

## INTRODUCTORY TEXT

Dedicated to the domestic workers I knew in my childhood, through whom I came to know the absolute not only of apartheid, but of class oppression, through whom I first came to know the inner warmth of Africa...

to my teachers Bill Ainslie, Donelle, Richard Wake, Joseph Bony, Brenda Cooper who opened their hearts and my eyes, often overwhelming me with their love and vision...

to the writings of Walter Benjamin, C.G. Jung, Susan Griffin, Pablo Neruda and Garcia Marquez, who perpetually awaken me...

to In. Ntshonondle who was my lodestone through many years of struggle... to the Sangomas from Petersburg who helped me understand the psychic battles taking place in the land, my part in them and the contents of my 'bundles' that they saw in my dreams...

to my friends and comrades, poets writers artists activists who are always passionate about something... to everyone who contributed their thoughts and insights for the text...

to Graham who helped untangle my mind from self-sacrifice, reawakened the pleasure of pleasure and the real meaning of struggle, and encouraged me to paint again, who reminded me of the need to struggle with contradictions instead of imposing myself on every one on my path, and for editing this publication...

to my children, Khanya and Rosa who have taught me many things, who put up with me, keep my heart warm, and who moment by moment bring the 'struggle' home...

to Vanessa without whom many things would not have been possible...

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Published and distributed by Dark Fines Press  
P.O. Box 802, Highlands North, 2017 TVL, South Africa  
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ISBN 0-620-14972-8

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John Berger says of 'the labor of poetry', the task of this increasing labor is to bring together what life has separated or violence has torn apart... Poetry can repair no less but it defies the space which separates. And it does this by its continual labor of reassembling what has been scattered.

The metaphor, the image are wands that transform alienation into connection. The bird and the flag and the heart are not exiled in the solitude of their coexistence - they become each other. Shelley Sacks' paintings are like the fine eye of a needle through which ragged strips of life are pulled, to come out on the other side as one whole silk cloth, billowing with the energy of convergence. In this country of brutal separations and mutually exclusive definitions of every form of being, she draws through her eye all threads of heaven, hell and class struggle, and paints them out into insights bigger than our rational tongues can hold.

*Rosemary Press - Poet and publisher, Cape Town.*

What is distinctive about great progressive art that separates it from the discourses of history and politics? What answers do we have for those who would define art solely in terms of its techniques in order to save it from becoming the slave of other disciplines?

Shelley Sacks' painting entitled 'The Child is Not Dead' is one articulate and powerful answer. She illustrates art's great task of exploring life's many dimensions - myth and history, reality and dream, militarism and its contamination of sexuality. The man you look, the man you see - righteous, ideocratic yet paradoxically universal archetypes - the howling wolf, the intimations of disaster. Great left art such as this sacrifices neither an understanding of the violence and oppression of the here and now nor the demands of a personal vision.

The complex artistic symbolism does full justice to both its medium and the reality of ruling class cruelty. The dead child killed in struggle, resembling a huge and ghostly withered baby leaves behind in the womb a generation of resisters. The violence portrayed does not produce poor victims. Resistance does not take the form of mindless triumphalism.

This painting both answers the challenge of producing highly political, highly complex art and ensures that the memory of the child who died at Sebokeng, so whom the painting is dedicated, will remain inscribed in our distinctively South African collective unconscious.

*Dr. Brenda Cooper - Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.*

Shelley Sacks' commitment and direct personal involvement in the socio-political sphere are well known - she has in one capacity or another been an integral part of most of the major community initiatives and struggles that have taken place in Greater Cape Town during the last ten years or so.

But she is first and foremost a creative artist of great integrity. As such, she has been in the vanguard of an as yet not well defined revolution in South Africans' conception of art. Some of her works are literally household articles in the homes of thousands of workers and students.

*Dr. Neville Alexander - Educationalist and political activist.*

We know that our struggle against exploitation and oppression has very deep roots, a rich culture and a long history. And we know too that we have to change many things as they exist today. Society will never be free whilst women remain in bondage. Our children have to do things differently to create a healthy future society.

