



OF FABLES AND FOLLY  
DIANE VICTOR, RECENT WORK

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FAULCONER GALLERY  
GRINNELL COLLEGE  
JANUARY 28 – APRIL 17, 2011

CURATED BY KAY WILSON



from *Recently Dead, Untitled*, 2006. Smoke on paper, 42 x 30 cm

## OF FABLES AND FOLLY DIANE VICTOR, RECENT WORK

The realities of living in contemporary South Africa are harsh. There is wealth and power aplenty but its distribution is hopelessly lopsided in favour of a small elite: the politically connected, the industrialists, the corrupt dealers, and the out-and-out swindlers. For the rest there is the prospect of inequality, promises not kept, services not met, crimes that go unpunished, and deaths that go unavenged.

For near on thirty years, Diane Victor has confronted these realities head-on in her work. Her images, in her signature media of printmaking and drawing, are obsessive, figurative, and narrative. She draws heavily on a personalised iconography that takes its cues from religious and mythological prototypes, observations from Victor's own experience, and art-historical influences. Subject matter is bound up in searing social commentary on the myriad maladies Victor sees around her: corrupt politics, tarnished morals, avarice, incompetence, apathy, lawlessness, rot.

Victor's images, stubbornly devoid of optimism, are often said to recall the work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525–1569), and Francisco Goya (1746–1828). Visions are dark and prophetic and, even when bordering on the fantastical or over-hyped, never fail to retain the disquieting pull of real-world credibility. This attribute, which can be put down to a number of idiosyncratic strategies routinely employed by the artist, singles Victor out as one of the country's foremost 'social realist'<sup>1</sup> artists.

Victor maintains a complex intertextuality throughout her work and no figure, object or symbol is ever included arbitrarily. The female figure, rather than conforming to the conventional patriarchal ideal—submissive lover, mother, martyr—is sexualised, demanding, confrontational. Venerated figures emanating from the Catholic canon—the Virgin Mary, Christ, the Pope—are conflated with the basest humans, their every frailty and folly plainly in evidence. And, similarly, figures from Greek mythology are staged to metaphorically allude to dysfunctional human interactions, inequitable gender relations and deviant sexual practices.

Furthermore, Victor frequently incorporates her own body and portrait into her

<sup>1</sup> I would be reluctant to describe Diane Victor as a Social Realist per se, in that her oeuvre encompasses a modus operandi and choice of subject matter that far exceeds the accepted definitions of Social Realism. Her persistent return to the topics of social and racial injustice and the economic hardship endured by the working classes (or in the case of South Africa, largely the unemployed) does, undoubtedly, align her output with that of European Social Realist artists however.

work. She comments that at the outset this tendency arose from her inability to afford a model. But what started out as a compromise has now become a deliberate strategy. Through the performative act of inserting her own identity into her drawn narratives, she conflates idolised figures of religious, political or cultish origin with herself, thereby undermining their inherent power and exposing them to the same scrutiny levelled at every common man/woman.

Victor's various techniques, too, go far beyond the simple act of rendering subject matter. Victor comments that she constantly strives to push the boundaries of her artistic practice and always with the intention of heightening meaning. Her drawing marks are aggressive and leave no question as to her frustration and anger at her fellow man's unremitting capacity for abomination. One constantly has the impression that she draws as a cathartic act in order to exorcise the evil around her.

Victor began a series of small prints in 2001 entitled *Disasters of Peace* (2001, ongoing) (pages 8, 9). As the title suggests, the series finds its referent basis in Goya's satirical *Disasters of War* (1810–1820) and interrogates the mass of uniquely South African socio-political barbarisms that have occurred in the past decade. Or as Victor puts it: "Society does not need a state of war to commit small atrocities, just as horrific as any in sanctioned war."<sup>2</sup>

The series becomes a depressing litany: #3 *In Sheep's Clothing* depicts a 'lamb-child' sitting passively on the end of a bed, legs spread to accommodate a swarthy man, his face buried in her crotch. #29 *She was killed like a Goat* literally substitutes a goat in place of a woman, alluding to dismissive male attitudes towards women that so often manifest in violent domestic abuse. #10 *Glue Boys* and #12 *Mind the Gap* remind us of the extreme and humiliating poverty still suffered by many black people in post-apartheid South Africa. And so on, and so on... Ironically, this inventory of tragedies seems to find its summation in the very first print in the series. #1 *Blind Justice* is dominated by a blindfolded judge nonchalantly feeding his goldfish in a bowl on his bench, while receiving fellatio from a kneeling man between his legs. His gavel rests redundantly nearby, and the public gallery stares vacantly forward, unaware.

