

Christopher Peter – 35 years. The Stern Exchange. By accident or Design – or By Accident as Design

History – Tina – MoP – Lien: Knitting group – new conversation

In fact, over the 3 months of working together, 3 conversations, corresponding roughly to the 3 spaces upstairs

Fireplace room: Clementina exhibits a set of masks – theme over several years – masks inspired by practices from different times and different places: Ancient Greece, Far East, and, especially Africa.

Like others, she is fascinated by the idea of the mask – by its function in redefining the identity of the wearer, on the one hand, and its ambiguous ontological status on the other: it is simultaneous animate and inanimate; and it simultaneously is – and is not – the individual wearer.

Lien has responded to these ideas in showing her *Moundou* series from 2008. Lien's masks are specific African masks. But, like Clementina, Lien is not interested in the anthropological – or scientific – significance of these masks. She is interested in how knowledge of these masks exists in the world, and how it has reached us: on the pages of an obsolete encyclopaedia. She is interested in the trajectory of this knowledge, how it has a history but whose future is perhaps as fragile as the paper on which the reproductions are printed. Moreover, in Lien's imagination, these trajectories intersect with other journeys, in this case a case of sewing equipment that, on its way between Amsterdam and Cape Town, was marooned in Chad, at the exact half-way point. By accident or design – or by accident as design – as these paths crossed, one image responded to another: a mask became elongated when juxtaposed with a spindle; a woolen sample piece picked up the pattern of the hair in its companion wooden mask.

There are further exchanges and conversations in this room – further products of accident as design.

As well as the masks, Clementina exhibits in this room a set of what she calls her Karroo plates – inspired by the landscape of her retreat near Calitzdorp. These plates respond to Lien's photographs in two interesting ways. On the one hand, apparently fortuitously, they echo Lien's colour palette of browns and ochres and greys. And, on the other, like Lien's double forms, they set up conversations internally also – conversations between a form and its image, an image and its shadow. Tina's forms here are elusive – one can trace, on the one hand, echoes of rock paintings and, on the other, emblems that Tina introduced into her Africa series many years ago. But here these forms have the substance of dreams or memories. Their sense is elusive – like the dialogue between the discrete forms in Lien's photographs – as they advance and recede in their desert palette. There is mystery here, a recognition of presence in an apparently empty land.

These exchanges, these conversations – between the two artists, and between and within the individual artworks – are enabled by the design of the exhibition space and its furniture by the Ebony Design Company. With almost Scandinavian economy, the exhibition gives space for these quiet voices to be heard.

We cannot address everything in this short introduction so I will omit the small central room only asking you to look out for the bold African-inspired shapes in both photographs and ceramics – a basic

vocabulary that is extended bravely by each artist; and the sense of monumentality that resonates between the two sets of work.

A new conversation is set up in the third upstairs space – and a new character enters the conversation, or rather, forces her way in: that, of course, is Irma Stern herself, the presiding genius of the museum.

Lien and Clementina respond to this presence in rather different ways and, in so doing, embark on yet another conversation.

One would think from the allusive, elusive, searching relationships that are the subject of her *Moundou* photographs, that Lien's understanding of life is poles apart from the assertive, even brazen approach that we think was Irma Stern's. And it would seem that Lien is acutely sensitive to the power of Irma's presence in her own house, not only for herself but for all those who work in this space. Her intriguing set of eight portraits seems to represent the ways in which these people cope with Irma's presence, the way they revel in her energy and yet guard against being overwhelmed by it. This is an extraordinary project, attributing, as do Clementina's Karroo plates, a sense of presence to a physical environment but also recording how people respond to that space.

Because she has exhibited in this Museum several times before, Clementina is perhaps more used to coping with Irma Stern's formidable presence. In fact, as she has done before, Clementina appears to tackle Irma Stern head-on. She has made a series of plates that are decorated with representations of objects in the IS collection – African masks and figures, Chinese ceramics, etc. These, of course, are simultaneously an act of homage to Irma Stern's taste – and an indication that Clementina is appropriating these forms for her own use. This feature in Clementina's work puts her in the same relationship to these sources as Irma Stern herself and draws attention to the richness of both artists' work. Like Irma Stern, Clementina routinely moves beyond iconography, beyond literal interpretation, beyond the very idea of meaning, in engaging with the fundamental principles of her art. In many of the work displayed on these tables, Clementina is focused entirely on issues of shape, of scale, of volume, of mass, of colour, of pattern, of texture, and of surface that constitute her essential vocabulary. Her absorption in this process is palpable and communicates to the beholder in a way analagous to the object itself passing from the hands of its maker to the hands of its user. To say that these are ritual objects would be to suggest that they belong in some arcane religious ceremony. This is not the point at all. The point is that when they are considered as utilitarian objects – containers, platters, bowls, drinking vessels – these ceramics seem capable of raising our basic creaturely practices of preparing and sharing food to a quasi-ritualistic level. This is Clementina's response to Irma Stern – at least the Irma Stern of the Flower Pieces and Still Lives, those wonderful affirmations of the beauty and fecundity of life. And this is what allows Clementina to have the effrontery to arrange place settings around Irma Stern's own dining table downstairs. And this is what allows Clementina, in Lien's marvelous photograph, to sleep as innocently as a child on the floor of the baroque majesty of Irma Stern's sitting room.

Thank you Lien, thank you Clementina for these delightful conversations between yourselves and with the presiding genius of this place.