

Art and Design

Silence talks with a powerful voice

13 AUG 2015 00:00 [BONGANI KONA](#)

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Voice is central to the struggles of the oppressed. Totalitarian regimes the world over always seek to silence the people they oppress. The alternative press is gagged, books and songs deemed subversive are banned, and activists are thrown in jail, executed, or “disappeared”. In an environment in which words can incur the wrath of the state, speaking out becomes an act of defiance. Silence is synonymous with complicity or cowardice.

But silence can also be an instrument of resistance. Neelika Jayawardane, in her brilliant essay, *A World Doped on Words*, on director Erik Gandini and cinematographer Tarik Saleh's documentary on Guantánamo Bay, writes: “Silence confuses most of us, who live in

a culture where we are told that access to language, information and speak are a means of displaying power.

Silence, in such a time, becomes an unexpected way of fashioning some semblance of selfhood in the midst of violent loss, a means of maintaining a private self at a time when the harrowing arm of the state attempts to forcibly enter one's innermost physical and emotional being."

There are many ways then of reading silence and the Goodman Gallery Cape Town's latest group exhibition attests to this. "Silence is something that can be experienced in a very profound way," says curator Natasha Becker. "There's something within silence. You can experience certain things when you stop the chatter or the noise. You can actually hear something."

Titled *Edge of Silence*, the show features single works by artists from the gallery's stable, a rich mix that includes luminaries such as William Kentridge and David Goldblatt, and younger artists who include Gerald Machona and Kapwani Kiwanga.

"A lot of the works are very quiet, very subtle, but speak to very profound moments, or issues, or histories, or memories," Becker says.

A mesmerising wall of portraits

The centrepiece is an installation by the Chilean artist and filmmaker, Alfredo Jaar – a light box with a black-and-white transparency that illuminates the words "OTHER PEOPLE THINK".

Jaar was inspired to create the piece by the boyhood writing of John Cage, the American avant-garde musician, in which he "affirms silence as an opportunity to learn what other people think". It's a way to step outside of ourselves and connect with other human beings.



The other major work in the exhibition, if only because of its monumental scale, is a collaborative piece by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Shtik Fleisch mit Tzvei Eigen*. (A Yiddish insult that translates as “piece of meat with two eyes”.) Their mesmerising wall of

portraits explores photography and its role in state surveillance. Here silence is evoked as the absence of consent.

The portraits, which includes Yekaterina Samutsevich, a member of the feminist art collective Pussy Riot, were created in Moscow using facial recognition technology developed in Russia for public security and border control surveillance.

“What is significant about this camera is that it is designed to make portraits without the cooperation of the subject; four lenses operating in tandem to generate a full frontal image of the face, ostensibly looking directly into the camera, even if the subject himself is unaware of being photographed,” the artists say on their website.

Art that challenges stereotypes

The effect of this on the viewer is unnerving; you feel as if some kind of security apparatchik is staring at these faces, stripped bare of any disguises or shadows.

In conversation with Broomberg and Chanarin’s Shtik Fleisch Mit Tzvei Eigen is Lorna Simpson’s elegiac video-art installation, *15 Mouths*, which she premiered at the Whitney Biennial in New York in 2002.

Inspired by the American songbook standard *It’s Easy to Remember (and So Hard to Forget)*, a song that’s entangled with her childhood memories, Simpson challenges stereotypical representations of black lives, particularly those of black women, in American pop culture. Simpson, who began her career as a photographer in the late 1970s, challenges the two-dimensional representation of black life and its stereotypical sameness. The overriding premise of her work is that the complexity of black experience is always flattened in movies, television, news and music videos.

For *15 Mouths*, she recorded participants humming along to John Coltrane’s version of *Easy to Remember*. The audio plays overhead as you look at her close-ups of brown lips, presented in grid form, five down and three across.

Becker says Simpson’s work contests the idea that “one can represent, say, superficially type, or based on racial profiling infer things about people ... She’s always interested in the myriad ways photographs can be read as types but, given those additional layers, they resist that. There’s a sort of resistance to that typecasting impulse.”

Shaping South Africa’s history

Coming closer to home, the installations by Kendell Geers and Nolan Oswald Dennis look at the role of fire in shaping South Africa’s history, both its high and low points.

Dennis was born in Zambia in 1988 and now lives in Johannesburg. His paintings, drawings and installations explore space, time and memory. His research-based installation, *Passage*, is, as the name suggests, a passage, constructed from plywood. Inside, the walls are lined with paraffin wax with text written on it. There’s the 1986 quote from Winnie Madikizela-Mandela: “With our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country.”

Passage is beautifully crafted and it allows the viewer to draw connections with and see parallels in the historical and cultural processes that have led us to this point. There isn’t a fine line separating apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Time is more complex than

that, the past and the present are intimately entangled. And, as Becker says, *Passage* makes you think about “the meanings and resonances fire has in the sociopolitical context of South Africa”.

Geers’s Songs of *Innocence and of Experience*, a homage to William Blake, is a lot more autobiographical. The installation, which is culled from his 2013 solo exhibition of the same name, is of two enormous truck tyres, set in such a way as if they’re about to be set alight. The first stanza of Blake’s poem, *The Tyger*, is written in white paint on the side of one of the tyres.

“Kendell Geers’ work is very personal and political,” Becker says, “It’s about the artist’s coming of age in South Africa in a time of political upheaval.”

The condition of silence

Historical and social processes again take centre stage in Cape Town artist Haroon Gunn-Salie’s *Half-Mast*. The installation is of three white flags raised halfway, a universal sign of mourning and distress. It’s a powerful commentary about contemporary South Africa.

“It’s a very quiet, very profound work,” Becker says. “It’s very simple in its construction but quite profound in its meaning.”

But perhaps the most poignant piece in *Edge of Silence* is a colour photograph by David Goldblatt taken from his series *In a Time of Aids*. Dated December 25 2003, the photograph harks back to a time when HIV/Aids and silence were synonymous. People died in large numbers but nobody ever spoke about HIV. The trauma of it was almost unspeakable. Goldblatt’s landscape photograph mimics this silence. There are no people in the image, only a rock with the looped and crossed HIV symbol painted on it. HIV is both present and absent in the social landscape.

“*Edge of Silence* also speaks to what we have become silent about,” Becker says. “It speaks to the condition of silence as something that can be very generative but also ungenerative.” All told, it’s a powerful meditation on what it means to live in this time and place.

Edge of Silence is on at the Cape Town Goodman Gallery until August 29