

Subverting the pastoral in Jane Alexander's *Pastoral Scene*

> Irene Bronner

Postdoctoral fellow with the NRF South African Research Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, FADA, University of Johannesburg

ireneb@uj.ac.za

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how the four figures in Jane Alexander's sculptural installation *Pastoral Scene* (1995) – the “domestic worker”, the nursing “Black Madonna”, the “white widow” and the lactating wild dog – may be seen to subvert the colonial role that domestic workers perform within the suburban home and landscape. The article delves with more sustained attention than has hitherto been given into some of the visual histories in relation to this tableau, specifically a colonial- and apartheid-era pastoralism that framed landscape conventions and servant portraiture. The article discusses how black African women, when represented as servants in landscapes, function to delineate a space that may be determined by a Europeanised artistic sensibility. Alexander's tableau subverts these anxieties, and the obfuscation of labour and presence that results, by centering the segregation, migration, urbanisation and disconnection that frequently arises out of South Africa's socio-political realities. Returning to this work, produced during the formative time of South Africa's socio-political transition in the 1990s, allows for the examination of Alexander's characteristically riddling allegories but also of her allusive, wide-reaching method of enquiry into a subject – paid domestic labour – that remains woven, frequently in the most challenging and complex ways, into the national psyche and way of life.

Keywords: Jane Alexander; pastoralism; colonial and apartheid landscape; domestic worker; servant portraiture; migration.

Pastoral Scene (1995) (Figure 1) is a sculptural installation, purchased for the Gauteng Legislature Collection, which features three particularised, female characters. One, a middle-aged black woman, dressed in a domestic worker's housecoat, is seated on a cast, apartheid-era park bench, alongside a younger, barefoot, nursing black woman, symbolised as a Black Madonna. The two are approached, seemingly tangentially, by an elderly white woman and at their feet is a small, lactating African wild dog. It would imply a unity that they do not overtly possess to describe the women as a female triad, yet this paradoxical bound disconnection is only one aspect of the subversions and alterations of pastoral conventions that, I demonstrate, this tableau courts.



FIGURE N° 1



Jane Alexander, *Pastoral Scene* (1995). Plaster, oil paint, clothing, wood, aluminium and velvet. 155 x 209 x 186 cm. Gauteng Legislature Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa. © Jane Alexander, DALRO.

Pastoral Scene thematises the geographical displacement and the exploitation of physical and emotional labour, specifically within the predominantly white suburban home,¹ that black African women have frequently experienced under South African colonial and apartheid rule. Ivor Powell's essay, 'The Angel and the Catastrophe', in his catalogue of Alexander's early work *Jane Alexander – Sculpture and Photomontage* (1995), Marion Arnold's *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996) and Fiona Couldridge's unpublished MFA thesis 'Christian thematics in the work of Jane Alexander' (1999) all offer valuable, albeit brief, insights into the work's allusions. Powell situates it within Alexander's artistic and social concerns of the mid-1990s and Couldridge (1999:76) discusses it principally in relation to 'idealised concepts of motherhood and womanhood'. It is principally Arnold (1996:119) who outlines why the pastoral as a genre does not contain representations of labour and how Alexander uses this fact to engage in a socio-political critique of the apartheid legacy. My intention in this article is to examine, in greater detail than Arnold or other writers have, how this particular tableau by Alexander may be seen to interrogate various visual conventions that have informed the historical representation of servants in South Africa. By examining *Pastoral Scene* with this degree of detail, and by making comparative analyses with works that have not been hitherto

discussed in relation to Alexander's oeuvre, I am able to explore, through *Pastoral Scene*, how the literal and symbolic value of black African's women's labour is represented in early and mid-twentieth century depictions of servants. I then suggest why this labour is frequently elided, co-opted or naturalised, rather than being *de facto* represented.

I outline how African women were portrayed according to certain existing European conventions when depicted as servants or domestic workers. I detail how these conventions rendered African women embodied allegories of a quiescent "nature" that had been "civilized" by European influences presented as benign. However, perpetuating the myth of an uninhabited land may not initially cohere with the fact that the representation of a racialised servant class was instrumental in establishing the possibility of Europeanised pastoral domestication in representations of South Africa. I argue that *Pastoral Scene* engages consciously with an established trope of African women servants as demarcating European-controlled land in order to make links to and interrogate the invisible reproduction of labour that contemporary domestic workers perform. To do this, I contrast *Pastoral Scene* with a landscape painting of the Groote Schuur estate by Hugo Naudé. *On the Steps, Groote Schuur* naturalises the servant figure that it contains, while also, I propose, welcoming a Europeanised landscape sensibility into South Africa's geographical space in the early twentieth century. I move then to discussing how tensions around labour production between servant and artist/employer result in the absence of labour in representations of servants. I discuss how the absence of labour is styled in Dorothy Kay's "loyal servant" portrait of her cook, Annie Mavata, from the mid-twentieth century. These comparisons are specifically selected in order to shed light on how the undemonstrative pose of Alexander's seated domestic worker figure may be interpreted as subverting visual and literary pastoral conventions. I argue Alexander's figure does this by *withholding*, rather than *absenting*, her labour, yet not her presence. Finally, a comparison with other selected works produced by Alexander between 1985 and 2010 allows me to discuss how, in *Pastoral Scene*, care-giving and maternal labour are presented not as essentialist (in keeping with a pastoral theme) but as an emotional and political form of (potentially exploitable) transactional labour.