Having lived with 'Some, we bleed and we sing' and 'The Child is Not Dead' on my walls for some time, and having heard and felt their message about human creativity and not only suffering, about the struggle for the richness inside us all, not only about the struggle against what oppresses us, I am convinced that culture can be an eye through which we see the liberation of our minds.

*Dama Nkomo - Shopowner and trade union president, Johannesburg.*

There are doubtless easier ways to walk with history. Looking at these images, they are hard to take in, this is their strength. They remain in the mind's eye longer than most, this is their strength. These images seek out the imaginative life where it might otherwise be extinguished. Here visual realism is meant for sharing, for conversation, for engaging... and confrontation. There is challenge in what is pictured here and in the language of such picturing. The witness, the unswaying, the banality that visual 'realism' has so often been made to speak has no voice here. This is another voice, powerful and rich.

These images gaze and glare at once. There is a vision that never loses sight of those caught in the shadow of history, of its bad faith and easy savagery. Unflinching they show what we might criticize and what we might affirm. In doing this they refuse to fall prey to the cleaving of the political and the aesthetic, the mind and the hand, and the many other mutilations carried out in the name of 'culture'. In this they reveal a rare thing.

*Celia Richards - Artist, art writer and lecturer, Johannesburg.  
Poetry Slips - Artist and art lecturer, Johannesburg.*



**Sister, We Bleed and We Sing**

Shelley Sacks - 1986

*Shelley Sacks 1986*



**The Child is Not Dead**

(Dedicated to the Child who died at Sebokeng. October 1984, while soldiers,  
lighting cigarettes and laughing, stood in her blood.)

