

# THE ROLE OF FINE ART IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Five works selected from the South African National Gallery's permanent collection of contemporary South African paintings, drawings and sculpture, have been used to illustrate the value of fine art in environmental education. An attempt is made to show that artists are social barometers, translators, interpreters and cyphers through which a better understanding of our environment can be achieved. The viewer, unschooled in the formal analysis of fine art, is encouraged to approach art works with a common sense, enquiring attitude and a spirit of creativity.

What can the study of fine art teach us about our environment? The answer should be self-evident but because art appreciation is frequently used as a weapon of elitism, uninitiated viewers are often too intimidated to approach fine art with the commonsense, enquiring attitude that would give them access to the work.

To answer the question is to start by stating the obvious. The image depends on natural elements such as form, space, colour, light, texture and line, which are drawn from the environment and are used in either a representational or abstract manner.

The material concerns the environment: if natural, in terms of its creative or destructive use; if synthetic, in terms of the motivation for its production as well as its ultimate impact on the environment. The subject and content of fine art is frequently a response to our environment, whether urban or rural. One has to remember that before the advent of Abstract or non-representational art, the chief

genres of sculpture, painting and drawing were landscapes and still lifes as well as portraiture and historical scenes. In other words, there is no aspect of fine art that does not speak of the environment, whether directly or by allusion, inference or metaphor. In this paper, five works have been selected for discussion, from the permanent collection of contemporary South African art at the South African National Gallery. Discussion will emphasize narrative content to facilitate the argument.

*Approximately Pieterneef* (1983) by André van Zijl (Figure 1), while rich in local art-historical references, is a very direct statement about an abused environment. The top half of the painting is worked in colour which delights the eye and this seduces the viewer into enjoying the gradual identification of forms: the aeroplane, the banks of clouds, the geometrical trees, the pattern of fields that spread from the farmstead to the horizon. The viewer is beguiled by the childlike jigsaw-puzzle landscape that emerges. It is one that exudes fecundity, equanimity and a sense of natural order in which man functions well with his environment. The large tree on the righthand side refers not only to the style in which the Afrikaner cultural hero Pieterneef painted, but in conjunction with the Cape Dutch gables, it celebrates the taming of a wild country by the intrepid forefathers of Afrikaner nationalism.

However, when turning to the monochromatic lower half of the painting the viewer is jolted out of any pleasant self-congratulatory frame of mind that may have set in, and is forced to face stark reality.

FIGURE 1

André van Zijl *Approximately Pieterneef* (1983). Oil on canvas.



Afrikaner culture is depicted once again in the figures of the hunters whose stance and position around the dead elephant refers to the sentinels at the base of the monument to President Kruger in Church Square, Pretoria. This time the viewer is shown the materialism of human nature and the adverse effects of colonisation. Instead of becoming a regenerative part of the natural cycle, the arrogant colonist regards the environment as a treasure chest there to be plundered. He is not ignorant of environmental concerns as he comes from a civilisation sophisticated enough to use electric lighting, telephones and the camera (the camera is alluded to in the fragment suggestive of a torn black and white photograph in which the hunters have been captured).

The triangular pattern along the base and lower sides of the painting is a reminder of the shapes used in wall painting and the decoration of crafted objects by traditional black communities in this country. Like the upper part of the painting it reflects a geometric patterning applied to or imposed on surfaces; there is also a similar anthropological allusion to the healthy symbiosis of man and his environment. By its very separation from the body of the work however, there lies the implication that colonial and indigenous peoples have not yet adapted to each other's cultural values by a 'civilised' process of accommodation, that indigenous traditional communities have been pushed to the fringe of the modern African lifestyle and the viewer is left to resolve the thorny questions that van Zijl raises: What has colonisation done to the natural environment and to rural traditional communities? What part have I played in this? What stance do I take on these issues?