Rarely discussing her own work, Alexander has nonetheless written that her projects represent 'an imaginative distillation and interpretation of research, observation, experience, and hearsay regarding aspects of social systems that impact the control and regulation of groups and individuals, of human and nonhuman animals' (cited in Subiros 2011:71). Much critical discussion of Alexander's work explicates and theorises her 'humanimals' – Julie McGee (2007) coined this particular neologism for Alexander's human/animal/object hybrid creatures. Revisiting *Pastoral Scene* from 1995 allows attention to be given to one of Alexander's more uncharacteristic, naturalistically rendered works, whose

rendering is a significant aspect of its critical examination of genre conventions that seek to regulate and control its subjects. The work's continuing relevance and value, I argue here, is in how it may be seen to link the obfuscating of domestic labour in pastoral colonialist images with the position of many contemporary domestic workers.

Female servants as symbolic boundary keepers in the “African pastoral” landscape

The work's title, *Pastoral Scene*, draws the viewer's overt attention to the conventions of pastoral art within the western European landscape tradition. Situating the pastoral within landscape as a genre, specifically within how it plays out through the frames of South African colonial settlement and extended white rule, however, brings into focus how servants were “there to be seen”, in other words, how they were significant in creating a servant class as boundary keepers in colonised landscapes. The production and presentation of African servants played a role in the domestication of African so-called wilderness into a Europeanised agrarian utopia and, I propose, is evident in paintings such as Hugo Naudé's *On the Steps, Grootse Schuur* (n.d.) (Figure 2). Naudé's painting provides the contrast through which I examine how Alexander's subversion of various pastoral conventions may be interpreted as a means through which to engage with an historically acquired visual language that obfuscated, and continued to inform, pressing social issues in South Africa's newly emerged democracy.

“Pastoral” paintings were a favoured subject during the Renaissance, especially in Seicento Venice, in conscious imitation of classical aesthetic patterns and classical values of reason, harmony and balance, seen as centred in the eternal human condition. “Pastoral” conventions are intentionally, unattainably Arcadian, from which all the complexities of human experience are exiled and excluded. Osborne's (1970:820) assessment is that ‘pastoral scenes create an imaginary and deliberately artificial world fraught with poetic glamour’. Alexander's particularised figures, however, appear to express dispossession in twentieth-century South Africa (Couldridge 1999:48); within their apparent idyll, urban rather than bucolic, ‘the only “timeless” characteristic appears to be one of eternal suffering’ (Couldridge 1999:48). Thus positioned as the antithesis of the genre, in *Pastoral Scene*, the subversion of pastoral conventions is, as Arnold (1996:119) puts it, ‘a reminder that in South Africa people were arbitrarily moved to rural “homelands”, or else left these areas to seek employment in cities’. The tableau's domestic worker figure² speaks to the reality that domestic work has, and continues to be, a significant area of employment for internal and cross-border female migrants (Peberdy & Dinat 2007:188).³



FIGURE N° 2



Hugo Naudé, *On the Steps, Grootte Schuur* (circa early twentieth century). Oil on board. 18.5 x 22.5 cm. Private collection. © Michael Stevenson Gallery.

Alexander confirms that the work refers to petty-apartheid regulations (cited in Daimler-Chrysler 2002:115). The so-called “bench law” (the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953) became, and continues to be in public memories, a visual icon of the day-to-day impact that separatist laws had on South African society. It enforced the segregation of all public facilities, which included transport buildings and medical and legal facilities open to the public, and also park and public benches, staircases, entrance doors and toilets; it also stipulated that the availability and quality of facilities provided for different “races” need not be equal. Alexander’s bench is a replica of the green ones used in municipal parks (in DaimlerChrysler 2002:115) The Separate Amenities Act had been repealed for almost five years when *Pastoral Scene* was completed in 1995, and hence, if one reads the installation as a contemporaneous scene, the bench is not labelled either “European” or “Non-European”. But the spectre of such discrimination is, arguably, still very much present in this bench’s iconic form. Presenting this urban, segregated parkland as a pastoralist idyll would seem to assert that the dismantling of apartheid is a far more

complex and long-term project than some of the more idealistic “rainbow nation” rhetoric that heralded the hard-won and generally euphoric advent of the nation’s democracy.

Unless site-specific, sculptures are more limited than oil paintings in their ability to locate figures within a landscape (Schmahmann 1996:222). This can be seen as functioning ironically in *Pastoral Scene*, which positions its tableau on a velvet dais, in some ways reminiscent of travelling photographic studios, whose props to evoke context and landscape speak, amongst other things, to dispossession. WJT Mitchell (1994:13) asks: ‘Is landscape painting the “sacred silent language” of Western imperialism, the medium in which it “emancipates”, “naturalises” and “unifies” the world for its own purposes?’. Mitchell contends that the conventions through which artists from western Europe codified their visual impressions of place ‘disclose both utopian fantasies for the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance’ (Mitchell 1994:10). These images were European artists’ responses to deeply unfamiliar and often hostile regions (Garb 2008:17). Such settler landscapes, David Bunn (1994:143) observes, establish ‘a non-contradictory colonial presence’, accommodating the settler family, which is conceived of as ‘a centre of gentle patriarchal control far removed from the violence associated with the actual colonial process’.

