**ISA 2015 Presidential Theme: Global IR and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies Feminist IR Today.**

**Dr Lola Frost**

**The Sublime South: identity and aesthetic reflexivity in contemporary South African art.**

“Kant and Hegel rightly identify the division between reflective and social selves as the defining feature of modernity. I contend that the alienation and internal discomfort generated by reflexive and social selves made identity a primary concern in the modern era.” (Lebow 2012, 4)

This quote, from Prof Ned Lebow’s book titled *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves* also gets to the heart of the tensions between identity and individual reflexivity in contemporary art. Prof Lebow argues that there are two modern strategies for overcoming the alienations modern life. The first, associated with British empiricism “understands interiority and reflexivity as compatible with the social order” (ibid,5) and the second associated with Romanticism “condemns society as oppressive and encourages people to turn inwards, or to nature, to discover and develop authentic autonomous identities”(ibid).

In this paper I am interested in the exploring how the ‘empiricist’ or what I will call Liberal tendencies, and Romantic tendencies, are articulated in artworks by contemporary South African women artists. In so doing, I hope to throw some light on how artworks engage with the tensions between the solidarity of regional identity politics and the dispersing effects of individualising practices in modernity.

My post-colonial and feminist artistic sensibilities were shaped and pummelled by the political events of the 1980’s and early 1990’s in apartheid South Africa. Largely regulated by the ‘struggle’ and resistance art, as artists and scholars we pulled together to critique and challenge the apartheid government.

We also struggled with our differences: some still in the grip of rural African tradition, struggled with the idea of female and male equality. On the other hand, I struggled toward a discourse of aesthetic reflexivity produced by contemporary art. In those heady days of the cultural boycott, we stumbled between a utopian vision of our shared futures and an impending sense of alienation and discomfort over our differences.

We were also bound together by the regulations of the struggle. Indeed in those days of solidarity, Romanticism was a dirty word, associated with those decadent, dazzling and metropolitan postmodernists. Yet those days are now over, and I have moved to the UK where I have come to understand how the disruptions of Romantic aesthetic reflexivity inform political and social critique, and allow for a form of ethical and social, co-constitution.

But, for the purposes of this discussion, we might understand that those Liberal aesthetically reflective strategies in art are externally oriented, socially responsive and relatively politically and conceptually clearcut, whereas, those Romantic aesthetic and reflective strategies in art, involve a form of subversive inwardness which disrupts or destabilises conceptual clarity.

I explore these different options through a brief consideration of artworks.

Penny Siopis *Shame* Series was part of an installation at the Freud Museum in London in 2005. Referencing Freud’s writing on shame, this installation consisted of 3 parts: audio recordings of South African activists (Krog, Cameron and Meer) musing on shame in the TRC, Aids and Torture; a short documentary on a group of black women shouting the word ‘shame’ whilst stripping naked in front white policemen bulldozing their homes, and a set of small paintings, on view here, which registered the contradictory qualities of shame in relation to sexuality, and sexual violence against girls.

A few words about the production of aesthetic reflexivity in this installation: Although it drew on the single theme of shame, it did so via a set of disparate and sophisticated interventions. In so doing this work addressed each individual viewer’s aesthetic, cognitive, emotional and affective sensibilities. Each viewer would have responded differently in terms of his or cultural assumptions, or as a critique of such assumptions, and in so doing performed him or herself as an autonomous and reflective individual.

Yet this work also registers a form of social solidarity. Referencing compassion for victims of sexual violence and approval for those who resisted the violence of apartheid, it speaks to those liberal, egalitarian and compassionate values that informed the anti-apartheid struggle and resistance art of the 1980’s. And, despite its heightened emotional appeals, it does so in a particularly conceptually concise way.

Nandipah Mntambo’s work, although a subversion of traditional and patriarchal African values, is also a liberal intervention. Mntambo deconstructs the relation between cattle and women in traditional African patriarchal culture by figuring herself here as a seductive and powerful human beast, or even perhaps as a bull. Her self-confident and knowing gaze issues a challenge to those traditional assumptions which would define an African man’s identity and status in terms of how many cows, or women, he owns.

