

Cross Cut - Criss Cross at the Millenium Gallery, Pretoria 2000

Notably these artists began as painters. They used oil on canvas. But Cross-cut Criss-cross there is little use of paint and canvas in a traditional way. Instead there is resin, thread, cloth found objects, wax. There is stitching and embroidery.

Sewing is an area colonised by women. Stitching is a creative act - often conducted in the company of other women. Although Karin and Gwen do not associate with each other in the actual act of sewing, their ideas are intertwined and connected by thread of similar concerns - feminism, an environmental awareness and a need to excavate other verities than the dominant ones, those apparent on the surface of things - the metanarratives of power.

In an inversion of traditional values Karin has chosen to spend slow hours with the needle embroidering onto plastic bags of the supermarket throw away kind. She uses gorgeous coloured thread with tiny stitches and loving detail she embroiders onto these objects of valuelessness. The plastic bag has an instantaneous usefulness as carrier. This is matched by its equally instant dispensibility. From the supermarket to the kitchen it has a useful life of not more than an hour or so. This stands in contrast to the two weeks of stitching a single image. The slow act of creation with the needle and thread speaks of an age when time was not so compressed. Karin offers a trenchant comment (some would say perversely so) on the environmental issue of wastage.

In a similar way Gwen is concerned with environmental issues. She has been called an "ecofeminist" although she balks a little at the label - it smacks of categorisation - of being too easily bored. Neither of these artists is willing to accept labelling - not for themselves nor for any of their ideas.

Gwen is concerned with humanity's loss of connectedness with the earth. In her large "Earth's skin" she explores the idea of harrowing - of penetrating the earth's surface with the steel of powerful machinery.

Harrowing/ploughing is about the feminine receiving the masculine - it is the passive and the soft of being penetrated by the hard and the unresisting. But her metaphor warns of the too easy protest stance. Hers is not a simplistic position of a radical style feminist or a "new Ageist" disciple. The act of harrowing or penetration of crosscutting, is also an act of impregnation - of creation - recreation. Cutting into the act of regeneration. Gwen's connection is with the romantic tradition of the sublime. The awe and terror with which one regards nature and the world. As she says, in our age of cynicism, achieving the state of awesomeness and terror is well nigh impossible. Yet for Gwen the significance lies in the attempt. Reconnectedness with the earth is where salvation lies.

"Criss-cross" refers to the medieval concept of the alphabet. Using this connection in a major work, Gwen has explored the possibilities of connectedness in a private alphabet.

The wall mounted books reveal only glimpses of its content. Most pages are not visible having been sealed with wax. Not being seen does not necessarily deny the existence of words. Not being seen does not deny their being. That is the nature of things to lie beneath and below waiting for the knowledge of revelation the cross cut can bring to the criss cross.

In a similar way to Gwen, Karin has sealed texts so scrutiny of the contents is denied. But the books are chosen to close, unlike Gwen's are not her own. The secrets within cannot be held warmly to her chest in a self knowledge of possession. Instead Karin has shut out the voices she no longer wants to hear. In her series of books, works such as Grey's Anatomy, Mineral of the World are transformed. They cease to be books, conveyors of information. They are bound, sealed, waxed, burned and violated. They cannot be read. They are no longer available as sources of information.

Karin is resisting, in fact denying the metanarrative implied by major texts of this nature. When she says these books do not speak for her or to her, she is also saying they do not speak for the myriad "other" voices. She is saying that there are other verities that have equal value, that too have to be heard. Karin's art speaks for and about the other. In a most poignant work she has engraved an image of her grandmother onto the surface of an old domestic iron.

This engraving is as detailed and as lovingly done as on a conventional plate. Yet the print made by the iron looks like a scorch mark. Here too are layers of meaning. The image of her grandmother was taken from a photograph of the hunter/grandmother, complete with gunbearers and tells of a woman of considerable will and courage - qualities reflected in her granddaughter. Hunting in Africa early in the twentieth century is about colonialism, power and exploitation of the earth and animals. But this is not a man in the metaphorical rape of Africa, but a woman - albeit in a masculine role. The fact that Karin engages with these contradictions should warn one of too easy a reading of her works, like that of her colleague Gwen. The fact that the image of dominance and power is then captured on the surface of the domestic iron, which is itself a symbol of extreme subservience adds to the depth of irony (sic).

Wax is a substance used by both artists. Whether it is used to aggressively seal and silence the books of grand narrative in the work of Karin or to heal and protect as in the work of Gwen, it is a material invested with meaning.

Cross-cut Criss-cross is about the connectedness of things. It is about weaving over- under - through and above. It is about threading, joining and making connections. It is also essentially about women's experience, women's work and women's realities. It is about cutting to the quick of things.

Wilma Cruise
Millenium Gallery
October 23 2000