

## CONTUSION

26 September to 24 October 2007

Essay writer

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Artists

Suzanne Duncan

Dale Washkansky

Natasha Norman

UCT Irma Stern Museum

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***Contusion (n)***

*An injury to the body in which skin and bone are not broken, but damage is done to tissues under the skin, causing a bruise or bruises.*

This exhibition navigates the sphere of violence within our society. The work reflects the many ways that social disturbances in our environment are experienced as dark shadows of a deeper unrest. Evidence of a collective distress or unease have manifested in coping mechanisms that these works expose. A common theme of all three artists is the recognition of these shadows on the social consciousness of our society.

# Surface Tensions

by Bettina Malcomess

Trauma is a word that cannot escape what Walter Benjamin might call its 'psychological shading'. However, prior to its being smuggled into the language of psychoanalysis to refer both to an event and its effects on the psyche, it was the medical term for a piercing or penetration of the surface tissues of the body, both externally and internally. Both skin and brain tissue, for example, could be the actual physical sites of trauma, leaving its visible trace in the form of the scar. This show takes its title from a term with a similar medical genealogy. A contusion, however, is where the skin, as surface limit of the body is disturbed but not broken. It perhaps suggests the moment prior to 'trauma'. The work of Dale Washkansky, Natasha Norman, and Suzanne Duncan, deals with how violence, criminal, historical or in its media representations, leaves its traces, both physical and psychological, on the self.

In his reading of Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Benjamin distinguishes between two types of memory: involuntary and voluntary. Voluntary memory is associated with the vividness with which one can recollect a traumatic event, such as the surreal detail of an accident, or a robbery. For Freud, the role of consciousness is to protect against the shocks of experience, so that they do not have a traumatic effect: the shock is sort of 'cushioned' by consciousness. One has recurring dreams of a traumatic event in order to master its shock retroactively, and in the same way one anticipates traumatic events by imagining what could happen. For Freud, 'fright' is 'the absence of any preparedness for anxiety'. The worst kind of shock is the unexpected. What these artists ask, is a question perhaps particular to the South Africa context, both in relation to the violence of its history, and its present. It is not so much a question of how we represent violence or trauma but of how our experience is structured by both a memory of and a preparedness for the 'shock' of violence.

Natasha Norman's work deals most explicitly with the representation of violence. Contained within a series of guns cast in resin from the moulds of toy guns, are objects associated with childhood: toy soldiers, plastic flowers, dice, fish, and alien action men. Caught like flies in the resin there is a jarring dissonance between the nostalgic gesture and the threat implicit in the lightbox gun displays. Accompanying these lightboxes is the sound of children's laughter mixed with gunshots. Literally at 'play' here is a childlike ignorance of the reality of violence, which is complemented by Norman's wall of TV stills, *Dope Show: TV Stills Freedom Day 2007*. Using a video camera to record DSTV programming over the course of the Freedom Day holiday the stills isolate moments

before, after and during acts of violence. There is a weird disjunction between faces, the innocence of little girl and a boy, a woman screaming; and hands, reaching for a gun, aiming a camera, holding a head. As in the gun display, there is a failure to identify the act of violence with its traumatic effect. The very lack of narrative past, especially given the historical significance of the day on which these stills were taken, leaves us in the present with no visible cause for the violence we witness, in itself traumatic.

The absence and presence of history is a thread that is taken up in Dale Washkansky's work. Washkansky presents us with triptychs. *Running Slur* shows what the artist himself calls, the most 'boring view of Robben Island you can imagine'. The island appears off-centre, towards the right of the last two panels, only just visible on the horizon. Above it, some (dawn) light breaks, if arbitrarily, through a generally cloudy sky, in an image whose tonal palette is limited to blues and greys. In opposition to the obscuring naturalism of the Robben Island shots, the other triptych, featuring Washkansky himself as the subject, is obviously worked and constructed. The colours and mise-en-scene are best described as violently camp. Washkansky stands in the provocative poses of the painted nude on a red-velvet surface, part sand, part faux-ocean; the sky ranges from indigo to red. In each of the poses, an oval masks the phallus, while a protea seems to serve as possible phallic signifier; initially the subject holds two, then one, then none. In both triptych's a game of absence and presence is played out. In *Running Slur* a particular site of historical trauma is represented, and yet also obscured, made insignificant by its lack of centrality in the framing - its lack of obvious historical significance. In *Keeping Mum* a particular sexual identity appears to be simultaneously displayed and censored, the potential 'shock' of its presence transferred ambiguously to a symbol of national identity. Both the shots of Robben Island taken from the Waterfront and those of the posed figures taken from Sea Point Promenade, place themselves at a kind of limit point, at the place between history and self, where identity and meaning are only ever potential sites of a loss.

Suzanne Duncan's work comes closest to literal meaning of contusion as a kind of 'bruising' of the skin. Duncan's work could be thought of as a productive outlet for a neurotic condition called Triptotychoomania, where anxiety leads to a person pulling out their own hair. Not that this is the artist's own condition, but that the artist weaves her hair into stockings intimately connects the work to skin as a point of anxiety. The stockings provide cover, even disguise, becoming a sort of second skin; the gauze protects, aiding the healing process at the point

where the surface of the skin has been injured: pierced or grazed or cut. The choice of her own hair as medium makes for the fragility, the ephemerality of these protective membranes, at the same time as it insists that they are extensions of the body. As complement to this intricate weaving process are sets of chain linked bronze casts of objects: scissors, keys, a torch, a screwdriver, a knuckleduster, a cewtip. Inscribed in these everyday objects, once again intimate extensions of the self, is the anticipation of violence. While the bronzing and chaining of these objects suggest preservation, their sharp edges index a potential danger. Anxiety is as implicit in their solidity as in the immateriality of the protective surfaces woven out of hair.

