

**Diane Victor**

## The sleeping monster produces reasons<sup>1</sup>

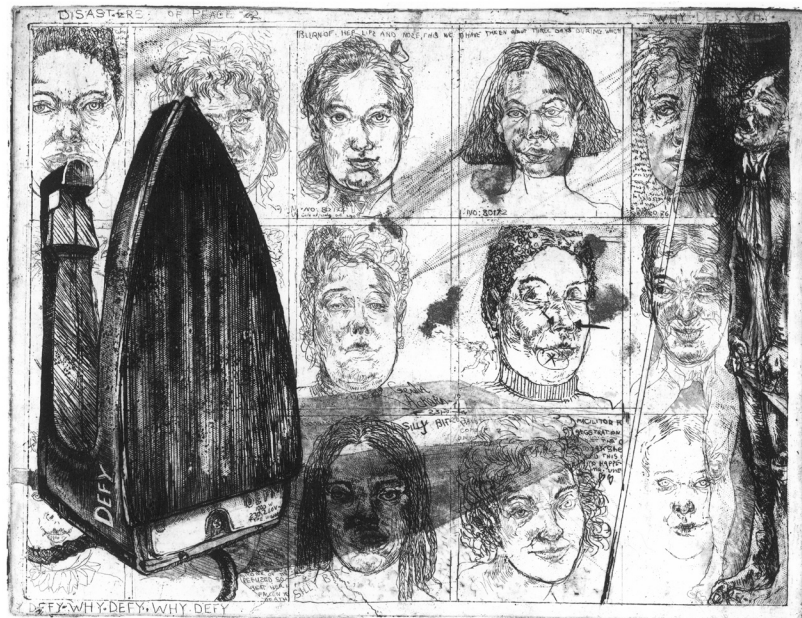
By Johan Thom

Never one to shy away from controversial subject matter, Diane Victor confronts head-on the violent reality of living in contemporary South Africa. In a series of thirty etchings entitled 'Disasters of Peace' (2001-2008, ongoing) her obsession with the rituals of suffering, submission and domination that accompany the various forms of socio-political and economic deprivation endured daily by the citizens of the 'new South Africa' is given graphic, visceral expression.

In a stark, social-realist style, Victor draws out the physical reality of being 'killed like a goat', of living in a 'cluster complex' with squatters directly adjacent (the Joneses on both sides of the fence simply shaking their heads), of being 'gang-raped' (children are not exempt) and so on – all without victims having any reasonable hope of recourse to the law, whilst at the same time providing ample reason for its very existence.<sup>2</sup> For if there is a word that cuts to the heart of the matter it is just that: 'reason' (and not 'law', for law is but the ugly, blind stepsister of the fair princess who holds the power to steal a nation's heart and soul).<sup>3</sup>



