Wim Botha's studio, Kommetjie, Cape Town, June 2018
Photo: Gabrielle Guy

AMBIVALENCE AND PATHOS IN THE PRACTICE OF WIM BOTHA

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I first encountered Wim Botha's work in 2011 while visiting South Africa, a relative late comer to the artist's practice. By this time Botha had been showing in public institutions, corporate collections and commercial galleries across the country for a decade, developing a reputation among the South African public for his predominately sculptural and installation based practice. His work featured in the educational curriculum and was included in the nation's public collections, such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery and Iziko South African National Gallery. In the intervening seven years, having completed multiple solo exhibitions, three things have continued to strike me about his practice.

The first is its emotive power, which continues to be refined and expanded. There is something deeply affective about encountering Botha's work as he manages to get under one's skin in a way that is profound. The second is Botha's relationship to European culture. Having grown up in Canada, a former British colony like South Africa, though with a radically different history, and far from a metropole, I can relate to Botha's ambivalence toward European culture. At once endlessly fascinating but also maddeningly exclusionary and implicated in a violent colonial history, the Classical, Renaissance and Baroque artists that Botha refers to, continue to strike an ambivalent chord for me. Simultaneously, and this touches on my third point, Botha has taken symbols associated with his Afrikaans identity and shifted their meanings in subtle yet powerful ways. Liese van der Watt's essay *Between Holding on and Letting Go*, also in this publication, touches on this final point.

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The process of transformation that Botha uses in his work has made symbols and icons that are familiar, uncanny, and is suggestive of the artist's ambivalence towards European and Afrikaans cultures, at once deeply invested and celebratory of both, but also critical of their colonial and Apartheid histories. Within this ambivalence, Botha continues to search for a visual language that articulates the contradictory, complex nature of being human. This will be explored through a careful reading of two works, *Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)* (2015) and *Joburg Altarpiece* (2009).

Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)

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Botha has reinterpreted an icon of Western art history, Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Pietà* (1498-99) in St. Peter's Basilica (Vatican City), in numerous paintings, ink drawings and sculptures. Botha's choice of subject is telling as the pietà is an example of an Andachtsbild, a narrative form that emerged in European art in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Northern Europe. This art historical term refers to figures extracted from a Christian narrative that are often emotionally charged, facilitating the identification of the viewer with Christ's emotional and physical pain. Scholar James Snyder notes that with

Prism 13 (Dead Pietà) in progress in the artist's studio, 2014
Photo: Mario Todeschini

the Andachtsbild, "subject matter is not a simple narrative of the Passion but rather a kind of contemplation picture ... to evoke in the viewer memories of the eternal suffering of Christ for his salvation".[1] In other words, the pietà emerged to elicit a deeply affective experience on the part of the viewer and Botha's practice draws upon this tradition through his selection of this subject.

In *Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)*, disjointed, crystalline bronze forms create a dynamic, if unsettling sculpture with the figures of Mary and Christ suggested in fragments. The realism and restraint of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, hallmarks of the Renaissance, have given way to striated shapes that are part of an expressionist language that seems to embody, rather than represent, the trauma that one could imagine Mary experiencing after losing her son. The form of the sculpture also connects the work to another Michelangelo sculpture based on the same subject, the unfinished *Rondanini Pietà* (1552-64) in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, Italy. The process that Botha uses to create the work is telling, as it suggests a continued ambivalence toward the pietà, at once deeply invested in the subject and its historical representations but also searching for a way to present the subject within a contemporary context. First, the artist studied the plaster copy of the *Pietà* in the Vatican Museums, taking exact measurements of Mary and Jesus, including the length of their limbs, circumference of their heads, and size of their appendages. With these measurements and aided by scale photographs of each side of the *Pietà*, Botha carved an equivalent sculpture in polystyrene foam using a hot blade. These polystyrene forms were then cast in bronze and patinaed black. The use of photographic reproduction and polystyrene foam places the work squarely in the present, yet the process of sculpting *Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)* with a hot blade, burning through the material, violently deconstructs an icon of art historical importance.

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Joburg Altarpiece

At the centre of *Heliostat: Wim Botha* is a monumental work entitled *Joburg Altarpiece* (2009). Like the pietà, the altarpiece has a long history within Christian visual art, stretching back to at least the eleventh-century. A devotional image or series of devotional images at the centre of a Christian church that stands behind the altar, visible to a congregation. Comprised of eight discreet linocut prints, Botha's altarpiece epitomises his concern with creating an emotive work that responds ambivalently to images and sculptures from the art historical canon. Across the three upper panels and five lower panels, *Joburg*

Altarpiece depicts a series of skeletal figures in various poses. These poses reference specific historical paintings or sculptures, which are discussed in relationship to the work below.

In the lower, central panel of the composition, three skeletons sit on upside down triangular pyramids known as tetrahedrons, with a suggestion of a fourth skeleton on the far right. This composition recalls Peter Paul Ruben's *Cimon and Pero (Roman Charity)* (c. 1630-49) in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Roman Charity is the exemplary story of a woman, Pero, who secretly breastfeeds her father, Cimon, after he is incarcerated and sentenced to death by starvation. She is found out by a jailer but her act of selflessness impresses officials and wins her father's release. This classical Roman narrative was often used by the Christian church as an imperative to visit the imprisoned and feed the hungry, two of the church's Seven Corporeal Works of Mercy. Ruben's version includes two voyeuristic soldiers peering onto the scene from an outside window, suggesting the image is not entirely innocent.

