Attention-seeking images: early work by Berni Searle and Paul Emmanuel[1]

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Contemporary South African printmaking boasts an uneasy relationship between classic printmaking and the attention-seeking gestures that have historically informed protest art, lending itself to performance culture. In this article, I use the term 'attention-seeking' in two different capacities. The art made within a protest rubric sought to rouse the attention of broader society and often put the artists responsible for these works and gestures in real danger. This art was not concerned with awakening society in order to make it appreciate aesthetic or conceptual considerations in the artworks, but rather it served to make people empathise with issues relating to the political injustices current at the time, and to incite society to activity in one way or another. The relationship between traditional and performance art is one historically in a state of flux, given shifts in technology, aesthetic approaches and artistic intention. Performance culture in the west developed historically from politically-centred traditional printmaking, causing the body to become a viable matrix,
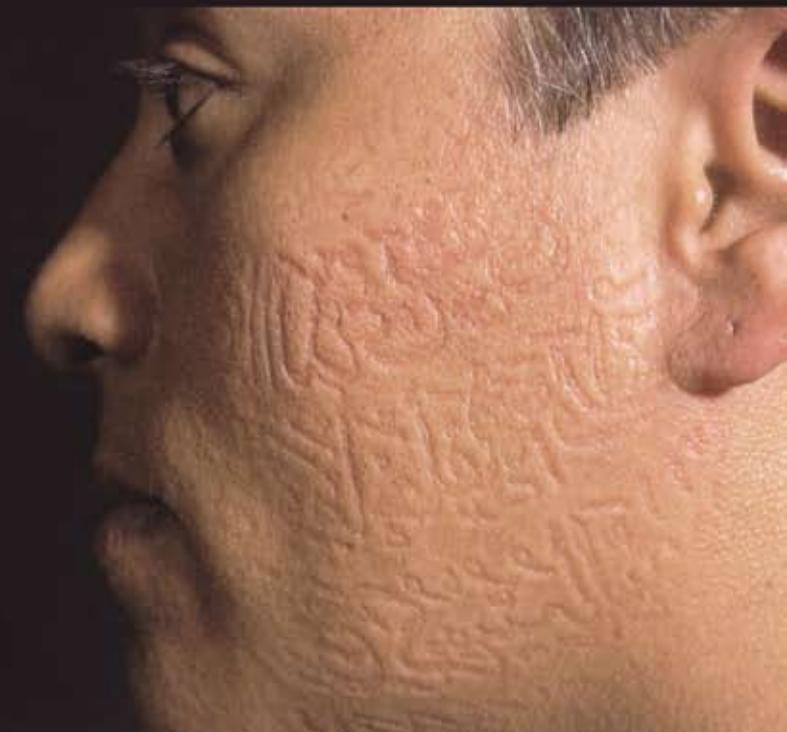
not only for social protest but also for identity-based protest and more conceptual gestures.

This use of the body attracts the attention of a mainstream audience because of the very substance of humanity that is exposed in performance art. South African artists Paul

Emmanuel (b. 1969) and Berni Searle (b. 1964) are critically positioned after South Africa's transition into democracy; they both engage with the notion of performance art, exploiting a technique derived from printmaking in which to do so. In this article, I will consider one installation by each of these artists as a prism that reflects the relationship between the performance and printmaking cultures in post-apartheid South Africa. I argue that the artists use these works to examine their own identities, coloured and transformed as they have been by South Africa's contemporary socio-political realities, contradictions and histories. Both artists employ the technique of blind embossing onto the surface of fleshy parts of their own bodies. This technique is traditionally an un-inked approach to printmaking, where the deeply etched matrix is run through the press, thus leaving an indentation on paper, the same colour as the paper and visible by virtue of how it bruises the paper and casts shadows. In *Profile* (2002), Searle uses her face as a support to blind embossing, exploring the ambiguities, anomalies and diverse roots in her identity (Figure 1). In *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* (2004), Emmanuel examines the political implications of his gender through the names and thus the identities of young men killed in South African wars during the nineteenth century (Figure 2). He embosses hot lead text bearing the names of these fallen soldiers into vulnerable parts of his own body.

