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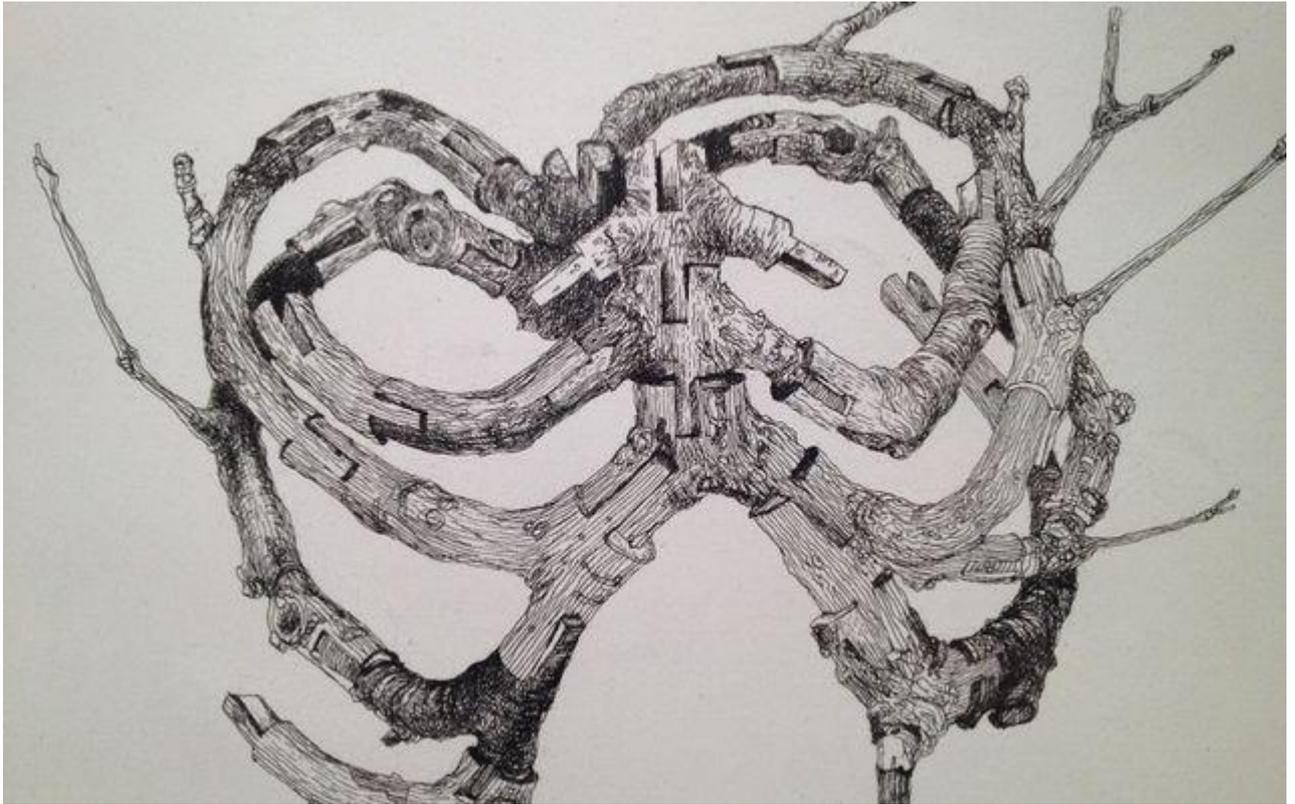
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## Marx's maps connect the sky to subterranean in unexpected ways

BY CHRIS THURMAN, DECEMBER 12 2013, 06:03

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SKELETAL STRUCTURE: Gerhard Marx's Ribcage (hard ground etching). Picture: GOODMAN GALLERY

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THERE was a certain inevitability to the sense of bathos experienced by many of those who tuned their televisions to watch the memorial for Nelson Mandela broadcast from FNB Stadium earlier this week.

This anticlimax was partly a result of the arithmetical fervour prior to the event: so many heads of state, so many dignitaries, so many people expected to fill the stadium and spillover venues across greater Johannesburg. It was partly caused by the rain, which, symbolic blessing or not, affected attendance and created a patchy sound quality. And it was partly due to the state of the nation immediately before Madiba's death: no doubt many viewers felt a measure of gratification upon hearing President Jacob Zuma roundly and repeatedly booed by large sections of the crowd, but this hardly lent dignity to the occasion.

The declarations of any large public ceremony were doomed to fall short. The only person inside the Calabash who came close to paying appropriate tribute was Barack Obama, whose usual eloquence went up a gear as he spoke of Mandela — using the opportunity not only to challenge and inspire South Africans but, implicitly, to critique his conservative adversaries in America and to take a swipe at despots and tyrants (many sitting near him at the time).

In the wake of so great a man as Mandela, and given that there are very few orators like Obama, perhaps quiet reflection is the only suitable response.

Perhaps, if hundreds of current and former world leaders joined thousands of South Africans to sit, silently, in an open stadium in the rain, that would have approached a suitable gesture of mourning.

Or perhaps if they all danced and sang together — as many did — this would have been a form of communal, active meditation and a show of unity matching Madiba's vision.

Failing these grand collective gestures, individuals are left alone to puzzle over the meaning of Mandela's life and death; to take a good hard look at themselves, but also to attempt to survey their country as if from above, with a level of detachment, for the insight this can offer. It is a dense, dizzying view, but one we all need to consider.

Such a practice of looking inward and looking down provides the impetus for Gerhard Marx's *Lessons in Looking Down* (at the Goodman Gallery Johannesburg, 163 Jan Smuts Avenue, until December 21). Marx takes Jules Verne's novel, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, as his starting point, alluding to a chapter in which the protagonists prepare for their geological voyage by spending five days on top of a church spire, staring down at the city below until they become accustomed to the vertigo of an abyss.

In recent years, a number of South African artists have made underground journeys, imagined or actual, in producing work that portrays the human and environmental complexities of the mining industry. That is not Marx's direct concern here, although his aerial views do connect the sky to the subterranean in unexpected ways. The central series in the exhibition, *Garden Carpet: Johannesburg*, constructs maps of central Johannesburg out of extremely thin strips of plants and roots. These images hint at the reassuring lines of cartography yet remain organic and dynamic, refusing to provide stability.

As Mark Gevisser writes, Marx uses maps "counter-intuitively, to provoke a sense of dislocation, of the vertigo that comes from looking down at a great height, of the terror of losing one's bearings but also the thrill of losing one's way".

The slightly distorted aerial representation of the urban landscape is continued in *Vertical Aerial: Johannesburg*, a smaller version of the large-scale mosaic installation produced by Marx in collaboration with Spier Architectural Arts.

If the works portraying Johannesburg as "a space that constantly negotiates the relationship between development and collapse, between thriving metropolis and ruin", constitute this exhibition's looking-down, the looking-inward manifests itself in various intricate and quite beautiful depictions of ribcages: sculptures, an etching and three canvases (also using plant material) of this "hidden structure" convey both the marvel and mortality of the human form.



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