A more recent series of ten drypoints, *Birth of a Nation* (2009–2010) (pages 10–13) carries some of the themes in the *Disasters of Peace* series forward but, somewhat uncharacteristically, offers the viewer some respite. Themes again centre on societal norms gone awry, but the mood is lifted by means of the substitution of a

2 Victor quoted by Rankin 2008:43.

familiar selection of classical fables, each of which plays out in the African landscape. The Abduction of Europa is translated to become a contemporary tale of the *Rape of Africa* and highlights the devastation of African fauna and flora. Zeus, cast as a rhino, rather than ravishing Europa, is literally brought to his knees under a dispassionate girl-soldier, her AK47 resting nonchalantly against his side. And in a scene that clearly parallels Leda and the Swan, a semi-autobiographical Leda is brutally raped by a malignant white-backed vulture.<sup>3</sup>

Victor's women defy virtually every code for the representation of the female form in both religious and secular art. Their eyes make direct contact, deliberately challenging the viewer; they revel in their own sexuality; they are lumpy, messy, uncontained and anti-aesthetic. But they are also often wounded, bruised and oozing, showing the stigmata of all-too-frequent damage. Lynda Nead writes in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*: "If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical forms of art perform a kind of magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears."<sup>4</sup> Victor, quite evidently, does not conform to this ideal and, in fact, continues to seek new strategies to push the concept of the porous and disintegrating body always one step further.

As early as 1999, Victor began to experiment with drawn stains emanating from parts of her figures and she has developed the technique to the point where the stain and the boundary of the figure become virtually indistinguishable. The intentions behind the technique are two-fold: when applied to figures of presumed religious or political authority, such as is the case in a 2008 triptych entitled *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* (pages 16, 17), they serve to destabilize—rendering the figures tainted, diseased, and impotent. On the contrary, Victor applied the same staining technique in an older work created in remembrance of a pregnant friend who had taken her own life. In this work, *Dead Nikki* (2004), the stained boundaries of the tenderly drawn female form causes it to hover between materiality and ephemerality, as would a reflection in a pool of water. Ultimately, the figure breaks up, appearing to dissolve into the paper on which it is drawn.

Whilst teaching a drawing course at a South African university, Victor assisted a student in alternative drawing media, and simultaneously realised the potential for using smoke as a drawing tool. Smoke drawing requires her to move a burning candle,

3 References taken from 'Diane Victor Gallery Brochure' (2008). Published by David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg.

4 Nead quoted by von Vey 2008:66.

in a drawing motion, beneath a tilted sheet of paper. The resulting images are largely uncontrollable, ethereal and extremely fragile. As per her usual *modus operandi*, Victor has employed this technique metaphorically in the portrayal of her most vulnerable subjects: people infected with the HIV virus, South Africans murdered in an on-going chapter of senseless crime, and the images of missing children based on the faded, grainy photographs seen on dismal 'missing people' websites.

In 2009 Victor began to evolve her smoke drawing in the direction of ash or dust drawing. Again employing her highly astute mark-making ability, she scatters fine ash or dust from a small height onto her paper, rendering some of the most delicate imagery of her oeuvre thus far. Unsurprisingly, her subject matter dwells on the transitory and fleeting lives of old age pensioners, their years all but spent.

The technical mastery of Victor's chosen graphic media is beyond dispute but, essentially, it is in her searing, uncompromising, and unremitting response to her subject matter that she really excels. No ugly stone is left unturned as she exposes folly, feebleness, or vice; and always her viewer is made to sit up and take notice through strategies that confront, disarm, and disconcert. In the final analysis, Victor's ability to present her themes and subjects in a manner that all but forces our identification with them ejects us out of our complacent stupors, whether we wish it or not.

Jacki McInnes  
December 2010

Jacki McInnes is a South African artist, curator, and writer who was awarded the Sacatar-Spier Contemporary Fellowship Award 2010 for a residency to the Instituto Sacatar, Itaparica, Bahia, Brazil.

