

Poisoned Landscapes

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This paper continues a study of South African photographer Santu Mofokeng, whose post-apartheid work has shifted to climate change. His photographs focus on the seepage, the leakage into light, of very long term processes. Things are coming from underground, often as slow encrustations and cancers of the earth. At the centre of this despoliation is Johannesburg, the city of gold, itself a 'concrete encrustation'. The paper discusses the convergence of industry, environmental symptoms and photography, the latter itself a 'residuum that history has discharged' (Kracauer). For many years Mofokeng has worked on the boundaries between the material and the immaterial. But here there are the boundaries between the elements: water, earth, air and fire. It is at their points of contact that the poisons emerge. Suppurations arise from the residues of the primary industries that made South Africa modern ahead of all the African continent. These melancholy productivities made a migrant labour force, a working class, a bourgeoisie, landscapes and cities over the last century. Also an empire.

Thus there is the city and its underground. But we have to get away from the bounded paradigm of 'the African city' into which Johannesburg is now inscribed. The city has its industrial and demographic scatterings that lie far from the metropolitan hub – as far as the northern border of Namibia - which the mining economy and apartheid development policies linked together in one system that incidentally lacks an obvious vocabulary. This includes any vocabulary regarding colonial extensions beyond its borders, and the mineral exploitation (especially uranium) and war prosecuted in Namibia and beyond in the 1970s and 1980s.

The theme of hollow ground, of forgotten pipes of stripped wealth and burrowed out passages under our feet, and the slow rise of acid mine drainage to the surface in recent years, ironically reconnects South Africans to the ground under their feet, after a long 'psychic rupture with the land'. Apartheid, dispossession, urbanization, are not the end of the story. Nor is decolonization. The attempts by the post-apartheid government to mend the broken social landscape through re-entitlement and restitution with the new Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) housing projects for example, point to sites of gross exploitation and pollution into which aspirant urban residents are often placed. The new landscapes however are raw and exhausted at the same time, full of old political poison.