Peter E. Clarke

b. Simon’s Town, Cape Town, 1929 d. Ocean View, 2014

Some thoughts on Peter Clarke[i]

Peter Clarke was, indeed *is*, a giant. Evidence of his achievements is (and will continue to be) narrated in numerous tributes, obituaries and testimonies. Evidence of his legacy as a mentor, across many generations, will increasingly become apparent.

With so many dying before their time, there is something so quintessentially Peter that he circumvented a traumatic death, stayed a very full course, and left quietly, on his own. And yet it is this image of Peter as ‘alone’ that I would like to reflect on.

I would like to reflect on this image of Peter as a solitary figure because it is a dominant one – an artist who opted to not leave, unlike many others whose lives intersected with his – Gerard Sekoto, Albert Adams, Louis Maurice, Gavin Jantjes, George Hallett, among them. An artist relocated through forced removals from coastal Simon’s Town to the hastily assembled township of Ocean View, where, decades later, he is the only resident known widely for his art. Certainly the trope of Peter as pioneer extends back to his early days as an artist. An old press clipping highlights that he knew of no other black practitioners when he decided to leave his work in the docks and embark on a career as an artist. Later, he would be exhilarated to hear of Gerard Sekoto, whom he met, many years later, in Paris.

For the first two or three decades of Peter’s professional career he was crafting various senses of belonging to communities of artists. Some of these networks overlapped, others operated in parallel degrees or even in ignorance of each other.

As a determined ‘student’, locked out of the academy by apartheid, he found some sense of community by attending art classes at the Old St Philips Church in Woodstock, Cape Town, alongside Albert Adams, Louis Maurice and others of his generation. Through his friendship with the writer Richard Rive he came into contact with liberal elements in the white art world, connecting with artists such as Marjorie Wallace and her writer husband Jan Rabie, as well as with Irma Stern, and many others.

Alongside these relationships, Peter was also part of ‘virtual’ communities in the way that an artist can come to ‘know’ another through the appreciation of their work. While the influence of the German Expressionists, Mexican muralists and Japanese woodcuts is often cited, less attention has been given to his interest in African-American artists, particularly those building on the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. The influence, or at least affinity with the collages of Romare Bearden presents perhaps the most obvious example, but one could also cite an aesthetic affinity with works by Jacob Lawrence and Charles Alston. It is also worth noting that Langston Hughes, one of the foremost literary exponents of the Harlem Renaissance, and a writer who (like Lawrence) was engaged in pan-African networks, corresponded with Peter during the 50s and early 60s, although I am not sure if they ever met.

One of the points of convergence between Peter and many African-American artists was the re-imagining and re-connection with Africa. In an early letter to Hughes (April 1955), Peter discusses questions of self-identity: “…here am I. coloured, but dark enough to be a ‘native’, so where do I stand?… I prefer to think of myself as African because I belong to AFRICA, no matter what ancestors I had (& they’re pretty mixed up). It’s something to be proud about & AFRICA is my home.” (his emphases)

Here it is significant to recognise that Peter inserted himself into the evolving discourse of modern African art during the 1960s. He did this in a classic Peter way – through posting small works to the South African

writer Ezekiel Mphahlele, then in exile in Nigeria, who was one of the foundational figures of the pan-African, Nigeria-based Mbari arts movement. Mphahlele would later move to Kenya, where he again would be instrumental in exhibiting work by Peter. The South African post office was also an unwitting ally in bringing Peter into conversation with the philanthropic, USA based, Harmon Foundation. His contact with them resulted in his inclusion in the first full-length survey of contemporary African art, published by the Harmon Foundation in 1966. Of course, due to the nature of South Africa's pariah status internationally, Peter would quietly drop from subsequent surveys, and has still to be reclaimed as part of this evolving discourse.

Closer to 'home', Peter sometimes participated in associations that were claiming a space for black artists. In the early 1960s he was part of Art Com, a group of artists from the Cape Flats, who exhibited in The Argus newspaper's gallery in Burg Street, Cape Town. But it was perhaps with Vakalisa in the 1980s that Peter came closest to being an integral part of a physical network of visual artists and writers, one that included his good friends Lionel Davis and the poet James Mathews. His contributions to Vakalisa calendars clearly show that he identified strongly with their project of creating a space for black arts practitioners, and for taking art into libraries, community centres and other public spaces. While Vakalisa's politics transcended political camps, collectively it provided a sense of black radicalism that stands in contrast to the earlier Peter Clarke, eager to be accepted as a professional artist, and perhaps even naïve in his belief of art as a liberated 'universal' space, a position that allowed him (along with Adams and other black artists) to be co-opted into official South African exhibitions in the post-Sharpeville period. Peter's work in the 1980s tends to be overlooked, not least because of the striking body of work he produced in the 1950s and 1960s. But it was during the intense cauldrons of the serial states of emergency that one gets the strongest indication of Peter taking sides, of venting his anger at the violence of the State. His Ghetto Fences series are a largely overlooked, even maligned, body of works, and tend to be seen as reflecting his interest in township graffiti. However, they go beyond this, with the walls depicted being not only reminders of physical barriers, but also visualisations of psychological barriers.

