

The Drain of Progress
A Catalogue Raisonné
2004-2007
by Zander Blom

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I initially used the medium of photography to record subjects for drawings, prints and paintings. Later, I photographed the drawings and paintings to keep track of what I was making. As I started taking more serious photographs, my awareness of the difference between the work and its photographic representation increased. The difference between a photograph of an artwork and the artwork itself is something that I have been interested in for some time now. My visual experience of most of the artworks I have come to know and admire, has been a mediated one. Like most South Africans my early education in art was primarily based in books. At some point I developed an immense appreciation for photographic documentation of artworks in old publications. I am, for example, more intrigued by photographs of Vladimir Tatlin's corner reliefs and Alexander Calder's mobiles in their studios at the time of production, than in the actual objects. The photographs of Francis Bacon's cluttered studio have also been a recurring reference point. I have a similar interest in colour plate reproductions of paintings and drawings, as a colour plate of a specific painting is never exactly the same in another publication. The variables in photographic equipment, lighting, colour printing, size, grading, or paper stock all influence the way the image looks, enabling one to experience a painting in a different way in every publication. My interest in these reproductions led to a desire to mimic the photographic mediation evidenced in these publications. In my world of books the actual works didn't have to exist, because the photographs were all I had access to. This led me to the position from which I am working today, where I am as interested in making drawings, prints, paintings, and installations as I am in photographing them.

I consider each colour plate featured in this book to be a completed artwork as much as I consider the surviving drawings, prints and other objects (once removed from my home) to be the same. I currently understand my use of photography as an application of the medium within a conceptually based art practice. The works I make that are not photographs are important to me mainly as props in a larger narrative as communicated by the photographs: living in a specific time and place, making work informed by a specific personal ideology. The photographic documentation is a vehicle which ties the work and its production to its specific time and place. Thus allowing for a greater reading and understanding of the intentions and circumstances under which they were made. Essentially I am documenting my life and my activities within the confined space of my home as an ongoing, invented narrative. I'm capturing a story which I'm writing, living in, and playing out, with the intention of directing the outcome within a contemporary art context.

I began photographing my living and work space extensively in 2004 when I moved into an old house in Brixton, Johannesburg where I currently live. The guiding principle for

making work from 2004 onwards has been to confine myself to the inside of my home, to make work, and to photograph whatever shape it takes. During 2006 my objective switched from solely using the space to produce and photograph drawings and prints, to utilising it to house installations that I previously would have intended to build in a gallery context (due in part to a lack of financial resources and access). I also realised that my home had already become a site of constant flux. This urged me to focus on the photographs more, because once I documented the installations I would dismantle them, leaving only the photographs as evidence - a process that changed my relationship to printing and drawing. To add to that I started cutting up, reconstructing and re-shooting the work I made earlier, transforming the house into something resembling a large-scale blender.

By mid 2004 I started directing my attention towards producing apolitical, anti-meaningful, anti-profound, and vulgar things. Pseudo-Nihilism and ironic gestures joined the mix of contradictory secondary-motives to feed my new position of ambitionless productivity. The result was a kind of visual diarrhoea which I decided to nurture and embrace. By the time I got a steady flow of irony and perverse Nihilism in place, my appreciation for books and reproductions of artworks kicked in right before boredom could prevail. I started looking more closely at North American and European art history. I felt that very few things could be less relevant to my life than a painting by Mondrian or Jackson Pollock, but was very connected to those works because of my interest in old art publications. I realised that I could use the perverse optimism of modernist abstraction as an alibi. An exploration of many modernist and avant-garde related subjects like Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Constructivism, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism followed. The scenario I had now devised to work in was at once an ironic gesture about my position towards these art movements, and at the same time a mechanism to escape and reject the socio-politically laden practice which characterizes the majority of contemporary South African art. A perverse seriousness juxtaposed with a charged sense of irony now characterised my work. The inside of my home became the exotic. A corner above my bed and the pages in the books on my shelves became the last stretches of unconquered terrain in which anything seems possible. The irony lay very much in that I set out to do this from a house in Brixton, Johannesburg, South Africa – the heart of the African continent as it adjusts and prepares itself for a new century of globalization.

The Drain of Progress: A Catalogue Raisonné is a corrupted, unachieved, undeserved and incomplete Catalogue Raisonné. A book purposefully designed and produced in a style and format to mimic the type of Catalogue Raisonné associated with an accomplished modernist artist from Europe or North America. The launch of this publication coincides with the opening of a retrospective exhibition, continuing within the same gesture: looking back on a process, currently in its infancy, through a frame that imitates the weight and importance of a late career overview. Although the work suitably fits the insincere and ironic frame which the book and exhibition provide, the act of its making and dedication to accurate contextual placing thereof, is undeniably, and almost regrettably, sincere.