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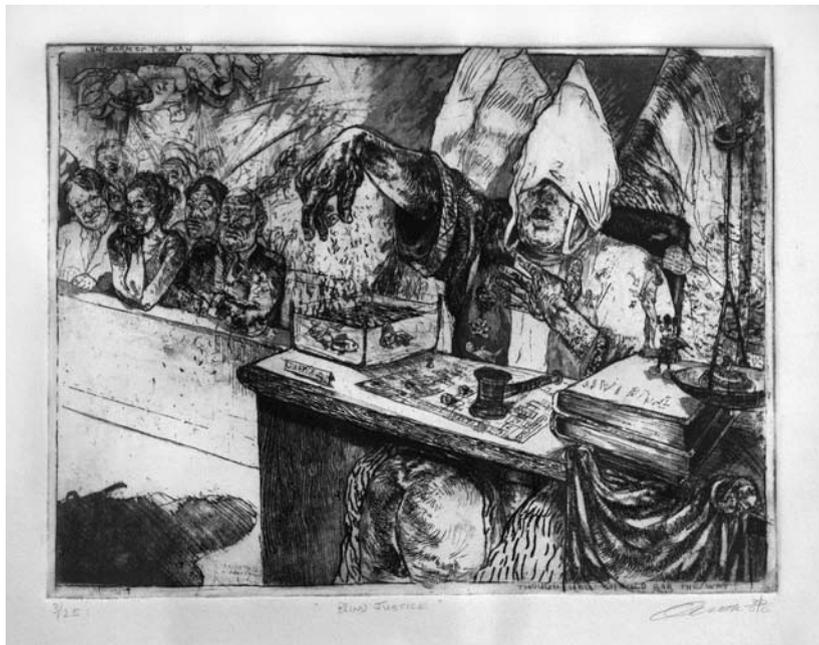
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From *Smoke Heads*, 2006. Smoke on paper, 42 x 30 cm



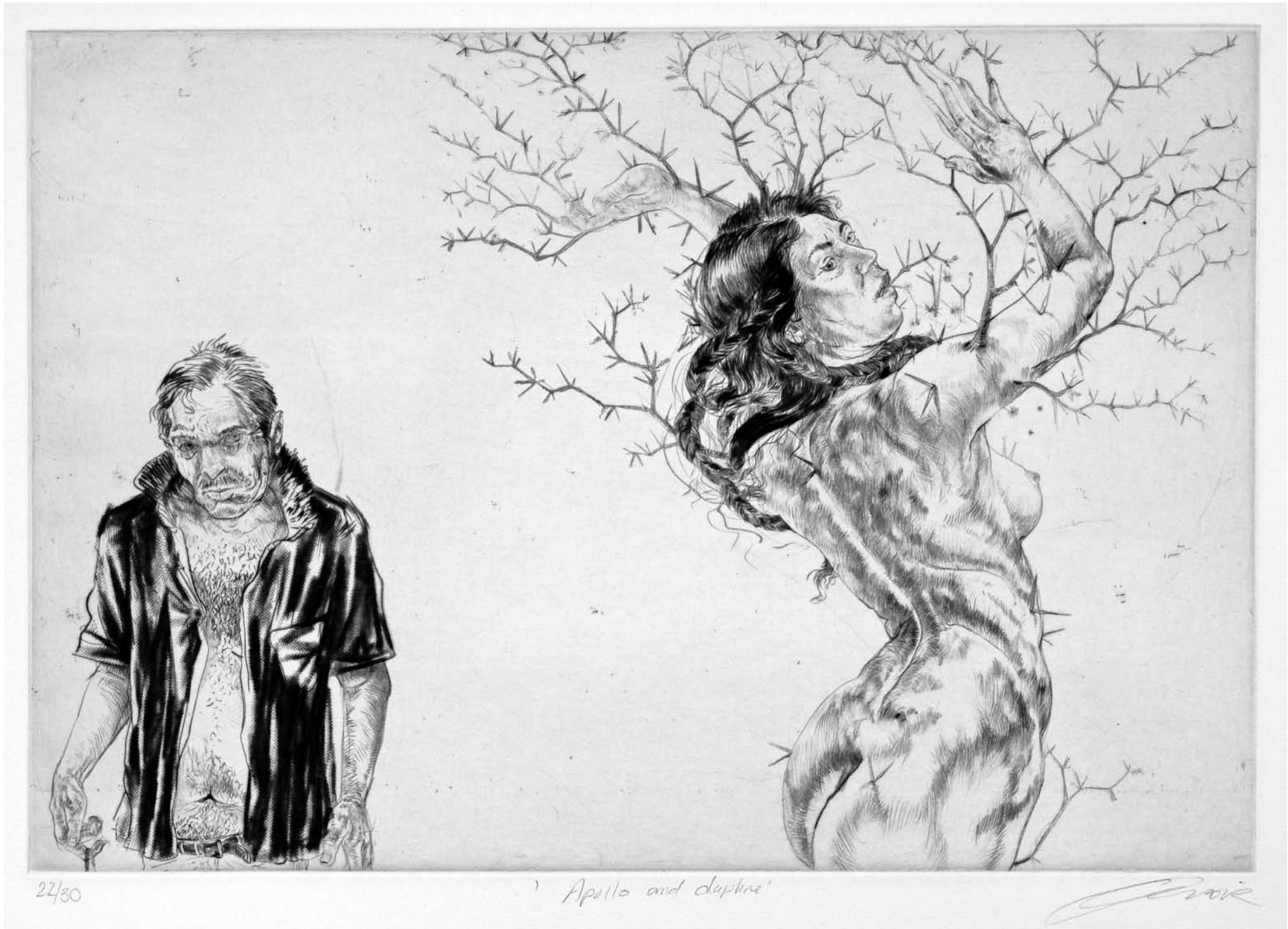
Top: *Disasters of Peace: #3 In Sheep's Clothing*, 2001, ongoing. Etching and aquatint, 28 x 32 cm  
 Bottom: *Disasters of Peace: #1 Blind Justice*, 2001, ongoing. Etching and aquatint, 28 x 32 cm

