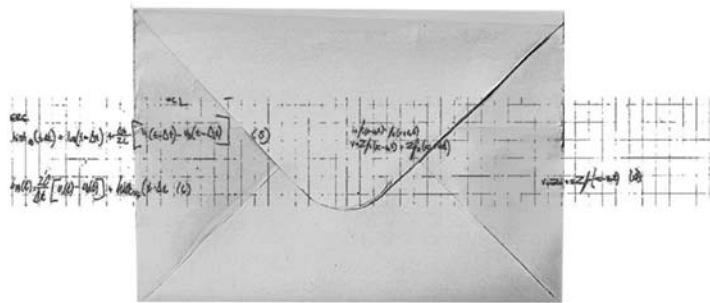


Bernadette Steyn



Vermy

By Anne.A. Archer

Edgar Allen Poe's detective story, *The Purloined letter* (1844) describes the search for a letter stolen from the boudoir of a lady who is presumed to be the Queen of France. The contents of the letter, if disclosed to the King, would cause the Queen great discomfort. It is a tale of blackmail, following the circulation of the stolen letter from one person to the next, until the letter is finally retrieved by Poe's astute hero, Detective Dupin.

Modern interpretations of the tale have centered on the underlying theme of the search for meaning, as emblematised by the constant search for the letter - a symbolic carrier of meaningful content. It is in this sense that one can link Poe's narrative to the body of works by Bernadette Steyn, entitled, *Vermy*. Here letters (alphabetical, numeric, and in envelopes) enjoy particular prominence, and, as in Poe's narrative, seem to refer to the desire for meaningful communication.

Her work is populated by her Ouma, with traces of Mom and Dad, silhouetted with giraffes and camels, layered with cryptic fragments of text and imagery - there is a cryptic

fragments of text and imagery - there is a multiplication of signifiers, so that meanings proliferate and refuse reduction to a single unitary message. Bernadette, a recent graduate from Tshwane University of Technology, is fascinated by language, examining its limitations and possibilities.

Bernadette's stylised images remind of words, as though forming a kind of pictographic language. Similarly, the cryptic lines and geometries of her father's engineering books and short-hand symbols from her mother's notebooks, remind of calligraphic text - something in-between drawing and writing. Throughout, while focusing on communication, her works seem to deal mainly with the limitations thereof. For example, whereas a process of zooming in might normally aid understanding, in the series, *Onbekende I - XXIV* ("Unknown"), enlargement merely distorts the image so that it seems incomprehensible.

In *Ouma sien alles* ("Grandma sees all"), the mathematical equations, calligraphy and word games overlapping one another make manifest her grandmother's confusion. Nevertheless, the title suggests that Bernadette's Afrikaans grandmother is perceptive and knowledgeable, and it is merely the unfamiliar English medium which is limiting.

This topic also appears in a particular series of works from which the title of the exhibition has been derived. Her grandmother's avoidance of her English neighbours because of this difficulty has occasioned the series' title: "Ek vermei my rooinek buurman". This is a play of words – the spoken phrase may translate: "I avoid my English neighbour", whereas the homonym, vermei, which is deliberately employed, contradicts this meaning, referring to enjoyment. This, Bernadette explains, is meant to indicate that her Grandmother is not antagonistic towards her English neighbours, but that this behaviour is the result of uneasiness within herself (this is reinforced by the appearance of the image of Bovril in the series: this English product, loved by Afrikaners, is used to suggest the possible conciliation of differences).

Problems in translation also appear in another work: the word, kameelperd (giraffe), directly translated into English would be equivalent to camel horse, and in Bloodline = Camel Horse, it becomes a symbol of this difficulty, of broken English.

Poe's story has been interpreted by the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, as a metaphor for the nature of language. The letter is seen as mere placeholder for

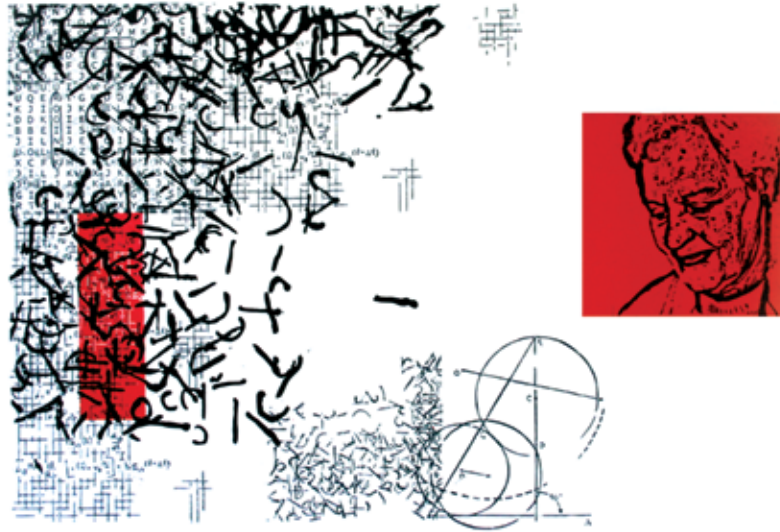
meaning, with potential referential power much as a word or image would seem to possess. In Lacan's reading, the circulation of the letter, the contents of which is never made known, is illustrative of the manner in which meaning is evasive.

Whereas Lacan is able to distill a final meaning from Poe's text, French Post-Structuralist, Jacques Derrida, insists upon a more radical interpretation, asserting that, in language, meaning is constantly deferred, and can never be delimited. Derrida insists on the proliferation of meaning, the process of dissemination. He also underscores the possibility of loss in the process of signification: the letter is constantly adrift, with the possibility of loss (theft, misplacement...), immanent.

Bernadette's work similarly evokes the indeterminacy inherent in language. It is not only the representational content of her work, and the fragmented nature of her imagery which invoke the limitations of language; her work conveys this on other levels as well. Printmaking contributes to this theme, as fading (disappearance) and processes of repetition, are characteristic of this medium. Moreover, visual and verbal signifiers, elements of both rational and irrational discourse, supplement

one another, as though either, on its own, would be inadequate.

The artworks ultimately evoke the manner in which language is inherent in the formation of identity, highlighting the complications involved in the transfer of cultural inheritance. As an analysis of Poe's narrative suggests, while these art works may be communicating indeterminacy, the content thereof is simultaneously also compelling and highly evocative.



Sources consulted

Derrida, J. 1975. The Purveyor of Truth, in *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lacan, J. 1955, Seminar on "The Purloined Letter", in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Poe, E.A. 1967. *The Purloined Letter*, in *Selected Tales*. London: Book Club Associates



Image: (page 3) ONBEKENDE I, ONBEKENDE IV, 2009

Medium: Ink-jet print on paper

Dimensions: 39cm x 29.5cm

Edition: 1/5

Image: (page 6) OUMA SIEN ALLES, 2008

Medium: Woodcut on Fabriano

Dimensions: 149.5cm x 109cm

Image: (page 10) BLOOD LINE = CAMEL HORSE, 2008

Medium: Woodcut on Fabriano

Dimensions: 149.5cm x 111.5cm

Map - South Africa

PO Box 39

Groenkloof

0027

info@map-southafrica.org

www.map-southafrica.org

Artist: Bernadette Steyn

Concept: Harrie Siertsema

Co-ordination: Abrie Fourie

Text: Anne Archer

- ⊕ - Graskop
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