Disaster 1 BLIND JUSTICE



Disaster 2 WHY DEFY

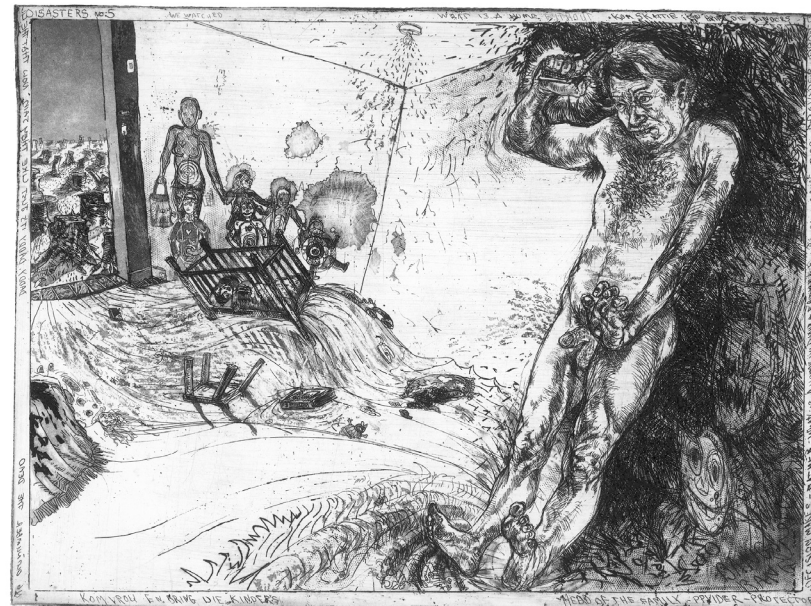


Disaster 3 IN SHEEPS CLOTHING





Disaster 4 DOWN ON THE FARM



Disaster 5 KOM VROU EN BRING DIE KINDERS



The famous maxim 'The sleep of reason produces monsters'<sup>4</sup> was coined by Spanish artist Francesco Goya (1746-1828) in plate 1 of 'Los Caprichos' – a series of etchings preceding the 'Disasters of War' Series (1808-1814). In these 'late works' Goya, a firm believer in the power of reason, condemns what he perceives to be a world governed by the dark forces of base instinctual drives, violence, corrupt social custom and war. No surprise then that in order to spare himself the horrors of persecution by the Spanish Inquisition, Goya ended his life in exile, with most of his works 'donated' to the Royal Court.

The 'Disasters of War' series by Goya also serves as the starting point for Victor's modern-day tribunal, aptly entitled 'Disasters of Peace'. Taking the stand is contemporary South Africa, the young Rainbow Nation born from the impossible: a peaceful, bloodless revolution in sub-Saharan Africa. Eagerly clad in its Sunday best, with respectable credentials stretching all the way from the coastline of Robben Island in Cape Town to Constitution Hill in the city of gold, it steps up to testify: "Yes your Honour, I have done my best. I have been reasonable. What can I do if the nation wastes its precious time complaining and not working? I have provided opportunities aplenty only to find that they have been squandered on

bruised, sleeping bodies! Still, even then, I have taken good care of the nation, nurturing it, making decisions for it and speaking on its behalf when it clearly could not. Would you, your Honour, have paid attention to the slurred speech of a sleepy, shapeless mass? No, what I have done is to give it palpable form as an entity to be reckoned with." The judge nods in affirmation, suspiciously eyeing the prosecution. For now it is clear to him that what he has in his courtroom is nothing less than the vulgar, incestuous revolt of Oedipus against a loving father.

And so the trial continues – for every bitter accusation a reasoned, lawful rebuttal that slowly erodes the case of the prosecution. Until, saturated with the slow tedium of it, the onlookers vacate the gallery, change the channel or simply switch off their minds when it returns to haunt their television screens, newspapers and radio programmes. And soon, the judge too tires of this dreary public business and calls the bench into his chambers where, finding no easy resolution to the ongoing crisis, he promptly transfers the case to the lower courts somewhere out there on the margins. Soon almost no one can remember that the trial was once important news; all accept the status quo and in the process forget that they once had a personal stake in its outcome. That is, until someone 'slaughters

them like a goat' and their families go off in search of the now near-mythical courthouse where the case continues. But of course, by then the official trial is long over and their plea for help, justice and reason goes forever unheard.

The sleeping monster produces reasons...

#### Endnotes:

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1. Editor: I understand that this is meant to be a play on the word – but I am not sure that it works here... and who is the sleeping monster? The Court? The country? And would a sleeping monster produce anything?

JT: It may dream and dreams are products too. I specifically choose a semi-fictional mode of writing that serves to provoke interpretation. I know it is not fashionable to write like this – one wants a clear scholarly approach that lays something like 'meaning' bare, so that readers may understand the works. Doing this will most certainly make the series more socially acceptable and the text more accessible – providing historical precedent for the works (which I have acknowledged but hopefully not imbued with a sense of justification), grounding the interpretation in a clearly defined critical model (such as Marxism or Feminism), and generally casting the work in a rational mould. However, my feeling is that a clear, critical approach to these works in particular would only constrain them. When I look at these works I despair – for me they do not fit neatly into the category of 'art', but rather speak about a multitude of realities that we have come to accept as simply being part of life in the 'new' South Africa. And that is also why I write about them in this way, not to justify their existence within the world of contemporary art in South Africa, but rather to condemn it. Put another way, to write about the work aesthetically (in an anti-systematic, Nietzschean sense), allows for a variety of interpretative strands to emerge that are not hermetically