Bruce Arnott's *Numinous Beast* (1978) (Figure 2) reflects similar concerns: the paradox of man and animal, creation and destruction, the spiritual and the physical. The image of this sculpture arose in a dream, the channel between the unconscious and the universal unconscious, as an archetype of a spirit of a place. That place was in the foothills of the Drakensberg where the artist was living at the time and where he became aware of the recent demise of the San (Bushmen) who had lived there. The work is in part a monument to them, to their 'ecologically perfect existence' (Arnott, undated). It refers to their antelope-masked and skin-carossed hunting and ritual figures, and also acts as a symbol for sacred and profane man.

Although this information is useful for a fuller appreciation of the work, the uninformed viewer has many clues to its meaning. The larger than life, simplified, raised form exudes a massive solidity and is a commanding presence. One is forced to look up at it, this alone implies an expectation of reverence and even obeisance; the strong verticality of the sculpture and its plinth represent the timeless, almost clichéd metaphor of aspiration, a movement into the realm beyond the material; the form composed of anthropoid trunk and zoomorphic head suggests a resolution of man and beast, and both are simplified, man is a trunk and animal a mask, which results in a symbolic presence. This alone can lead one to compare the artist's view of the ideal relationship between man and beast with our everyday experience. Again environmental questions are raised: who finds such symbols spiritually uplifting and why should they? Does it matter that we are ignorant of these values? Have we lost perspective in our sense of place in the world? If so, can a sense of balance be restored or can future ecological imbalances be prevented? Do I care?

In *Animal Instincts*, an assemblage on wood constructed by Norman Catherine in 1985 (Figure 3), we once again find a direct reference to man and beast. This time the association is appalling. Man's uncivilised 'un-

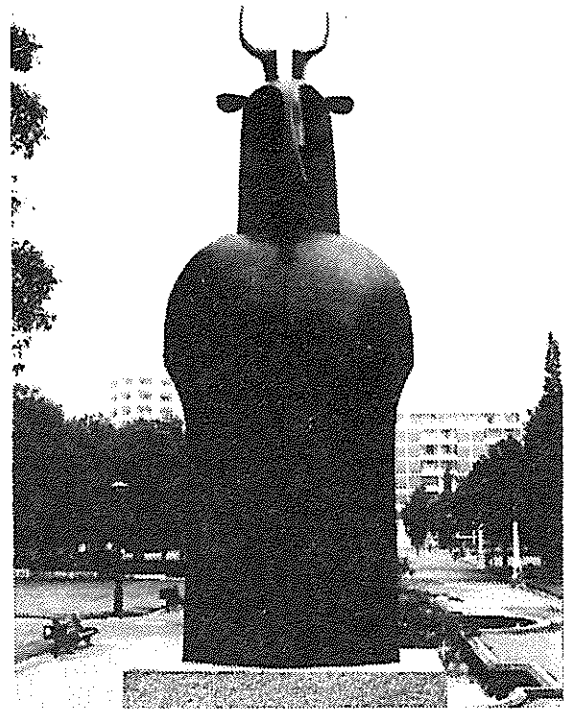


FIGURE 2 Bruce Arnott *Numinous Beast* (1978).  
Bronze.

tamed' behaviour is traditionally called 'bestial', and seems more commonly evident in the most apparently 'civilised' environment, the city. Here man the predator, a victim of his own drive for self gratification, exists in a cage of his own making. The presence of the primeval creature, the dinosaur, albeit amusing in its toyshop origins, is a reference to the primitive expression of man's basic drives, to their terrifying and uncivilised nature and to their anachronistic existence in a society which claims thousands of years of cultural history.

