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Nature, paper, man: The cycle of evanescence as embodied in fin. and Sleepmerke

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In our day where rapidly developing technologies such as computers, the internet, email, cellular telephones, *Facebook* and even the *Kindle* and electronic books have become entrenched in our way of life, the possibility becomes ever larger for one to imagine a time where the physical book and the page made of paper will not be commonly used anymore. Ian Marley and Jan van der Merwe's books *fin.* and *Sleepmerke* address, among other themes, this notion of the transience and vulnerability of the book (and, by implication, of the page and of paper).

Every delicate laser-engraved Fabriano paper page in *fin.* is protected by Perspex. This form of protection, together with the yellow, aged colour thereof, create the impression that the paper is protected for the purposes of its documentation: as a treasure from the past. The gloves that are placed next to the work and which are used to handle it reinforce this message of the vulnerability and preciousness of paper as something that is slowly being forgotten and only remains in the form of documentation in environments such as museums. Even the packaging of the book reminds one of a filing cabinet from

where the very last examples of paper from days long gone can be drawn for historical purposes. The theme of evanescence addressed in *fin.* becomes more complex when the laser-engraved landscapes in and on the paper are taken into consideration.

The first representations of the landscape in *fin.* show abundant cosmos flowers beaming with a sense of life. As one pages through the book, the scenes change to lifeless terrains that show scars caused by over-processing of the landscape, its exploitation and mankind's gradual destruction of nature. The yellowed laser-engraved paper now becomes a metaphor for the suffering of the land. The paper becomes a homage in the form of documentation to one of the last forms of life that mankind exploits in nature and gradually destroys: the tree. Seen this way, *fin.* not only points to the cycle of evanescence of the paper page and the physical book as functional items in the present era, but also to the way in which human consumption of paper contributes to the gradual destruction of nature – and suggests that nature may over time remain visible only as paper documentation about the past.

The cycle of transience is also addressed in *Ontwortel* (2009), an installation work by Van der Merwe. This work is closely related to the themes of *Sleepmerke*, according to Dreyer (2009). *Sleepmerke* documents the cycle from tree to furniture, paper and eventually to charcoal. Although *Sleepmerke* addresses the notion of being uprooted and therefore the displacement and processing of the tree into paper, furniture and charcoal, it does so essentially by means of the suggestion that the displacement of furniture echoes the removal and displacement of people. The work therefore comments on the diaspora of peoples, as defined by Cohen (1997:26), as the displacement and removal of a group from their original homeland or fatherland, possibly in a traumatic manner, to foreign areas. The drag marks of the charcoal that are the only evidence to remain on the last page of the book speak of the transience of nature, but also of the importance of conservation – of nature, of the culture of documentation, and of the memories that people associate with places and experiences.

Sources cited

- COHEN, R. 1997. *Global diasporas: an introduction*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- DREYER, E. 2009. Jan van der Merwe, *Opening of Ontwortel/Uprooted*, UJ, 11 November 2009. [Web:] <http://www.art.co.za/janvandermerwe/default.htm> Date accessed: 2010-08-07.