

Visual Century. South African Art in Context. Volume 1 1907-1948

Jillian Carman (editor)

2011

Johannesburg: Wits University Press

ISBN 978 1 86814 547 8

Visual Century is subtitled *South African Art in Context*. Clearly this four-volume project is about 'art', yet nowhere in Gavin Jantjes' Preface, Pallo Jordan's Foreword or Jillian Carman's Introduction to Volume 1 are there any definitions of 'art'.

'Art' as practice and theoretical construct is culturally determined and related to social needs and values. In Africa, particularly South Africa, which experienced cultural collisions through migration and colonialism, 'art' is a contested term. Owing to the different histories of Dutch/Afrikaner and British cultures and those of black African ethnic groups, the meaning of 'art' is inherently different for each community. Either one should explain the expanded field of *art* promoted by late 20th-century revisionist art history's challenges to modernism, or argue for 'visual culture' as a useful discursive umbrella term for art and design practices.

Visual Century assesses 100 years awkwardly positioned between 1907 and 2007. Contributors began work in 2007. Seemingly this determined 1907 as a starting point but what was significant that year? Britain granted responsible government to the former Boer republics, leading to the Act of Union in 1910, the logical year to begin a survey. In terms of international art, as we are reminded in several essays, Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* in 1907. Yes he did, but the painting remained in his Paris studio, seen only by friends until 1916 when it was exhibited briefly in Paris and Andre Salmon gave it the title it now bears. It only gained significant public exposure in 1937 when it entered the MoMA collection in New York after decades of secluded existence. The year a painting is created may be less important than the year of its critical reception.

South African enthusiasm for Picasso seems to result from the misconception that the whole direction of modern Western art was changed by Picasso 'discovering' African art (he was introduced to it by Matisse in 1906). Like his contemporaries he found the formal, visual qualities of foreign cultural artefacts, including West and Central African masks, were a revelation, as was medieval Catalan sculpture. Picasso could teach South Africans that artists construct their creative identities by raiding innumerable sources and acting on this material with imagination rather than restricting themselves to national navel-gazing.

Visual Century volume 1, which ends in 1948 when there was a shift in white political power, is the most safely historical of the volumes. It will probably be the least contentious, but it matters greatly how 21st century South Africans understand their nation's historical origins. However, I get the impression that it was not easy find material to fill 1907-1948, which indicates that there is a small pool of scholars studying art history.

Who will read *Visual Century*? Was it produced primarily for South Africans or is it being actively marketed throughout Africa and the English-speaking West? Is it pitched at an educated, primarily academic readership or an art-interested general public? (Volume 1 is too sophisticated for school learners). If it is aimed at diverse readerships the series Foreword could have indicated that some chapters might appeal to readers in different global regions or that texts possess cross-disciplinary relevance.

Jantjes notes that, 'The prominent themes that emerged from initial research prompted the division of the book into four volumes' (Preface p.viii). These themes remain a mystery. Volume 1 has essays on separate topics but no discernible themes and taking note of historical events is not a theme but a methodology. Obviously there was an explicit or tacit instruction to mention as many black artists as possible, a difficult task when so few black men between 1907 and 1948 had any compulsion to draw or paint likenesses of their world and its peoples. It made more sense for black men and women to carve and decorate artefacts, weave baskets, create beadwork and murals, or shape clay to meet the aesthetic and ritualised needs of their communities. Liebhammer and Bila offer an informative essay which re-evaluates 'traditional' art although they do not position this within a discussion of why this should be understood as art rather than material culture.

Volume 1's eight chapters, written by academics, discuss black painters wherever possible to compensate for their exclusions from early histories. In fact Pemba, Sekoto and Mancoba are no longer neglected owing to ground-breaking research by Elza Miles, Barbara Lindop and others in last few decades, so there are constant references to the published literature and not a lot of new information or discussion is generated. The desire to dwell on race means that other issues (early photography and design) are neglected. Worryingly, women artists only receive perfunctory mention in the context of representing the black 'other' or depicting landscape. The politics of gender are completely side lined. This neglect seeps into the Timelines. The 1907 entry states that 'Finland becomes first country to elect women to parliament'. Turning to 1933 are we told that in this year Leila Reitz became the first South African woman elected to parliament? No. (There is also a Timeline error about air flight: Blériot flew across the Channel in 1909 while 1919 saw the first trans-Atlantic flight.)

My greatest concern about the first volume is the failure to address Modernism seriously. Slow to arrive in South Africa, the radical aesthetics of modernism were

largely spurned by white male artists and bravely adopted by women artists (Stern, Laubser and Bertha Everard). Unless the visuality of modernism and use of pictorial language are articulated, the relationship between realism and stylisation/abstraction, cannot be raised in larger debates about the functions of visual communication within postmodern theory and practice. Modernism is still deeply embedded in contemporary art and this theme could be raised in Volume 1 and tracked into subsequent volumes. Virginia Woolf, misquoted in Chapter 1, p.31 because her essay was not consulted, acknowledged the importance of Roger Fry's 1910 London exhibition, and claimed, 'in or about December, 1910, human character [not nature] changed'. She was inferring that the function of character to drive realist literature had changed; she, Joyce and Eliot brought internal states of consciousness into poetry and novels. Similarly Stern's modernist portraiture did not aim to represent external appearances through illusionism as did Lewis, but to call attention to the language of depiction and a deeply personalised response to the model and art itself. Of course modernist painting renders an implicit comment on South African art and its myriad peoples because context opens up interpretation. Art does something and it *is* something.

Visual Century will contribute to South African art literature but, although Volume 1's essays are well-written and researched, they offer little that is provocatively polemical.

Marion Arnold

School of the Arts, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

VISUAL CENTURY. South African Art in Context. volume one 1907 - 1948. Jillian Carman. editor. VISUAL CENTURY. South African Art in Context. Volume 1. 1907â€”1948. Edited by Jillian Carman. Published in South Africa byÂ The century under review begins in 1907, which marks the year the British restored self- governance to the Boer Republics after defeating them in the Second South African War. This in turn led to the establishment of the Union of South Africa (1910) that joined Afrikaner and British settlers under one government. The year 1907 also coincides with the epoch in which artists in Europe broke with prevailing conventions by assimilating African and other cultures into their practice to create European Modernism.