

FAR NORTH

Alexia Vogel

At the Johannesburg Art Fair in 2015 the Barnard Gallery created a temple for the paintings by Alexia Vogel. The light the paintings emitted had found a home. The installation has left a lasting impression. In 2016 it was Jaco van Schalkwyk's turn to shine. Once again the Barnard Gallery did not disappoint, this time giving us a six meter long wall for a series of profoundly subtle forest scenes. Against the makeshift cool commonly associated with exhibitions at art fairs, there is a lesson here in how art can be framed differently. If nature abhors a vacuum, then these two exhibitions – consummate on both counts – remind us that in a mercantile context art need not bow down to mammon, that art can "help us to accomplish a task that is of central importance in our lives: to hold onto things we love when they are gone."

This reflection, from *Art as Therapy* by John Armstrong and Alain de Botton, reminds us of that which we all too often forget: The role of art is to heal. A therapeutic medium, "art ... can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves." "Art is a way of preserving experiences, of which there are many transient and beautiful examples, and that we need help containing."

The Barnard Gallery's strength lies in its ability to 'contain' that which we fail to effectively see and understand. Their exhibitions, at their best, are still points in a churning world. If "sorrow is written into the contract of life," then Vogel's temple and Van Schalkwyk's sacred wall are the "tools that can preserve our hopeful dispositions." For "the main point of engaging with art is to help us lead better lives – to access better versions of ourselves."

This salutary vision is not common today. The intellectuality of art – an art ideational, politicised, prescriptive, and contestatory – has compelled us to go against our better natures. Not so the paintings by Van Schalkwyk and Vogel. What we deem 'canonical' is all too often "disconnected from our inner needs." Because so-called "good art" is insidiously constructed – "the result of complex systems of patronage, ideology, money and education" – means that taste has been genetically, or rather culturally modified. But what of the "search for consolation, self-understanding and fulfilment?"

Here nature – the natural world – continues to play its part. As John Fowles reminds us in his beautiful monograph, *The Tree*, "It is

far less nature itself that is yet in danger than our attitude to it." What then are we seeing, when we see? What is it that nature, when shot through the lens of a refined artist, telling us? As Ralph Waldo Emerson observed a hundred years before Fowles, "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all of the parts, that is the poet."

And here, finally, we turn to Alexia Vogel's most recent solo exhibition – 'Along the Way.' For it is she, the artist, who has given us the insight we long for. In a series of paintings in oil on paper – *Wave*, *Marsh*, *Loch*, *Alp*, *Swamp*, *Rift*, *Fjord*, *Range*, *Glacial*, *Clouds*, *River*, *Pool*, *Ice Pool* – Vogel has turned our attention both to the infinite horizon and the molecular detail. If her images shimmer and shiver it is because what grips her, what draws her in, is the intoxicating ephemerality of an animated moment. It is not only the natural world that animates her, but the worn imprinting of, and coexistence with, that moment. Works titled *Afoot* and *En Route* affirm her fragile place within a boundless realm. It is as if divinity – the power of divination – lay in nature, and in the power of the poet and artist – if momentarily – to hold it. Her paintings are not only exercises in skill but attempts to bind human life –



Alexia Vogel, *Glacier*, 2017. Oil on paper, 98 x 69.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Barnard Gallery.

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increasingly denatured – to the cathedral that is sky, earth, water.

As the American art historian, W.J.T. Mitchell, concurs in *Landscape and Power*, “Landscape is itself a physical and a multisensory medium (earth, stone, vegetation, water, sky, sound and silence, light and darkness).” The artist’s role, her part therein, is to commune with the ‘multisensory’ quality of nature. One does not simply see the world, one exists within and because of it. It is intriguing how even to consider not only nature’s visual power, but its auditory power – its ability to make us listen anew. I for one find the run of rivers more consoling than the ocean, the brush of grass and leaf more calming than the whoop and groan of sky and mountain range. No matter – each one of us returns to the song which binds and secures us best.

In Vogel’s world it is not so much the grandeur of earth and sky that compels, but the clustered details of a particular scene and setting. Her world recalls Jane Austen’s ‘narrow band of ivory,’ a world piecemeal and finely etched. If Austen understood the finer ironies and longings of a social world, then Vogel understands the finer longings of a protracted band of river, swamp, or

field. Even her fjord’s and gargantuan rifts seem contained, their focus pulled, reigned in, rendered cameo. Her take as it were – though I wonder if Vogel ever takes away from what she sees and feels – is an aesthetic operation designed to restore the human within nature.

Regarding the natural world, J.H. Pierneef wisely noted that “To be blind to its beauty is crass, but to be swallowed up by it seems equally foolish.” This view, often disregarded when assessing Pierneef’s work, is of vital importance when regarding Vogel’s interpretation of nature, for she too refuses to heel to nature’s constraining power. Rather, the artist asks of herself that she redeem herself in the instant she immerses herself in the vision she paints. This redemption is never transcendent but rudimentary, for Vogel asks of her art only that it connect her amorphous and inarticulate being with a natural world as amorphous, as inarticulate. For the multisensory song that is nature refuses the harmony we commonly affix to it.

The painter’s role – the work that is painting – is therefore wise, rather than ‘foolish,’

when it holds fast to a sliver of concordance. If Vogel’s paintings are uncannily striking – rather than merely beautiful – it is because they allow us “to hold onto things we love when they are gone.” Sacramental, tender, fragile, Vogel’s paintings, after Armstrong and De Botton, are “connected to a psychological agenda... purposeful and rich, in its own way.”

The very title for her exhibition – *Along the Way* – suggests the itinerant nature of the enterprise. She is ‘afoot’ in a world that exceeds her, a world to which she gifts the grace of her momentary belonging. And yet, I wonder, given the accelerating provenance and value of the paintings by Maggie Laubser and J.H. Pierneef, whether in fifty to a hundred years Vogel will not be regarded as a sentient force – as a painter who in refusing the grim dictates of her time allowed for a vision far greater than the “sorrow ... written into the contract of life.”

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Alexia Vogel, *Pool II*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm. Image courtesy of the Barnard Gallery.