Top: *Disasters of Peace: #10 Glue Boys*, 2001, ongoing. Etching and aquatint, 28 x 32 cm  
 Bottom: *Disasters of Peace: #12 Mind the Gap*, 2001, ongoing. Etching and aquatint, 28 x 32 cm



Top: *Birth of a Nation: Leda and the White-Backed Vulture*, 2009. Drypoint, 27 x 36 cm  
 Bottom: *Birth of a Nation: Minotaur*, 2009. Drypoint, 27 x 26 cm  
 Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection

Top: *Birth of a Nation: Rape of Africa*, 2009. Drypoint, 27 x 36 cm  
 Bottom: *Birth of a Nation: Romulus and Remus*, 2009. Drypoint, 27 x 36 cm  
 Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection



Birth of a Nation: Apollo and Daphne, 2009. Drypoint, 27 x 36 cm  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection



*Learning Posture*, 2004. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint, and embossing, 200 x 150 cm



*Straight Dress*, Panel 1 from triptych *Trinity Fetish*, 2002. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint, and embossing, 158 x 85 cm



*The Wise and Foolish Virgins: Catherine, 2008*

*The Wise and Foolish Virgins: Mary, 2008*

*The Wise and Foolish Virgins: Agatha, 2008*

Triptych

Charcoal stain drawing on paper, 190 x 120 cm each panel

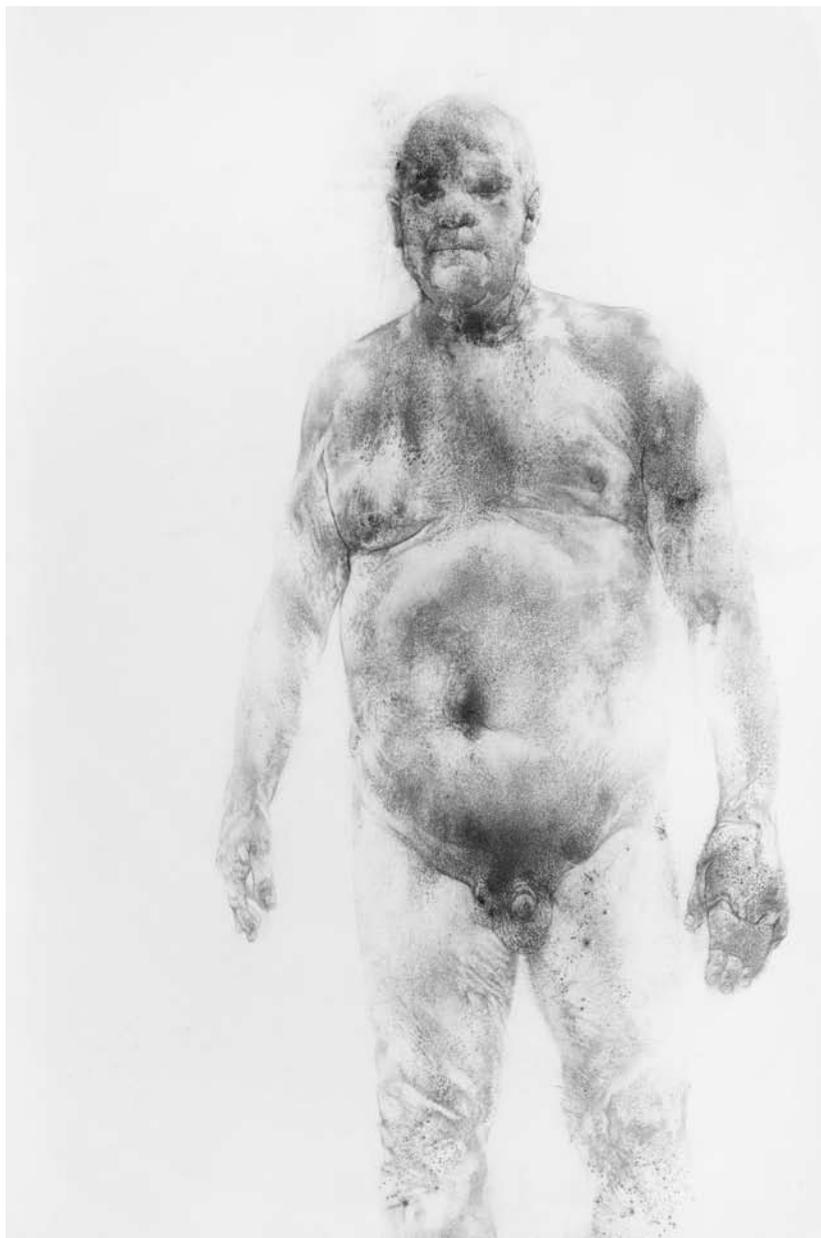
Private Collection, New York City



*Four Horses: Baited*, 2009. Etching and digital printing, 105 x 200 cm



*Four Horses: Bearer*, 2010. Etching and digital printing, 105 x 200 cm



*Jan*, 2010. Ash and charcoal dust drawing on paper, 150 x 95 cm



*Norman*, 2010. Ash and charcoal dust drawing on paper, 151 x 100 cm

## CURATOR'S NOTE

From its founding in 1846, Grinnell College has been committed to social justice. It was an important stop on the Underground Railway that secretly transported slaves to freedom. From 1960 to the present, students actively have worked for civil rights. It is our historic mission to educate young women and men who are prepared in life and work to use their knowledge and abilities to serve the common good. In support of that mission, the Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection is distinguished by its social commentary by artists that have taken pen and stylus as weapons against oppression, exploitation and human folly. It includes prints and drawings by Francisco Goya, Pablo Picasso, Käthe Kollwitz, the German Expressionists, and contemporary American artists John Wilson and Enrique Chagoya. We are pleased to add the prints and drawings of Diane Victor to that distinguished list.

