

AFTER BAINES

An Exhibition created in partial fulfilment for
the degree of Masters of Fine Art
Rhodes University
by
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All the works in this exhibition reference the life and work of Thomas Baines (1820-1875) in a multiplicity of ways – as a careful perusal will reveal. Having been created between 2008 and 2010, they are obviously “after” Baines in the chronological sense, but are also “after” Baines in the sense used by engravers of masterpieces (those early producers of multiple copies). The works are, however, “after” Baines in even more complex senses in that they consciously and deliberately quote, play with, juxtapose and even reinvent both the works and the figure of Thomas Baines.

Walters’s work was conceived as a painterly way for a young white artist of British descent, working in the Eastern Cape in the 21st century to interrogate and critically reflect on what it means to be so situated and so identified.

Walters sees himself as very much within the “culture of painting”, a culture where artists freely reference (“imitate”) the work of other artists. A longstanding interest of his has been history painting, especially the work of Jacques-Louis David, and Caravaggio. Referencing, however, is not “copying” in a mechanical sense: it involves a deep understanding of the artist’s work and technique, and the re-presenting them in a new and different artistic context which may often involve an element of profound parody or intertextuality (if one regards paintings as “texts”).

The exhibition consists of three suites of canvases which are designed to be viewed in sequence: *BEFORE*, *GENESIS*, and *TABLEAU*.

Tableau, however, was first in order of creation, and consists of three large canvases in which Walters has approached and re-presented both “the figure of Baines” – picking up from photographs ways in which Baines wished himself to be represented – and the work of Baines: three well-known representations of Grahamstown. Given that “After Baines” was first hung in a gallery situated within the Albany History Museum, where the original Baines paintings are kept, there was an element of “installation art” about this first public context – as Ms Christine Dixie, Walters’s painting supervisor, pointed out. Ms Dixie also pointed out that, given the scale of the figures in *Tableau*, there was also an element of “performance art” about these canvases as viewers and painted figures seem to interact with one another.

When confronted by the three canvases in *Tableau*, we are able to see creator and creation bracketed in new and challenging ways, but we also see the familiar Baines paintings through a veil of colour – a colour carefully mixed so as to reference the colour most frequently used to represent the skin of “white” people. (This colour is still marketed by some manufacturers as “flesh tone”!) Thus these canvases raise such questions as “How did Baines ‘see’ Grahamstown?” “How did Baines ‘see’ himself in Grahamstown?”

Returning to the intended beginning of the sequence, let us turn to the ten canvases in the suite entitled *Before*. The status of these canvases is deliberately ambiguous in order to foreground several of the ambiguities/ambivalences which necessarily surround Baines's (and - by extension - the Imperial) project. While giving the impression of – or masquerading as - sketches on paper, these works are in fact digital inkjet prints on canvas. Only two of the 10 panels reference Baines directly: Panel Two, which draws on Baines's *Self-portrait at the age of 38*, and Panel Four, which draws on an undated Baines sketch of Table Mountain. Together with the other 8 panels, however, *Before* attempts to represent a figure of Baines, albeit one in which the artist's imagination is given full play. As a whole, the series attempts to foreground several ambiguities around the figure of Baines:

1) trained originally as a coach painter, Baines considered his sketches, watercolours and paintings to be objective records of reality – much as we today might regard photographs (before the advent of Photoshop). Artists, however, even while seeming to represent reality, are capable of offering landscapes which - however realistic they appear to be – exist only in their imaginations or on their canvases. A well known example would be the popular Eighteenth-Century genre of Capriccios in which artists arranged classical ruins in wholly invented juxtapositions and localities in order to produce an aesthetically pleasing composition which defied their real settings. Thus, too, Baines the “realist”, could lecture at the London Polytechnic on Abyssinia – without ever having set foot there.

Baines's landscapes are discernibly influenced by the style and subject matter favoured by the Romantic movement, and are “full of wild scenery” which is often at odds with the actual topography of the putative site, and so raise the ambiguities which surround the interplay of subjective and objective when one begins to ask “where” Baines's landscapes actually exist/ed.

2) Further ambiguities posed by the *Before* suite include generic ones inherent in the problematic “Imperial gaze” directed towards new potential colonies, and the trope of “Africa as Eden”.

The middle series, *Genesis*, uses the Biblical narrative of the seven days of Creation as a conceptual framework in which to present seven “events” imagined as occurring in the course of the British colonisation of the Eastern Cape – events which played no small part in the shaping (or notional “genesis”) of a white African identity. Five paintings directly reference pictures by Baines; all are uniformly rendered in a single diluted “white-flesh” tone. Observing literally the idea of “day”, the artist limited himself to 24 hours' work for the actual production of each canvas.

The first 5 panels of *Genesis* are quotations from Baines paintings. Though not all are set in South Africa: Panel 3 is set in Australia (which Baines actually visited), and Panel Four in Mashonaland and is entitled *The Discovery of Gold*. The figure of Baines in Panel 6 is taken from a photograph of Baines entitled *The Shadowless Man at Noon*, where Baines the Explorer is represented as the colonised-object, and the present artist as the colonising-subject. This panel foregrounds the problems of presentation and representation – the so-called “politics of painting”. The seventh and final panel, with its deliberate interplay of the “muddy flesh-tone” and “black-and – white” plays with and leads on to the first panel of *Tableau*.

Emeritus Professor Paul Walters
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