Contemporary South African art has historically been thwarted and shaped by political currents. This is nothing new in the discipline of art history around birth pangs of new political identities in the world. So, for instance, similar values were reflected in early twentieth century modernism by the Italian Futurists who developed their own attention-seeking gestures in an attempt to wake up society politically and to develop a visual arts language that would reflect their sense of contemporary reality. Confrontational artwork in South Africa began to develop through the struggle for democracy in the form of poster art. Thamsanqa kaMnyele (1948-1985) has, in retrospect, been considered to be the first performance artist working within this protest ethos.[2] Mnyele transitioned between the creative fields of theatre and print-

Figure 1: Installation shot of Berni Searle's *Profile*. Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, 2003. (Perryer 2006:41).

Figure 3: Detail from Berni Searle's *Profile* 2002. Duracleer Lambda print. 98 x 120 cm. Image shows a Christian crucifix. (Perryer 2006:45).

Figure 4: Detail from Berni Searle's *Profile* 2002. Duracleer Lambda print. 98 x 120 cm. Image shows the British crown. (Perryer 2006:44).

Figure 5: Detail from Berni Searle's *Profile* 2002. Duracleer Lambda print. 98 x 120 cm. Image shows an apartheid era shield. (Perryer 2006:45).

making in South Africa during the 1970s, before going into exile in Botswana in 1979. He continued to be a very powerful proactive voice in the poster movement and was shot dead by the South African Defence Force on 14 June 1985. Subsequently, artists like Steven Cohen (b. 1962) developed a visual performative language that aimed to cast an idiosyncratic and often intentionally offensive mirror to society, exposing its bigotry, bias and baseless hatred of outsiders.[3]

During the years of apartheid, between 1948 and 1994, South Africa was effectively put under financial but also cultural embargo by the rest of the world.[4] The consequence of this was that South African cultural practitioners were not exposed to the protest and performance art that was happening in the west, which articulated values surrounding feminism, the Vietnam war and a coming of age of queer and post-colonial theories in literature and art. Art produced in South Africa under apartheid veered between parochially pretty and politically innocent landscapes, portraits and still lives; and politically outspoken posters and art gestures. Black artists in South Africa were barred from university education and developed in collaborative studio environments, several of which operated around the law. Many artists, including people like Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993) and Durant Sihlali (1935-2004) began their artistic careers by working within the rubric of romanticising the brutality of apartheid-induced existences because they appreciated that these types of easily legible images were 'pretty' and would sell commercially.[5] As Colin Richards (1997:82) argues in his essay that deals with Sihlali's work, the early watercolours are 'deceptively easy and transparent. This is perhaps a special form of opacity'. Richards (1997:83) writes of the underlying astuteness of the picturesque element in Sihlali's watercolours; he rests

Figure 6: Detail from Berni Searle's *Profile* 2002. Duracleer Lambda print. 98 x 120 cm. Image shows cloves. (Perryer 2006:45).

Figure 7: Detail from Berni Searle's *Profile* 2002. Duracleer Lambda print. 98 x 120 cm. Image shows an African beaded 'love letter'. (Perryer 2006:44).

Figure 8: Detail from Berni Searle's *Profile* 2002. Duracleer Lambda print. 98 x 120 cm. Image shows a Dutch windmill. (Perryer 2006:44).

his argument on the premise of what defined 'township' art — 'a lazy label which demeaned it aesthetically and otherwise'. I concur with Richards's position here, supporting the understanding that the paintings that fitted this genre were indeed the forerunner of protest art proper, but they were more understated and manipulative in the art values they espoused and the source of income (primarily from white collectors) that they embraced. Concurrently, hundreds of artists[6] went into exile in London and New York, but also in neighbouring countries like Botswana, where they formed collectives and collaborative studios where

poster making was the primary visual outlet.[7] Furthermore, artists developed what loosely became known as Resistance Art in South Africa, a diverse body of art that in many ways engaged with the status quo of the political climate, but stretched and challenged boundaries and expectations of art making.[8] In many respects, the work of Emmanuel and Searle fits into this rubric.

Both artists are critically positioned after South Africa's transition into democracy; as they emerged onto the cultural sphere as professional artists after the struggle period. Yet,

they both confront the notion of performance art, using their bodies as a matrix for blind embossing and to explore issues of their own identity — be it racial or gender-based. Neither artist can obviously be considered to be attention-seeking in the manner in which artists central to South Africa's struggle for democracy between the 1970s and 1990s were, but the direct use of the body offers a spin of values which force the art to become confrontational on several levels. With reference to the use of the living human body in art, Kathy O'Dell (1998:15) explains the "it's me" quality, a term developed by Roland Barthes with regard

to the readability of photographs and the domain of touch. '[I]n masochistic performances, not only because of the enormous attention the artist brings to the body but also because of the focus on the performer's skin ... [the viewer is provided with] ... a general point of identification'.

