

# Notes Made While Listening

Jürgen Partenheimer's South African works offer insights on the relationship between language and images, writes **Bronwyn Law-Viljoen**

It is no small thing – and oft observed – that abstract painting, in its modernist manifestation, set itself up as a form hostile to language. Writing in 1985 about the modernist grid, Rosalind Krauss argued that it “announced, among other things, modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse.”<sup>1</sup> Those who championed abstract art, most notably Clement Greenberg, claimed a pure materiality for such art, a resistance to the *literary* in favour of what WJT Mitchell calls the “pure, silent presence of the work.” Since then, modernism’s resistance to language, writes Mitchell, has been overturned by postmodernism’s “breaking down of that barrier between vision and language that had been rigorously maintained by modernism.”<sup>2</sup> Postmodernism’s appeal to language, however, is not to *literature* but rather to another discourse, that of *theory*. Postmodernism grew up, as it were, alongside the flowering of a theoretical response to painting (and other mediums). At the same time, it also took language – text – into its formal fabric so that text became any one of a number of possible vehicles of expression to be used in the construction of a work of art. Armed now with the language that theory has bequeathed us, we can contend – as Mitchell does – that, far from resisting language, “all abstract paintings [are] ... visual machine[s] for the generation of language.”<sup>3</sup>

There is one fundamental difference between the way in which theoretical discourse arose around abstract painting and the relationship between literary and historical narratives in “traditional” painting. Theoretical discourse always arises after the fact, in response to, as an extension of the creative work, which is not the case in painting that relies on literary and historical narrative – in the latter, image and narrative are integral to, born out of, each other. This is not to say, however, that abstract painting eschews “subject matter”

or content. Rather, and here is Mitchell again, “although iconography and represented objects may disappear, content and subject matter do not.”<sup>4</sup> By extension, this means that abstract painting may be as overtly “political” as a painting in which we recognise signs, figures, objects and so forth, but that its relationship to the political – or the historical – is premised upon openness to ambiguity.

I have, admittedly, offered a rather neat historical trajectory: classical painting to modernism to postmodernism on the one hand; literature to theory to an erasing of the difference between text and image on the other. But it provides us with a useful point to begin speaking about the work of the German artist Jürgen Partenheimer, who visited South Africa at the end of last year at the invitation of the Nirox Foundation and returned again this year to wrap up projects started on his first visit.<sup>5</sup> Partenheimer is a distinguished artist who has exhibited widely in many major museums in Europe, including solo shows at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, S.M.A.K. Ghent, the Nationalgalerie Berlin and the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe. He has participated in the Paris, Venice and São Paulo biennales, and exhibited at MOMA, New York, the National Gallery in Washington DC and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid. His was the first retrospective of a contemporary German artist at the China National Gallery of Art in Beijing and the Nanjing Museum.

“Abstraction”, for all that I have used the term to approach this artist’s work, falls away somewhat as we contemplate the sly relationship between representation and refusal to represent in Partenheimer’s images. He remarked to me that working in South Africa made him extremely conscious of the “language” in which he has always worked, both of its consistent engagement with its abstract forebears and its tracing of a relationship to silence and



Jürgen Partenheimer, *Folded Spirits (Seeds & Tracks)*, 2012, oil on canvas, 140 x 115cm. Image courtesy Galerie Hans Strelow, Düsseldorf



**ABOVE LEFT** Jürgen Partenheimer, *Folded Spirits I/1*, 2012, hardground etching, sugarlift and spitbite aquatint, linocut and chine collé, 96 x 76cm. David Krut Print Workshop **ABOVE RIGHT** Jürgen Partenheimer, *Carme (Tracks #10)*, 2012, oil on canvas, 50 x 45cm. Image courtesy Häusler Contemporary Munich/Zurich **FACING PAGE TOP** Jürgen Partenheimer, *Seeds & Tracks and Folded Spirits*, artist's book, 2012, 9 prints (linocut and lithograph) with 8 poems by Lebogang Mashile. Image courtesy David Krut Projects, New York; Onrust Gallery, Amsterdam; Galerie Hans Strelow, Düsseldorf **FACING PAGE BOTTOM** Jürgen Partenheimer, *Tracks #1*, 2012, linocut, 46 x 58cm. David Krut Print Workshop

to the “space of breathing” such as he has encountered in certain forms of Japanese art. Reevaluating, somewhat, his resistance to representation (though perhaps it is not as conscious as a resistance, but rather simply an approach to making images in which representation is bracketed, left aside), he created a body of work here that, if it does not quite “represent” objects, nonetheless demonstrates a conscious articulation of what it means to show, or to speak, through marks made on paper or canvas. Responding, therefore, to colours, shapes and textures, but also to the intangibilities of conversations with fellow artists, of encounters with several South African poets, most notably Lebo Mashile, and the contours – real and imagined – of a particular landscape, Partenheimer lays down a delicate tracery of paths – punctuated by startling pinks, lavenders and blacks – over the creamy surfaces of sheets of cotton rag paper.

These influences notwithstanding, the drawings and prints completed in South Africa suggest an approach to the making of an image that begins not with language – for all his occasional inclusion of text in the works – but with silence. One has a sense that Partenheimer faces an expanse of paper not with the question of how he might proceed to fill it, but rather, precisely how he might avoid filling it, how he might create an image without negating the pulsating expanse before him. Acutely aware of being a sojourner, Partenheimer creates works that, before they do anything else, *listen*. When he does make a mark, however – an arcing line, a globe of colour – it is sure, unapologetic, a bold gesture in black, orange or pink that enters the realm of the paper determined to leave tracks.

Twelve large oil paintings created in the period between Partenheimer’s visits to South Africa, and as a further contemplation of time spent here, are quite different in mood and expression, a return to gestures more typical of other bodies of work, but with subtle inflections of what he has gleaned here. Though two out of the twelve paintings, like the South African prints and drawings, display a contemplation of the expansiveness of surface, in others, lines run from edge to edge, breaking the surface rather than skirting its empty

spaces. In some, like *Folded Spirits (Seeds & Tracks)*, colour takes over utterly: here a bright fuchsia reaches from top to bottom. Shapes in black, purple and orange interject. In the earlier prints these shapes were allusive and suggestive. In this work they represent a declarative thisness, a heady contemplation of form and colour that transforms their former allusiveness.

Importantly, Partenheimer sees these several bodies of work as constituting a “diary”, which means he regards them as “notes” on an experience, a record of sorts, of things seen, heard, listened to, understood or not understood. The diary constitutes an act of remembrance, but what diary is a record of anything except in fragments and bursts of recollection?

In Partenheimer’s “South African” works, we have neither “pure, silent presence” nor a machine for the generation of language, but rather a subtle oscillation between listening and speaking. A gesture is familiar, readable, “narratable” – a seed, or a track. At the same time, it celebrates an exquisite relation of forms – a globed shape, a line going from this corner of the paper to that. This give and take suggests, unequivocally, a response to the place visited, a genuine and generous willingness on the artist’s part to meet halfway.

1. Quoted in WJT Mitchell, *Picture Theory*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 215.

2. *Ibid.*, 217.

3. *Ibid.*, 234.

4. *Ibid.*, 223.

5. During his first visit, Partenheimer was resident at the Nirox Foundation where he completed a series of watercolour drawings on paper. He also worked at David Krut Print Workshop on six prints, and spent a week at Mark Attwood’s The Artist’s Press where he completed an artist’s book that includes poems by Lebo Mashile.

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