When indigenous peoples are represented in early South African landscapes (rather than being deliberately omitted), they are habitually present according to a regimented typography. Garb (2008:17) observes that ‘[l]ocal inhabitants functioned alternately as ethnographic specimens, a species of wild life, or as noble savages in idealised and remote settings’. What Garb does not discuss, in her analysis of the conventions of early South African photographic portraiture, is how African servants are represented by European artists. McClintock (1995:30) describes colonial discourse as representing the journey through Africa as ‘proceeding forward in geographical space but backward in historical time’; the presence of any indigenous peoples is only allowable as ‘the living embodiment of the archaic “primitive”’, thereby shifting their contemporary presence into an incidental anomaly (McClintock 1995:30). Black African women are also, I observe here, permitted into colonial landscapes when to a Europeanised eye they have come to embody in dress and demeanor a “domesticated wilderness”. I emphasise therefore that when African women are figured as servants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they function mnemonically as legitimating a European claim to the spaces that they are shown as moving within. These then are the some of the historical visual tropes relating to issues of domestic labour and migration that are brought with Alexander’s depiction of a contemporary domestic worker in a so-called “pastoral” landscape framed by “separate and unequal” ideologies.

Hugo Naudé (1868-1941, South African) painted *On the Steps, Groote Schuur* (Figure 2) sometime in the early twentieth century: a bucolic scene in which the figure of the servant plays a crucial role.⁴ The bounty of nature on the cultivated estate is manifest in the golden dappled groves in the middle distance and the riotous blue hydrangea blooms whose presence in swirls of paint is so fecund as to exceed any realistic scale proportions. This abundance is on the estate, and there is thus cultivated a sense that the estate has brought it forth, that this domesticated harmony is one of so-called culture shaping nature, of western European imagery – Impressionist-style brushwork and Cape Dutch architectural space – that has aesthetically and materially “domesticated” a section of Africa. That Cecil John Rhodes purchased Groote Schuur in 1893 places the estate firmly within the ideological purview of the colonial project in Africa.⁵ That the work cannot be dated⁶ is ironically appropriate in that the scene itself is ahistorical; depending on a historical timeframe (slavery was abolished in the Cape Colony on 1 December 1834), the woman might be either a servant or a slave. If this pastoral time is proposed as eternal, and perfect in its eternity, then recorded time is implicitly proposed as beginning when the Groote Schuur estate, and the colonial rule that it showcases, was established.

‘On the steps’ is a threshold position, and the servant is a liminal figure; her placement here is therefore doubly appropriate. Her dusky pink dress and white head cloth harmonise her with the colours of the landscape; her light traipsing on these steps affiliates her with the blooms that rise up from the ground. A female nude in a pastoral landscape may give embodiment to idyllic, timeless bliss; an integrated servant in a colonial landscape admits European colonialists as well as a European artistic sensibility into the geographical space. McClintock (1995:24) proposes that ‘the representation of the land as female is a traumatic trope, occurring almost invariably, I argue, in the aftermath of male boundary confusion, but as a historical, not archetypal, strategy of containment’. When female figures become embodied personifications of landscapes, McClintock motivates for a historical reading of these tropes that pays attention to how these tropes function as “policing” and emphasising boundaries of “inside/outside”, “self/other”, “control/wilderness” and so on. Disputed land, such as those from colonial and apartheid histories, is particularly prone to such personifications. Bearing this in mind, I argue that the cultivating of African landscapes into a Europeanised agrarian Eden finds its expression of containment in an unindividuated black African female servant. The female figure in Naudé’s painting would not appear to be any of the stock characters, such as shepherds, gypsies or pagans, that Eleanor Hight and Gary Sampson (2002:4-5) identify European artists as depicting an unfamiliar terrain into pictorial conventions of the picturesque view, so as to order it. If anything, this figure may be interpreted as an instance of Garb’s (2008:17) ‘species of wildlife’ in her harmonisation with her environment.

If, however, she is viewed as a servant (as her clothing, her task and her position on the stairs may lend themselves to interpreting), her containment in a serving and subservient role becomes a fetishised personification of the cultivated European estate in Africa. As a historical strategy of containment, McClintock (1995:24) points out that '[f]emale figures were planted like fetishes at the ambiguous points of contact, at the borders and orifices of the contest zone'. The European estate is such a contested place, its domestication requiring constant vigilance. Therefore, by identifying the female figure with the represented environment, by evoking an idyllic harmonisation between African female figure and cultivated, Europeanised estate, the woman is in service to an ideological hierarchy. While the title of the work is most likely posthumous, it remains significant that *On the Steps, Grootte Schuur* identifies the female figure's position, but not her person. Her presence in the composition functions as a gateway for, as Bunn (1994:133) phrases it, the 'excursive eye [of] an enquiring self that is unencumbered, free to enter into exchanges, inhabiting a space full of exotic interest but cleared of obstacles'.

When positioning a female servant as embodying the fetishised ambivalence of a boundary guardian, Jane Gallop's (1984:215) observations are apt: as a servant, the 'maid' is a mediating figure, existing between within and outside the family. Gallop (1984:216) points out that whether the family employs strategies to assimilate the maid into their unit and/or to isolate and reduce their exposure to her, she remains a figure on whose account such strategies are explicitly initiated. The maid in her alterity stimulates tension by representing the symbolic, the economic, the extra-familial and the class structure within the composure of the family circle (Gallop 1990:216). The black nanny and domestic worker, I argue in particular, serve as a boundary keeper of white settlement. The ambiguity of her own interests and allegiances however leaves those who would align both with or against her questioning whether her overriding role is 'to contest or conserve' the prevailing social order (Gallop 1990:214). The figure thus also embodies anxiety. The female servant (or slave) in Naudé's painting serves to balance a dialectical tension and resolve potential conflicts between (Europeanised) artistic interpretations of life and everyday lived experiences, which are, as Arnold (1996:119) maintains, in accord with pastoral conventions. The domestic worker figure in Alexander's tableau has, however, been positioned by the artist to subvert more consciously these conventions of the boundary-guardian role. She does so, as I argue now, by not engaging in the labour proportioned to her demonstrable position.

