

JOHANNES MEINTJES - TO THE END OF THE NIGHT

[Written by Dr Jean-Pierre de la Porte for the website www.johannes-meintjes.co.za]

The recent Preller exhibition, curated by Esmé Berman and Karel Nel, put on display the unease of a generation. This unease had much to do with artists born after 1910 not knowing what kind of society they were addressing and so living as if everything were possibly a clue - even if it could not be deciphered yet.

South Africa's future in the little colonial family was as unclear as its future in a brave new republic. The greatest artists of that time, Alexis Preller and George Pemba, responded by massively enlarging the range of concerns for South African art. In Preller this range is enlarged by his hunt through styles - van Gogh, Cezanne, Gauguin at first then Nash, Ernst, Miro, de Chirico and eventually the entire imaginary museum of published images, remembered gallery visits and photographic trips to Ndbele villages and other sites.

Pemba, like Rembrandt or the great Spanish genre painters, or Courbet whom they so influenced - stretches the range of South African painting with scenes and moments of everyday life in a far from everyday society.

Johannes Meintjes, a decade younger than these frantic virtuosos, would have seen their work and certainly belongs with their frenzied quests for the right language and the most telling scene. Except, unlike these painters, or perhaps because they were ahead on this path, he found a way to extend their quest for new ways of being South African to writing, to criticism and to interpreting history. In doing so Meintjes provides us with an image not only of the renewal of painting imagined around the nineteen thirties and forties but also of its imagined audience, its ideal reception - in his words we sense a reader of a new kind, enlivened by the war and the uncertainty of the coming republic.

His many abilities unroll ahead of him into this overheated space of South African change - part colonial confidence, part republican vision, part bizarre nationalistic misadventure in separate development. Each of these vortices demands a different

ethical response, a different conception of who speaks and is addressed and a different responsibility for one's own identity and compliance. Meintjes' genius is his ability to cash in on the onrolling possibilities instead of being awed into silence and waiting for certainty. Few twenty one year olds, for example, would have the clarity of purpose or the nerve to write a monograph on Maggie Laubser. Meintjes had a confidence, a vision and an ability to love and admire - all sadly unmatched by the calculating society in which he made his very public way.

Clearly the young Johannes Meintjes wanted to invent a canon for the new South African painting and find or imagine in the Malmesbury Expressionist a kind of power to localise the Europe of Gauguin, Franz Marc and Rousseau. His own paintings show his long fidelity to this dream, of a new country walking out of the exoticism and personal urgency of the great paintings of the Gauguin - Van Gogh provenance like an actor finally leaving a set. Having missed its moment, this South African romance with Expressionism stretched into the nineteen eighties when a very different set of artists expected the emancipated South Africa to arise as a cultured leftist *mitteleuropa* from the surface of Kokoshka, Beckmann and Grosz.

Circumstances made Meintjes not only a painter but an orchestrator and impresario of painting, fiction, history and broadcasting in his quest to fill an ambiguous present with images and words. It is too early to tell if his vision was a passing shadow in the political cave or a new but much delayed dawn as we are still mapping the contours of Meintjes' world as it appears in our post 1994 light. Preller and Pemba, Battiss and Sekoto seem to be its compass points but Meintjes is in some sense the agitated needle.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is to focus Meintjes in his own era - as perennial beginner or recommencer - this recirculation is why his critics accused him of nostalgia for the painting of his youth - he had intuited experiences long before a society came about in which they could develop sensibly - and so his only way of bearing witness to them was by repeating them with variation - here from Leger, there from Appel or neoclassical Picasso but always subordinate to the sketching, the avoidance of construction and connivance that were his first and last insight.

There is a sense that Meintjes the writer and scholar and eventual chronicler of generals and corporations was marking time with what he must have known were passing debates and parochial reputations while waiting for the world of his earliest paintings to dawn. His later work shows a remarkable lack of irony or disillusionment - as if he could prolong his faithful hovering before this advent forever.

This lack of transformation makes him an easy target for commentators who expect age to bring sagacity. In fact as Meintjes descended deeper into the state administered culture, art prizes and watchdog literary academies of the Republic, the refusal to make his art into a map of this little purgatory becomes his point of honour. He must have felt a deep disappointment with the actual future and perhaps expressed this by agreeing to put his writing talents in the service of what he saw as the best and the most ambiguous moments of the past. His art remains a strange exception to his times, it does not gain confidence after 1948, it does not settle into the consensus and cold sobriety of the powerful, but remains a perfume of the first decade of the century strangely fresh and subtle so far from its origins.

Meintjes was denied a great oeuvre in South African painting because the dangerous new tasks of his era had been accomplished just before him. Preller had already tested marginal white identity in the core of the grand styles and Pemba had already tested painting in the heat of the present. Meintjes, the precocious latecomer, had little option but to keep the Expressionist tableau he admired in his adolescence as a kind of haven of reminiscence, a treasure box of potentials unrealized or perhaps awaiting their moment in an unthinkable future. His paintings, for all their suaveness and accomplishment, suffer from this concern not to use up that finite store, the reservoir of the future and hence Meintjes shows, throughout his life, excessive deference to his precursors.

His nostalgia as a painter and his nostalgic vocation as historian are courageous acknowledgements of his dissatisfaction with a present which showered him with honours but lacked honour itself.

The artistic moment of Laubser and Meintjes is frozen in time, its potentials massively seized and diverted by Preller's violent, creative misreadings.

What was left to Meintjes was to enact nostalgia for a purer era, an era of beginnings - and the hope for their return and genuine commencement. Meintjes is in this sense like Bonnard, persisting with Impressionism well into the century of Matisse, Picasso and Klee, keeping watch over another, more intimate possibility and when loved, loved inaccurately, for his charm alone.

Meintjes, for all his many sided mastery, his desire for justice for the lives lived before his, his ability to coax words to explore a world, is badly served by the notion of a Renaissance man. The men and women who receive that label were confident re-enactors of the ancient world. Johannes Meintjes had no precedent of this kind to fall back on. His beloved painting - stemming from mavericks Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cezanne and collated in a brief decade before the first World War by a handful of individuals - including the young Kandinsky, Klee and Mondrian - was a transition in European art, soon eclipsed by upheaval and other styles and already in a kind of unexpected afterlife with Stern and Laubser when Meintjes found it. His Boer generals, presidents and pioneers were not the classical leaders of Athens and Rome but improvisers, political acrobats, inventors of a new kind of freedom struggle and of a new kind of conservatism. Meintjes' short stories and fiction were not models of composition and rhetoric but decisive moments culled from the blur of words around him.

To imagine Meintjes in a Renaissance is to ignore the isolation, the demand for invention, the lack of any provisioning past and the insecurity of taste and judgment that characterised South African life in his era and continue to do so - hidden under a million distractions - now. For his courage to simply keep going day after day in this ambiguity Meintjes is a great South African - leading a life of persistence with only his intuition to sustain him. This stance will honour him long after his images and words have vanished.

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