Goliath’s faces show suffering of a war that touches us all

by Chris Thurman, January 30 2014, 05:32

ALERTED: Faces of People who may or may not be Victims or Perpetrators of Domestic Violence (James), 2013. Pigment ink in cotton Baryta.

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AS I sat in the parking lot of the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, listening on my car radio to Democratic Alliance leader Helen Zille announcing Mamphela Ramphela as the party’s presidential candidate, I couldn’t help but imagine the ghost of Steve Biko hovering over proceedings.

Would he give his blessing to the political union of these two women in opposition to a corrupt African National Congress? Or would he condemn Ramphela for betraying the Black Consciousness Movement?

Yet, it seems unnecessary and inappropriate to reduce these two substantial women, who have achieved much independently over the past three decades — and who have worked together in various contexts — to their mutual connection to Biko.

Yet that is exactly what many of us did. Walking up the ramp to the gallery, I reflected on the way in which such a response is resonant of the patriarchy that continues to bedevil us: a male-centredness that invests masculinity with authority and normative identity, that sees men as active and women as passive. As it turns out, this wasn’t an altogether inappropriate thought to take into Gabrielle Goliath’s Faces of War (at the Goodman until February 15).

The “war” that is Goliath’s concern is domestic abuse. The first piece one encounters is Roulette: visitors are dared to put on a pair of headphones through which a stream of static plays, interrupted every six hours by the sound of a gunshot — an interval matching the country’s outrageous femicide rate. Will the gun go off while we are listening? Roulette asks us “to engage with this distressing social phenomenon ... to personally acknowledge the potent threat of its reality".
Alexandra Dodd concludes Intimate Warfare, the text that accompanies the exhibition, by driving home this sense of complicity: "The extreme intimacy of one-to-one power relations means that we are all, at some stage, a victim, a perpetrator or a victim-perpetrator of a completely unreasonable and damaging war at home. Some use phrases, some use fists.... Conscientious objectors are as rare to the lounge as they are to the theatre of war."

The reciprocity in Dodd’s treatment of the topic takes its cue from the photographic series that dominates the exhibition: Faces of People who may or may not be Victims or Perpetrators of Domestic Violence. These are portraits of 12 men and women of differing ages and races, taken with the same lighting and background. Each subject’s expression is ambiguous — it could be aggressive, fearful, threatening, pleading, resilient or desperate.

We are left to wonder about their stories. At best, the lack of information given to us demands a special effort of imaginative sympathy; at worst, the neutrality of the camera lens exposes our gendered and racialised prejudices as we guess at narratives and cast them in particular roles. The point is that we can’t be sure. In fact, even our eyes deceive us — we are only seeing half of each face. This "unnatural symmetry", as Dodd describes it, is the result of another form of erasure: Goliath has taken one side of the face and duplicated it. "Everything in this show," she notes, "has been strictly altered."

Goliath thus eschews the direct depiction of abuse. She takes her cue from Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others, a book that presents the activist-photographer with an ethical challenge (neatly summed up by Dodd): "How to engage with the pain of others without inflicting further violence through representing the effects of that pain?"

While Goliath’s artistic empathy extends to both men and women — her etchings of wounded male soldiers, based on the antiwar photography of Ernst Friedrich, are haunting precisely because they sublimate the graphic horror the originals sought to convey — we know that, in South Africa, the silent suffering of abused women is the greater cause for alarm.

This is emphasised in Personal Accounts, five video sequences in which women’s testimonies of their violation are edited so that no words are spoken: instead we hear the breathing, sighing, sniffing and stuttering of voiceless women.

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