

Findlay's Flowers: Surfaces on the Move Isabel Hofmeyr

In 1995, Bronwen Findlay completed an MA thesis on Tsonga-Shangaan cloths and fabrics. Tracing out the genealogy of these textiles, she shows how they emerge from a medley of different places and traditions: indigenous cotton and bark cloth; Portuguese and Indian textiles; German indigo weave; Holland Java print; Manchester cloth which mimicked Indian designs; and more recently, Japanese fabric produced from designs sent by local South African Gujarati merchants. In addition, local traditions of beading and embroidery have long enhanced these various fabrics encrusting them in images drawn from commodity labels, curtains, contemporary politics, dreams and in some cases, from heaven itself.

To look at the surface of any Tsonga-Shangaan cloth, is to witness the mobile intersection of these multiple and far-flung networks of movement, circulation and exchange. Old and new vectors of Indian Ocean trade intersect with images from a Tsonga-Christian heaven. Czechoslovakian beads, South African safety pins and decommissioned tickeys cohabit with peacocks which have travelled via India and Japan. Likewise the terms for these fabrics contain histories of mobility: "Shangaan salemore" is a brand of striped cloth sold to make the exuberant, swaying bustle-like skirt or *xibelani* which consumes 18 yards of fabric. Originally a blue cotton cloth made in Madras for export to the West Indies, salemore acquired more colourful stripes as it moved through the Indian Ocean world and encountered a world of Tsonga-Shangaan fashion and style.

Mobile Surfaces

In analysing these fabrics, Findlay brings her unique eye to bear on what at first glance appear to be static objects of the domestic realm. Instead, she helps us re- envision them as spaces bursting with transactional movement, a surface where designs, images and objects are briefly arrested before being taken up and re- circulated elsewhere.

This method of analysis that Findlay evolved in her MA thesis arises from her corpus as an artist where she has long examined the domestic and everyday as being shaped by larger networks of movement and exchange. The domestic objects that her work depicts and contains imply and insist on such movement. Doilies, serviettes, embroidery cotton, jugs, plates, combs, handbags, beads, and curtains crowd her work where they are briefly detained in the painting (often quite literally by being embedded in paint). Where have they come from? How did they arrive on this surface? Where might they (and the painting) be headed?

The objects in Findlay's paintings demand that we think about the biographies and the backstories of their circulation and movement. An earlier exhibition, 'Blanket Story' (2005) focuses on Basotho blankets and enacts such micro-histories of circulation. The stripe on the blanket was originally a mistake and indicated the end of a machine run. The manufacturers intended to rectify this but were asked not to, as the stripe had become popular and accepted as 'traditional'.

In freezing a galaxy of circulating objects in her paintings, Findlay asks us think about the household and the domestic in new ways. Like the painting, the household comprises a world of travelling commodities that we briefly detain and redefine through investing them with our emotion and memory. Yet, these commodity- reliquaries are

always destined to move on: given away, handed on, discarded, sold or dispersed as we, their owners depart this world.

Findlay's Flowers

Findlay brings these themes of movement and circulation to bear on this exhibition which appears on the face of it to deal with the most static and domestic of objects, namely flowers.

Yet, Findlay orients this apparently inert subject matter towards themes of mobility. Even the briefest glimpse at these paintings tells us these are flowers in motion – they explode, burst and shatter; they move in the wind; they rise like pencil-thin underwater swimmers heading for the surface. Or as Julia Charlton who has commented so perceptively on Findlay's work notes in another context, her paintings entail "scattering, dispersal, abundance and repetition" and "expansive fields of colour, drift and flicker" (2006).

This originality is to be expected from someone who has been painting flowers for much of her career. An aficionado of representing flower, Findlay has, over the years, created a rich 'flower' archive. She has 'researched' their properties via different media; painting, etching, printing and photography. One experiment involved putting actual flowers through a press in order to create mono-prints. Floral surfaces feature in her work (linoleum, bedspreads, serviettes) as do dead flowers embedded in her paintings.

The vivid and intense paintings in this exhibition capture the profligacy of the flower world. Flowers are after all gorgeous but extravagant gambles. In the hope of reproducing itself, a plant sacrifices its reserves to produce a flower, a short-lived flair of scent and colour. As one commentator on the workings of flowers observes: "From a plant's point of view, flowers are brief because flowers are so much work. Beauty is expensive to maintain, all that scent and color, all that waving in the wind" (Russell 86). Yet this expensive process is necessary both for the plant and for us.

All the vegetable, fruit and plant matter we and other animals eat require a flower to come into being.

We love flowers for their colour, form and scent; we treasure them as potent and visible metaphors for the absurd brevity of life. They are symbols of transient beauty, of an extravagant flare against mortality, a brief and glorious wager against time. We love flowers for what they teach us about beauty which, as they demonstrate, always comes at a price and presupposes great effort and struggle. We give flowers in love, in celebration, in sickness, in death and in mourning.

Findlay's depictions of flowers have always captured these multiple meanings of beauty, brevity, splendour and decay. In some of her earlier paintings, one can't be

sure if one is looking at a garland or a wreath. In yet other paintings, as Virginia McKenny points out, the flowers resemble road kill (2002).

