being not so much about a connection to place but about a desire for that connection. Desire, which is about a reaching elsewhere, a reaching for something other... wanting something other, something beyond, something that is not. And it is, in one sense, eternally unfulfillable; except that perhaps the ultimate fulfillment of desire is death, and maybe in some way death is the consummation of desire. And in Bonita there seems to be quite a strong yearning towards death. Not in the sense that she wants to die now, but wanting to understand death as a completion. So maybe there's utopianism in that... a struggle with life, wanting to reach beyond that to death as utopia.
- K.. I think she has a very heightened awareness in the present moment of that future consummation. So there's a temporal paradox running right through the show, of the interest in the sheer materiality and present-ness of the work, and yet straining to an unrealised future.
- A.. There are various ways in which that happens. One sense is of the very day-to-day presence of the objects which are definitely this side of utopia, the things of everyday life. So there's the trees painted in silhouette on the washboards, as a dark barrier – placing you in the present time but aware of something beyond – which seems to articulate this. And the long canvas with the water symbols, perhaps crystallises that tension, in as much as it is a static representation of what is a fluid, moving and uncontainable thing.
- K.. That's a different manifestation of the same paradox – fixing that which moves. Much as ash is the prevalent medium, I think that water is a secondary but also very important medium. The video opens with the shots of water moving, there are the water markings on the cloth.
- A.. There is also a preponderance of fabrics... canvas, wool, felt, clothing. Quite a range. There's the velvet which is sumptuous and luxurious, and although she doesn't mention it, it has that satin lining which is quite beautiful because it plays with the light in a different way. And that is something very different to the heaviness and thickness and claustrophobia of felt. And then the coarse functionality of canvas...
- K.. ...and yet canvas turned domestic in the way it is draped over those chairs.
- A.. And then – all these issues collide into each other – but I think an important element in the work is not just these objects but also their transformation, either by what she does with the objects themselves, or the way she juxtaposes objects, or how she configures them as a whole within the show. So there are the plastic children's chairs, the nursing chair, the table, the clothing, the washboards, the curtain. And all of them have gone through some form of transformation.
- K.. That's implied also in her video, the self as transformed, or as constantly transforming. There's very much a sense of the self that is not static.

A.. Some sense of sliding identity.

- K.. ...and a slip sliding of place associated with that. You and I have both mentioned in passing an interest in the fact that the waste products she uses – the wool scatterings and ash – don't disperse. They are by nature dispersing materials and yet she coalesces them. There's an urge to aggregate that which would disperse.
- A.. And maybe a wanting to grasp hold of, or comprehend in some way, things which are seemingly incomprehensible – as life and death are. Life and death are so much the same thing, and both entirely incomprehensible.
- K.. Yet, if there is an attempt at coalescing that which disperses, there isn't a sense of being static.
- A.. Any static-ness is undone by the range of objects, their varying dimensions, and the manner in which they are put in dialogue with each other and set off against each other. The work seems also to suggest a concern with purity and cleanliness. So there are washboards and laundered clothes. Then ash invokes fire and the purifying action of fire. There's something severely cleansing about fire, in the undifferentiating way that it reduces everything to the absolute essentials.
- K.. Brutally cleansing. I felt that energy too... Bonita's exploration of euphemism and sweetenings; an impulse away from euphemisms around death.
- A.. Yes, the way she brings them into the show is not to endorse them but to critique, to heighten consciousness of them, highlight them; they are set in contrast to the other work.
- K.. Do you think most Western viewers have an instinctual repugnance towards ash? Because burial is more commonly the ending. Maybe repugnance is too strong a word. But perplexity perhaps with ash. And Bonita briefly mentions in her statement that Tibetan ethos [of placing bodies in the open for vultures to devour], and I find it very lovely that she's demystifying ash and using it as an earthing rather than as a rot or a disintegration.
- A.. It's used as something quite precious and not something dirty, messy, something you don't want to touch. She almost enshrines it, as she inserts it into the hem of the curtain and stitches it into the chair.
- K.. Do you have any urge to touch and see the ash?
- A.. I do. You want feel it in your fingers.
- K.. I also had that feeling that I wanted it to be tactile, let it run through my fingers.
- A.. I'm not sure that that's to say she should do that with the work. Maybe what one wants is that the viewer has the urge but cannot do it. This seems to relate interestingly to Bonita's reference to the potency of secret desire – in as much as the ash is hidden; the secrecy of that ash. One has this desire to know it more completely, to have closer contact or immersion in it.... Still on ash – we spoke about burial and then cremation – and given the ash, I can't help thinking about cremation – and that perhaps relates again to that idea of transience versus substantiality. Burial deals with solidity; this putting of a body in the earth. Whereas cremation seems to ...
- K.. ...it's a different element. It's an implied aeration. But she pockets it, so that in the nursing chair the ash is wrapped up in little furtive pockets, and ... I'm trying to tease out that impulse of Bonita's fingers ... to wrap it up.
- A.. And of course to give it a place, in a way, so it doesn't scatter once again.