In the wake of South Africa's transition to democracy, it became important for artists to create their own new visual language. This language had to relate to how art in the rest of the world had developed while South Africa was, so to speak, in a state of politically induced hibernation. It also needed to reflect on how individuals in a newly democratic South Africa reflected themselves, ethically, morally and spiritually. The South African art context is further complicated by a long and rich history of sophisticated indigenous aesthetics, which was downplayed for political reasons. These aesthetics were part of a litany of traditional expression practiced by people of black and brown skin pigmentation throughout the turbulent history of the continent. The result of this in a racially determined context is that many of the gestures and objects made in the name of aesthetic or spiritual beliefs in Africa were discriminated against on the same type of level as the people who made them. Considering the history of bodily scarification, also known as cicratisation, that has been practiced historically throughout the African continent,[9] I argue that a relationship may be read between the history of scarification as an art-form in Africa and the

Figure 10: Detail from Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* 2004. Pigment print on archival paper. 105 x 148 mm. Photographed by Andrew Meintjies. Image shows details of the back of the artist's head. (*After-image: Paul Emmanuel* 2004:sp).

gestures being made by Searle and Emmanuel. Rather than using their bodies in these works to literally perform a gesture, they emboss a visual symbol into their flesh. Many pre-colonial African cultures had a belief structure that embraced the notion of marking the body permanently in order to express certain important social values. According to Robert Brain (1979:70), cicratisation came into common usage all over the African continent as a corollary to tattooing because

'tattooing is not effective on dark pigmented skins'. The scars created in this technique represent a cutting of the skin and intentional raising of scars, which can range from 'rough, ugly keloids to complex and delicate patterns' (Brain 1979: 70). Brain (1979:70) goes on to comment that cicratisation is about 'social status and social structure, emphasizing the continuation and way of life of a particular ... group or class. It nearly always ... follows aesthetic as well as social canons'.

Brain has also established that many African groups of people used scarification after puberty. The technique is designed to enhance the individual's beauty. Considering the use of the adapted form of scarification that constitutes the work of both Searle and Emmanuel, one could read into them a coming of age, in the sense that both artists are engaging with identity-based constructs that resonate with power structures and inform who they are as individuals. This can be further supported by the fact that the works under discussion here represent starting points for both of these artists. In the wake of Profile, Searle garnered considerable local and international accolades and critical attention, and Emmanuel is currently engaged with several local and international projects that are a direct spin-off from *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)*.

Searle comes of mixed-race parentage, an element to her identity which forced her to be classified by the apartheid

Figures 11-12: Details from Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* 2004. Pigment print on archival paper. 105 x 148 mm. Photographed by Andrew Meintjies. Image shows details of the back of the artist's head and back. (*After-image: Paul Emmanuel* 2004:sp).

roots in her own identity (Figures 3-9). The large-scale digital lambda prints of several facial profiles of herself, bear the impress of emotionally and historically-loaded objects in her cheeks. These include a Christian cross, a rakam (a Muslim prayer),[11] a British imperial crown, an apartheid-era shield, a panel of African beadwork, and a Dutch windmill and cloves, which refers to the spice trade that led the Dutch to colonise Africa and which brought Searle's ancestors to be in Africa in a state of indentured servitude. The works were installed suspended from the gallery ceiling, forcing confrontation between the viewer and larger than life sized images of the intentionally misshapen face of the artist.

Similarly, in *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* (2004), Emmanuel explores the connotations of his male gender by extrapolating the identities of young men killed in wars (Figures 10-15). This work is an installation of 21 sheets of silk, 1 x 2m in size, digitally printed with photographic images of parts of the artist's naked and shaved body that have been embossed with an old serif font lead typeface, bearing the names of actual British, Boer and Xhosa men killed in the Frontier Wars in the Eastern Cape of South Africa between 1820 and 1850. The sheets were hung on washing lines within the indigenous landscape. The installation's appearance was determined by the unpredictable movement of the sheets in the wind. 'The Xhosa names were never recorded except in stories told by the white soldiers', Emmanuel

system as 'coloured'. Annie Coombes (2003:14) describes Searle's family history as spanning 'a network of colonial encounters and migrant desires from Mauritius to Saudi Arabia to Germany, England and South Africa'. She quotes Searle: 'Tracing this heritage is an ongoing process, often hampered by a reluctance of relatives to talk about where they come from, especially those who were re-classified white. Often amongst "coloured" people, tracing this heritage is avoided because of the negative stereotypes surrounding

indigenous people and slaves that were brought to the Cape' (Coombes 2003:24).[10] The so-called coloured community comprises people whose skin pigment was neither dark enough for them to be considered black, nor light enough for them to be considered white, but as a people, they were discriminated against by both black and white communities.

