South African art now by Sue Williamson [book review].

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Additional Information:

- This is a book review

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/15676

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: MIT Press / © Regents of the University of California

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Please cite the published version.
South Africa Art Now  
Sue Williamson  
New York: Collins Design, 2009  
320 pages, 278 color illustrations, 39 b/w illustrations  
Biographies, Chronology, Index  
$65.00  
Reviewed by Marion Arnold

The question, ‘Who is South African?’ is not easily answered yet it needs consideration when reviewing South African Art Now.

In 1652 the Dutch occupied the Cape. They co-existed with nomadic Khoisan people but imported slaves from Central Africa and the Far East, resulting in the ‘Colored’ (mixed race) classification of the 20th century. In 1806 the British assumed rule of the Cape Colony, while on the eastern frontier Bantu-speaking peoples moved down Africa. Different black groups battled for supremacy and the Zulu became dominant, causing other clans to disperse. Resenting British government, the Boers moved north (the Great Trek) and founded independent republics, and the British established a second colony in the east – Natal. In 1910 the Union of South Africa bound together British colonies and former Boer republics; theoretically the inhabitants of this new British dominion were ‘South African’.

When the Afrikaner Nationalist government assumed power in 1948 it imposed its separate development policy (apartheid) and re-drew the map to demarcate ‘homelands’. Black people could not be citizens of South Africa if they had a homeland and many were registered as citizens of ‘independent’ countries such as Ciskei or Bophuthatswana. Only in 1994 did South African citizenship become unambiguous in the ‘new’ South Africa.

To title a book South African Art Now invites curiosity about this art. A close reading of the text informs us that ‘now’ is late sixties to 2008 but will we discover art made in the geographical space of South Africa, or produced by South African-born artists who might reside elsewhere? Marlene Dumas (b. 1953 in Cape Town) is accorded considerable exposure. She left South Africa for Holland in 1976 and has spent thirty-four years in Amsterdam practising as a European artist. Of course her country of origin and youthful experiences shaped her creativity. She is a highly successful artist with a well-deserved international reputation, but claiming her for a publication on South Africa art ‘now’ is misguided. One also encounters young South African-born artists – at least seven are cited - who, in an age of the global market, find it expedient to live and practice in Europe or the United States. Their career management acknowledges the competitive art infrastructure of the West, the relatively limited gallery and dealer scene in South Africa, and the fact that contemporary art is not confined by geographical boundaries. Identity should be chosen and not conferred, especially in South Africa where apartheid was based on racial classification.

Although the issue of singular ‘South African’ identity remains confused throughout the book, Sue Williamson is clear about the publication’s objectives: it is directed at the American market. In the United States, African studies programs are entrenched in academia and there is a general readership for African art. It is important to bring South African culture to Western readers and art institutions and this lushly illustrated publication will
do this in a field where little South African literature circulates beyond African shores. Williamson woos readers with a Foreword by Nobel Prize winner, Nadine Gordimer, an Appreciation by singer-songwriter, Elton John, and short essays by established American academics Okwui Enwezor and RoseLee Goldberg. Goldberg's contribution is one of the most thoughtful contributions, positioning South African performance art in its society of origin and discussing the bigger picture of performance as a contemporary art form. Williamson’s texts introduce chapters, provide biographical comment and describe illustrations.

The structure is unconvincing. Oddly titled themes move back and forth in time, and some artists emerge in several guises, gaining undue prominence. A chronological format, allowing pre- and post-apartheid narratives to develop coherently, would have facilitated reference to the wide range of artists who influenced the history and vitality of South African art. Readers new to South African art will never know from this text how many significant artists are not mentioned, let alone discussed. Many of those excluded are white, female or live beyond the Johannesburg-Cape Town axis which dominates the selection process.

When writing books of this nature, personal authorial decisions guide choices but in this publication there is no declared rationale for the selection or omission of artists or art genres. The Biographies constantly reiterate ‘lives in Cape Town/Johannesburg’. Why is KwaZulu-Natal ignored? Since the 1990s the Durban Art Gallery has been actively engaged with cultural initiatives on the HIV/AIDS pandemic; this is not mentioned in ‘Love and Gender in a Time of AIDS’. Why is there no mention of acclaimed Durban-based artist, Andrew Verster, political activist and gay rights champion, or of Karel Nel, well-known in the US? Why is printmaking so under-represented? And why is there such a huge imbalance between male and female artists? In the 93 Biographical entries there are 68 men and 25 women. Women have always been prominent in South African art and are still very visible. South Africa continually trumpets its non-discriminatory constitution so it is extraordinary to see so little attention paid to women artists who have achieved recognition and the many women’s collectives enriching the cultural scene and generating useful academic debate about the erosion of art/craft boundaries.

Williamson ensured that black artists feature prominently and it is appropriate to acknowledge their contribution to South African art but balance is also important. If Zanele Muholi is discussed as a lesbian artist, it is wrong to exclude the pioneering work of Jean Brundrit. At the very least such information could have been included in footnotes but only Enwezor’s article has footnotes. In Williamson’s texts quotations appear without their sources. This lapse and the inexplicable absence of a Bibliography means that valuable research and commentary by South African writers and scholars is not made available to academic Western readers.

South African Art Now possesses undoubted visual impact but the text does not match the illustrations in quality. This is disappointing because the fascinatingly complex, hybridized South African art world deserves to be known beyond its geographical borders.