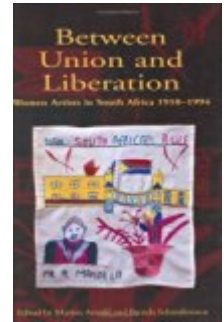


Marion Arnold, Brenda Schmahmann, eds.. *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. 221pp. \$99.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-3240-5.



Reviewed by Julie McGee

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Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann function as editors and authors in this densely packed volume on women artists in South Africa. Each of the ten essays is about twenty pages long, inclusive of illustrations and notes. There are forty-five black-and-white illustrations, three maps, and eight color plates. As its title suggests, this book is about women artists in South Africa between 1910-1994. But it is more than that, for it also reflects upon its contributors--all of whom are women artists or professionals in the arts field (art historians, curators, educators). To this end, this book may have a political and historical chronology (union to liberation and 1910-1994), but it is also very much grounded in the contemporary perspectives of these women who live and work in South Africa, or who have done so in the past.

Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann have previously published seminal texts relative to women artists and visual culture in South Africa, among them Arnold's *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996), and Schmahmann's *Material Matters* (2000) and *Through the Looking Glass*

(2004). As editors and contributors, they bring historical scope, material breadth, and intimate field research to the volume. This is a difficult volume to review, perhaps as difficult as the task Arnold and Schmahmann set for themselves. As Arnold notes, this book does not offer "a comprehensive history of South African women artists" (p. 19). Rather, the book aims to "focus on and analyse the lives and achievements of women artists and cultural workers, while exploring the asymmetrical power relationships that defined, controlled, restricted or sustained women's participation in visual culture" (p. 19). It offers art history within women's history and vice versa. It also provides a very good, albeit necessarily brief, history of South Africa and arts education, and notes the clear advantages for white women.

The first essay by Arnold, "Visual Culture in Context: The Implications of Union and Liberation," lays out the historical importance of the book's chronology and *modus operandi*—namely a critical look at women artists' milieu between the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the "liberation from apartheid rule in 1994" (p. 1).

This does not mean that the specters of colonialism or apartheid are absent—far from it; but, it does mean that the focus is on the years of white rule in South Africa and women's artistic practices within these years. This tidy framework presents certain problems and Arnold tries to locate and acknowledge these in her first chapter. She notes the years 1910-1994 are "dominated bleakly by black and white tensions" (p. 19), and that "creative black women were hidden by an interpretation of cultural production that effaced them" (p. 19). Thus, essays pertaining to the early part of the twentieth century focus on white women (p. 19).

There was a clear attempt to achieve balance, however, as only five of the following nine essays could be said to be exclusively focused on white women. On the other hand, only one essay, that by Jacqueline Nolte, explores individual black women artists in depth, in this case, Noria Mabasa and Mmakgabo Sebidi. Three other essays in which individual black women artists and cultural workers appear are focused more on gender politics or women's agency within the production, industry and design of specific cultural objects, such as baskets, ceramic work and needlework. The authors of these essays, Nessa Leibhamer, Wilma Cruise, and Brenda Schmahmann, write with full recognition of racist and patriarchal ideologies that permeated past narratives of craft production in South Africa. They provide new research, fresh insights and nuanced readings as well as sound methodological models for research in these areas.

Some essays are focused on the cultural and social relationships that diminished women's capacity to be regarded as full agents in the history and/or production of visual art and culture. Jillian Carman's excellent essay on Florence Phillips's aspirations for an art museum in Johannesburg—which ultimately aided in the foundation of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (1910)—exposes the limited range of Phillips's influence within the elite

cultural economy of the new union dominated by white men. South African-born Phillips was married to mining magnate and Randlord Lionel Phillips, spent part of her married life in Britain, and "aspired to the lifestyle of the British aristocracy and looked to the metropole for cultural affirmation" (p. 36). Phillips sought to bring to Johannesburg a museum of culture and erudition much like the British Victoria and Albert Museum. In the end, as Carman concludes, "Florence Phillips, the most important patron of the arts the year the union was inaugurated, is remembered more for a project that was incomplete and not a true reflection of her original intentions" (p. 44).

In a similar vein, Liese van der Watt's detailed and fascinating essay on fifteen tapestries commemorating Afrikaner women, specifically the *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation) icon of domesticity, loyalty and even nationhood, articulates a heavily circumscribed space of enactment for Afrikaner women in the mid-twentieth century. Van der Watt details Nellie Kruger's attempts to at once legitimize as art the tapestries (made after designs by male artist W. H. Coetzer) embroidered by women over an eight-year period (1952-60), and secure their place with rightful celebration in the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. Much of what is teased out reflects the continuous attempts at that time to "regulate the presence of Afrikaner women in the Voortrekker Monument complex, indeed to exclude females from a main building reserved for masculine activity and which presented a public symbol of Afrikaner power" (p. 108).