Bringing domestic labour into the pastoral landscape

The woman dressed in a domestic worker's overalls was known to, but not working, for the artist. Her presence in Alexander's *Pastoral Scene*, it may be argued, specifically draws out how labour is obfuscated in traditional pastoral landscapes; conflict or labour is framed as impossible when humanity and nature live in complete harmony with and unity in time and place (Arnold 1996:120). Any "labour" depicted, such as shepherds herding animals or women drawing water, is naturalised. The 'silence about the place of the black man [sic] in the pastoral idyll' (Coetzee 1986:16), due to a 'silence about the place of black labour' (Coetzee 1986:8) is what JM Coetzee identifies as a defining and unresolved issue for the early twentieth-century literary genre of the South African farm novel (when in Afrikaans the *plaasroman*). In this genre, characterised by 'nostalgic pastoral celebration' (Coetzee 1986:13), so-called 'noble' labour, usually framed through a Calvinist understanding of salvation through (self-defined) productive work, is distinguished from a degenerate 'idleness' and 'sloth' that was ascribed to indigenous peoples who refused to participate in the labour that sustained the colonial economy, and specifically, the homestead (Coetzee 1986:11). A domestic worker reproduces labour for and in the (white) household, and for that reason, her labour is not "slothful". In most representations of work and workers, work may be seen to define the subjectivity of its performer (Mainz & Pollock 2000:3). Yet by representing this domestic worker not working, rather, ambiguously still, potentially waiting, Alexander may be seen to critique a domestic worker's "invisible" labour by rendering it "not-labour" and affords the woman the opportunity to step outside of her role. To expand upon this assertion, a comparison with Irish-South African Dorothy Kay's *Cookie: Annie Mavata* (1956) (Figure 3), specifically in the representation of the two women's hands, may historicise some of the consequences for the representation and obscuring of labour in "servant" portraiture.⁷

Kay's portrait would appear as an exemplary instance of what historian Alison Light terms a 'loyalty' portrait: the servant and the portrait of the servant enhances the employer, as is standard in servant portraits (Light 2003). In a composition study of the figure in Kay's oil painting, Kay (1886-1964) wrote 'ANNIE MAVATA FOR TWENTY YEARS A FAITHFUL FRIEND & HELPER' (cited in Reynolds 1989:312, sic). Mavata's good relations with her employer are characterised by loyalty ('faithful friend'), her purpose to assist Kay, as a 'helper', and in that capacity she is respected (Kay gives her full, although Anglicised, name). Kay valued the finished work for her associations with Annie Mavata as the portrayed subject but also, or primarily, for her own skill in portraying her. For Kay, the mimetic "likeness" to the sitter, what she calls 'pure realism', is her tribute to her subject. Kay's primary enthusiasm is for the technical aspects of the painting process, as an extract from her diaries suggests: '[A] very steely crisp one of Cookie – sitting



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Dorothy Kay, *Cookie, Annie Mavata* (1956). Oil on canvas. 69 x 57 cm. Pretoria Art Museum.
© Paul Mills.

with basin in her lap – big white apron all stiff, & cap & specs & all – Meticulously painted’ (cited in Reynolds 1989:312). It was catalogued as not for sale at its initial exhibition and was not sold during Kay’s lifetime as she wished to be selective about its ownership (Reynolds 1989:318). Kay is not overtly politically conscious in her work; the Women’s March in 1956 for instance, the year in which *Cookie: Annie Mavata* is painted, is not something about which Kay records any opinions. In the finished portrait, Mavata’s authoritative presence is enhanced through her steady, steely gaze, magnified through her spectacles and the anchoring of her solid figure against the dark background, appearing to assert her assurance and familiarity within the represented space.

The viewer’s attention may, however, be drawn to the empty enamel bowl and Mavata’s left hand, awkwardly positioned, not balancing the bowl but holding something not present. In Kay’s source photograph, it is clear that she is cutting up beans or shelling peas. Shelling peas is an established trope to depict ‘the Cook’ in early genre paintings of servants (Light 2012:40). Kay made a pencil sketch of the sitter with a background of hanging pots and pans, objects that, as ‘tools of trade’, establish Mavata’s skills and position in the artist’s household, but Kay rejected it in the finished portrait (Reynolds 1989:314). One may infer therefore that Kay was drawn to conventionalised precedents of representation for servants that gave creative licence to honour that person without disrupting social hierarchies, even as her desire to portray Mavata in her own way would seem to have led her not to duplicate exactly established precedents. In the finished portrait, the result is that the subject’s labour is dispersed into the rendering of the image itself; it is Kay who performs the artist’s creative labour here. If the artist’s sketchbook may be read as a visual unfolding of the artist’s thoughts and associations, it is not insignificant that three pages of studies of Annie Mavata follow immediately after a drawing of Kay’s hand in her sketchbook (Reynolds 1989:314). It may be interpreted that Kay was symbolically asserting her own labour power, as represented by her hand that holds her artist’s brush.

Alexander’s domestic worker, in contrast, folds her hands in her lap and also crosses her legs: she seems to be waiting, while seated on a bench emblematic of the petty and degrading bureaucracies of everyday experience under apartheid. The aura of visceral menace and expectation is more overt in Alexander’s iconic hybridised *Butcher Boys* (1985-1986) (Figure 4); by contrast, *Pastoral Scene*’s naturalism may date the work to Alexander’s oeuvre of the early and mid-1990s. At this time, as Powell (1995:35) discusses, Alexander’s sculptural and photographic tableaux explored ‘a more internal process no longer carrying the immediacies of violence, but instead are born out of a traumatized and tainted reality’. The attention to naturalistic detail rather than cross-species hybridisation in *Pastoral Scene* encourages the viewer to read the tableau as part of everyday experience, which brings its own disquiet (Powell 1995:5).