- K.. I'm also very struck by the constant re-emergence of the word "desire". We as writers and participants and viewers have desire elicited by the show. And your use of the words "yearning for", "desire for", I think express a valency in the show of a pervasive desire for a future, a different future ... or that same tension between a very material present and a promised land, a utopia, a heaven.
- A.. It's a sense of the other place, which is also no place, the place that isn't. That's very much the essence of desire, that it's desire for... but in the end it's desire for everything and nothing. Desire for the absolute ideal, which is to say the desire for that which isn't. And it's always moving beyond what is.
- K.. Bonita's work offers a parody of that impulse. And yet, she seems not to want to throw it out completely.
- A.. ...a recognition of the folly of it, yet at the same time unable to entirely put it down. She also refers to – and here again is the issue of ephemerality in tension with substantiality – in Western society a denial of, and obsession with, the physical, the body. And there's some sense in which denial and obsession are the same thing. In both of them, you're completely entangled, whether you're denying it or obsessed with it. It's the same thing ...and maybe that's one way in which substantiality and ephemerality come together.
- K.. And also the trajectory of Bonita's shows over the last 15 years, moving from the materiality of the human figure, towards turf, more recently, and now into this recent work. A line from flesh to turf to ash, in an absolutely necessary "that to this" movement. And this show both celebrates and mourns that trajectory. But I'm feeling, that in the same way as all this ash is more for grounding than for dispersing, I think that all the sediments of self upon self upon self don't spin out into the atmosphere. They concentrate. One is aware of the dangers of reifying the artist, but perhaps art-making is a concentration of selves.
- A.. Even as it throws them all into question.
- K.. It also coalesces them. Doesn't it?
- A.. Perhaps even if it's a momentary self, if you make an object, you give that self some tangibility and fixity for a short while.... but then I think that by making different things, you acknowledge the multidimensional. Many selves.
- K.. And that Bonita's calling into question the solidity of utopia. It's almost as if the coalescence around an art-making self is both a desire and a folly.
- A.. That elusiveness of identity is interesting – to return to the video, apart from the final product, the interplay of roles and identities between Bonita and Zelda in the making of the work is intriguing, and Zelda's participation in the making of the work. ... Bonita is not just staging a complicating of identity. In the making of it she's doing that. She and Zelda are practicing an exchange of identity... playing with that shift of identity.
- K.. ...I'm thinking about states that translate into other states. Zelda's Yiddish and how it translates into that one visual image in the show of the Immigration Official, made with the wool dust... This is a different thought, but my sense of those wool-dust drawings is that they're machine-like, those shapes...
- A.. They have a schematic quality, like illustrations in primary school texts, or the reduced schematic-ness of signboards, so that the image is made generic. ... In their textural quality and dustiness the wool drawings seem to make sense alongside the rest of Bonita's work.

- K.. I can't quite see the fit between that texture and that image.
- A.. Unless again it is an act of translation, by complicating the normal meanings and recognitions of that type of image which usually would be signboard-ish or line illustration. To make this type of image in wool dust adds another layer altogether.
- K.. ...that paradox of the dispersed and yet its re-solidification. I'm intrigued that something as elusive as wool dust should be rendered so solid. Almost metallic.
- A.. Or maybe the reverse is happening also, so that those signs which are normally so crisp and have an unquestionable-ness and authority, the signs you see in airports...to do it in wool dust gives it something else...it's dull monochrome, it's a fragile material, it's textured and vulnerable as opposed to clean-finished. So it does throw into question the normal identities of that genre of sign.
- K.. If I think of the show as a whole, for me the cypress tree with the little chairs is very much the still point. Bonita's been exploring that quote from T.S.Eliot, "the still point of the turning world". There's something so domestic about those baby chairs. We know them as an icon of contained childishness. And yet here they are piled up one on top of another and it looks so assertive. And also close to toppling.
- A.. It collides robust childhood and youth and energy, with the cypress tree with all its implications of death and thus age and fragility.
- K.. For me it seems as if the show, and the video especially, arose out of what I can only call the long view of things.... That understanding the meaning of one's own human process can only happen looking back over it over a long length of time... That it's not something we can necessarily grasp in the present moment or through future projection, but it takes the space of hindsight, looking back over a long time, that allows the flow of meaning of identity to come through. And I have that feeling throughout the show. I think it's a very spacious show. And very poignant in that way.
- A.. That seems an apt way of describing what Bonita is doing in her work. Trying to puzzle out the meaning of her life and life in general. And the time, the space, this requires – there's a way in which Bonita being Zelda, identifying herself with this older woman, is in a way trying to take that space and have some of the hindsight to look at herself from the outside now ...taking the long view, rather than being limited to the immediate view.