In *Profile* (2002), Searle uses her own face as a printmaking support, exploring the ambiguities, anomalies and diverse

explained in an interview with Diane Tipping Woods (2004) for the Grahamstown Festival-based newspaper *Cue*: 'They aren't even full names'. The body parts onto which the texts have been embossed are male and white, but without other recognisable identity.

Emmanuel missed the forced conscription imposed on white young men of a specific generation throughout South Africa during the years of apartheid because he was not born in South Africa.[12] The reality of forced conscription for white males during the central years of apartheid determined the life choices of hundreds of young men.

Trained and employed as a printmaker, Emmanuel's articulation as an artist has been shaped by the disciplines that inform classical printmaking. He first earned critical repute for his intensely detailed mezzotints. In *The Lost Men*, Emmanuel contextualises himself: '... making and working with material objects [is] ... a way of "cheating death"' (Sassen 2006:9). He explains part of his motivation in creating this work as resting on impermanence. Using the body as a matrix to create these embossings becomes particularly poignant. Unlike a plate that has been permanently etched or cut into, the flesh will heal itself from a bit of hot lead pushed into its surface.

Both these works offer an astute engagement with the body as medium and support, but also with the history of

Figure 13: Detail from Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men (Graham-stown)* 2004. Pigment print on archival paper. 105 x 148 mm. Photographed by Andrew Meintjies. Image shows a detail of the artist's feet. (*After-image: Paul Emmanuel* 2004:sp).

marking the body to denote ownership by others. While Searle obliquely touches on the notion of indentured slavery, indicated by the complicated politics surrounding the reception of her coloured body, Emmanuel alludes to the idea that his maleness could have led him to be a casualty, fighting a war in which he may have had no vested interests or even opinions.

Essentially, both artists elect to represent the manner in which they have used their bodies as printmaking matrices in another means of printmaking-the photograph. Rather than inking up and printing this matrix, they give it life and socio-political resonance by photographing it. And yet, Ariella Azoulay (2001:17), who considers the role of photography in a world coloured by the prevalence of death in the media, groups casting and stamping together with photography as a form of reproduction of images. She paraphrases Martin

Figure 14: Detail from Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men (Graham-stown)* 2004. Pigment print on archival paper. 105 x 148 mm. Photographed by Andrew Meintjies. Image shows a detail of the artist's abdomen. (*After-image: Paul Emmanuel* 2004:sp).

Figure 15: Installation shot of Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* 2004. (*After-image: Paul Emmanuel* 2004:sp).

Heidegger: 'we are living in an era of the conquest of the world as a picture'. In many ways, both Emmanuel's and Searle's work resonates with the clinical genre of photography that documents medical anomalies for research purposes. This type of imaging relates them to the traditions of colonialism that stereotyped specific groups of people for the purposes of scientific study, which was often very destructive in its implications and isolation of 'human types'. Both Searle and Emmanuel engage with this colonial-evocative stereotyping on several distinct levels. Their use of different means of reproducing image (or texture) and performed gesture within the same work, directs their accent on their own identities, thus effecting a blurring of distinction between the print and the performed gesture.

Searle and Emmanuel engage with drawing the viewer's attention to their artwork through the direct use of their own bodies. While the works central to this article are both relatively early works of these two artists, it has aimed to comment on the relationship between the art gestures and the traditions of printmaking. The article has further positioned both Searle and Emmanuel within an understanding of more African-specific visual culture. It argued that the use of creating patterned lumps and indentations in the surface of the skin relates poetically to the pre-colonial practices of cicratisation on the continent. The works are, however, never directly about any level of nostalgia or engagement with pre-colonial values, neither are they about colonial values, which they evoke through their use of the photographic medium. Rather, these works seek audience attention by developing a visual language unique to each artist, but sophisticated and evolved in terms of what they are engaging with as individuals with identity-based concerns and sensitivities.