FIGURE N° 4



Jane Alexander, *Butcher Boys* (1985-86). Plaster, bone, horn, oil paint, wood. 128.5 x 213.5 x 88.5 cm. South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa. © Jane Alexander, DALRO.

The elderly, white, female figure in her black lace, perhaps widow's weeds, was modeled by a woman, known to Alexander, who was an Eastern European immigrant (Powell 1995:11). She would appear as someone who has also experienced spatial and cultural displacement, which, while not analogous to that of the black women, provides an experiential link between the three women that may not be necessarily apparent. Any tentative points of shared reference between them do not, however, seem to be sustainable due to their mutual disassociation. The "widow" holds a small plate on which a piece of bread and three sardines are placed, perhaps referencing the biblical miracle of multiplying loaves and fishes (Arnold 1996:118). Her secular offering may be read as inadequate and overdue, although potentially the beginning of a proliferation into more abundance. Although hardly "miraculous", the tableau is unlike the brutalised, restless impotence of the *Butcher Boys*, who seemingly have no possibility of any relational engagement. In *Pastoral Scene*, a "madam" figure is included, but arguably is presented as more appealing than authoritative, unlike the diffused omnipotence afforded to Kay's own role, as artist and employer, in her portrait of 'Cookie'. Yet given that, I argue that *Pastoral Scene* subverts the systemic appropriation and exploitation of black women's labour within the domestic sphere, and perhaps particularly, as I

move now to discuss, the emotional labour that a nanny, care-giver or domestic worker may perform, any rapprochement between the tableau's figures seems to be presented as only, at best, in its infancy.

Denaturalising care-giving in pastoral landscapes

While the domestic worker figure may draw attention to the occluded labour of a domestic worker in an ironically "pastoral" landscape that would conventionally exclude transactional labour, Alexander's representation of the nursing figure arguably subverts the essentialism of maternal care and creates a grim metaphor for the care given by black nannies to (predominantly) white infants and children, often at the expense of their own children. The nursing woman's head hangs heavily on her neck, but her head is lifted slightly and her one visible eye looks both beadily and deliberately but also vacantly ahead of her. Waiting as the infant feeds, this birth doesn't seem to have been experienced as miraculous, although the infant is shrouded in a royal purple and the woman's head encircled with a halo; it appears to be another bundled burden to be carried. Because one breast is uncovered to nurse the infant and her head haloed, she most resembles, arguably, a Quattrocento 'Nursing Madonna' (*Madonna lactans*), an icon of the Virgin Mary cradling and breast-feeding an infant Christ.

While a wet-nurse (*balia*) might even appear alongside the Nursing Madonna, this icon on its own provided scopic control of an image of the nurturing mother (Holmes 1997:191). It does this by reconciling the split maternal image in Florentine society of the wet nurse and the patrician mother into 'an idealised image of the milk-giving blood-mother' and thus avoids issues of contractual labour and class difference in this social practice (Holmes 1997:191). While black women in contemporary South Africa clearly do not breastfeed white children, the prevalence of slave wet nurses to the settler population in the Cape from 1713 to 1808 has been posited to have been a significant factor in the growth of the settler population and the concomitant restricted growth of the slave population (Shell 1992:14). While not immediately apparent, if the viewer leans in closely, the infant may be seen to be dark-skinned. The bundle that the Pastoral Madonna appears grimly to hold to her breast may be read as representing her own child(ren) who might well have been left with a relative in a distant, rural area. These children lack the day-to-day emotional succor and care that a black nanny may provide to a white employer's child or elderly relatives; their mother's devotion is demonstrated through the sacrifices that she makes to provide for them financially. This nurturing has broader connotations of the support that the black labour sector has provided to white South Africans, both in and beyond the domestic household. This reliance could be conflicting for both employer and employee, through which fears of the contamination and danger of the *swart gevaar* may have been channeled.⁸



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Jane Alexander, *Black Madonna* (1991). Plaster, oil paint, leather, wood, ammunition box and thorns. 130 cm high. Private collection. © Jane Alexander, DALRO.

The iconographic similarities between the nursing Pastoral Madonna and Alexander's earlier sculpture *Black Madonna* (1991) (Figure 5) would appear to indicate that Alexander here pays homage to forms of mothering more complex than the ideologies around the sanctified maternal figure in the European family triad. In *Black Madonna*, a devotional "Black" Madonna statue is mounted on a wooden ammunition box, standing surrounded by thorns, reminiscent of barbed wire fencing. Alexander subverts conventional Christian iconography – the Madonna is black as well as pregnant – so that she may speak, perhaps, about the visual containment of the historical pregnant female body. Powell (1995:10) contends that the Madonna's gestation serves to 'sanctify the motherhood rather than the virginity'. Arnold (1996:118) suggests that the halo transforms the nursing Pastoral Madonna figure not into a martyr, but into a symbol of motherhood. Deploying the tropes of motherhood to build non-racial and authority-challenging alliances proved a valuable tool in the struggle against apartheid.⁹ This pregnancy may also be understood as a more metaphorically gestating embodiment of creative change and transformed energies, at a time when apartheid was being dismantled both in law and in practice, yet people were suffering under significant sectarian violence. Indicating perhaps that the caring roles of the nursing Pastoral Madonna are split or stretched, the lactating wild dog is conspicuously without her pups.

