



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

The unbearable uncertainty of waiting

The starting point is the sensation of waiting – waiting for what? A waiting that is filled with expectation, or with fear?

Sarah Biggs won the 2015 Turbine Art Fair & Sylt Emerging Artist's Residency Award (TASA) and spent some months in Germany. Her new exhibition, called *Waiting for Rain*, depicts our human universal anxiety when it comes to climate change and weather phenomena. The absence of rain, the increasing lack of water, is one of the major threats of our time and climate change is an uneasy fact that leads us to stumble and despair when we think about our future.

The drought we experienced in South Africa and its devastating effects on nature and people, is only the starting point for Biggs' exploration of how transformation and change play their roles in our lives, our perception of nature and our ability to cope with it.

The alienation of humans from nature is a long-deplored fact and the juxtaposition of the landscape and the human beings whose hopes seem to have shattered is an integral part of our contemporary conception of the world we are living in. In the 1950s, German philosopher Günther Anders wrote his famous book *The Obsolescence of Man* in which he deals with the impossibility of man to keep path with his creations.

The gap between the apparent perfection of the machines that we create and the apparent imperfection and deficiency of our own vulnerable, mortal and messy bodies (and accordingly, since we cannot detach ourselves from our bodies, of ourselves) is hard to accept. In fact, it is a permanent source of a particular kind of shame, which Anders calls 'Promethean shame' and which he defines as the 'shame for the embarrassingly high quality of the things we make.' It is the frustrating and humiliating recognition of our inferiority when compared to our products, and what

seems to *make* us inferior more than anything else is the fact that we have been *born* rather than *made*.

The destruction of humanity goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of nature and Biggs' figures no longer inhabit a landscape, they are barely connected to anything anymore and seem to occupy a lonely wasteland of their own imagination and creation. How do we keep pace with the technical monsters we created when we do not understand the enormous consequences of them? The desertification of our land is increasing and there are still those (even scientists) who see no connection to man-made destruction.

Biggs' landscapes are waiting too – either for rain or for destruction. Like a botanist who wants to explore the lives of the plants, she renders the inner soul of the landscapes. These inner forms may be atomised depictions of landscape, might be the evocation of the ephemeral through dissolving structures. Nature is changing, is transformed too by our human striving for perfection and thus destroyed. The vortex of reality results in a torn consciousness as well. Ashes fall from the sky, fires of destruction tell us of a spiritual twilight in which the abuse of nature has been turning its reliance into an ecological dystopia. We have made nature our enemy.

This faceted consciousness of man today is his curse, and often goes with an orientation to the mythological and traditional certainties in the search to understand this unprecedented dystopia of his own creation.

Biggs' portraits are found in this ambiguous realm of not understanding and still trying to apply patterns of knowledge that we still know. She scrutinises the alienation of those lonely men, the anxiety of waiting and their futile approach to their situation. It is not a waiting room where



Sarah Biggs in her studio



Waiting for Rain, Sarah Biggs, 2017. Oil on paper.

one can expect something that is to come. No, Biggs' waiting room plays with the fact that this waiting might be futile, that the world we have known will come to an end in a dystopian nightmare that can no longer be inhabited.

The obsolete souls of the depicted, the different expressions of waiting, of anxiety, of futility composed masterly next to the images of the transforming landscapes.

Biggs plays with our culturally formed ideas of nature and how it should react. But can we still trust our perceptions here? And, as obsolete man seems to be today, he uses the technique and the knowledge he has been using to deal with the world throughout time.

There is a portrait of a crow. A foreboding for those who are waiting? Waiting for rain? Waiting for destruction? Waiting for death? The cultural history of man has been observed by crows. They came close to us because they lived off the fields of our corpses. Their reputation as death messengers is deeply rooted in our cultures and our arts. This portrait plays with our myths, our perception of nature and is simultaneously a homage to one of the most intelligent animals that might, therefore, survive in a dystopian new world. One almost hears the quiet laughter of the winning crow, or is there a sign of pain in its croaking?

It is the pain and the lost beauty of creation that remain after we are done with our hubris. Anders' three main principles that 'we are no longer adequate to our products, that we produce more than we can imagine and take responsibility for and that we think that we are allowed to do everything we can actually do' are more relevant today than ever.

And it is in Sarah Biggs' paintings that our fight for transforming our social, political and ecological landscapes to rescue the world becomes a visual *memento mori*. An evocative appellation that it is us who need to change – the viewer becomes the very subject of each of the images and therewith is object and subject at the very same time. **CF**