The artist uses both images and objects of everyday life to describe this urban environment: beer cans, ropes, wire fencing, cocktail glasses, motorcars, paint and toothpaste tubes. His city dwellers are disembodied heads, twisted into snarling viscous masks, caught up in a chaotic predatory environment. The central figure, a razor-headed teeth-baring face, far from representing the humanist view of 'man the centre of the world around whom all things are ordered', is as alienated and caught up as the rest. The buildings are cage-like grids of white or black, vertical or horizontal slabs; there is no suggestion of home or comfort or resting place in them. The very title of the work is a pointed comment on the detrimental effect that the city can have on its inhabitants, and that alienated individuals can have on their environment and on each other. The viewer is left wondering why such environments are created; why people allow them to be created and allow themselves to live in them; whether these 'animal instincts' are as thinly masked as the artist suggests; and whether it isn't these predatory practices that make life nightmarish for man, whose creative capacities would allow him to survive in a calmer, more harmonious balance with his environment.

Between 1978 and 1983 Aileen Lipkin (Bedford, 1984) travelled widely, particularly in the Middle East. Five weeks spent in the Sinai desert, isolated from



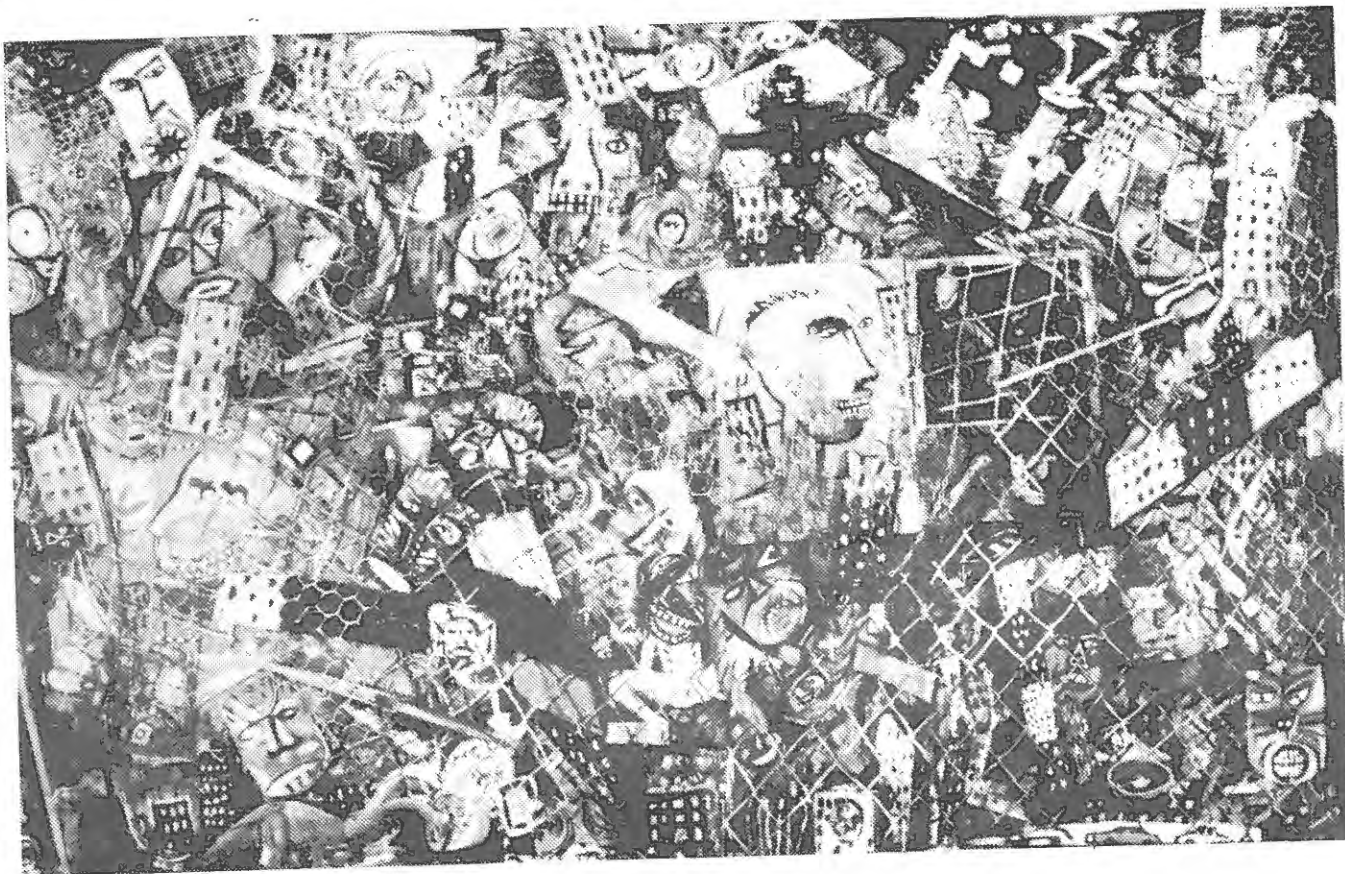


FIGURE 3 Norman Catherine *Animal Instincts* (1985). Assemblage, painted wood.

sophisticated Western culture, left an indelible impression on her and she returned to Egypt to continue her research into Ancient Egyptian culture and mythology. The most potent symbol which crystallized from her investigations was that of the scarab or dung-beetle regarded as sacred by the Ancient Egyptians, who saw in its life-cycle, a microcosm of the cyclical processes of nature and especially of the daily rebirth of the sun. As a result of its regenerative associations the scarab also became a symbol of the enduring nature of the human soul.