sealed in the verities of our knowledge and reason, but rather, refute such verity altogether. For me this exacerbates the incredible horror of the series of etchings, works that I think will occupy a prominent place in the canon of contemporary art produced in early twenty-first-century South Africa. We may rightly fear what these 'artworks' say about us, our society, our laws and systems of governance – entities that are in fact all aesthetic phenomena: how impoverished and cruel these dominant fictions are, the continued existence of which we are part of. Stated differently, the horrors depicted in 'Disasters of Peace' are the signs of an impoverished, corrupt society, and not the reasons for it – something like snapshot of a Socrates on his deathbed. (I think most people know this instinctively when they see the series i.e. MOMA has already purchased a set of these prints and I know of quite a few local collections who have expressed interest in them, not to mention the debacle at the University of Pretoria following their removal from the corridors of the Law Department).

2. Editor: This does not make sense – the crimes are not the reason for the law; rather the law is in place to protect against crime. Perhaps "while at the same time showing the urgency of strictly enforcing this law".

JT: This comes down to a difference of opinion. In mine, the law is primarily in place to protect property ownership, however loosely defined the concept of 'property' may be – land, objects and 'citizens' (or in Kristeva's terms: 'patrimonial bodies'). Here the anarchist theories of William Godwin, Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman and the post-structural writings of Michael Foucault come to mind. The existence of law may account for the existence of crime as it calls into being a set of actions, behavioural patterns and certain kinds of relations between entities/objects as 'crimes' or 'criminal behaviour'. Thus, without law there is no crime (though the opposite does not necessarily hold true) – violent acts won't disappear but the ways in which we understand them and the reasons why such acts are perpetrated within society, would have to be reconsidered. As long as we continue to believe that 'justice is blind' we sustain the illusion that the law protects citizens through a mandate that is somehow above the petty practices of (our) commerce, politics and socio-cultural interactions. Barbarism and civilization go hand in hand and we are all implicated.

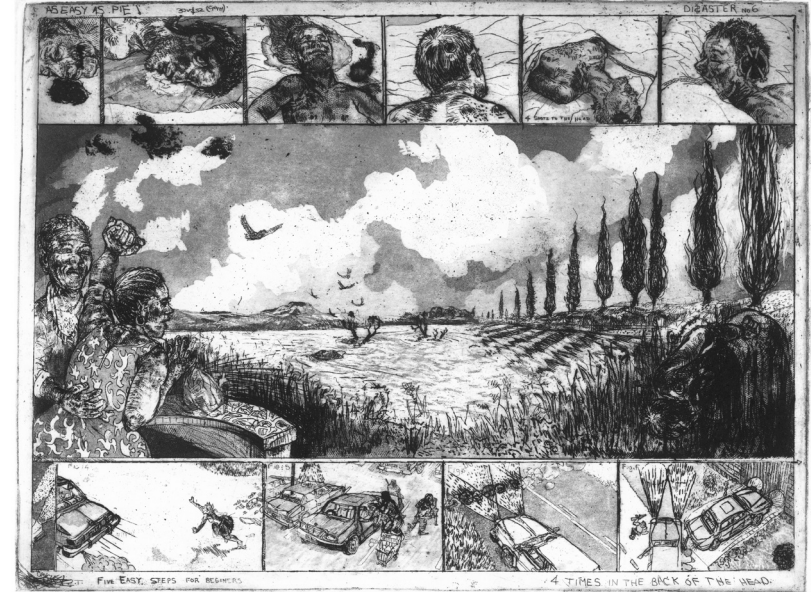
3. Editor: This sentence should be reworked because you are using 'reason' here to mean 'rationality' (as opposed to madness etc), while in the previous sentence

you used it to mean something like 'the justification for'. Some consistency is called for.