Nessa Leibhammer's essay on basket weaving in KwaZulu-Natal suggests there is little evidence to support beliefs that it was a specifically gendered activity—that is, women's manufacture only—or that baskets woven and marketed today as "traditional" have an unbroken lineage to ancient practices. Her essay examines the socio-cultural, aesthetic, and practical connections relative to work of established weaver artists such as

Beauty Batembile Ngxongo and Laurentia Dlamini, and other contemporary baskets marketed for their allegiance to ancient Zulu practices. Leibhammer's essay, and a few others in the volume, reminds us of the critical need to better define, historicize, and theorize the usage of such concepts as "tradition" and "authentic" within South African visual culture.

These three essays and, to a certain extent, Schmahmann's essay "On Pins and Needles" really are as much about gender politics as they are about art. They evidence the value of looking at visual culture through the lens of gender. Race and class are equally relevant here, but are handled separately, if gingerly, by the authors. This has an overall impact on the book's cohesiveness. Cohabiting here are Randlord aspirations for art collections alongside economic development projects and much in-between. The collection had the potential to offer working methodologies and theories relative to women artists in South Africa, but space was not given to this. The essays are self-contained units and when read consecutively they beg for some glue, some way of diminishing their isolation without relinquishing rigor and focus.

Arnold's essay on painters Irma Stern (1894-1966) and Bertha Everard (1873-1965) lays out a compelling argument relative to the ways both artists defined themselves. Both had the privilege of traveling from South Africa to Europe and back, and both did. Stern used her German-South African identity to propel her career forward, while the less professionally successful Everard "was ambivalent about whether her artistic identity should be located in Europe or Africa" (p. 60). Jacqueline Nolte's essay on painter Mmakgabo Sebidi (b. 1943) and sculptor Noria Mabasa (b. 1938) considers the relationship of their art to "the effect of migration upon women in increasingly complex and changing social landscapes" (p. 189). Nolte sees Mabasa's and Sebidi's work as migration narratives, visual metaphors for each

artist's complex and shifting associations with "home." Much of the migration Mabasa and Sebidi experienced was the result of apartheid legislation. Their regulated movements within South Africa are hardly equivalent to the national and international travels of Stern and Everard--and yet, at some point, they must be discussed together to more fully delineate and open up the South African art historical landscape. The movement of these four artists and its relationship to their respective arts is individual and personal, but the character and definition of the travel experience is South African to the core.

Articulating the connections between the essays in this collection, or "prying open their apartness," to map a more comprehensive historical picture would have contributed significantly to this volume. This would perhaps have necessitated another essay, despite the breadth of Arnold's introductory essay. In addition to introducing each author's contribution, she provides an essential thumbnail sketch of South African history, clarifying the importance of the benchmarks dates 1910 and 1994, and detailing important historical moments for women in South Africa. In the same essay, Arnold explains the ways in which women's creative productions suffered under modernist paradigms that valued fine art over craft, defines South African society between 1910-94 as largely patriarchal, and questions whether the liberation from apartheid has really brought liberation. Liberation from apartheid she notes is not liberation from sexism and, in an awkwardly worded sentence, Arnold seems to relate this problem to the majority rule government: "Sexism continues to be a festering wound after a decade of black government" (p. 24). Indeed, race has an awkward place in this essay and perhaps will have an awkward place in South African history for some time to come.

Arnold works hard to disclose past and present inequities in South Africa relative to the book's focus, but these efforts reinforce a com-

mon problem—attempts to historicize the effects of colonialism and apartheid collectivize and at times essentialize black people's experiences in South Africa. Indeed, black is a placeholder for non-white identities here and those histories that have yet to be individually chronicled. Arnold writes, "Research into art made by black women is rendered difficult by a paucity of black women historians and art historians within South Africa.... For black parents and students who face the financial burden of tertiary education, degree courses must offer reasonable wage-earning prospects and, for young black women, the art world makes no such promise.... Furthermore, the middle-class black community does not offer significant patronage to the visual arts and has yet to be convinced that the visual arts (and academic, art-oriented research) offer competitive career prospects, especially for women" (pp. 19-20). One wonders what critical research supports these comments and why there is no parallel discussion on white students and white patronage. Indeed Arnold's second essay on Stern and Everard makes plain the difficulty Everard had finding patronage—but here it is related to her individual life and practice, rather than race.

This is an important book and its essays make significant contributions to the field of art history in South Africa. They bring forth new material and offer fresh insights into old material. Gathered here, they confront gender biases and sexism within art historical discourse and social practice. We can only benefit by such a book. Bringing together and wrestling with the unequal lives of women living in South Africa between 1910 and 1994 will always pose challenges—but better to take them on as Arnold, Schmahmann, and their contributing authors have, than to ignore them.

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