

**From *Wille Bester Apartheid Laboratory* Exhibition Catalogue
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Apartheid Laboratory
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*“Most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror,
Rendered unlovely and unlovable;
Sundered are we....”*

Dennis Brutus

One staggers before Willie Bester's mixed media works because they are so fiercely inscribed with the insanity of apartheid. These works are the pulsing repositories of an artist's consciousness of the madness of the apartheid state, a regime intent upon total repression of its populations, fearing loss of control, and therefore reducing human beings to the status of things - to be numbered, counted, processed, categorized, removed as waste from the White landscape and society. Apartheid's dehumanizing intent and infrastructure are the subjects of the works in this exhibition, *Apartheid Laboratory*, and though they were created in the years following apartheid's dissolution, they attest to the artist's unabated engagement with these issues. These installations confront us, requiring us to come to terms with the perniciousness of the regime's objectives and strategies. Constructed of metal, wood, rubber, fabric, and found objects, Bester's works appear to have been welded together not by the soldering iron's heat, but by the fire of the artist's own outrage. As such, they are both metaphors for apartheid and catharses for the suffering it engendered.

I was in South Africa in 1995 as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began its work. Though I had followed the South African liberation struggle for many years through study and solidarity activism, and hence knew something about the brutality of the apartheid system, the Commission's hearings disclosed a level of dehumanization among White leaders that I could not have imagined. When we actually witnessed the leaders of South Africa's security forces confessing the heinous crimes they had committed against Black South Africans, we were truly horrified. Who could possibly know what would be required or how long it would take for such monster-men to redeem themselves, how much time and by what measures this society might overcome 46 years of terror and the depravity of having put even its most valuable resources of human creativity and intelligence at the service of systematic, murderous oppression? These are the questions that Willie Bester's work encourages us to ask, questions concerning identity, both individual and collective: who am I now, so long a torturer or so long a victim, and who will I become in the future? What kind of national life am I capable of creating with those whom I have persecuted or resisted for so many years?

One of the works in this collection, Security Branch (1996), functions as a centerpiece for the whole. It resembles a very large medallion in which one may locate most of Bester's recurring anti-apartheid motifs: here is the camera (of perpetual official surveillance), the intravenous bottles, signifying drugging or other means of control; the electrical wires, implying monitoring, control, and torture; the bullets, the instruments of counting, measuring, and calculating by which human beings may be objectified; the rope, intimating restraint or torture; the upside-down hooded victim, No. 8067 WX, and a dismembered body, both evoking terror.

As counterpoints to these symbols, the artist has inserted dark, slender representations of the indigenous peoples, each figure isolated as if uprooted and scattered. These miniature objects and images with their powerful inferences are gathered in a densely woven, multi-layered fabric of paint, burlap and other textures to form an icon, the correlative of a ghastly idea, an inhumane system, an insane philosophy.

If the *Security Branch* synthesizes the ideology and tactics of apartheid, *The Great Trek* (1996) prompts us to reflect upon the Afrikaners' historic mission of colonization, their journey to occupy and dispossess the South African peoples of their land. The gallery space surrounding this sculpture functions as the South African landscape, a backdrop against which Bester casts his monstrosity of a pioneer wagon. This vehicle is both grandiose and pathetic with its majestic horns and harness, and its wire mesh waste receptacles. Laden with dishes, pots and other settler necessities, it is also a mobile arsenal of mounted gun and ammunition. Bester's satirical construction makes us realize the Voortrekkers' preposterous arrogance -- foreigners advancing with blind determination to possess a country, fortified by the drug of racism (the intravenous transfusion bottle is present), appropriating the Bible (*Die Bybel* is also featured in the work) to justify their virulent domination. The horizontal column at the center of the wagon holds a metal box where there is a procession of identical white bodies entangled in concertina wire. In this ironic detail, the artist depicts Afrikaners as self-righteous clones who were themselves imprisoned by the horrors they imposed.

To wield the power of apartheid -- separating populations by race (Black South Africans, Coloreds, Whites), allocating specific geographical locations to them, patrolling their movement, and securing borders -- required massive policing resources. *Soldier No. 2* (1994) and *Speelman* (1995) are works that represent the essential role that the South African security forces played in these operations. Bester represents *Soldier No. 2* as a little man -- that is, a stunted, underdeveloped man -- mounted on the vestiges of a bicycle, only one small, tennis-shoed foot, the size of a child's, pushing the pedal -- a man whose most visible attribute is his oversized phallic nightstick, which hangs from his waist by chain links. He appears to be choked by the rubber tubes intended to ensure his breathing. He wears a girdle of rubber bullets, carries additional ammunition, a rifle and a pistol. A metal mask covers his face; a camouflage helmet crowns him. One of his bodily organs is constructed of a wire mesh box and sack with trash suspended from an upside down ammunitions canister. *Soldier No. 2* is stamped as if he were a *thing*, branded repeatedly by sets of numbers and letters of no consequence, as an apartheid document might have been. He is not his own man, but subject to the orders coming via the radio attached to his side. As a *thing*, he might be capable of unspeakable transgressions.

Speelman is every security officer, the anonymous protector of the state and persecutor of the oppressed. He appears inhuman, his soul having been extracted by the forces for whom he works, and by his daily practice of brutality. The massacres and other crimes he has committed in the name of national security remain in his memory only as the fog of ancient nightmares. Apartheid madness has possessed him, providing direction -- perhaps through the intravenous tubes of Bester's ubiquitous drip bags -- without which he would be lost. In *Speelman's* presence, I was reminded of the assaults Black South Africans endured daily at the hands of the security forces, and recalled a poem by South African poet Dennis Brutus entitled "Somehow We Survive" (Brutus 92):

Somehow we survive
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither.

