

THE UNDERLYING

You have to go and see Clive van den Berg's new exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. It's not just that I think it is worth a visit; his new paintings are so much about the physical experience of standing in front of them that it's hard to get a proper sense of them without seeing them in the flesh. While much pandemic art has inevitably become screen-friendly (and Van den Berg's landscape-inspired and sometimes vividly visceral colours might look good on the page or screen) the full effect is only possible if you actually go and discover what it feels like to be in the same room as them.

First, they're big. Some of them are the full height of the gallery walls and as wide. Looking at them is both a matter of standing back and trying to take in the whole canvas at once, and going right up to take a close look at the details. You find yourself moving around, stepping backwards and forwards, letting your eyes travel over the huge painted surfaces.

On one level, you could say his new paintings are landscapes. They are a continuation of a project that has run through Van den Berg's work, which he calls "African Landscapes". But they are not landscapes in the traditional sense; they're as much about undoing the ways in which we look at landscape as they are about representing it. And for Van den Berg, representing a landscape is as much about history, memory and body as it is about the landscape itself.



Landscape XVII (Seep)

He explains that conventional pictures of the landscape – "the traditional colonising" perspective – involves a "unified point of view" and places you in the present tense. It's a way of looking that positions you in a certain relationship to the landscape, imagining your body and subjectivity in a particular way.

These vast canvases break up that perspective. Within their undeniably beautiful compositions, they present a fragmented surface. On certain areas of a canvas, you might find yourself looking at something like a traditional landscape, and then something that more closely resembles a map, or something indicating a land surveyor's or a geologist's understanding of landscape. Sometimes you're above ground and sometimes below. Even abstract lines or colours are freighted with associations.

"The line is obviously a very important thing in the context of any colonised country," Van den Berg says. "What does the line mean? What was divided from what?" Is the colour symbolic, referring perhaps to gold beneath the ground, or is it from a map, a flag "or some other kind of cultural marker"? Is it the colour of something inside your own body?

Van den Berg often uses words such as "syntax" and "visual vocabularies" when referring to how we look at landscape. He says we "read" them in a certain way according to certain conventions. "Painting is a very literate art." Within these paintings, he constantly asks you "to shift your comprehensive capacities from one area of the painting to the other".

What's at stake in this disruption – he calls the surfaces by turns "broken", "porous" and "fragmented" – is not just a "cultural perception" but also a "bodily reality". Your experience of being in your own body actually starts to change when you change your relationship to the landscape.

"I've been noticing recently that many of our words for landscape are in fact bodily terms," he says. Necks and elbows are common. He says that even when you look at a feature of the landscape "hundreds of metres high" – a hill,



African Landscape XVI (Scarlet Lake). Pictures: COURTESY GOODMAN GALLERY

OF THE LAND

Clive van den Berg's latest exhibition, *Underscape*, at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg is as much about undoing the ways in which we look at a landscape as they are about representing it, writes **Graham Wood**

for instance – "you feel a bodily equivalence". So when you change the way you relate to the landscape, your conception of your own body shifts, too.

Sometimes you recognise human figures in his landscapes. African Landscape XII (Gold Below) and XIII are obvious examples. Sometimes on the same canvas, you become aware that other figures nearby exist on a different scale or plane, and clearly don't belong in the same place and time as them, and you realise you're looking at ghosts.

"If you're in any way sensitive to the history of land," says Van den Berg – including exploration, colonisation, mining and other kinds of exploitation – it's "impossible to be in that landscape without some sense of cost." One of the ways in which we represent cost is through ghosts: "The idea that there are people who need to speak."

This haunting is one way in which he undoes our sense of existing in the present, collapsing it with the past.

Looking at the landscape in this way does not allow you to "take comfort in appearances". "Everything we look at has something underlying," he says.

As articulate as Van den Berg is about his work, he is not

interested in being didactic. "I'm not here to make pronouncements about our responsibilities to the past, but to alert us to a consciousness of those responsibilities," he says. What makes painting such an important art form for him, as much as it is laden with language and literacy, is our "wordless relationship" to it. "I think a lot of art has become incredibly verbal," he says. Too often, the talk is primary and the artwork comes second.

In the works of *Underscape*, it's not just an idea of the landscape that is undone, or a notion of history or of subjectivity. These paintings work on you physically. Through this strange, collapsed, fragmented view of landscapes and bodies, your experience of your own body changes. It's a physical sensation, almost as if your bodily reality is being undone. It's a moment that silences you. "It's that alertness which I'm interested in," says Van den Berg.

What is at stake, as much now as 27 years ago with the advent of SA's democracy, is how we imagine the future.

Underscape is at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, until January 15