Moving Flowers

The paintings in this particular exhibition embody this intensity of the flower, a vortex of

congealed energy, of concentrated life and colour, and of decay. To capture this intensity in words is difficult but alliteration can suggest some of its power. This exhibition can be likened to floral fission; to a fusillade of flowers; to a fascicle. The latter word has two meanings: (1) a close cluster of flowers and (2) a section of a book published in installments as separate pamphlets or volumes. The word is apposite for this exhibition which quite literally comprises a close cluster of flowers but also a series of paintings which are separate but belong together in a 'volume' or 'archive'.

In keeping with this theme of energy, there is movement in and through the paintings. The wind blows across their surfaces. In 'Fynbos Landscape', the wind ruffles the sea – or is it the sky? A slight breeze animates 'Grass Aloes'. Time and the seasons likewise move through the exhibition. The flowers were only painted during their season of blooming: agapanthus in summer; aloes and leonotis in winter; freesias and clivias in spring. To walk through the exhibition is to experience a compressed cycle of seasons; almost to inhabit concentrated 'flower time'. This sense of season and time is captured in some flowers whose centres appear to rot before our eyes.

Journeys too weave in and out: a trip to the Cape to see the fynbos; a visit to Udaipur in India. Objects circulate in and around these paintings. Pieces of decorative paper from Japan and Goa are embedded in several paintings. Floral in design, these bits of paper provide ironic internal reflections: the regularity of the decorative pattern alongside the less ordered painted flowers. In some cases, the floral paper restricts itself to a border. In other cases, it functions more playfully. In 'Highveld – Winter', a piece of glowing yellow paper from Goa forms a rectangular sun. In 'Leonotis with Wallpaper II', three pieces of origami paper become like punctuation marks in the picture.

In the companion piece to this latter image, 'Leonotis with Wallpaper', this movement between floral paper and painted flowers intensifies. The preposition 'with' invites us down this path by directing our attention to relationships and movements in the painting. How do we relate paper and flowers? Are the flowers obscuring the paper? Is the paper interrupting the flowers? Are the flowers protecting the paper (in the left hand corner the flowers seem to draw protectively around the paper)? Do the papers punctuate the flowers (as the three pieces of origami seem to do)? Does the floral paper substitute for the flowers, reproducing a miniature of the painting within itself?

The three terms of the painting (flower, wall, paper) 'speed up' as one contemplates the proliferating relationships between them. Are these 'paper walls' and hence 'paper flowers' and if so what kind of garden are we in? Are these 'wall flowers' or a 'wall of flowers'? What is foreground, what background? As these possibilities mount, the tempo of the painting itself speeds up.

A further order of movement arises from flowers rising and falling. This theme has long occupied Findlay's work. In 'Flowers Falling' (2008) a confetti of embalmed flowers plummet downward. In 'Agapanthus Still Life' in this exhibition, an inverted bouquet of roses invokes this earlier motif. A chain of dried flowers snakes across the same picture. What is it – a desiccated garland or a dead wreath?

Elsewhere flowers rise up decisively. In 'Leonotis Landscape with Jug' the flowers appear against a high veld sky but could also be in water where like lithe divers, they moving purposefully towards the surface, as we noted above. In 'Highveld – Winter', a towering aloe on a hill draws our vision decisively upward. Thin lines of grass slice the

same picture, moving up and down at the same time. Elsewhere agapanthus rise up, unusually upright and erect.

Other pictures imply movement through questions of internal scale and ratio. 'Tapestry Painting' contains the reverse side of a tapestry and then carries out the same design in paint on a giant scale. 'Grass Aloes' and 'Highveld – Winter' remind us of the profusion of aloe types and their relative scale: some small and knee high, others towering and vast.

As others have noted, Findlay's work is always as much about paint as about the subject matter being depicted. These pictures are hence about painting and flowers in equal measure. Indeed, at times, the paint and the flowers appear to be battling each other. In an earlier image 'Protea I' (2010), an energetic palette smear of pink paint threatens to overcome the flower itself. In 'White Leonotis' in this exhibition the flowers rise triumphantly and joyously above the paint.

This struggle of paint, colour and subject matter is central to Findlay's technique. As Charlton notes, "Findlay is entranced by paint's endless possibilities: the dribble, puddle or piling; visceral quality; potential for luminosity and opacity; thick crustiness and thin glaze. Often violent and always bold, the glutinous viscosity of Findlay's paint is seductive ... She takes pleasure in the woven texture of canvas, and the bounce of the brush on its surface and consistently draws attention to the paint as physical matter independent of the object" (2006).

These sets of techniques lend themselves especially well to the themes of this exhibition, of the vortex of energy and struggle which constitutes a flower as a moment of beauty and possibility poised between life and death. The struggle between paint and subject, between surface and matter along with the exuberant colour captures the intensity of this short-lived moment.

As we noted above, flowers are brief but necessary, metaphors for the absurd brevity of life. Like flowers, these paintings thicken our perception of time. One can almost hear these paintings, growing fervently, dying reluctantly, poised between growth and entropy, life and death.

References

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