Both Arnold (1996:119) and Couldridge (1999:52) draw analogies between the prejudice against and persecution of wild dogs on the basis of their perceived aggressive and cowardly (scavenger) nature and the discrimination against women motivated by biological determinism, in order to suggest a shared predicament, rather than an essentialist conflation, between these different females. The primary role of the lactating wild dog at this depicted moment would appear to be as the suckler of the pack's pups. African wild dogs, to which this dog bears a resemblance, have only one breeding pair in a pack, which is also the alpha pair. But her pups are absent in the tableau, at a stage in their development when she would not by choice leave them. Perhaps like the domestic worker, certainly like many migratory women, this female's offspring are elsewhere. The potential consequences of such an absence endow her with a vulnerability that her alertness to the viewer only enhances. The dog is, as Arnold (1996:119) points out, the only presence to display awareness of the viewer, her ears pricked; in this sense, like *Infantry's Beast*, the dog is an intermediary to the viewing audience.

The dog in *Pastoral Scene* bears a resemblance to the canid-like figures in *Infantry with Beast* (2008-2010) (Figure 6). The sexuality of the *Infantry's* dog-creatures and *Pastoral Scene's* wild dog have differing symbolic emphases however. This installation consists of a phalanx of 27 marching hybrid figures on a red carpet before a small dog-like creature. The small *Beast* of the title is literally the harbinger of the infantry figures, since it was made four years earlier in 2003. Here the beast heralds or witnesses the infantry



FIGURE N° 6



Jane Alexander, *Infantry with Beast* [comprising *27 Figures* (2008-2010) and *Beast* (2003)] (2008-2010). Fiberglass, oil paint, cast found shoes and pure wool carpet. 118 x 1200 x 200 cm. Collection of the artist. © Jane Alexander, DALRO.

formation, whose humanoid bodies have wild dog heads. The tight unity and uniformity of the phalanx is ambivalent, both a strength and a weakness. Rosalind Morris (2014:88) notes that the overt display of pre-pubescent male genitalia on the dog-creatures leads the viewer to consider the role of desire, or of immature or misdirected male libidinal energy, as reflecting a social motivator. In this, they bear a resemblance to the *Butcher Boys*. Alexander highlights the socialised and hierarchical structure of a wild dog pack, 'bound by systems of co-dependence and co-operation, not unlike the military' (Michael Stevenson 2013). In *Pastoral Scene*, however, the wild dog is clearly female and its alert watchfulness is neither obviously cowed or aggressive.

To consider the role of the dog-as-witness from another angle, Sam Naidu's (2016) perspective of the dog in the contemporary South African farm crime novel is relevant. Naidu discusses a selection of post-apartheid novels as both a satirising and a development of the *plaasroman*, building therefore on the work by Coetzee which I have already mentioned. She writes:

Against the background of narratives about personal and social crimes, undoubtedly manifestations of the most abhorrent aspects of human nature, the figure of the dog stands out as somehow transcendent. With such relations possible between humans and animals, the prospect of more empathetic and ethical relations between humans and humans is conveyed (Naidu 2016:34-35).

Alexander's inclusion of a lactating wild dog, confusingly without her pups, as one of the four characters in her "pastoral scene" is not, I suggest, necessarily a denial of the empathic and ethical possibilities that Naidu advances in relation to the domesticated dog. In this spirit, I suggest, the non-human, canine character questions the co-option or denial of nurturing and the provision of care as contracted, potentially exploitable, labour, in which the human characters of the domestic worker, the nursing Madonna and the widow are entangled. The dog's presence is also a reminder that factionalised human beings are not the only inhabitants of this landscape.

Conclusion

This tableau is named a "scene" rather than a "landscape" because, as I have sought to demonstrate, Alexander subverts conventions of the pastoral genre, staging segregation, urbanisation, migration, loss of family and community, and unfulfilling, exploitative or no employment from female perspectives in this psycho-spatial drama. The viewer is encouraged to consider how ideologies of the colonial and apartheid social-engineering projects underpin the visual idiom of an 'African pastoral'. Using the example of Naudé's painting of the Groote Schuur estate, I have detailed some ways in which artists drew on the conventions of the western European pastoral genre in order to naturalise the presence and the domination of European settlers. Some consequences of this have been a positioning of Europeanised African women as visual boundary keepers in the African landscape. They are signalled as being under paternalistic European patronage, especially, I have argued, through being depicted as servants. Yet while being depicted as a socio-economic subordinate whose place in this Europeanised landscape was permitted due to the service that they performed, actual depictions of that labour-intensive

service are potentially problematic in that the absence of labour is central to pastoral landscapes, even if that labour were framed as the moral antagonist of “sloth”. The historical solution would appear to be to naturalise and render ahistorical the labour that African people performed on behalf of Europeans. I have also suggested that unresolved tensions about power relations and labour (re)production between artist and sitter are expressed when the sitter is also the artist’s domestic worker. In Kay’s portrait of her cook, *Annie Mavata*, the elision (even the co-option) of labour is particularly noticeable, I have argued, through Kay’s representation of Mavata’s hands.