Shelley Sacks - 1985





WHERE ARE  
THE MOTHERS  
NOW? THEY  
HAVE LET THEIR  
SONS LOOSE IN

THE WORLD-

WITH PENISES  
AND GUNS  
FATHERING

WAR AND  
CONTROL  
OF

COMPETITION  
AND DENIAL

DAUGHTERS  
OF ABUSE  
MOTHERS  
OF TORTURERS  
EXPLOITERS

HUMANITY SHALL  
SWEEP AWAY THE  
BROTHERHOODS  
OF POWER

Urban Safari

Shelley Sacks - 1990

*Shelley Sacks*



The Old Tortoise Woman is Watching from the Hills

*Shelley Sacks*

Shelley Sacks - 1989





**Naked Sister, the Angel of Western Man Has Stalked You**

Shelley Sacks - 1984





**The Shadow**

Shelley Sacks - 1989

*Shelley Sacks*

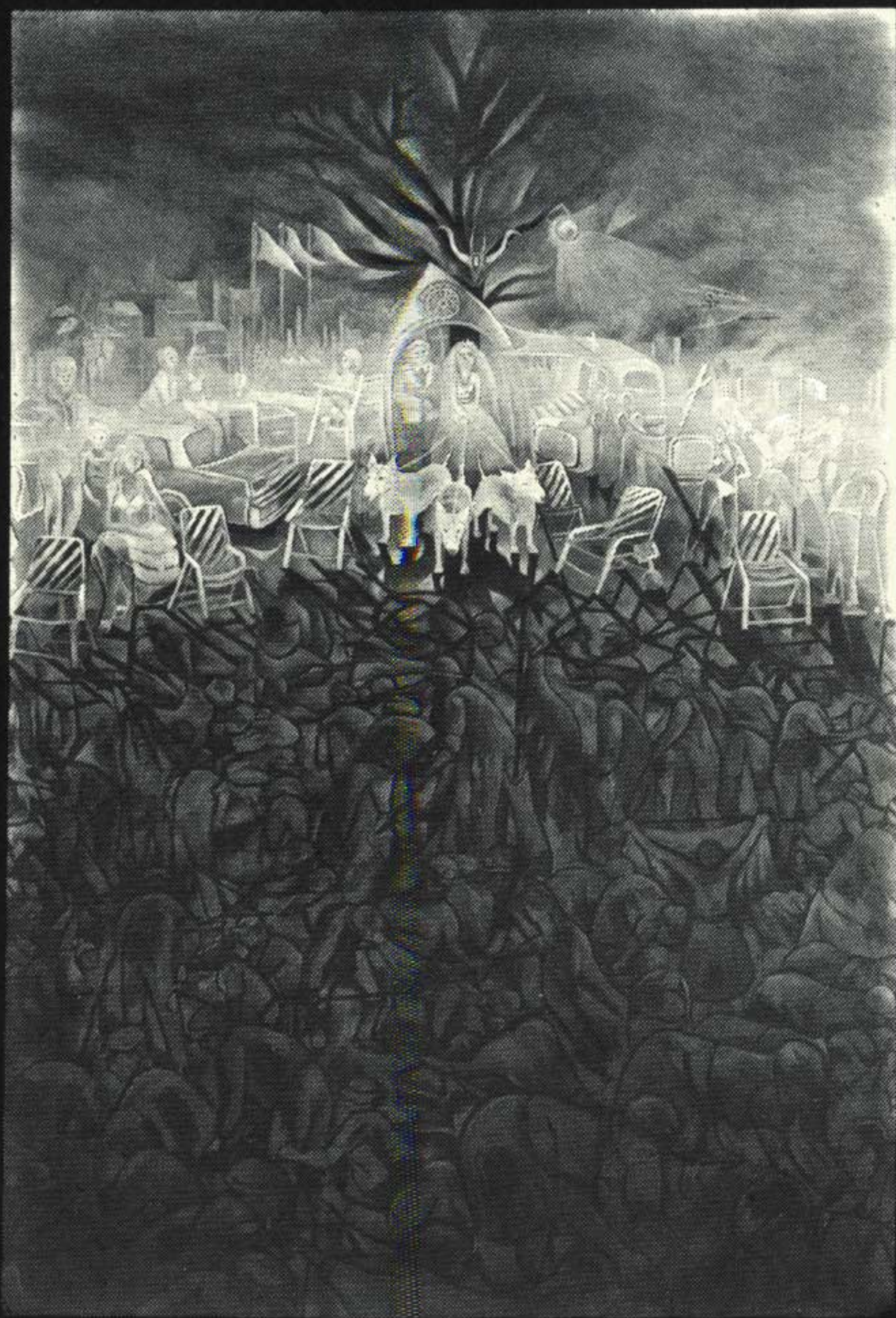


# 'SISTER, WE BLEED & WE SING'

A Portfolio of Prints

by

SHELLEY SACKS



"THE SHADOW" 1990

"Shelley Sacks' paintings are like the fine eye of a needle through which ragged strips of life are pulled, to come out on the other side as one whole silk cloth, billowing with the energy of convergence. In this country of brutal separations and mutually exclusive definitions of every form of being, she draws through her eye all threads of heaven, hell and class struggle, and paints them out into insights bigger than our rational tongues can hold."

Karen Press



Review copy for SALB

Re- phone call Thurs 12/7/90  
with Karl.

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Hops you can come to the  
launch.

Shelley  
Ph. 6148504. (H+W)



There is an essential difference between the paintings of resistance that I have seen and the songs of resistance that I have heard. The pictures are almost all invariably images of suffering. They are windows onto the various forms of devastation wrought by apartheid - faces behind bars, nightmare streets, pitiful hovels, and so on. The songs on the other hand, have hulls humming and pulsating with an invincible collective voice rooted in the African past and rising inevitably to meet the sun. The paintings say 'We are deprived. We lament and we protest.' The songs say, 'Our resources are limitless and we will use it that our material conditions reflect this. We celebrate our power and we advance.'

'Sister, we bleed and we sing' stands like a beacon at the frontier of the two modes I have outlined here. A woman is moving forward, as if in a dance. Her feet tread the darkness and her arms are raised to a fiery sky. Her eyes are closed as if she is turning inward to feel the song welling up from the depths of her being. Behind her, amidst the flames, throngs a chorus of figures and faces gathering like a tide to carry her forward towards us. She brings us face to face with the reality of suffering and the power of song.