The dung-beetle, as an ecologically sound model of nature, forms a sharp contrast to contemporary man, who, in this painting entitled *Dungman* (Figure 4), is depicted surrounded by the symbols of technological progress. His distorted features derive from Richard Hamilton's *Portrait of Hugh Gaitskell as a Famous Monster of Filmland* (1964) (Figure 5). In 1960, Gaitskell (Figure 6), as British Labour Party leader, had opposed the adoption of a unilateral nuclear disarmament policy. Hamilton's view of this abrogation of political responsibility motivated him to combine a press photograph of Gaitskell with various archetypal monsters such as 'The Phantom of the Opera' (Figure 7) and 'Jack the Ripper' (Figure 8) to produce an image that would epitomize social evil. In transcribing this image into her painting, Lipkin stresses the potentially disastrous consequences of man's disregard for ecological principles and in particular the danger of nuclear proliferation.

The massive figure, dominating the centre of the composition, presides over an assortment of domestic appliances, with both hands ironically raised in Christ-like gestures of blessing and peace. No less than four toasters arrayed before him attest to man's acquisitiveness and suggest the sacrifice of moral and spiritual values to rampant materialism. The appliances also become devices by means of which to introduce various art historical references. The



FIGURE 4 Aileen Lipkin *Dungman* (1983) acrylic on canvas (260 x 160,5 cm).





FIGURE 5 Richard Hamilton Portrait of Hugh Gaitskell as a Famous Monster of Filmland (1964).

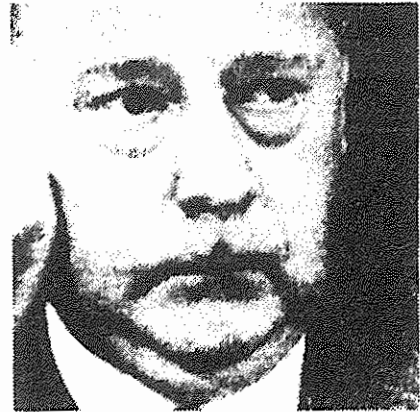


FIGURE 6 Hugh Gaitskell. Press photograph.

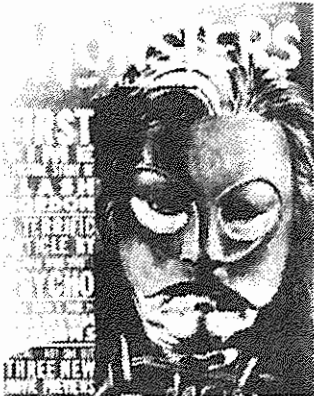


FIGURE 7 *The Phantom of the Opera* (1943).



