

Deon Venter: *Missing & Flight* — 182

Buschlen Mowatt Gallery, www.buschlenmowatt.com, 1 May 2008 - 25 May 2008

John K. Grande

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Courtroom No. 1, 2007
Oil on linen
100 in. x 82 in.
Photo: David Borrowman



VANCOUVER, BC

DEON VENTER *MISSING & FLIGHT-182*

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Deon Venter's acute empathy for the disenfranchised in society may stem from his South African background. His paintings continue to challenge historical and socio-political beliefs, but do so through the language of art. In an earlier exhibition at Montreal's Parisian Laundry, Venter presented a controversial *Headline* series. With strong surface textures and structural phrasing, these works had a sense of the finality of things, even of history, that recalled Anselm Kiefer's re-phrasings of mythology and the same could be said of Venter's *Last Supper* series. For his exhibition at Vancouver's Buschlen Mowatt Gallery Venter's *Missing* series extends the language of contemporary art in a way that deconstructs the subject. The subject matter of the *Missing* series addresses the disappearance of female prostitutes, (many of them Native), in Vancouver's Eastside and on the so-called Highway of Tears in British Columbia, and some of the paint-

ings, such as *Courtroom #1*, deal with the Air India disaster victims. Though very controversial, particularly in today's art collecting climate, as Venter states, "the intention and resolution these works achieve, brings recognition and respect for the missing women of Vancouver Eastside and the victims who perished in the 'Air India disaster'."

Venter's textured painterly images of the women victims carry something of that sensual textural style we see in the paintings of De Kooning or Chaim Soutine, whose *Side of Beef* painted in 1925, is as iconic as Andy Warhol's media derived *Car Crash* and *Electric Chair* (1965) series. Like Warhol, who produced serial repeated images in developed sequences with the electric chair, to suggest the variability of a repeated image, Venter presents the tragedy of these women's multiple deaths by showing successive images of the prostitute victims. This is not a singular tragedy, Venter's paintings seem to say, but a collective and societal one, that is repeated again and again over time.

The *Courtroom* paintings put the emphasis on structure, as we see the geometric design of the courtroom seats. The glaring lighting further depersonalizes

the scene. There are no people. It all seems to be about emptiness. Where is the human scale? In *Courtroom No. 1*, the dramatic, violent colour of the carpet and obstructive architecture become a comment on the way courtrooms and the legal system function. Another *Courtroom* image has white grid lines that all but obscure the actual scene, and obstruct any depth; a metaphor for what the legal system is doing to those who do not have the resources to defend themselves? The visual *double entendre* Venter builds with the courtroom structure, and the way it acts as a very physical and inflexible obstruction, is also a metaphor for the very nature of truth in society represented by a courtroom scene. The same goes for *Names* (2008), where the grid becomes denser, and the figurative elements smaller, more digital and caricature-like.

Venter's paintings describe a system - both informational and socio-cultural - where it is the absence of knowledge and information that determines and guides the media and society. The (social) structures exist as thin white painterly surface lines, strictly codified, and the imagery is partially erased and obscured in these paintings. Venter presents the implicit violence through

painterly effects analogous to that unlikely spiritual icon in the history of art, Rembrandt's *Carcass of Beef: Flayed Ox* (1655). A hanging beef carcass eviscerated and with rib bones exposed at the chest, is so visceral and immediate in its realization that the subject becomes the paint itself. For this animal's body, once a structure, is now but meat, sinews, lumps, clumpy details, with no head and the hooves removed. The distancing is effected through lighting. Interior *Hakeme* (2004) has a Kiefer-esque painterly roughness in its upper section, while below we have a series of white wave-like horizontal bands on off-white. *Tappings No. 3* (2008), with its vertical bands, narrow and then broader in the centre, seems to be about erasure, neglect, censure, and the invasion of freedom and privacy in society, all this done through the language of abstraction.

As Venter comments, "This disappearance of women of the sex trade is by no means confined to Vancouver. It is happening worldwide. As a painter my goal is not to memorialize, but in documenting these tragedies to attain beautiful paintings that will, in their very execution, bring some resolution, both emotionally and intellectually." □