Creative people can inspire us to recognise and liberate ourselves by revealing to us the depths and heights of our experience. It is good to see our artists extending their vision by tapping into the celebratory energy of our freedom songs and finding a language that can render it in paint.

Terry Adewole - *Writer and Alternative Educator*

The paintings brought together in this collection are about women and children, about the oppressed, the working masses, the tortured, the voiceless. They are dark and difficult, but no, they are not depressing. They are liberating in the deepest sense of the word. The title painting 'Sister, we bleed and we sing' speaks of the dialectic in any liberatory process.

These paintings throw light into the darkness and pain of our real situation. They challenge us to know fully and consciously the violent forces that shape our psyches and our society. They challenge us to know our wounds in that the ongoing cruelty of the labourer's and portographer's red hot poker/sunbata in 'Ufunt Sofan'; to shiver at the cold shadows of Western Man in 'Naked Sister...'; to stand in our high heels and feel the frost of the rapist's penis/gun whilst the child lies in its pool of blood in 'The Child is Not Dead'; to groan under the load of endless labour and to stand rigid as does the bride of the ruling class, holding the vicious dogs in 'The Shadow'.

These paintings speak about oppressed women but sometimes too about women as the universally oppressed, regardless of class. The ruling class bride, defined in terms of the man she belongs to, is enchained, as are the labouring women and men on whose backs the wealth she partakes of is built.

A woman who views herself in terms of the ideology propagated by 'Cosmopolitan' magazine is oppressed. But 'The Old Turkish Woman Watching from the Hills', lines of labour tracking her face, the magazine loop in her hands? It has no power over her; it falls on her lap like a forgotten rag. She is watching and she sees!

Seeing our situation as it really is, makes transformation possible. Shelley Sacks' paintings shatter the illusion that individual psychic liberation is possible. Her paintings demand the recognition that psyche is a collective shaping, that transformation is a collective task. The indivisibility of individual and collective, psychic and political liberation processes, of which these paintings speak, makes them - for me - simultaneously radically political and deeply mystical.

Dr Roger Kleeberg - *WindsorL, Namibia*

It has been said that art is a reflection of social reality.

Bourgeois art usually falsifies our social reality. Shelley, however, is an artist who succeeds in laying bare the destruction of the labouring masses by Capital, clearly reflecting the social reality in South Africa. In her works the human crises are examined with real artistic skill. The message that human labour is turned into a commodity by the rule force of Capital comes out especially strongly in the work entitled 'The Shadow'. This image portrays the daily struggle of the workers in the midst of plenty, surrounded by the decadent life of the ruling class.

This is art that pricks one's conscience and challenges one to take positive action.

Mphahlele Mavimbeng - *Dramatist and Trade Unionist*

#### The artist

Shelley Sacks received her art education under a number of local artists, in particular Bill Austin and Richard Wale, and later at the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town, graduating with distinction in 1971, and having twice been awarded the Michaelis Prize. She then spent two years at Hamburg University and working under Joseph Beuys.

In 1987 Shelley participated in an African Studies Honours Programme focusing on issues of Marxist aesthetics. Between 1988 and 1993 her work involved mainly sculpture, performances, events and installations in SA and Germany, with a predominantly psycho-political focus. In 1977 she participated in Documenta 6 with the Joseph Beuys group. Since 1976 Shelley has worked in progressive community organisations, focusing on cooperatives, alternative education and cultural politics, regarding this work towards social transformation as radical 'social sculpture'. In recent years having resumed art teaching and many traditional forms of image making alongside these activities, the insights gained are clearly manifested in her interdisciplinary approach to art teaching and in her stronger than ever refusal to separate the 'aesthetic' from the 'political', her practice from theory. She is presently active in progressive art and cultural organisations in the Transvaal.

She has paintings and sculpture in both public and private collections in South Africa, and has lectured and run workshops on art and related topics both here and abroad. Her practical art making over the years also includes numerous posters, a mural and banners for trade unions.

# SISTER

## WE BLEED & WE SING

A PORTFOLIO OF 6 SIGNED PRINTS  
IMAGES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

### SHELLEY SACKS