JT: I am being unclear/ non-'commonsensical' for a reason – to produce doubt/questioning through rhetoric, world play and style. These meanings are related in ways that appear both playful and rigid i.e. the (Western) concept of rationality exists in relation to its binary opposite, 'irrationality', and all that it implies: an absence of order, chaos, lack of causal relations etc. These values are always context-specific and open for re-interpretation.

4. Editor: Another thought: Goya's title is ambiguous, which is an important consideration for a print produced in the eighteenth century – consider its relationship to Enlightenment thinking about reason. Did Goya mean that when reason sleeps monsters are produced, or did he mean that reason itself has a sleep that produces monsters?

JT: In the etching from which the maxim is taken, the artist lies sleeping at his desk with monsters hovering directly above his person. In Enlightenment (inspired) thought the individual subject took centre stage – its capacity for reason and thought as an expression of natural order. Thus when sovereign self is violated/neglected/'asleep', the natural order of things to falls into a state of chaos. One could argue that such a violation directly interferes with the very fabric of existence, placing an obstruction in the logical syntactical completion of Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum' formulated in his Meditations in 1641. Thus, when the sovereign subject 'sleeps', is absent or its rightful claim to centrality as cornerstone of civilized society is infringed upon, the horrors of (state) tyranny, violence and excess are released upon the world: here the works of Goya's nineteenth-century contemporaries, Delacroix or Gericault, come to mind. To return to Goya's etching, perhaps because the enlightened subject (the artist) who gives rational form to the world (through his work) is 'asleep', monsters are free to roam, through both his dreams and his lack of 'presence' – thus accommodating both readings to some extent? However, I don't agree with Goya whichever way one looks at it. I tend to think that when the subject is awake and rational, it brings all the horrors of the world to life. To name a single example: the Jewish Holocaust during the Second World War. What about Apartheid in South Africa, the inferior position of women in society generally and the current global war on terror? How do these phenomena exemplify the virtues of reason and the cult of the enlightened subject that permeates it?



