

Clive van den Berg

GOODMANGALLERY | JOHANNESBURG



Clive van den Berg, *Man Loses History*, 2011, jelutong with pigment and wax, 176 x 70 x 60cm

It would not be unreasonable to compare Clive van den Berg's new installation *Soundings, In Passage* with a smorgasbord – a large variety of hot and cold dishes, served buffet-style. To date, van den Berg has exulted in his multiplicity of media. A risky strategy by any reckoning and prone to allegations that the artist is casting around randomly in the hope that, sooner or later, he will hit pay dirt.

In the hands of van den Berg, however, a consistent and rigorous investigation coupled with the astute assimilation of his materials has seen them conceptually transformed to best serve his theoretical purposes. But there is a caveat: as the maritime metaphor implicit in the exhibition title suggests, van den Berg's viewers must be prepared to plumb the depths in search of this artist's intended but often veiled narrative.

Previously, van den Berg preoccupied himself with the violence of nationalism. In brooding works that conflated land and body, he revealed his concerns for the political abuse of both terrain and citizen. These themes have not disappeared but now manifest through a new lens. Where skin had been perceived as a separating and protective boundary, now it becomes a membrane pervious to the exchange of matter. And where formerly the ground was a hard surface beneath which vision could not penetrate, van den Berg represents land as shifting and fissured. Throughout much of his oeuvre, this artist has attempted to afford his viewers access to the inside of that which is normally only seen from without.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the "Broken Syntax" series. These new landscapes – described by van den Berg as "decompositional paintings" – are an exercise in the total obliteration of boundaries. This applies in a physical sense, in terms of viewpoint, perspective and an above/below ground distinction but also in terms of painterly techniques. In each of the three paintings *Broken Syntax*, *Land VI, X* and *XI* (all 2011), the conventions of historical landscape painting are minutely hinted at through a sliver of recognisable Johannesburg horizon at the top. But familiarity is short-lived as one contemplates the space below: it is neither foreground, background nor underground. There is no focal point and no coherent composition, only a decomposition of aesthetic principles and a disorientated/disorientating landscape. Van den Berg writes of this work that he is unlearning everything he knows to find a new visual language.

The "Broken Syntax" series seems to have eschewed any reference to the human body but this may not be quite true. The cacophony of daubed colour and line, rammed up against the surface of the painting, presumably alludes to cartographic forms, conjectural grids or sagittal slices through the land. But could it not also allude to camouflage? And, taking the metaphor a step further, to the process of biomimicry, whereby man makes use of natural camouflage to

produce "camo gear" – with all its violent evocations of subterfuge, conflict and warfare.

Such an interpretation returns us to another important area of research for van den Berg. With the dissolution of boundaries comes a resultant vulnerability of bodies and land – a concept he refers to as a "new Medievalism". This concern took root in the artist's work at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in this country and manifests in a number of ways. Its most potent materialisation, however, must be in the leitmotif of the "bubo", or swollen lymph node symptomatic of Bubonic Plague. It features prominently in a 2004 wooden carving *Saint*, and later in another wooden work entitled *Fruit* (2009). In the words of Rosalind C. Morris, essayist for the catalogue accompanying this exhibition: "It is the sign and symptom not only of a body in crisis but of an era."

A reconfiguring of the bubo can be read in van den Berg's single sculptural work on the exhibition: *Man Loses History* (2011). A carved figure, arguably a self-portrait, seems, literally, to haemorrhage documents through every pore. In Morris's words: "They erupt from the body in a monstrous evocation of bureaucracy run amok". It is as if we are living in a renewed age of plague that has gone beyond the body to infiltrate our individual and collective psyche as well. Without papers, and the bureaucratic processes of recording, classifying and ordering that underlie these, we are nonentities, denied rights, access and indeed, our very identity.

Van den Berg shows a reluctance to jettison his historical themes, preferring to rephrase and reanalyse them in *Soundings, In Passage*. And it is the somewhat awkward abutment of these disparate ideas, symbols and materials that gives rise to my original concerns on viewing this exhibition. In response to this, van den Berg states that he wants his audience to go deeper, to re-orientate their thinking and to come up with new, albeit less stable, conclusions. He has purposefully upended the idiomatic expression "groundedness" and left us "all at sea". Approaching the exhibition with a lens more closely aligned to his facilitates a more fulfilling interpretation. And solves the mystery as to why an exhibition focusing on a landlocked city should rely on a maritime metaphor for its title.

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