Alexander’s tableau critically subverts these conventions. Her ambiguously waiting domestic worker bears the marks of age and work, yet in what may be interpreted as a subversive act, she is not here performing her labour of domesticating the (suburban) landscape (materially and ideologically). The nursing Madonna figure would appear to be grimly performing the task of surrogate motherhood, however symbolically that plays out. Any sentimentalised or sanctified iconography accorded to her seeming only magnifies the disparity between the conception and the experience. These life-size figures haunt the present day as well as the near and more distant past. This is because these particularised figures and the ambivalent (non-)relationships that exist between them enact issues that continue to pose challenges to South African society.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Professor Brenda Schmahmann, the NRF South African Research Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, with whom I hold a postdoctoral fellowship, and who supervised my doctoral thesis, from which this article derives. Jane Alexander generously took the time to answer my questions and gave me access to images. Paul Mills and Michael Stevenson Gallery also provided images for publication. I am also grateful for the comments of the anonymous reviewers of the first draft of this article.

Notes

1. The high numbers of migrant black women working in white suburban homes was a highly visible feature of life in South Africa during apartheid, and continues today. In the 1930s and 1940s, women began migrating *en masse* (Phillips & James 2014:427) and from the middle of the twentieth century, influx control laws, pass laws and few educational opportunities served, as Jaclyn Cock (1989:37) has studied, to ‘trap’ women in unregulated employment as domestic workers and/or nannies and carers, usually away from their own families, with no job or housing security and in isolated and poor working and live-in conditions. While migrant black men were channelled into employment in the mining industries,

domestic labour became the feminised and low-status sector that arguably it today remains (Ntombela 2012:132). While comprehensive labour legislation in South Africa is intended to improve working conditions and has had some significant impact (such as in prohibiting summary dismissal, and thereby providing some work security), the personal and intimate nature of domestic work can mean that informal mechanisms for negotiating working conditions based upon relationship-management with their employers are often relied upon by domestic workers, which can afford them some agency (see Ally 2010). The political economy of reproductive labour is frequently a contributing factor to community and family fragmentation, which, in turn, has wider social implications. Sociological and historical studies such as those by Gaitskell *et al* (1983) and Cock (1989) also situate the violence and exploitation frequently suffered by atomised domestic workers. Elizabeth Delpont (1994) contextualises the call for rights for domestic workers as emblematic of the emergent democratic system, speaking to the transitional time at which Alexander created *Pastoral Scene*. More contemporary accounts include Ally and Jennifer Fish (2006).

2. This figure wears the button-through overall and headscarf, commonly worn by many South African domestic workers. The figure is modeled on a woman known to Alexander, identified as 'Beauty'; Alexander asked her to be a model for a body cast because of her physiological resemblance to the character that Alexander envisaged (Couldridge 1999:15).
3. Peberdy and Dinat (2007:190) highlight how Census 2001 showed that domestic service was the largest sector of employment for black South African women who had moved to Johannesburg from other provinces and other countries from the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Census 2001 data obtained from South Africa shows that 42 percent of employed black women from the SADC who lived in Johannesburg worked in private households, although they comprise only 4.9 per cent of women employed in private households in the city (StatsSA 2004 in Peberdy & Dinat 2007:188).
4. This work was included in Michael Stevenson's *South African Art 1800 – Now* exhibition in February 2004 (and eponymous catalogue 2004). An archived thumbnail is available on Stevenson's website. It has been sold to an anonymous buyer. Although little information is available on this work to my knowledge, I include it as it is most striking in illuminating my discussion representations of servants in colonial pastoralist landscapes. This enables me to contextualise what I have called Alexander's critique of such pastoralism.
5. Originally bought as a plot of land by the Dutch East India Company in 1657, and after being refurbished by colonial architect Sir Herbert Baker, Groote Schuur was the official Cape residence of Prime Ministers from 1910 until 1984. Brooke Simons (1996:40) tells how the 'spectacular flowering around Christmas' of the roses, hydrangeas, cannas, bougainvillea and fuchsias planted originally on Rhodes' orders brought 'thousands of visitors' to the estate in English stately home-type excursions from 1893 to the early 1970s.
6. The approximate dating is surmised by Michael Stevenson Gallery because the 'broad brushstrokes suggest that Naudé painted this work in the early years of the twentieth century when his impressionistic renderings of the Cape landscape were bold in execution' (Michael Stevenson [O]).
7. Marjorie Reynold's biography of her mother, Dorothy Kay, is a valuable source of anecdotal information about the artist and records of important source material, such as letters, and sheds light on Kay's creation of this work (Reynolds 1989). Her publication does not however have a scholarly emphasis. Marion Arnold's *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996) provides a scholarly overview and analysis of the work. Pretoria Art Museum, in whose collection the work is held, holds acquisition and exhibition information of the work. I selected this work for comparison because Kay's artistic choices appear to express issues and understandings of labour in the relationship between the artist and the sitter (her employee), which relate particularly to my discussion of Alexander.

8. When the trope of the domestic worker is fetishised, it is expressed most significantly perhaps in white fears of the 'swart gevaar'. The 'swart gevaar' refers to the perceived security risk that the majority black population posed to white South Africans; the rhetoric reached a peak of fervour during apartheid in the 1980s. The black domestic worker, who had access to and knowledge of the vulnerable "private" home and relationships of the white family, and who (together with a man employed as a gardener) might be the only black person with whom white suburban people were personally familiar, was often viewed as a potential threat. Her liminality, often being both familiar and trusted but simultaneously not one-of-the-family, may continue to play out in the relationships between employer and employee today.
9. Without suggesting a manifest destiny of heteronormative maternity, McClintock (1991:115) discusses how 'African women have embraced, transmuted, and transformed the ideology in a variety of ways, working strategically within traditional ideology to justify untraditional public militancy'. One example would be the organisation of pass protests for African women in the 1950s, where slogans like 'As wives and mothers we condemn the pass laws and all that they imply' were intended to promote solidarity among black women as well as provide them with moral authority in a conservative environment. Another instance is how a racially inclusive image of motherhood fostered non-racial alliances with white women; Albertina Sisulu, in organising protests in 1986, would make the call that '[a] mother is a mother, black or white. Stand up and be counted with other women' (cited in McClintock 1991:115).