...Investigating searchlights rake

our naked unprotected contours;

over our heads the monolithic decalogue
of fascist prohibition glowers
and teeters for a catastrophic fall;

boots club the peeling door.

But somehow we survive
severance, deprivation, loss.

Patrols uncoil along the asphalt dark,
hissing their menace to our lives,

most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror,
rendered unlovely and unlovable;
sundered are we and all our passionate surrender,

But somehow tenderness survives.

In the lines “*investigating searchlights rake / our naked unprotected contours*,” Brutus refers to apartheid’s assault on the very personhood of its victims. The surveillance of “investigating searchlights,” the violence of doors being kicked down and privacy intruded upon were common terrorizing tactics used by the security forces to strip away individuals’ emotional and physical dignity. That some people did not relinquish tenderness in such a system is the precious miracle that inspired Brutus’ poem; however, Bester’s focus remains on the “severance, deprivation, loss,” the measures through which the apartheid system made human beings the direct objects of brutal state power. We can turn to French theorist Michel Foucault for an explanation of how this state violence works. In *Power/Knowledge*, he describes the ways in which capitalism impales its victims psychologically and physically. I would suggest that apartheid amplified these effects:

[The power of a capitalist system] reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives...(39).

On the same subject in *Discipline and Punish* (25-26), Foucault adds:

The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs...(25-26).

The bodies of everyone suspected of being South African liberation fighters were indeed the targets of the South African state through its security forces. The TRC hearings disclosed the extent to which South African intellectual life and scientific professions were involved in discovering new ways by which the regime could advance its murderous operations. The role played by these sectors of national life in serving apartheid interests is referenced in *Apartheid Laboratory*. This work simulates a ghastly control station: the operator’s chair has a machine

gun backrest; bloody plastic gloves have been left at one end of the table, and a pan of hypodermic needles (put to what sinister uses?) at the other. The ever-present surveillance camera is there. This is a site for human experimentation or torture and death. The back wall of the laboratory features a strip of tiles, a mirror and a white towel, suggesting a washroom where technicians might clean up after their work. The contrast of the predictable white of the washroom – suggesting a certain everyday normalcy -- with the bloodiness and grime of the lab signifies the deep contradiction in the minds and behavior of apartheid practitioners. As the traumatizing TRC hearings forced everyone to realize, men who committed horrendous atrocities at work returned to their homes and neighborhoods in the evenings, to carry on as loving husbands, fathers, and friends.

The dismal installation, *Bantu Education* (1996/97), illustrates the baneful pacification objectives of apartheid educational policy: to render generations of Black South African children non-critical thinkers, accepting of their prescribed inferiority, submissive to the limitations of the bitter life imposed upon them. South African poet W. Keorapetse Kgositsile, writing in the 1970's of his own childhood in Johannesburg, pointed out that the system's intended effect on the children was "to kill [them] even before [they] could begin to live..."(64). *Bantu Education* features Bester's recurring symbols: the camera and computer screen (police surveillance), the gas mask, the mounted gun (violence); the numbered bodies, and the intravenous drip bottle. From a seat suggestive of an electric chair, the "BOSS" (teacher or administrator) oversees a barbarous conveyor belt on which students are numbered, wired for monitoring and transported to a point where they are finally dumped as waste. The conveyor belt frames a rough assembly of rubber tubes, old desks where students have carved their protests, stacks of used exercise books, and school records, the whole assemblage portraying the apartheid school system as a dark, exploitative environment extracting humanity rather than cultivating it. In response to the policies that would subject them to such processes, and require them to be schooled in Afrikaans while relinquishing their own native languages and cultures, Black South African children withdrew in massive protests.

The *Apartheid Laboratory* collection asserts that no aspect of South African national life escaped apartheid's influences and requirements. In *Armchair* (1997), Bester implies that apartheid tainted even the spheres of leisure and enjoyment of life. From a distance one recognizes the shape of this work as an inviting piece of furniture -- the kind of lawn chair where one might enjoy a delightful afternoon tea. Up close, however, we find a repulsive thing, constructed of hideous emblems: A frightful carved snake arches across the back of the hard, unyielding seat, which is built of abandoned auto parts and other found objects. The armrests are mounted machine guns. Near the bottom, miniature, identical, numbered bodies are marching in line to some horrible end. A *Whites Only* sign emblazons the whole. We think Bester is saying, "Look, not even moments and sites meant for rest and cordiality escaped the degradation of the system. The oppressors can find no peace."

Bester's works are powerful indictments of apartheid and the people who implemented it. They are satirically horrid in appearance, yet expressive of the artist's extraordinary imagination and craftsmanship--particularly his exquisite mastery of metal sculpture technique. Equally impressive is his acumen in choice and orchestration of symbolic details in all the works. That he is working in the *genre* of art made of salvaged objects lends sharp irony to the whole, as these constructions of waste insinuate the bitter absurdity and spiritual vacancy of the apartheid project.

The works in the *Apartheid Laboratory* collection are warnings to everyone – not only South Africans – of the destructive power of racism and colonialism. They help us realize the

irrevocable devastation that state violence may inflict upon individuals and upon our collective humanity. Through the ingenious ugliness of these sculptures and installations, Bester concretizes the essence of apartheid's legacy: a society wounded by years of terror, unremitting violence of all kinds, and spatial controls which ensured profound social and economic inequalities. This legacy fuels the mounting political strife with which the "new" South Africa must now cope.

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