

Recycling the Apocalypse

Jacki McInnes and John Hodgkiss collaborated on a powerful work that interrogates our need to understand the present in apocalyptic terms, writes **Michael Titlestad**

Men in the midst make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle.

– Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

I just don't need none of that Mad Max bullshit.

– Modest Mouse, “Good News for People Who Love Bad News”

We live in an age that imagines itself on the brink. Doomsday environmental scenarios, the aggressive globalisation of corporate capitalism (overseen by a mad, bloated financial sector) and the looming possibility of energy and food wars have made “catastrophism” and “declinism” our orthodoxy. It is not only in popular culture that the End of Days prevails: in which post-apocalyptic hunter-gatherers are salvaging from the wreck of civilization; in which marauders are given to atavistic fetishism, tribalism and cannibalism; or, in which zombies literalise our horrific history of unrelenting consumption. In response to this, an increasingly influential evangelical leftism takes its rhetorical structure from the jeremiad, presenting the world in chiliastic terms. “The world is already apocalyptic,” Evan Calder Williams declares, “just not all at the same time.” In the Euro-American complex, he continues, we live “conveniently unaware of pockets of hell on earth that approximate the total breakdown of civility and quality of life ... we catch glimpses of them only when they surge up in the midst of supposedly advanced sectors of the world.”¹ Catastrophists – including the influential Nafeez Ahmed, Executive Director of the Institute for Policy Research and Development – read these “pockets of hell” as prophetic. The poor, living on waste dumps or in abandoned buildings, scabbling in the dark corners of disintegrating societies, are heralded as avatars of the apocalypse. They foreshadow a condition that, unless we change our ways, threatens to become universal.²

This understanding depends on a rectilinear temporality. Historically, Judeo-Christian eschatology displaced earlier versions of cyclic time. Rather than a regular succession of deterioration and regeneration, human history came to be understood as a progression from Creation to Revelation. The apocalypse – the Greek word for “lifting the veil” – will reveal human life and history from the point of view of God. Human hubris and illusion will be brought to nothing, and divine grace alone will redeem the righteous and salvage value

from the destruction of the world.

This eschatology petrified into secular myth and became the foundation of historical allegories, fictional structure and visual representation. Despite its detractors, it has been the dominant temporality in Western thought, binding our imagination to the logic of crisis and disclosure. In Frank Kermode’s view, its endless reiteration is a symptom of “a permanent need to live by the pattern rather than the fact, as indeed we must.”³

South Africans have an intimate relationship with spectacles of conclusion. In our history, imagined threats of endings have borne down on us with relentless regularity, and most major social and political changes have been imbued with millennial significance. Even in the midst of the complicated exception of our Beginning (1990–94), the End loomed as it always has. Yet again, the bourgeoisie scurried to stock kitchen cupboards with tinned food and bottled water. Our Four Horsemen have worn a variety of masks, but have never been far off.

Even the most evangelical South African catastrophists have to concede that each rent curtain has only revealed another. In the terms of J Hillis Miller’s deconstruction, the apocalypse has never been “now”, it has always been deferred.⁴ Time keeps discrediting our predictions, as it always has. But we quickly gather ourselves, re-read the signs, and contrive a new ending, as obviously and irreducibly real as all those that have proved false.

Apocalyptic representations abound in apartheid and post-apartheid art. I am loath to list examples, lest this conceptual rejoinder be read as accusation. Rather, I would like to characterise a project that, in my view, responds to the limits of the apocalyptic vision.