REFERENCES

- Alexander, J & DaimlerChrysler. 2002. *Jane Alexander: DaimlerChrysler Award for South African sculpture*. [Catalogue]. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz & New York, N.Y.: Distributed Art Publishers.
- Ally, S. 2010. *From servants to workers: South African domestic workers and the democratic state*. Scottsville: UKZN Press.
- Arnold, M. 1996. *Women and art in South Africa*. Cape Town & Johannesburg: David Phillip.
- Brooke Simons, P. 1996. *Groote Schuur: great granary to stately home*. Vlaeberg: Fernwood Press.
- Bunn, D. 1994. 'Our Wattled cot': Mercantile and domestic space in Thomas Pringle's African landscapes, in *Landscape and power*, edited by WJT Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press:127-174.
- Cock, J. 1989 [1980]. *Maids and madams: domestic workers under apartheid*. London: Women's Press.
- Coetzee, JM. 1986. The farm novel and plaasroman in South Africa. *English in Africa* 13(2):1-19.
- Couldridge, F. 1999. Christian thematics in the work of Jane Alexander. MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

- Delport, E. 1994. Domestic Workers – Light at the end of the tunnel, in *South African Women today*, edited by M Lensing. Cape Town: Masken Miller Longman:173-180.
- Fish, J. 2006. *Domestic democracy: At home in South Africa*. New York: Routledge.
- Gaitskell, D, Kimble, J, Maconachie, M & Unterhalter, E. 1983. Class, race and gender: Domestic workers in South Africa. *Review of African Political Economy* 27(28):86-108.
- Gallop, J. 1984. *The daughter's seduction: feminism and psychoanalysis*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Garb, T. 2011. South African Photography in the perfect tense, in *Figures and fictions: contemporary South African photography*, edited by T Garb. Gottingen, Germany: Steidl/V&A Publishing:11-76.
- Hight, E & Sampson, G. 2002. *Colonialist photography: imag(in)ing race and place*. New York: Routledge.
- Holmes, M. 1997. Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna lactans in fifteenth-century Florentine art, in *Picturing women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, edited by G Johnson & S Matthews Grieco. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press:167-195.
- Light, A. 2003. Behind the green baize door. *The Guardian*. [O]. November. Available: [http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2003/nov/08/art.history# history-link-box](http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2003/nov/08/art.history#history-link-box). Accessed: 18 September 2011.
- Light, A. 2007. *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: The Hidden heart of domestic service*. London: Penguin Books.
- Mainz, V & Pollock, G. 2000. Introduction, in *Work and the Image 1. Work, craft and labour: Visual Representations in Changing Histories*, edited by V Mainz & G Pollock. Aldershot & Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate:1-12.
- McClintock, A. 1991. 'No Longer in a future heaven': women and nationalism in South Africa. *Transition* 51:104-123.
- McClintock, A. 1995. *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context*. New York: Routledge.
- McGee, J. 2007. Canons apart and apartheid cannons: interpellations beyond the colonial in South African art, in *Partisan canons*, edited by A Brsyski. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press:289-308.

- Michael Stevenson Gallery. 2003. South African Art 1800 – Now. Available: <http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/buscat/buscat.htm>
Accessed: 7 April 2018.
- Michael Stevenson Gallery . 2013. Jane Alexander *Survey: Cape of Good Hope (2005-9), Infantry with Beast (2008-10)*. Available: <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/alexander/index2013.html>.
Accessed: 13 September 2015.
- Mitchell, WJT. 1994. Introduction, in *Landscape and power*, edited by WJT Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press:5-34.
- Morris, R. 2014. Exhibition review: Jane Alexander *Surveys (from the Cape of Good Hope)*. *African Arts* 47(3):86-88.
- Naidu, S. 2016. The emergence of the South African farm crime novel: socio-historical crimes, personal crimes, and the figure of the dog. *English in Africa* 43(2):9-38.
- Ntombela, S. 2012. Do clothes make a (wo)man? Exploring the role of dress in shaping South African domestic workers' identities, in 'Was it something I wore?': *Gender and dress as material culture in social research in Southern Africa*, edited by C Mitchell & R Moletsane. Pretoria: HSRC Press:132-147.
- Osborne, H (ed). 1970. *The Oxford companion to art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phillips, L & James, D. 2014. Labour, lodging and linkages: Migrant women's experience in South Africa. *African Studies* 73(3):410-431.
- Peberdy, S & Dinat, N. 2007. Restless worlds of work, health and migration: domestic workers in Johannesburg. *Development Southern African* 24(1):187-203.
- Powell, I. 1995. *Jane Alexander – Sculpture and photomontage*. [Catalogue]. Cape Town: The Video Lab & Tall Systems.
- Reynolds, M. 1989. 'Everything you do is a portrait of yourself' *Dorothy Kay: a biography*. Rosebank, South Africa: Alec Marjorie Reynolds.
- Schmahmann, BL. 1996. Representations of women in the works of George Segal. PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Shell, R. 1992. Tender ties: women and the slave household, 1652-1834. Collected Seminar Papers. *Institute of Commonwealth Studies* 42:1-33.
- Subiros, P (ed). 2011. *Jane Alexander Surveys (from the Cape of Good Hope)*. [Catalogue]. New York & Barcelona: Museum for African Art and Actar.