With her artist's residency at Grinnell College and exhibition *Of Fables and Folly*, Faulconer Gallery is honored to introduce Diane Victor, one of South Africa's most important contemporary artists, to a wider American audience.

Kay Wilson, Curator of the Collection  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Diane Victor for her talent, skill and courage. She graciously responded to our requests at every step in the three-year process of organizing *Of Fables and Folly*. She incurred an Iowa winter to travel to Grinnell to create a series of smoke drawings for the exhibition. We appreciate Jacki McInnes for her words of insight into the working of Diane Victor. We thank a private collector in New York City for generously lending the triptych *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*. Many of the works of art would not have arrived from South Africa without the efforts of Neil Dundas of Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.



## DIANE VICTOR

Diane Victor was born in Witbank, South Africa in 1964. She earned her BA/Fine Arts in printmaking from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She became the youngest recipient of the prestigious Volkskas Atelier Award in 1988. Recently she was recognized as one of the most important contemporary artists in South Africa with the Sasol New Signature award and the Gold Metal Award for Visual Art, South African Academy of Arts and Sciences. She teaches drawing and printmaking at the University of Pretoria and Rhodes University.

Diane Victor in her studio working on *Four Horses: Bearer*

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Smoke on paper, 42 x 30 cm

Unless otherwise indicated, all works  
courtesy of the artist.  
Jacki McInnes: Photo of Diane Victor  
Daniel Strong: Images of *Birth of a Nation*



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