Like the previous photographic image, this installation by Mntambo subverts African patriarchal values even as it suggests a cultural heritage that would include Greek antiquity. In occupying this hybrid cultural space, these works resist calls to African solidarity or fixed identities, even as they celebrate African cultural forms and materials. Like Siopis work, Mntambo’s invites that liberal form of aesthetic reflexivity which would sustain the relation between individual critique and socially shared values, albeit the liberal, egalitarian social values of the new South Africa rather than those of traditional African patriarchy.

Berni Searle’s and my current art practices occupy the Romantic end of the aesthetically reflexive register. This is the complex, subversive, inward, even unknowable or sublime, end of that register.

Searle’s 2009 video artwork titled *Alibama* begins with a view of a mixed race, or Cape Coloured boy and his mother throwing red streamers into the evening light above the sea. This view follows a slow and sublime visual trajectory out to sea, whilst a male choir sings the chorus of a Malay slave song, titled *Daar kom die Alibama*, a song which commemorates the sighting of the American Slave ship, the *Alibama,* as she sailed close to the Cape during the American Civil War in 1865. A light and sound blast break this moving narrative and we are left with the discordant singing of the same song by an invisible mother and child whilst viewing a small paper boat floating in a bath of water into which leaches red dye from those original streamers.

This work commemorates the production of identity and solidarity across generations and nations, folded into sense of loss and alienation. But that production of solidarity and agency also operates as subversion of those tactics of isolation and denial of agency for mixed race populations by the South African apartheid government. The Romantic charge of this work then operates through such subversions, but also through its calls to inwardness and emotional depth.

My painting titled *Taking Risks* 2014, part of my *Going South* project, also registers a sublime engagement with the Southern Oceans, but in this case with Milford Sound in New Zealand. This Romantic, difficult to categorise ‘substitute self’ painting, not only subverts any expectations of conceptual clarity, but hints a kind of unconscious psycho-sexual inwardness which at some buried and unspeakable level, subverts both conceptual clarity and phallic hierarchies.

In conclusion then, in this paper I have drawn distinctions between how those two modern strategies for negotiating the tensions between social solidarity and individual reflexivity operate in art. Artworks with Liberal tendencies are relatively conceptually concise, outwardly oriented and unambiguously socially responsive or co-operative, whereas, those works with Romantic tendencies, are complex, inward, undecideable and subversive. Such subversions, I briefly noted, are also a form of social responsiveness.

These two tendencies compete in the world of contemporary art. Yet I would suggest the Romantic tendency has something of an edge in western high culture. However, such subversive complexity might be seen as daunting, or not fit for purpose, by those who are comfortable with, or are struggling to develop, liberal cultures and egalitarian values in developing regions of the world, like South Africa.

This divide between those Liberal and Romantic tendencies is not only contested in contemporary art but is also a source of conflict, I have noted in International Relations: between those theorists who defend the egalitarian protocols of the Liberal order, and those Romantics who also value equality and freedom, but who seek to subvert and challenge liberal methods for doing so.

In this paper I have mobilised Prof Ned Lebow’s insights that those two key Liberal and Romantic strategies which register the alienations and discomforts of modernity, are two sides of the same coin, albeit sides, pulling in different directions. In the same vein, I have given an account of how artworks not only register the tensions between the solidarity of identity politics and processes of individualisation, but are vehicles in which new identities might be performed and old one interrogated.

**References:**

Bleiker, Roland. *Aesthetics and World Politics*. Palgrave MacMillan. Basingstoke. 2009.

Frost,Lola.www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/warstudies/people/lolafrost/index.aspx

Lebow, Richard Ned. *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 2012

Mntambo, Nandipah. www.michaelstevenson.co.za

Ranciere, Jaques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans Gabriel Rockhill. Continuum Books. London and New York. 2004.

Searle, Berni. Alibama. www.michaelstevenson.co.za

Siopis, Penny. Shame Series. [www.freudmuseum](http://www.freudmuseum).org