In 2009 and 2010, Jacki McInnes investigated the lives and practices of informal recyclers living in an abandoned building, House 38, in Sivewright Avenue in Doornfontein, Johannesburg. The community comprised mostly



TOP LEFT Jacki McInnes/John Hodgkiss, *Hazardous Objects: House 38*, 2009–10, pigment inks on cotton rag. Photo: John Hodgkiss **TOP RIGHT** Jacki McInnes/John Hodgkiss, *Hazardous Objects: House 38*, 2009–10, pigment inks on cotton rag. Photo: John Hodgkiss **ABOVE LEFT** Jacki McInnes/John Hodgkiss, *Hazardous Objects: House 38*, 2009–10, beaten lead sheet, bulk-bag, dimensions variable. Photo: Jacki McInnes **ABOVE RIGHT** Jacki McInnes/John Hodgkiss, *Hazardous Objects: House 38*, 2009–10, pigment inks on cotton rag. Photo: John Hodgkiss

Basotho migrants and some South Africans, one of whom acted as a translator for McInnes. Due to safety considerations and her desire to document the daily journeys of the trolley-pushers across the city, she asked John Hodgkiss to accompany her and take photographs.

McInnes’s resulting artwork, *Hazardous Objects House 38*, comprising a bulk-bag of waste objects fashioned from beaten sheet lead, won the Sacatar-Spier Contemporary Fellowship Award 2010, allowing her to spend two months in residence at the Instituto Sacatar in Bahia, Brazil.

Surprisingly, the Spier Contemporary 2010 selection committee had no interest in exhibiting Hodgkiss’s photographs. Only five were ever shown – at a subsequent exhibition hosted by the University of Johannesburg, curated by McInnes.

The photographs represent far more than research or documentation. They are a careful engagement with the lives and circumstances of a community making do, living off the waste generated by the consumptive city into which they have insinuated themselves. Hodgkiss was at pains to capture the details of the recyclers’ labour: the wheeled pallets they appropriated from bakeries and retailers (according to McInnes, many from Woolworths); the ironing-board legs wired on as handles; the woven bags laden with plastic bottles or white paper; the piles of collapsed cardboard cartons; the occasional jutting haul of scrap metal.

McInnes and Hodgkiss mapped the men’s daily routes: many walked 20–40 kms, pushing increasingly laden trolleys through the suburbs and then to the Newtown depot where the waste was weighed, bundled and stored for dispatch. The men were paid R25 to R40 for each cubic meter they collected, amounting – on good days – to an income of R160 to R200.

In the evenings, the recyclers gathered in House 38, where they had constructed living quarters in the gutted building. These were furnished and

decorated with suburban cast-offs, Hodgkiss’s photographs revealing, without condescension, the minimum it takes to be house-proud. At night, the men, wrapped in Basotho blankets, some still wearing balaclavas, gathered around braziers, eating meals of pap and greens prepared for the community by a designated cook.

We can identify two strands in the combination of *Hazardous Objects House 38* and the photographs.

McInnes’s leaden waste objects are resonant metonyms for the toxic burden of unchecked consumption. They produce a centre of physical and moral gravity, drawing us onto the contours of their matt surfaces. Entirely unreflective, they resist any comfort of seeing anything other than themselves: in a mute assertion of the ideology of their production, they give nothing back but their irreducibly dead mass.

Their other strand of meaning suggests alchemy, reworking, manipulation. The lead objects recycle waste into meaning; they translate the residual into the dominant, complicating the relations between commodification and value, between beginnings and ends.

These possibilities are also evident in Hodgkiss’s photographs. He does not balk at the decimating effects of migrancy, the brutality of poverty and the police, and the ransacking violence of the Red Ants who, in late-2010, destroyed the men’s improvised rooms and evicted the community. A few months later, the building itself was demolished.

Yet, the photographs do not suggest naïve utopianism or sentimental romanticism about the tenacity of community or the resilience of the individual. No such clichés. They are a more robust response to catastrophism. These are lives, not at the End of Days, but produced by an eddy in the flows of late-capitalism. An “eddy” is a swirling, reverse current produced when a fluid flows past an obstacle. Our world is defined by rectilinear flows of



FACING PAGE Jacki McInnes/John Hodgkiss, *Hazardous Objects: House 38*, 2009–10, pigment inks on cotton rag. Photo: John Hodgkiss **ABOVE** Jacki McInnes/John Hodgkiss, *Hazardous Objects: House 38*, detail, 2009–10, beaten lead sheet, 8 x 29 x 11cm. Photo: Jacki McInnes

commodities channelled by financial contours. Commodities pile up in places of excessive consumption, generating clumps of waste in which vestigial value remains lodged.

