SCENE TOO MUCH GABRIELLE GOLIATH

By Bettina Malcomess. At about 3am every morning, daily newspapers send out people employed to put up the headlines for the morning news. Often these headline pages are slipped into metal frames over the headlines from the previous day, so one could find any headline from the past two days or so behind the current one. By Sam, when traffic begins, the city is already lined with today’s news. On our way to work we pass, almost distractedly, words like ‘disaster’, ‘horror’, ‘murder’. It is often more difficult to actually read the papers themselves. Whether it’s Die Son, the Daily Voice, The Star or the Cape Argus, not a day goes by without a story of a tragic personal loss related to crime or domestic violence. One reacts through a range of emotions at these stories, a sense of shock and incomprehension,
followed by identification or recognition of one’s own vulnerability – or worse – of others close to you. It is so difficult to distance oneself from these stories and images that on most days it is easier not to read the papers at all.

Gabrielle Goliath is an artist whose most recent work confronts these images of violence, not in their physicality but their psychological rawness.

_Berenice_ (2010) is a body of work that deals with the death of a 9 year-old girl on Christmas Eve 1991, shot in her own home. While the story is a familiar one in the South African context, one of the many counts of domestic violence around that time of year, Goliath’s treatment of it returns a shocking news story to a more personal experience of loss.

As part of the body of work, _Berenice 10-28_ consists of 19 portraits of appropriately aged coloured girls – each one a potential substitute for the real but absent Berenice. The images are titled accordingly, from 10-28, each representing a year unlived – a portrait for every year from the year after her death, right through to the present. There is an almost neutral, duplicate quality to the portraits referencing police mug shots or images of Jane Doe’s: the same white vest, the same blank background. The use of black and white highlights the documentary nature of the imagery, being as they are records of a life unlived. The portraits are encased within a clinical red border with the title at the bottom reading “BERENICE”, and the appropriate number [from 10-28], further emphasising their surrogate nature.

This work formed the centrepiece of Goliath’s recent exhibition at Circa on Jellicoe, the new addition to the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg. Currently completing her masters at the University of the Witwatersrand, Goliath was this year’s joint recipient of the Brait-Everard Read Award.

Goliath explains that her interest in Berenice was not in the violent act itself, but in the effect, the social reaction to this loss. Goliath explained the process by which she got the various avatars of Berenice to agree to pose for the portraits. Some she found through family and friends, while others she met by chance in malls or public places. When she approached them and explained the story behind the work, they were surprisingly open to posing for the photographs. Aside from each receiving a bouquet of flowers as a gesture of gratitude, what is interesting here is the willingness of these strangers to participate in her project and posing in an uncontrived and candid way, which is often much harder than being styled and made-up. It suggests not only an empathy with the story, but an understanding of the social condition of such violence as gendered. In some way, these women recognised their own position being interchangeable with the vulnerable position of this particular girl, Berenice.

In an earlier work, _163_ (2009), Goliath again investigated the social condition of victims of domestic abuse. “163” is the ward number of the Trauma Unit at Johannesburg General Hospital, colour-coded red. Goliath explains that while the word ‘trauma’ evokes visceral, physical images of violence; bruised eyes, cut lips, broken noses, many women experience...
abuse on a daily basis without these obvious traces. Their experience is a private one, a fearful one – their normality an environment of psychological as well as pathologi-
cal abuse. While bruises are temporary, the abusive environment is a constant and every-
day reality. In such cases women feel trapped, locked in a manipulative and intim-
ating relational matrix, unable, or so they feel, to express or resolve the abuse they experience. Rather than seek treatment, they ‘suffer in silence’. More than this, many of these women exist in social circumst-
ances that disallow them from becoming finan-
cially or personally independent, and in some cases a complicity exists between their position as women in a larger commu-
nity that turns a ‘blind eye’ to the domestic situation of abuse.

The work consists of the image of a sleeping female head, seemingly ordinary, except for
the harshness of the lighting, which is clini-
cal and exposing so that every pore, follicle
and freckle is visible. The tone of the image
is forensic rather than peaceful or familiar.
Printed large scale (200 x 90 cm), the sleeping
head is presented within a hospital bed-
like object, one that the viewer looks down
on, whether sympathetically or judgement-
tally. Sterile and set on castors, with a red
colour for its base, the structure becomes a
‘hospital bed’, something that transports a
body in trauma as opposed to a body at rest.
In both cases, the image of the ‘sleeper’ is
passive, reified and magnified to become equal to and contained within the surface of
this ‘bed’ on castors, itself movable or at ’rest’. The viewer is put in a strange position in
relationship to this image and the object, at once implying containment and seamless-
ness in the object’s neat, clinical finish and
 disturbance at the ambiguity of the image – its fragmentation and dismemberment
from the rest of the body. As such, we re-
main observers, unable to ‘disturb’, thus
complicit in her containment.