That these walls were more than surfaces struck me after looking at his diptych titled Trojan Horse, which he later donated to the Constitutional Court. The Trojan Horse incident, where security police baited and killed stone-throwing youths in Belgravia Road, Athlone, Cape Town in 1985 is well known and documented. What I found interesting was the limits to which Peter pushed his aesthetic. Generally, his style is graphic and narrative, and it is the paper works in this series that he meted out the most 'punishment'. While his use of paint and found materials is timid if measured against a Willem De Kooning or Anselm Kiefer, the physicality of his Ghetto Fences are pretty rough when measured against a 'typical' Clarke. Even here, the anger in his inscriptions was offset by his very elegant handwriting. But the aspect that most intrigued me was that beyond the wall there was the evocation of a fabulous sky. That this sky was painted in orange and blue, colours synonymous at the time with the old apartheid flag, was deeply unsettling to me. I came to read this as an assertive, even forcefully imaginative reclaiming of an artist's right to use colour (analogous to the right of the massacred to reclaim life), and I remember saying to Peter that this was evidence of his optimism and faith in humanity: even in his angry expression of protest he had introduced a vision of a better tomorrow. In another work from the same series the walls were emblazoned with messages of love. These observations made me begin to reconsider these works as an enactment of going beyond the walls, of breaking them down. This led me to ask him whether these

works referenced the idea of the ghetto as a state of mind. I remember him responding with a wry smile, “what else could it be?”
Later collages by Peter, best known through his Fanfare series, unsettled me in other ways. Here we find Peter paying tribute to people who influenced him or that he respected. My discomfort stems from the overwhelming euro-centricity of those he chose to homage. Quite what this means I can’t tell you, but it once again underlines the existence of constellations of actual and imagined communities with which he was in dialogue, and which he drew on in developing his own sense of himself.
To the last, Peter kept close to ordinary people, travelling by public transport, walking in between. Close friends recount his strong ties within his local communities of Ocean View and Simon’s Town. Here one can imagine Peter at ease, playing dominoes and cards, eating, drinking, listening to music and sharing stories with members of the community, some of whom were his life-long friends. His generosity was legendary, and Lionel Davis has commented how he was often surprised to see works by Peter hanging in the humble homes of friends and relatives. It is perhaps this level of community engagement that most directly affected the content of his works, which he could produce in the quiet solitude of his home.
Visiting Peter at home, it was always interesting to see his proud display of work by fellow artists, including a portrait of himself by Sipho Hlati, and a serene marble head carved by Ishmael Thyssen. These were seamlessly integrated into an ever-changing display of his own works, and ever-growing piles of books. He also prominently displayed a photograph of former President Thabo Mbeki awarding him the national order of Ikhamanga, along with the medal itself. This was a poignant reminder of how in latter years the older image of Peter as ‘valued abroad but ignored at home’, turned. At the Cape Town opening of his retrospective exhibition (curated by Elizabeth Rankin and Philippa Hobbs), Peter joked that if this had not happened in his lifetime he would have returned to haunt the national gallery. With his retrospective reprised (principally by Riason Naidoo) in Dakar, London, and Paris, and his works beginning to receive high prices on auction, Peter left us knowing that his position in South African art history was more assured than ever before.
And yet, despite these acknowledgments, I am left wondering whether the task of interpreting Peter Clarke has made much progress. In a short video produced by InIVA in 2013, Peter comments that space was a recurring theme in his works. If we consider this observation along with another statement (in an accompanying video) that walls were both physical and psychological barriers, then we begin to get a sense of an acute and sustained reflection on questions of proximity and distance, on inclusion and exclusion, on belonging and not. This translates into a productive tension in many of his works: the simultaneity of warmth and humanistic affirmation, coupled with a sense of detachment, of looking in from outside (or looking out from inside, as in some interior scenes).
I would like to suggest that in considering the particularity and singularity of Peter Clarke, that careful consideration be given to his own concurrent or shifting senses of community. Apart from providing a way to situate him socially and historically, this question of his relationship to notions of community provides one way of getting to grips with the treatment and meaning of space in his works.
Peter has left us with a rich body of work. Can our art historians and curators do it justice?
Mario Pissarra 17 April 2014
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