In addition to the Roman narrative, the insertion of tetrahedrons within the composition links the work to antiquity, as the concept of synthetic geometry, which the tetrahedron is an example of, was first articulated by the Greek mathematician Euclid. It is one form of what is called the Euclidean simplex. A simplex is the different dimensions that a triangular form can be articulated in: for example, in two dimensions the simplex is a triangle, in three dimensions the simplex is a tetrahedron, in four dimensions a simplex is a 5-cell. It is also the simplest of the five platonic solids, which Plato discussed extensively in his philosophical text *Timaeus*.

The lower left panel of *Joburg Altarpiece* is based on the Roman copy of a Greek sculpture by Lysippos entitled *Silenus with Infant Dionysus* (c. 200 AD) in the Chiaramonti Museum in the Vatican City. In this panel we see Dionysus, the god of religious ecstasy in ancient Greek and Roman mythology, as a child being held by his tutor and companion, the Greek god Silenus. The eminent German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel speaks about this sculpture in his *Lectures on Fine Art, Volume II*, suggesting that its emotive power, while significant, cannot compare to later Christian art, such as Michelangelo's *Pietà*. The lower right panel is based on another, albeit darker, Peter Paul Rubens painting entitled *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1636) in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. Rubens' painting features the Greek god Titus Cronus, known as Saturn in Roman mythology, devouring his children so that he would not be disposed by them.

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The central panel on the top of the composition is based on Baroque sculptor Lorenzo Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina* (1621-22) in the Galleria Borghese in Rome. It depicts the abduction of Persephone, goddess

of the underworld and personification of vegetation, by Hades, the god of the underworld. According to the Greek and later Roman myth, Persephone is trapped for half of each year in the underworld with Hades, during which time winter dominates the world and nothing grows. Come spring, Persephone leaves Hades and returns to earth's surface, allowing the vegetal world to thrive for another six months. In Botha's version, Hades' dog Cerberus, is present in the bottom left of the composition. Cerberus is usually depicted with three heads, yet in this rendering he is depicted with only one head but is sitting in front of two mirrors that show two reflections, reinforcing the theme of reflection that is apparent in other works in *Heliostat*.

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The upper left-hand and upper right-hand panels of *Joburg Altarpiece* is based on Spanish Baroque painter Diego Velázquez's *Mars* (1640-42) in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. Velázquez's painting depicts the god Mars, the Roman god of war, in a moment of almost comical repose. Botha's work is a double interpretation, as Velázquez' painting is itself based on Michelangelo's sculpture *Il Pensieroso* (1520-34) in the Medici Chapels of the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence.

In each of these panels, except for *Silenus with Infant Dionysus*, which is a direct quote of a sculpture from antiquity, Botha references works from the Baroque period that use Greek or Roman myths to understand the human experience. The Baroque was a counter measure by the Roman Catholic church in the seventeenth century to stem the tide against the Protestant Reformation that was sweeping Northern Europe. Using dramatic visual imagery and incorporating a new sense of realism, the Baroque was meant to move viewers emotionally, much like the earlier Andachtsbilder imagery, ultimately causing them to support the Roman Catholic Church. Botha's choice to reference Baroque works within a contemporary, twenty-first century practice may at first seem out of place, but when considered alongside the highly emotive artworks referencing biblical narratives that he created before *Joburg Altarpiece* and continues to create, including the *Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)*, a certain logic develops. The haunting images and sculptures by Velázquez, Bernini, Lysippos and Rubens, create a vortex of affective meaning that was precisely what the Baroque aimed to attain.

The obvious difference between the works that Botha references and *Joburg Altarpiece*, is of course the choice to exchange the human figures for skeletons, casting a melancholic pale across the work. Yet the representation of the skeleton has a long history in Western art, perhaps most notably as the Danse Macabre, or Dance of Death. The Danse Macabre is an allegory of the universality of death regardless

of one's social or political position that began in the fifteenth-century following the Black Death. It is a form of Memento Mori, or Christian symbol of the transience of life, that speaks of the vanity of acquiring material goods and appeals to the viewer to reflect on their personal mortality. It is an injunction to live a morally upright life inline with Christian values. The skeleton is also the generic architecture of the body, lacking the explicit markers of identity and likeness and suggesting that Botha is attempting to explore ideas that are not reducible to the specifics of identity.

Conclusion

The emotive power of Wim Botha's practice and its complex, ambivalent response to the art historical canon as well as his own Afrikaans culture, has created a powerful body of work. Even as it looks to the past for its references, the materials and approaches resolutely situate it in the present. Having watched the trajectory of Botha's practice over several years, I am delighted that Norval Foundation is presenting *Heliostat: Wim Botha*, a major solo exhibition of Botha's work. This exhibition continues the Foundation's focus on exhibiting and researching artists from South Africa and beyond, broadening the understanding of the visual arts.

1 James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture and the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2005, p.27

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