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With love and thanks to Claire and my studio muse, Mango. B

Photography by Wayne Oosthuizen

Print Design by Kerry Alice

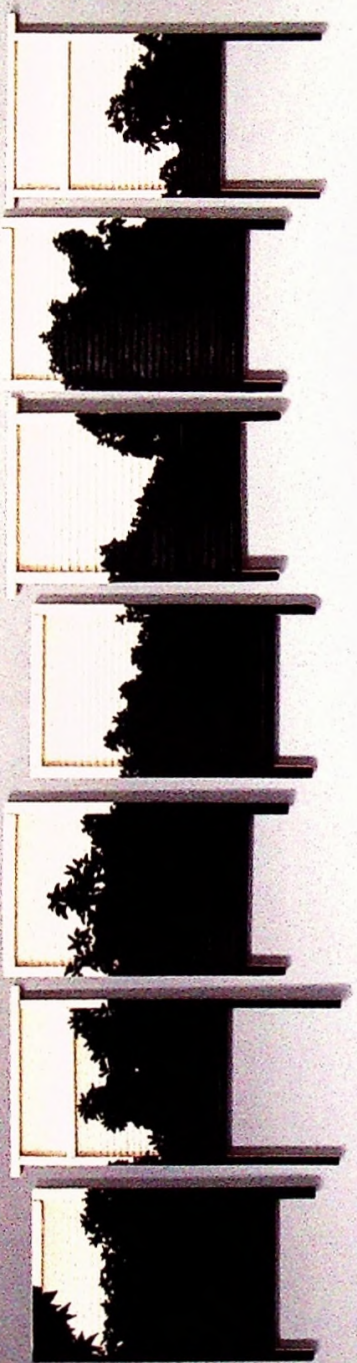
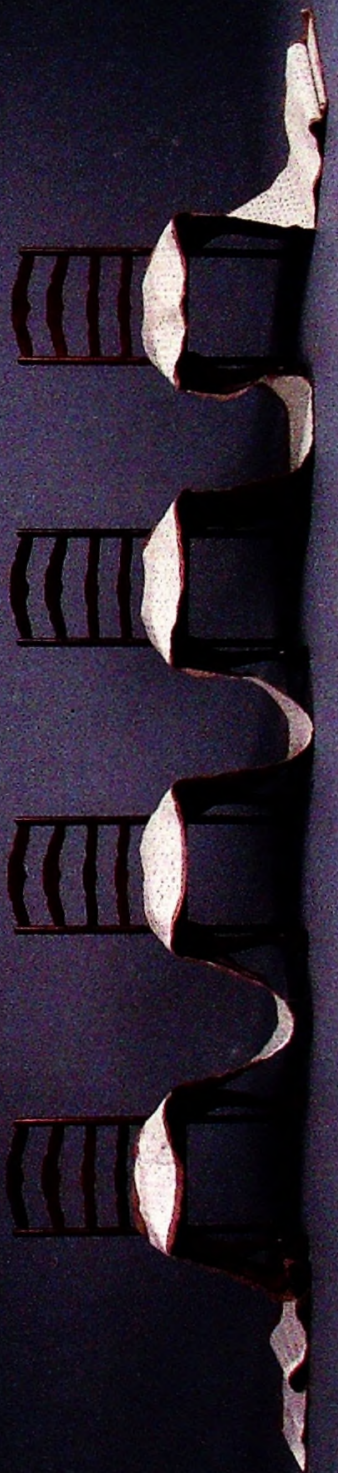
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Promised Land originates at The Premises at the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, Feb 2005





Then we went back for the nightlie



Bonita Alice
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