

# ALIEN LANDSCAPES

**Kim Berman**

(University of Johannesburg, South Africa)

*For visual artist and activist Kim Berman the xenophobic violence that ripped through South Africa in 2008 was a horror, a disgrace, and marked the end of an ideal. She discusses her responses as a print-maker to the violence and its aftermath.*

In May 2008 South Africa erupted in a wave of xenophobic violence. Black African people from countries other than South Africa were designated as ‘other’ using the pejorative term *amakwerekwere*. The extreme violence, which included burning victims alive, killed sixty two people and displaced thousands. The authorities responded by rounding up foreign nationals and moving them, ‘for their own protection’, into tented encampments in outlying areas. After six months the inhabitants of these camps were forced back into the communities that had ejected them so aggressively, where they again faced marginalisation and the threat of violence. Many were deported back to their countries, others simply ‘disappeared’.

For many South Africans the devastating attacks, and the State’s response, was a painful reminder of the oppression and violence of the apartheid era. It re-opened the wound of that trauma in the national psyche, revealing it as unhealed. It dashed the notion of a ‘Rainbow Nation’, a trope introduced by Archbishop Tutu that was so often quoted in the immediate post-apartheid period to celebrate togetherness despite difference: inclusionary commu-



**Winter Camp 1, White River** (Monotype)

Photo: Courtesy Kim Berman ©

nity. It betrayed the ideal of *ubuntu* ('I am because of you'), and diverted South Africans away from the democratic society imagined in the writing of the Constitution.

Over the past two decades across the globe, genocide resulting from policies of ethnic cleansing has provided the world with its most difficult lesson since the Holocaust: the loss of our humanity. South Africa tasted this bitter, de-humanising experience during the xenophobic violence in 2008, which damaged the dream of a society that promised to protect and safeguard human rights for all its people.

Like many of my fellow citizens, I was devastated by the destruction of ideals that were struggled for, at such cost, for so long. As an artist I sought visual metaphors through which to process the trauma. I turned, as I have done in much of my work, to landscape in order to explore disconnection and the concept of the alien or 'other'.

First I created a series of etchings comprising a landscape constructed from the splicing together of two unconnected spaces into a co-joined but disjunctive space. The United Nations white refugee tents temporarily provided for the dispossessed on the edge of South Africans cities became a stark symbol of the nation's failure to accommodate diversity.

The etchings, drawings, and monotypes in the second series of work are inspired by seemingly unrelated landscape images that I photographed around the time of the xenophobic violence. In June of 2008, rural areas close to the town of White River in Mpumalanga province were consumed by vast forest fires. It was necessary for farmers to revive their badly damaged exotic fruit orchards by drastically pruning down the trees and painting them white with lime in order to protect the exposed bark



**Invasive Alien** (Monotype)  
Photo: Courtesy Kim Berman ©

from the sun and possible disease. For me the fields of white amputated trees in regimented rows visually enacted the predicament of the alien; the shameful, drastic marking and control of the other. Exploring this imagery through a range of visual art techniques offered me a way of processing and exploring both the fragility of South Africa's democracy, and of integrating and accommodating radical dislocation into a deceptively ordinary landscape.

In my work, landscapes have always provided a metaphor for South Africa's transitions as a country: even in a poisoned, burnt, or smoke-filled landscape, the light on the horizon sparks the energy and hope for the cycle of change and imperative of renewal. Both of these series are set in the winter of 2008: they speak of a stark, sterile, dry, cold, empty, white, regimented aftermath of earlier fire, violence and chaos. But winter is part of a cycle, and its moment does pass.

These works were created for the exhibition  
"Dislocated Landscapes"

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and Design, USA, September 2009.

They will be exhibited at Art on Paper (AoP),  
Johannesburg, in August 2010.