Disaster 6 AS EASY AS PIE





Disaster 7 OR HAD YOU FORGOTTEN



Disaster 8 BLIND MANS BLUFF 4 BOYS IN BLUE



Disaster 9 KEEPING SCORE



Disaster 10 GLUE BOYS



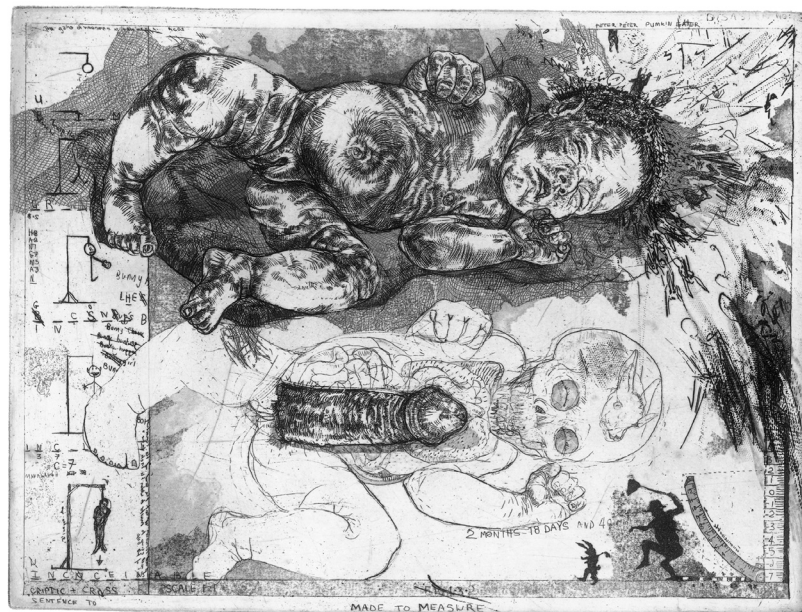


Disaster 11 R5000 A HEAD



Disaster 12 MIND THE GAP





Disaster 13 MADE TO MEASURE



Disaster 14 ALL FOR THE RIGHT PRICE



Disaster 15 MEMORIES

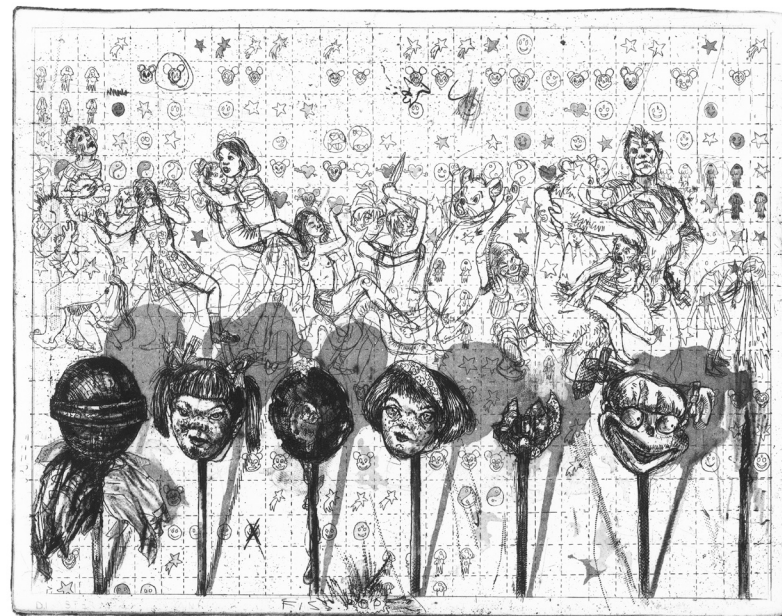


