

REVIEWS / GAUTENG



Minnette Vári
Mirage
Video animation



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Aurora Australis
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Minnette Vári at the Standard Bank Gallery

by Brenda Atkinson

There are only two works on this exhibition, and they are flawless. The first (by way of visual encounter) is *Mirage*, a projection of a digitally constructed coat of arms that almost melts beneath notice if you're not attentive. Or maybe I should speak for myself. My mind's eye caught the gestalt of a static crest, its Rorschach stain reminiscent of the old South Africa, and oddly I prepared to pass it by, not thinking it out of place. Until it moved, morphed, and then in fact did melt - animals, antlers and organising icons shimmering into a chaos of Dionysian energy, fawns and females twisting the appearance of things (and at times, in the pornographic suggestiveness of the shapes, reminiscent of Candice Breitz's 'Rorschach Series', in which body parts obscenely juxtaposed create partially pre-determined projections).

The legend on the crest's ribbon - *Historiae ardore in spiritu nostro* ("The heat of history is in our breath") - transforms, via a moment of cataclysmic meltdown, into *Memoriae febre in venis nostris* ("The fever of memory is in our veins"). In the process the crest, super-symbol of national, usually patriarchal order, the imprimatur of civilisation and structure, is made briefly but startlingly vulnerable to the white-hot heat of history and memory. Gradually it reconstitutes into its original, static, Apollonian form, and then the process of almost viral attack begins again.

Through most of her career, Vári has been engaged in a simultaneous but split dialogue with historical forces and the modes of production that consolidate ideologies and hierarchies. Her early and most controversial work explored racist constructions of identity, through sculptural and digital media that already marked her fascination with shape-shifting technologies. Burned herself by the heat of outraged responses to that work, Vári submerged, re-emerged, and has since then worked steadily and with increasingly impressive results on pieces that maximise the tense play between appearance and reality, history and our collective obsession with what is ahead.

Aurora Australis, the other of the works on this small exhibition, uses the technology of popular culture - in this case video animation - to provoke responses to that technology, ranging from the enthralled to the critical. This pulsing, crooning, jarring, soothing animation extravaganza grafts Vári's original footage to the soundtracks and abstract visual patterns of familiar found footage: the hypnotic imagistic hum of scrambled television signals. Vári remarks that "all things and all energies can be seen as information in transit", and in *Aurora* she positions her own eye and body as a double to the shadowy distortions of distorted electrical transmission. She, we, become the decoders, the dazed mystics of media whose ubiquitous babble both threatens and soothes. The visual marker of this interpretive pursuit is not just one but several layers of horizon. These recall not only the light phenomenon of the title, but more existential questions of how we transmit, inhabit and survive the transition of histories and information.

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