Notes

1   A version of this paper was delivered at Impact V, the international printmaking conference, in Tallinn, Estonia, in October 2007.

2   Cf. Judy Seidman (2006).

3   Cohen's working ethos represents an extreme in terms of artworks seeking attention and is beyond the ambit of this article.

4   The South African United Front (UF) was formed in May 1960 in the aftermath of the Sharpeville and Langa massacres that had occurred a few months earlier. One of its aims, according to Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, was to isolate South Africa politically, economically and culturally from the international community. It was able to secure support by the United Nations for economic sanctions against South Africa. Ndlovu quotes a memorandum prepared by the UF for the United Nations, entitled 'Boycott and Economic Sanctions':

> The situation in South Africa has ceased to be one that can be settled by persuasion, a change of heart, or even a condemnation of apartheid in the strongest possible terms. It should be seen for what it is: a serious threat to peace and security, calling for forceful and resolute measures, a matter of urgency … The economic isolation of South Africa, through the boycott of South African goods and the enforcement of economic sanctions by the United Nations, is essential to a peaceful solution of the growing crisis in South Africa (South Africa United Front Memo, ANC London Papers, MCH02-1, Box 1, Mayibuye Archives, University of the Western Cape) (Ndlovu 2004:429).

5   In his essay on Sihlali's development, Richards goes into detail regarding the iconography in the work, from Sihlali's naturalistic watercolour images, produced up until 1980, to the considerably more abstract compositions engaging with graffiti, in oils and coloured paper pulp that reflected more directly on violence (cf Richards 1997).

6   I refer to Gwen Ansell (2005:221-248) in this regard — and refer not only to visual artists but performance artists, writers and musicians as well:

> The earliest South African jazz exile was probably painter Gerard Sekoto, who left South Africa in 1947 … But the first big exodus took place in 1961, with the departure of the cast of *King Kong* for London … In 1961... the Africa Centre was set

up in Covent Garden to provide a meeting place and support centre for African students in London … the post-'76 exodus of young people had included many talented writers and performers.

Exile to Botswana was equally widespread (Ansell 2005: 248):

> Botswana had long been home to a large community of South African exiles. Medu was founded in Gaborone in 1978 with the aim of providing an organisation for refugee writers, artists and performers, and a point of contact for those still living just across the border in South Africa … Medu ran art classes in schools and prisons, staged plays, concerts and exhibitions, held discussions, and published a regular newsletter containing graphics, poems, stories, reviews and debates. … Medu was the organising force behind the 1982 Culture and Resistance Festival.

Seidman (2007:70) corroborates: 'Over the eight years of its existence, Medu varied from 15 to as many as 50 members. Most were South African exiles'.

7   It has been argued by several sources that the political posters produced and circulated in South Africa during the final twenty years of the struggle for democracy form a legitimate movement in South African art. The art status of these posters is debatable, but retrospectively the body of images retrieved and kept by the Poster-book Collective and other organisations, offers a cogent understanding of attention-seeking and attention-gaining images and gestures in terms of political awareness, as well as a marked and meaningful tendency on the part of the poster-artists to generate a genre of visual images that was relevant to the broader community.

8   I use this term, reflecting both on the focus of Sue Williamson's publications with the same name, *Resistance art in South Africa* (St Martin's Press, 1990) and *Art in South Africa: the future present* (David Philip, 1996) as well as the shift in focus prescribed in a groundbreaking comment by the then struggle activist Albie Sachs, in 1989. Amongst other things, in this paper Sachs commented that the phrase 'culture is a weapon of the struggle' should be banned for a period of five years. He argued that a blanket statement describing the political value of South African art was garnering solidarity support rather than critical attention (Sachs 1990:10).

9   Arnold Rubin (1988:14) comments that permanent forms of bodily alteration practised by peoples of Africa, Asia and the Americas came to the awareness of Europeans from the late fifteenth century onwards. He continues, 'it is possible that North African or other Islamic and Western African traditions were known earlier. This is also to leave aside little-known European body-art traditions during antiquity, and survivals of them into the Middle Ages'.

10 Berni Searle, quoted in her proposal document for the installation *Traces*, in the exhibition 'Towards-Transit: New Visual Languages in South Africa," De Blaue Saal, Zurich, 1999.

11 A *rak'ah* (pl. rak'at) is the description of movements and words followed by Muslims during worship. The Arabic prayer embossed on the surface of Searle's face is a description of these *rak'at*.

12 He was born in Kabwa, Zambia.

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