

Jacki McInnes: *Strutting, Flying and Dying*

ABSA Gallery, October 2008

Opening speech: Bronwyn Law-Viljoen

I have to confess to some unease when I first considered the metaphor offered as part of the *raison d'être* of this body of work by Jacki McInnes. But before I explore my own misgivings, let me start with the images and objects themselves. There are several works on this exhibition vying for the pivotal position, the role of the fulcrum in a gathering of work that demonstrates a clear attempt to bring something to light through a series of curatorial decisions. For this role, I favour the drawing *Harbinger*, given some of its force in this context by its position, albeit at some distance, opposite the copper diptych *Aerial*. It seems to me that a good deal of the combined aggression and softness of this exhibition is concentrated in this image of a bird figure lying Christlike, its head thrown back in death, its wings broken and its feathers cohering like limbs. McInnes's skilled manipulation of her material – soot from burnt tyres mixed with oil and grease on paper – lends force to the expressiveness of drawing and succeeds, at the same time, in conveying a deep sense of unease through the figure of the bird. The dead creature is a mass of allusions and possible references: to the idea of peace that usually accompanies images of doves; to the necklacing rituals that are a part of our history; and to the horrifying image of the so-called burning man, now also part of our history, set alight in an appalling display of xenophobic barbarity and pure lawlessness and played out on our TV screens and in our newspapers. This bird is no messenger of peace, but a harbinger of death and loss.

But these allusions give me pause, if only because I am wary of the aestheticising impulse that sometimes reduces lived experience (those of animals as much as those of humans) to an image. I suppose in this moment of wariness, I have some sympathy with the taboo against the image not because it reduces god to the status of man, but because it reduces man's experience to something that can be passed over and

forgotten in the way that images are forgotten, even when they remain in the mind's eye. Forgotten, I mean, in the sense that they go from being life to being art, and hence unmindful.

But this is not always so. This would mean that Picasso's *Guernica* does not remind us and appal us; that Goya's "Disasters of War" does not make horror live on when history has almost forgotten which war he was referring to. Indeed, on the other side of this wariness is the compulsion to speak of things as they are without detracting from their horror or aestheticising them away. But doing this makes for uncomfortable viewing. I see something of this impulse in Jacki McInnes's work, in her consistent weighing up of experience, testing its validity, articulating it through the means available to her, through soot, copper, pewter, paper, stone, lead. These are heavy materials, carboniferous, toxic, unyielding, demanding despite their inertness. McInnes does not choose her media for their softness and malleability; she seems deliberately to choose what will offer only resistance to an aesthetic language. In some cases, she seems compelled to make her materials 'speak' by punching letters into their surfaces, as she has done in the works *Cocoon* and *Aerial*, painstakingly making them yield to language so that they become, through the process of her work, articulate.

In the light of this way of working then, let me consider how we might go from the figure of a dead bird to the organising metaphor announced in the invitation to this exhibition, one that, as I have already suggested, gives me pause. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben speaks about the reduction of human life in the last hundred years of history, to what he calls "bare life". He refers, in his complex analysis of this concept, to the bandit, a man who has been "excluded from the religious community and from all political life; he cannot participate in the rites of his [humanity] nor can he perform any juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is reduced to bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign

land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditional threat of death" (*Homo Sacer*, 183). Agamben is thinking specifically of the death camps of World War II, but let us extend his theory about the exclusion of the man of bare life to a consideration of what it means to be in flight or in a foreign land. I think that in the face of xenophobia, Agamben might readily adjust his thinking to suggest that flight and being in a foreign land are now the same thing. It would seem now that if you once begin to flee, you will continue to do so in a foreign land. You will not, in fact, rest from flight in a foreign land. Instead you will be chased to the very edge of the land, to the point of death. You may well be killed and your death will not be homicide, but the death of a foreigner, xenocide, if I may be so bold as to coin a word.

I suppose that what generates in me a sense of discomfort is the idea that the pigeons here, in flight, or scattered, or killed, or caged might be a metaphor for those we cannot name who come into our towns and cities and are killed. What I would suggest, rather, is that the pigeons are not metaphorical human beings, because this would make McInnes's work an exercise, and a rather futile one at that, in anthropomorphising. And clearly it is not that. So let us think of the pigeons not as standing in for people but, rather more philosophically, as harbingers. As bearers, in other words, of thoughts, of warnings, of news, good or bad. The word "harbinger", though it is usually associated with death, is in fact simply a reference to someone who carries news of an arrival. In medieval times, the one who brought news of an arrival was also, logically, the one sent ahead to secure lodgings for an approaching entourage. The French word for hotel, "auberge", is etymologically related to "harbinger": both are from the Old French "herberge" which means, simply, "lodging". This gives Jacki's series of drawings "Safe as Houses" extra weight. The images of birds, scattered like shot, are in direct counterpoint to the idea of safety, of the hearth, of home, of belonging.

It seems to me that several of the works that we see here cohere not around the idea of flight or alienation or banishment, but instead around something that gives rise to these ideas. How can one have flight, for example, without having somewhere to flee from or to? How can one experience danger without the knowledge of safety represented most primally in the notion of the hearth, the place that is most safe. And in the beautiful diptych *Aerial* the geographical and the environmental are distilled through an idea that the place in which we are most at home is, at the same time, the place we seem compelled to lay bare.