FIGURE 8 *Jack the Ripper* (1959).

toaster in the left foreground refers to Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* (Figure 9) while that in the right foreground resembles the sleek reflective appearance of Richard Hamilton's *Toaster* (Figure 10), an apposite statement on the seduction of consumer objects. A slice of toast, hurtling across the canvas, parodies the rocket blast-off depicted on the television screen. The refined and unhealthy quality of white bread, as an example of junk food, is further emphasized by the presence of mould while the ashtray, in all its revolting detail, is a critical revelation of man's wilfully self-destructive habits.

Amongst the banks of electronic equipment, a tuner displays the numerals 1984, referring to George Orwell's satire on modern politics, which prophesies a manipulated and dehumanized world continuously destroyed by warring dictators. The bookshelf contains a number of books which evaluate the results of technical progress and propose alternatives, e.g. *Limits to Growth - The Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. H.D. Thoreau's *Walden* repudiates materialism and advocates a return to nature and self-reliance. In *Small is Beautiful*, E.F. Schumacher attacks the economic structure of the

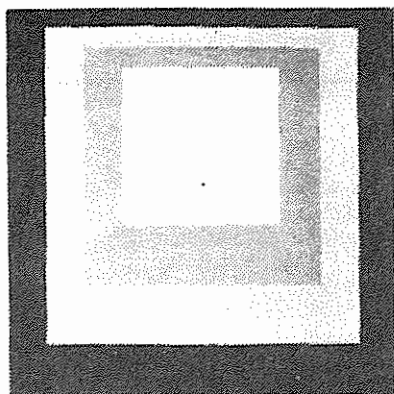


FIGURE 9 Josef Albers *Homage to the Square* (1950).

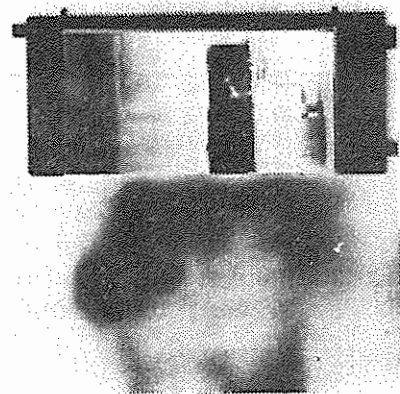


FIGURE 10 Richard Hamilton *Toaster* (1966-67).

Western world, claiming that inefficiency, inhumane working conditions and environmental pollution are the result of man's pursuit of profit and progress. By comparison *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* contains texts and declarations of innocence intended to ensure a favourable verdict on the judgement of the deceased. In *The Tao of Physics*, Fritjof Capra explores the connections between Eastern mysticism and modern physics. This selection of books reveals the significance which the artist ascribes to ancient cultures and myths and their contemporary relevance. They also clarify the artist's conceptual concerns and amplify the painting's message: man's failure to harness technological progress for the good of mankind. It is here that *Dungman*, in the ugly colloquial sense of the word, becomes relevant in its diametric opposition to the concept of the dung-beetle.

The largely monochromatic tonal range assists in creating the sombre mood appropriate for so serious a message and unifies the dense imagery into one powerful statement - a critique on the misuse of technology.

Judith Mason's *Table of Relics* (1972) (Figure 11) provides a wealth of information about our environment, responding as it does to both a symbolic reading as well as to common sense extrapolation. The symbols are perfectly clear: as a circle, the table represents perfection; eternity and the cyclical nature of life; at the centre lies a wooden bowl of eggs - were there three one might justifiably expect a Christian message, but as there are four eggs, attention is directed instead to the symbolic nature of the egg itself, and its potential for generation; hands represent labour, communication and autonomy, we use them to generate, moderate and execute events, to sign, gesture, protect, create and destroy.