Disaster 16 GLASS HOUSES AND FENCE SITTERS





Disaster 17 MAD BOB

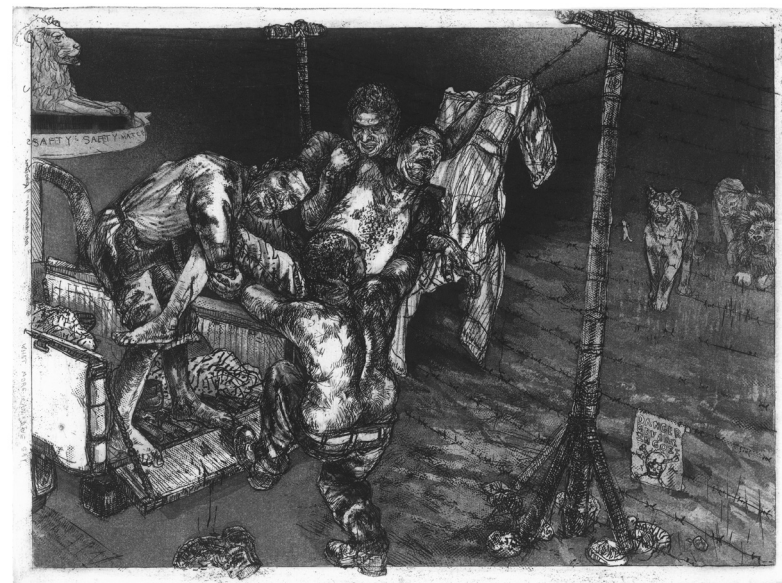


Disaster 18 FIZZ POP





Disaster 19 WITCH HUNT



Disaster 20 THE MAN, THE LION AND THE FENCE

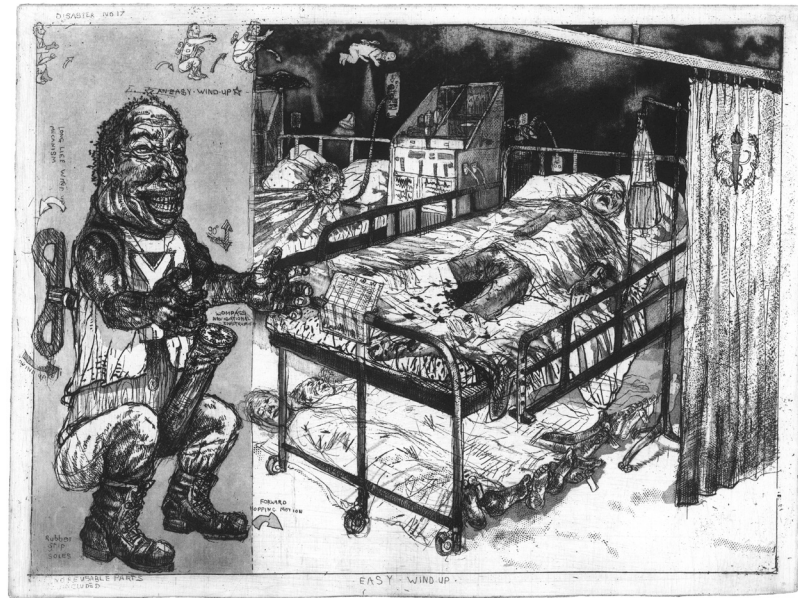


Disaster 21 FUNERAL MARCH

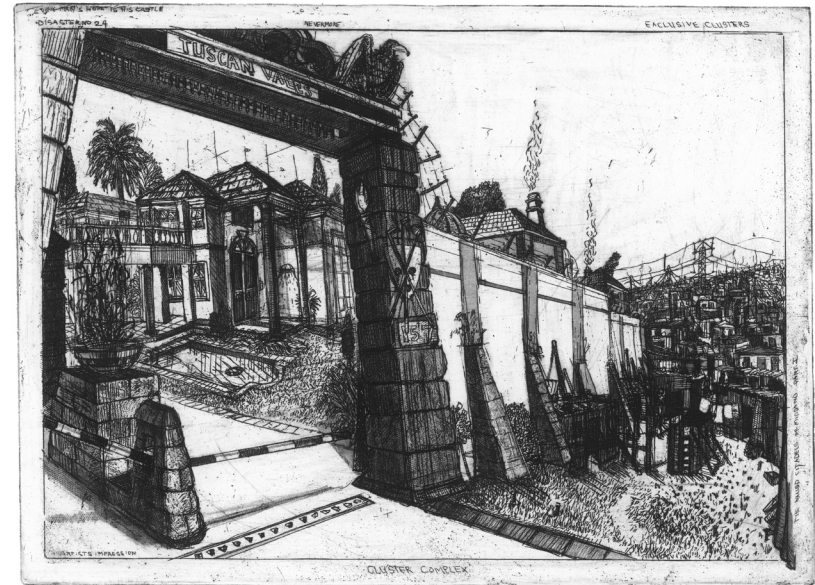


Disaster 22 GRAPHIC (TO BE CONTINUED)





