



S A B C A R T

Unbearable Heroes: Bonita Alice at Nel Gallery in Cape Town

Cape Town-based artist Bonita Alice is interested in the most looming crisis of our age – ‘environmental degradation and our apparent inability, as a species, to properly register our role in it; to act to rescue the situation and ultimately, ourselves’. Although she works in both two and three dimensions, Alice is predominantly a sculptor, and sculpture is the medium of her current show, *Unbearable Heroes*, at Nel Gallery on Long Street.

In this poignant exhibition, she continues to explore her sustained interest in human psychology and our relationship with other animals. ‘In our resistance to the idea of the suffering and annihilation of other species, despite the intense emotional closeness we share with some of them, I suspect a kind of madness,’ says Alice.

Unbearable Heroes features a series of finely wrought assemblages that resemble monuments or altar pieces, each featuring an animal surrounded by or propped up on familiar domestic objects and textures – carved wood, patterned cloth, trinket boxes and ceramics salvaged from charity shops. The familiarity of these items establishes a mood of intimacy, homeliness and closeness with the horse, the dog or the cow. But at the same time, the animals seem oddly misplaced in these domestic settings, highlighting the strange dualism of human relationships with nonhuman animals, and our efforts to tame them, own them, use them and subordinate them to our will.

The titles of the sculptures ('All of Them Have Greedy Hearts'; 'There Are Both Heretics and Believers Among Them'; 'In All These Countries People Wear Two Cloths') are extracts from the writings of early (1st- to 15th-century) travellers describing the people of other cultures encountered in distant places; strangers whose 'foreignness' in physical appearance and language is referred to in terms we've come to understand as dangerously devaluing and 'dehumanising'.

'Throughout human history, individuals in positions of power have recognised the strategic value in questioning the legitimacy of certain groups' claims of belonging to our species and sharing the elevated and privileged position we occupy on the planet,' reads the exhibition statement. 'Even in our supposedly more conscious contemporary world, this practice persists through the crassest mechanisms of "othering" on the basis of some or other point of superficial difference – often with deadly results. It could be argued that there is little difference between that impulse and the one underlying our positioning and treatment of nonhuman animals.'

The SABC Art Collection is proud to be home to three works by Alice. Although each of these works is made in a different medium, a common conceptual thread and mood runs through them. *Still Life* (1987), an oil painting features what could be a pile of white plates precariously balanced on the corner of a table. The muted hues of this painting and the slightly indeterminate shape of the plates bring a strange, otherworldly mood to what would otherwise be a very familiar, homely scene, rendering it strange and at a remove.



Bonita ALICE (1962 –)
Still Life
Oil on canvas
1987

Similarly strange, indeterminate shapes are also a feature of *Night Operation* (2010), a triptych made from wool, dust and archival glue on paper. The outline in the right panel of the triptych alludes to light illuminating a cloud just emerging from a craggy mountainside. The middle shape alludes to a rock, but could also be a heart or a shadow, while the shape on the left recalls prehistoric stone tools. At once abstract and atavistic, this work subtly calls into question the line between ideas and reality – what we think of as solid, fundamental, earthy and what we think of as a dream, a shadow, a passing cloud. Things are not what they seem.



Night Operation - triptych
2010
Wool, dust and archival glue on paper
800.5 x 1000 mm

The sculpture *Remainder* (1997), has much in common with the *Unbearable Heroes* series. In its totemic quality, it alludes to belief, tradition and institutions of lineage and power. A floppy form that resembles a tongue is held aloft by a wooden candlestick on a carved wooden box. Of course, the floppiness of the tongue is an illusion itself, having been carved from wood by the artist – again calling into question the materiality of things and our assumptions about them. A circle of succulent leaves sprouts from the base of the candlestick. This magnetic and intriguing work leaves the viewer with more questions than answers. The surreal tongue drooping from the pinnacle of the piece is a mystery, referring perhaps to the failure of language to adequately express some of the weirder, more unexpected and difficult aspects of human experience. Not everything can be reduced to a slogan. Alice's work insists on obliqueness and mystery.

Bonita Alice's *Unbearable Heroes* runs concurrently with an exhibition of recent painting by Arlene Amaler-Raviv, simply titled *surrender*, in the ground-floor gallery at Nel. Both exhibitions run until 16 May. – Alexandra Dodd



Remainder
1997
Bronze
Size unknown

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Johannesburg, Bonita Alice studied at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town and lectured in several Fine Art Departments until 2003. She relocated to London in 2007, returning to South Africa in 2020. She is currently based in Cape Town. Alice's work is held by the Everard Read Gallery in London and can be viewed on request: <https://www.everardlondon.com/>.

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