The informal recyclers, excluded from the flow of the formal economy, capitalise on an eddy, an evanescent reverse flow. Watching the current of the formal economy from which they are excluded, the recyclers know it wouldn't pay anyone else to do the work.

I am not suggesting that, rather than incarnations of the apocalypse, the recyclers represent an ideal of urban inhabitation. It is common to venerate the capacity of the marginalised to contrive means of survival at the borders of cities. Academics often applaud the ingenuity of those who make do; those who recuperate, adapt, manipulate and recombine elements of possibility to improvise subaltern lives. But it insults reality to replace dystopian fictions about the poor with naïve, self-satisfied utopianism. The lived reality of the poor is what it is.

We can, though, refuse the utopian/dystopian binary altogether. As many writers and artists have shown, it is possible to stop submitting to fictive patterns that have reified into myth. As long as we remain committed to the logic of the apocalyptic imaginary, we will continue to be mesmerised by a received, rectilinear eschatological melodrama.

McInnes's lead objects and Hodgkiss's photographs confound ends and beginnings. Neither affords the viewer vicarious pleasure in the horrors of the End; neither is motivated by a revelatory evangelical logic. Instead, both dwell on the boundary of damage and possibility, rigorously placed in what Kermode calls "the midstest"; the place in which we stand and from which it is possible to perceive the world without resorting to the simultaneous hysterical alarm and rapturous glee of the catastrophist. This "middest" is the territory of a relentless present in which all traces of the past and the future converge and to which we owe the obligation of detailed reading and regard. This may, as Kermode suggests, require prudential, modest "clerical scepticism".⁵

To reiterate my opening gambit: why resist the apocalyptic imaginary? Why set out to oppose a concept and present an artwork as an exemplary challenge? I have implied three reasons. First, imposing a millennial logic on the

complex, compromised, often complicit lives of the poor makes them serve our rhetorical and symbolic purposes. It is a form of exploitation in which particularity and political potential are subsumed by mythic ends. The apocalypse is anodyne high-drama that frees us from the demands of political agency. It can only blunt any effort at redress.

Second, apocalyptic metaphysics veil reality from us. They stunt the imagination rather than disclosing the nature of the world, the dynamics of the economy or the suffering it inflicts. The apocalypse is a way of stopping seeing and stopping thinking. The greatest threat functions as the pettiest convenience.

Finally, we are all convinced by the evidence that our time – the *now* – is truly the End. Without a Post-Carbon Revolution now – *right now* – the world will be reduced to a wasteland; and it will come to pass that ...

Urgency and millennialism are not the same thing. We need to act, but not at the instigation of Jeremiah or St John of Patmos. Let us consider, rather, the recycling of the present, the eddies of capital, money and sociality in which the midstest consists. This may seem a proscribed ambition, but at least it can take us somewhere we do not already expect.

I would like to thank Jacki McInnes for allowing me to interview her and for permission to use her photographs as well as those taken by John Hodgkiss. McInnes will be presenting de Magnete, a solo exhibition of her recent work, at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery from 6–27 June 2012. The exhibition will move to the gallery of North-West University from 19 July–3 August 2012.

1. Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, Ropely: Zero, 2011, 149.
 2. Nafeez Mossaddeq Ahmed, *A User's Guide to the Crisis of Civilization (And How to Save It)*. London: Pluto, 2010, 1–15.
 3. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 11.
 4. J Hillis Miller, *Others*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 106–7
 5. Kermode, 103.

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