Disaster 23 EASY WIND UP

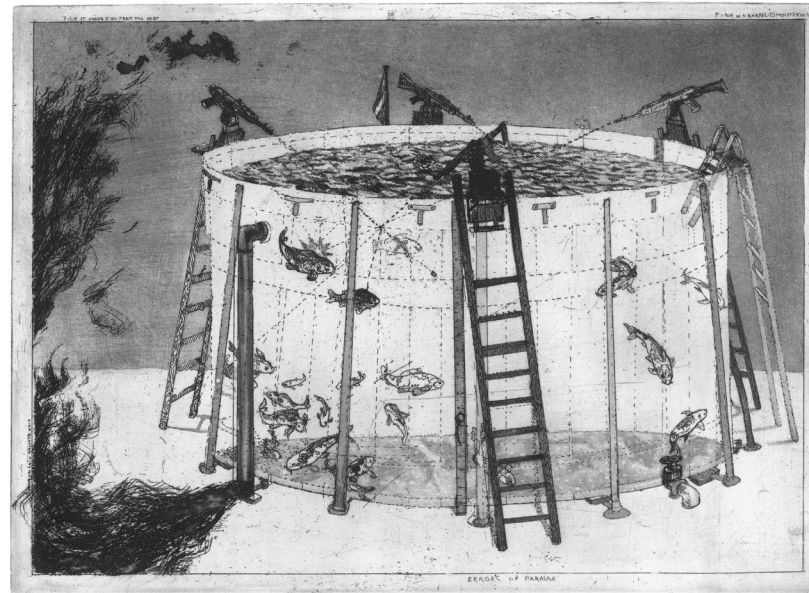


Disaster 24 CLUSTER COMPLEX





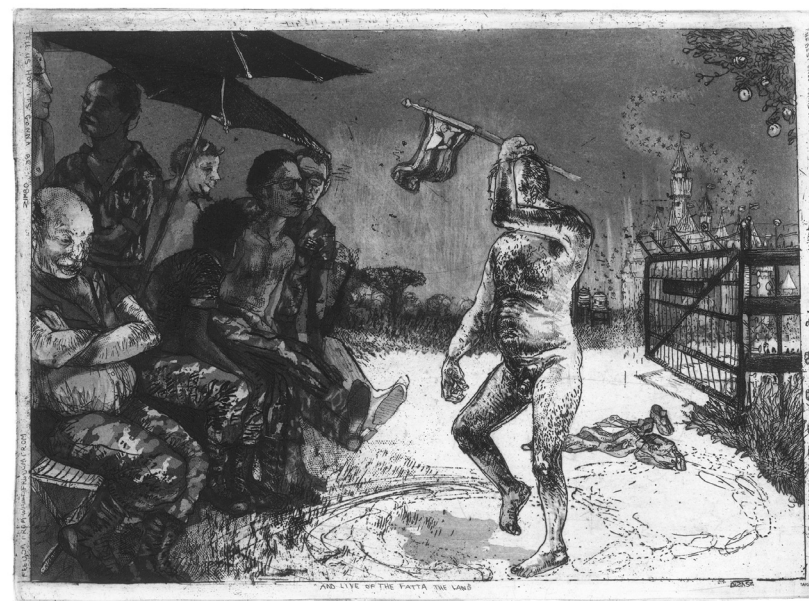
Disaster 25 HYPOXIS ROOPERI [AFRICAN POTATO]



Disaster 26 LIKE SHOOTING FISH IN A BARREL

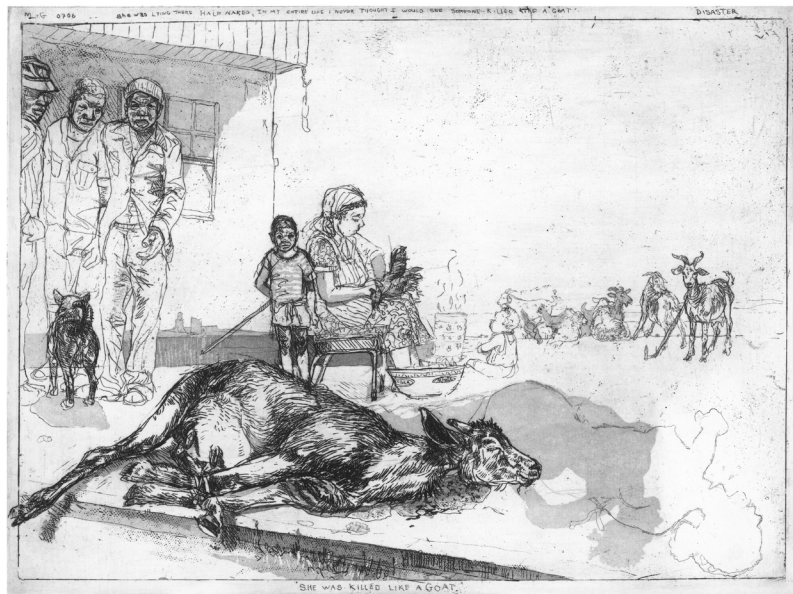


Disaster 27 AND JUSTICE FOR ALL



Disaster 28 AND LIVE OFF THE FATTA THE LAN





Disaster 29 SHE WAS KILLED LIKE A GOAT



Disaster 30 BLIND RISE

**Series:** Disasters of Peace 2001 - 2008

**Medium:** Etchings on Paper

**Size:** 21.5 x 28cm (paper size, each)

**Edition:** 25

Currently set of 30 - ongoing series

Map - South Africa

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- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town