In this work, the artist reconstructs a kind memory of man's interaction with his environment. Unthreatening, and at times bordering on sentimentality, each object serves to remind us of our creative potential. The horn stuffed with pods and grasses is a comucopiac reference; the animal jawbone laid with dried flowers recalls the cycles of nature; the gilded shell resonates on several levels - we can be hollow inside a seductive exterior; or we can beautify our surroundings which in turn become monuments to our existence; a small vial filled with polished chips of coloured glass reminds us of man's ability to convert natural resources into useful and beautiful objects; the split pomegranate spilling semi-precious stones represents mineral wealth and refers to the ancient myth of Proserpine in Hades, by which the seasons were explained; a lock of plaited hair may represent human sentiment or vanity, or it may remind us of animal warmth and protection; the decoratively carved bone speaks of cultural values; the shell encrusted fragment of pottery and rusted cross invite speculation about crusades, early trade and

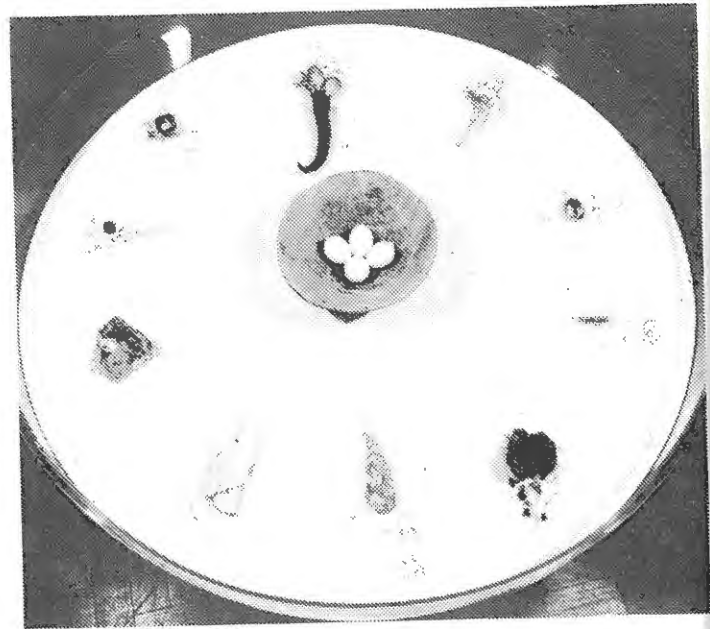


FIGURE 11 Judith Mason *Table of Relics* (1972). Pencil drawing and objects on paper.

voyages of exploration and conquest; a polished stone ornamenting a single vertebra recalls the use of primitive tools and their decoration, as well as the idiomatic use of the word 'backbone'; finally, the chipped remains of an ancient pinchpot holding fragments of turquoise coloured stone refers to basic concerns of self-reliant communities.

Thus we find an aspect of human potential in each 'spoke' in the wheel of creation. We can look at the work, enjoy its lyricism and walk on, or we can respond to its quiet gestures and reflect on the nature of our interaction with the environment.

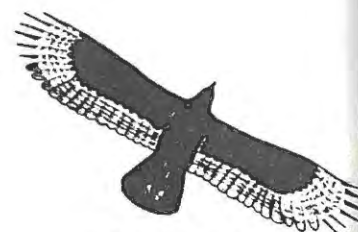
In these five works it can therefore be seen that the appreciation of fine art is not an exclusively aesthetic concern, that artists are social barometers, translators, interpreters and cyphers through which we can receive a better understanding of our environment and a more sensitive awareness of environmental concerns.

#### REFERENCES

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"... het 'k gesien 'n bont en skraal  
arend, waaksaam, met geel oë, op sy klip  
hoog teen 'n krans; taai nek; die dun kop kaal  
onder die son; en hy roer met elke stip  
wat onder in die vlakke roer: snel  
om te val; vol staar en vol geduld, -  
en stil, so stil op die vlot van vleuels wat swel  
van die ligste wind ..."

N.P. van Wyk Louw  
Arend



Witkruisarend