

Whose Land Is This?

• DAG HENRICHSEN

“WHOSE land is this?” asked the renowned South African photographer Santu Mofokeng. He returned to this question repeatedly.

While visiting spiritual sites during the last years of his life, the photographer described how “I am taxed before I can enter the shrines of my ancestors”.

Mofokeng passed away in January this year. His work is pivotal when it comes to reflecting on the violent landscapes of apartheid southern Africa. With his black-and-white photographs he transformed spaces into haunted, fragile and even at times intimate places of belonging.

The Namibian cross-disciplinary artist Nicola Brandt engages with Mofokeng’s artistic and written work, in addition to a range of artists working at the interfaces of various media, in order to chart these – particularly with ‘Landscapes Between Then and Now’ and ‘Recent Histories in southern African Photography, Performance and Video Art’.

The title of her recently published scholarly book captures aptly what is an impressive analysis of those artists who in their work not only bore witness to colonial violence, but have moved beyond and are now reclaiming histories and memories and experimenting forcefully with what Brandt refers to as “new practices of self”.

As in her own artwork, notably in her acclaimed multi-screen video installation ‘Indifference’ (2014), Brandt breaks a mould with this book, and surely from the perspective of Namibian art and visual histories.

In ‘Landscapes between Then and Now’, she escapes from such histories without abandoning them altogether.

In part, she does this by reflecting on her own inheritance.

In ‘Indifference’, the lived experiences, memories and stories of a Herero woman and a German woman refers to Swakopmund’s stark, selective and virtually invisible reverberations of the genocide of 1904 to 1908. Seemingly innocent domestic interiors are alternated with the barren Namib Desert landscape where thousands of African prisoners of war died.

In one of her earlier, large-scale photographs, ‘Next to the Graves’ (2012),

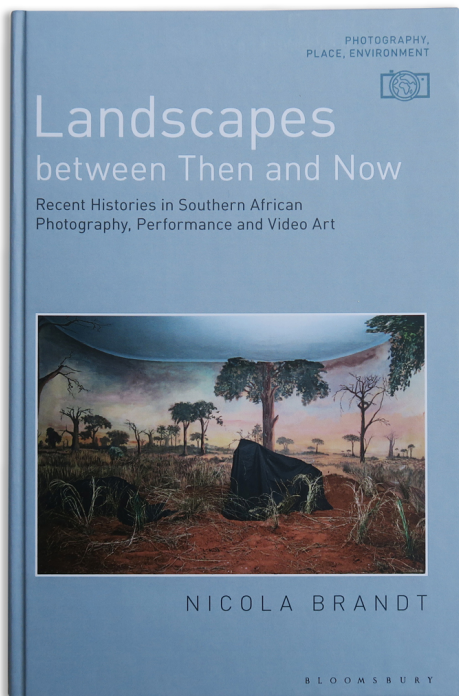


Photo credit: Amazon.com

Brandt documented the violent stillness of one of the villa fortresses which sprang up after independence on the grounds of the former Old Location of Swakopmund in modern Kramersdorf and now overlooks the African prisoner of war cemetery.

In ‘Landscapes Between Then and Now’, Brandt offers a succinct reading of South Africa, Namibia and Angola’s entangled socio-political and cultural histories.

This elaborately illustrated book offers both a fascinating, wide, and close reading of specific artists’ works.

It demonstrates the richness of the region’s contemporary and intersectional art scene. While Santu Mofokeng’s work and ideas remain a focus point throughout the book, the author also presents the social and spiritual landscapes of Andrew Tshabangu (South Africa), the critical public memory re-assessments of Kiluanji Kai Henda (Angola), and the site-performance work ‘Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell’ (2015) of Sethembile Msezane (South Africa).

In a similar way, she charts genealogies and highlights the novelty of works by contemporary Namibian artists.

This book not only offers deep insights into varied histories, but also has the author contextualise and revisit her own work with astute reflexivity.

In this book, Brandt invites a wider readership to celebrate the multiplicity of these “new practices of self” and how they reimagine and embody landscapes.

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