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Drawing out of the Darkness: Contemplating after-image

Paul Emmanuel: after-image, Paul Emmanuel and US Art Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2004.

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Dictionaries remain a reflex position both as launching pad and as refuge when trying to enter the often arcane and enticing world of image and text. The Collins Concise defines *after-image* as "a sustained or renewed sensation, esp. visual, after the original stimulus has ceased".¹ This careful description of a noun contrasts with the Exploratorium: Science Snacks web site's contribution of an active experiential process "a flash of light prints a lingering image in your eye".² The positional distinction between the traditional and electronic research options seems apt, and the contradiction inherent in an attempt to fix the effect of light on a bodily surface is an incisive fit for Paul Emmanuel's major new work.

Staring into an intense light source such as a candle flame or bright sunlight and then shutting your eyes creates unstable colours and patterns in the darkness on the inside of your eyelids. The shapes move and morph in ways not unlike the globs inside a lava lamp, before eventually slowing down and gelling. Staring at a computer screen long enough has the same effect, as I'm told does meditation. In the transition from light to dark is there any correlation, beyond idle speculation, between sensory phenomena caused by chemical retinal changes and electric neural impulses, unfocused gazing in disconnected states, and paths to spiritual enlightenment? Attempts to picture what the mind's eye sees are as fugitive as they are absorbing and they result in a frustrating full-stop. Nirvana remains elusive.

The opposite journey however has a powerful pull. Moving from dark to light has positive emotional associations (I choose life! Just say yes!) Hackneyed Psycho 101 interpretations aside, the metaphorical process of establishing form and substance from nothing implies a searching vulnerability that is shared in the literal act of finding an image through subtracting blackness.

After-image continues a path the artist chose over a decade ago. In his small mezzotints from the early 1990s for example, muffled forms emerge softly from velvety blackness, a sensory rendering quite unlike the crisp clean contrasts of the latest work which crackle as if seen in a sustained flash of bright light. The difference in scale is also substantial, as after-image is an enormous work and the prints are tiny intimate pieces. They generate a stunned contemplation evoked by an awareness of the intense temporal and labour commitment involved in their making. The processes involved are essentially subtractive and enable the same reverse image evolution: the somewhat archaic mezzotint process of burnishing areas on a roughened etching plate finds a contemporary custom-created equivalent in the scratching into exposed black photographic emulsion to uncover the white paper beneath.

The image of a discarded uniform on an expanse of grass depicted with such eyeball-expanding clarity in *after-image* speaks powerfully of absence and loss. The endeavour to fix

that loss in an image communicates a compelling need to rail against the overbearing authoritative structures that proscribe identity.

The established equivalencies in art historical discourse of body and topography, and of landscape as site of metaphorical and literal struggle are embedded in this image. Essentially though, the combination of obsessive mark making and marking time in the artist's ritualised undertaking communicates an intense reflective and self-reflexive practice that seems to allude to the existence of a bargain having been struck, of drawing to hold back midnight.

Julia Charlton, curator, Wits University Art Galleries, June 2004

1 The Collins Concise Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, First Edition 1982

2 <http://www.exploratorium.edu/snacks/afterimage.html>