



FNB VITA ART PRIZE

2001

NSA GALLERY

GLENWOOD DURBAN

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First National Bank

Proudly South African

Kathryn Smith

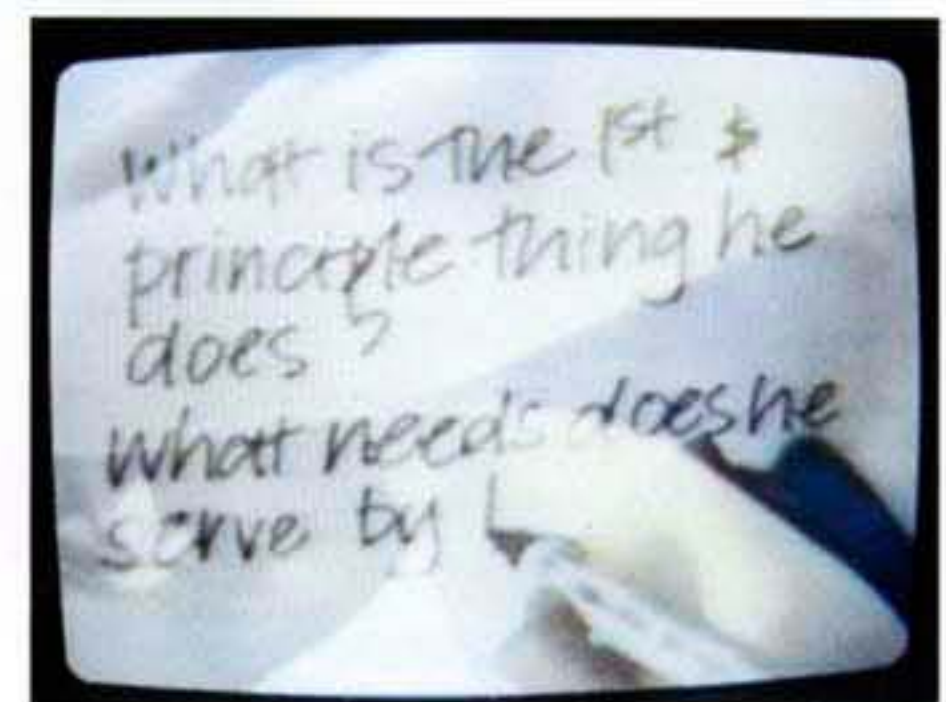
Forensic Aesthetics and Death in Series

Smith does death, usually violently. It has occupied her extensive artistic, curatorial and critical oeuvre for several years. Nothing new in that, you may say. Death has featured as a driver of art since time immemorial, for very good psycho-cultural reasons. Wrong. Smith's take on the nexus of death and aesthetics is refreshingly scientific, with a trash-pop slant thrown in. For starters, she's a forensic pathologist **manque**, which lends a level of obsessional detail to the work which unnerves as much as the subject matter. There's also a whole armature of deep critical and theoretical insight informing her practice, lending a gravitas to the pop touch and dispersing accusations of sensationalism.

Let's start somewhere else. Violent death has become, to paraphrase Mark Seltzer, something of a career option in the twentieth century and beyond. Our era differs from previous cultural reactions to death and violence, which involved taboo, ritual, transgression, punishment - a severe circumscription of violent acts, physical trauma and violent death, often with religious censure or approval. In medieval times torture and death were community spectacles, a means of binding groups together in fear and loathing. With the growth of urban existence came also the impossibility of a certain kind of public life. Shared experiences now, in a class-based new urban sprawl, have to be mediated ones. The characteristic forms of violent death in our era are those which are highly mediated - vehicle crashes, homicide and its special subset, serial killing. The technologies of urban life, devised to negotiate the new ergonomics of the industrial age, such as the highway systems round most major cities, have become sites of appalling traumatic violence and death. As we gather to spectate at crash sites, they resolve into postmodern execution scenes, complete with a rubbernecking audience. To assist in these fascinated acts of spectatorship, technologies of seeing have been co-opted into this new world of mediated violence. Photography was first used as an aid to homicide investigations early in the twentieth century, before such procedures as 'crime scene integrity' had been established. Photographers artfully arranged the victim's corpse, often with a sentimental touch such as a bloodied hat laid on the chest of the body in repose.

But it was with the rise of cinema, the true medium of the industrial age, that the connections between trauma, violence and looking were most tightly drawn. It is at this nexus that Smith's work unfolds. Her photographic series resemble consciously the forensic homicide 'genre', as with the work in the emblematic early series **Still Lives (1997)**, where the 'constructed' nature of colour photography overlays the documentary character of forensic death records.

Born 1975, Durban, South Africa
MA (Fine Art) with distinction, University of the Witwatersrand
Group Exhibitions Including:
2000 - Two Icons: the atom, the body, Museum Africa A.R.E.A. 2000, Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland
2000 - Tour Guides of the Inner City, Rembrandt Gallery, Johannesburg
1999 - Sasol New Signatures, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
1998 - Histories of the present, Johannesburg



As Smith puts it: "Forensic methods inform my production on all levels, primarily in recreating narrative and histories (both public and secret) through a given set of clues. My 'clues' are the debris, fragments and potentially risky spaces in the city through which I make meaning of myself within, and in relation to, these spaces. It's about latent information and coded access. The[re is also] the constant thematic of the body as an emblem of sorts, ever present and demanding, even in its absence".

In later work this relation of violent pathology to physical space is played out in collaged video pieces explicitly referencing the impulse to look, to conceal and discover in both forensic and voyeuristic approaches to violent trauma. **Regard (1999)** engages one of the canonical cinematic investigations of the fascination of the gaze and its relation to death - Antonioni's **Blow Up (1966)**. This emerges as part reconstruction of the original and part meditation on the idea, continued in her FNB Vita exhibition work, of a 'lethal space' - that is, the apparently innocent, bucolic inner city park, lake or hideaway which conceals the corpses dumped by psycho killers. It also broaches a signature easy listening soundtrack, its melodic kitsch jarring uneasily with the visual subject.

The FNB Vita exhibition work is entitled **The Way We Kiss in Public/A.D.A.S.T.W.** It is a further meditation on the confluence between space, mediation, trauma and the public/private divide represented by the forensic recording of violent death. In Smith's words, "The intention behind this work is to create an installation that is multisensory. I have tried to work with images such that they begin to behave like the body (twitch, breathe, jerk, 'sweat' and 'bleed'). As a unit, the installation works with the secret histories and unspoken desires that exist between the private and the public. Issues of transgression and license are primary areas of interrogation, focusing on the threat of danger and its association with the erotic (suspense is not a fear but a dilated wait)".

As the idea that there should be a divide between the public and private, the traumatic and the spectatorial, the violent and the voyeuristic continues to be eroded by the pressure of increasing degrees of experiential mediation and disassociation, the need arises for an artist like Smith, who highlights the hidden consequences of such fascinations in her work, and is able to ally those visual interventions to a gimlet critical eye. Only in this light is the difference between the normal and the pathological still possible. **James Sey.**



The Way We Kiss in Public/A.D.A.S.T.W. 2001 Installation