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Uriel Orlow: Mafavuke's Trial and Other Plant Stories

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Uriel Orlow: Mafavuke's Trial and Other Plant Stories

The Showroom

28 September - 19 November 2016

Review by Ruth Hogan

In 'Mafavuke's Trial and Other Plant Stories', the artist Uriel Orlow proposes the concept of botany as a political sphere, where vegetation and plant life emerge as instruments of political agency, both in colonial and post-colonial contexts. This commissioned work examines the history of plants in relation to the landscape of South Africa and the region's complicated history with British and Dutch colonial rule.

In 1652, the South African city of Cape Town was established as a permanent settlement and garden for the Dutch East India Company, a chartered company involved in the international spice trade. Orlow uses the concept of this garden as a microsite to play out the legacy of colonial influence. Ideologically, the garden operates as a contested space for land. Within this site, plants become instrumental in organising space, delineating borders and establishing territory. Similarly, the introduction of foreign species to the delicate ecosystem functions to overwhelm local indigenous plant life, attempting to supplant a traditional system with another.

A key work in the exhibition is the two-screen film projection 'The Crown Against Mafauvke'. One screen plays out the dramatisation of the trial of Mafauvke Ngcobo, a South African inyanga (a traditional herbalist or medicine man) who, in 1940, was accused of practicing 'non-traditional' methods of producing muthi or African medicine, according to perceived European standards. As the trial plays out, the protagonist Mafauvke reveals to the viewer that the court's motivation is not malpractice but is due to the economic success of Mafauvke's business, selling to both native and European clientele. This success, at the time, was deemed as an indigenous threat to the emerging European pharmaceutical trade in the region.

In contrast, the second screen offers contemporary observations of herbal practices. This varies from street vendors selling their wares in Johannesburg and gardeners cultivating their crops to alternative healers and educators imparting their knowledge to

a community of students. The implication is that, despite the legacy of colonialism, traditional herbal practices have withstood the impact of foreign influence.

Further to this, a conceptual 'herbarium' bisects the exhibition space. The herbarium is a shelving display unit where each case study, provided by invited artists, represents a plant specimen.

In 'Grey, Green, Gold', Orlow presents a photograph of Nelson Mandela's garden at Robben Island prison, where he was a political prisoner from 1964 -1982. This is juxtaposed with an image of the rare yellow crane flower, native to South Africa and selectively bred to produce a yellow bloom. The bloom itself is encased in a wire mesh, a preventive measure against the grey squirrel - another European predator introduced to the African ecosystem - consuming the seeds. The flower was adopted as a symbol of Mandela's political resistance and renamed 'Mandela's Gold' after his presidential election.

Each specimen in Orlow's exhibition represents a living, thriving organism, capable of resisting external factors. This resistance in the natural world mirrors resistance in the political sphere. It is one that will thrive despite all odds.

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