Goliath’s Murder on 7th (Gallery Momo, 2009) was an exhibition that engaged with
South Africa’s obsession with home security, a reflection on a continual state of anxiety
and a kind of morbid fixation with crime. The artist points out that even the most or-
dinary interactions are infused with a sense of paranoia and worry – an overriding neu-
rosis. The tone of the show is somewhat
more ironic than 163 or Berenice, working
with the presentation of rooms in the home
in the style of a whodunnit murder mystery,
cum cluedo game, cum surveillance foot-
age. The image of each room, a titled por-
trait set in an appropriately suburban con-
text, is presented within a black CCTV-like
structure and is accompanied by a floor pan-
el suited to the room in question – parquet,tiles, linoleum, Astroturf. The viewer is in-
vited to stand on the floor panel, and as such ‘enter’ the room, visually and physical-
ly. The slightly foreshortened image works
like a mock mirror reflection of their own obsession with domestic security and order.

In this show, as in all of her work, Goliath
demonstrates an acute spatial sense,
whether in the interaction of the installa-
tion and architecture or the dynamics of the
viewer’s interaction with the work. The
overall installation of Berenice is precisely
considered to fit the oval design of the Circa
exhibition space. The sculptural installation, Last Seen, while strongly minimalist in form,
makes reference to a specific place and time
by the words of the Christmas carol Silent
Night: in reverse and spelt out in twinkling
Christmas lights, the phrase “All is Bright” is
read as a reflection in a pristine, black glass
surface. On the upside of the suspended
panel, “All is Calm” sits in relief beneath a
simple cloth cover, a reference to an absent
body, a disruption of the quietness of
the work’s formal appearance.

Goliath’s sophisticated use of materials and
her spatial language infuse her work with a
formal quality that often belies its complex
social content. Portrait of a Woman (2010)
works with four bright pink (almost pop)
corrugated panels and four floor-panels
housing segments of a photograph of a
woman, Ntombi, living in the Masiphumelele
informal settlement outside Cape Town, in-
terspersed with extracts from Henry James’
novel Portrait of a Lady, accompanied by
Xhosa translations. The viewer is invited to
step onto the panels, thus onto the image of
the person and into their ‘space’, as such
conflating the human subject and their con-
text. Again, the spatial unfolding of the work
implicates the viewer in an active process of
looking, which each brings their own posi-
tion as a complicit observer into view.

It seems appropriate to conclude that, in a
way, Goliath herself is often present in her
work. The third component of Berenice is
the video, Missing Persons – a stop-frame
animation/video piece styled on missing
persons TV inserts, but with a fractured, il-
legible roll call of names and text. The video
is a memorial of sorts to the nameless, face-
less, forgotten victims of domestic violence
and homicide, commenting also on the
hushed nature of many of these crimes. It is important that it is Goliath herself who plays these substitutable, anonymous victims. In the same way Goliath places herself in her earlier work Ekke (2007) and Ek is ‘n Kimberley Coloured (2007). Drawn from personal experience, Ek is ‘n Kimberley Coloured makes a humorous presentation of the ‘romantic’ but false ideas people often have about the artist’s own cultural background. In Missing Person’s, however, Goliath’s tone shifts to register the position of the personal in the social-political context in a slightly different way.

Goliath here is returning images of violence, whether they are contained in a word in a headline or an image on the front page, to the personal experience of loss. She is doing the complex and difficult work of memory, the only way to reduce the trauma of seeing when the scene is too much.

ENDNOTE

1 Here I am referring to Walter Benjamin’s distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory. For Benjamin, Freud talks about traumatic events as entering voluntary or conscious memory, so that they are never forgotten. This accounts for the level of detail recalled after an accident. For Benjamin, ‘involuntary memory’ is that which enters the unconscious as experience, i.e. is able to be forgotten. (Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ in Illuminations, 156-158, Pimlico, London, 1999 (1955), trans. Harry Zorn).