The artist has also cast several smaller amorphous hair sculptures in bronze. There is perhaps a resonance here with Washkansky's work, 'Echo', a bronze cast of an actual protea, and Norman's resin casts of childhood toys. 'Contusion', as its title suggests, is a show that is meticulously conscious of how any surface is a delicate meniscus, on which there will always be visible traces of tension.

suzanne duncan

coping mechanisms

These works are intended to reference the body during the anticipation of injury. The body's physicality is often absent in our experience of daily life, but elements such as pain, desire, error, limitation, and particularly in this case, anxiety, cause an awareness of our corporeality.

These sculptures are derived from objects that function as extensions of the body. The materials used in the creation of the objects render the items useless: unable to protect or defend. This inability reveals their inherent vulnerability and in this sense the work is a metaphor for the body itself. The mere inhabitation of our bodies situates us in an ever-vulnerable state of being since most trauma results from physical attack. Our vulnerability stems from what we can never escape, our own physicality, which is the medium through which we experience the world.

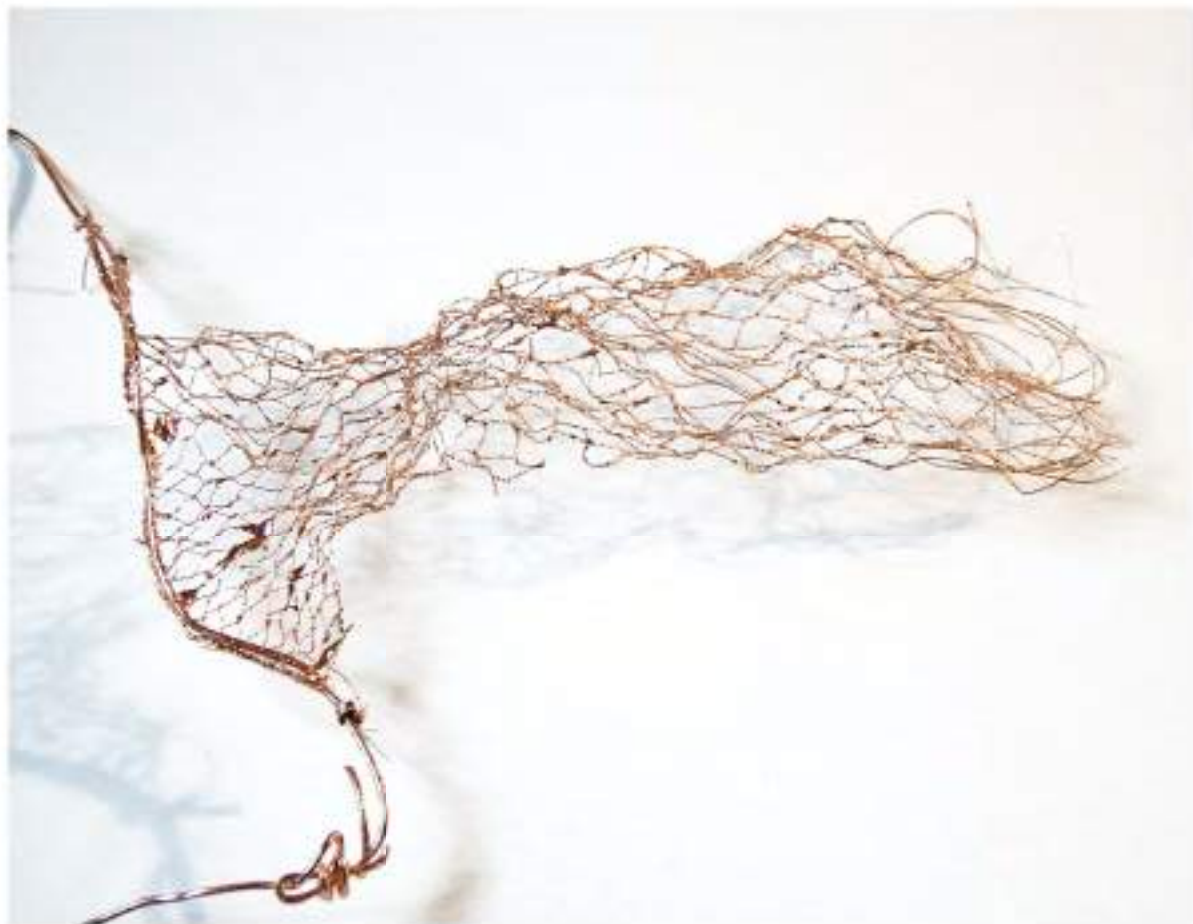
The artist has transferred the need to protect and defend her body onto the objects she creates. The repetitive nature of the various processes used to create much of the work has been developed as a coping mechanism for the artist - to soothe her anxiety and preserve these disposable bodily materials.

The work references the artist's experience of the anticipation of injury. For this reason, the work is made up of resources that belonged to her, including her own hair. While the artist uses her own experiences as an element of research for the work, in its completed state, the work transcends her individual narrative and becomes a collective statement of anxiety.



*Weighed Down, 2007*

Bronze, copper-plated links  
400 x 250 mm



*Safe Keeping, 2007*

Copper-plated artist's hair  
180 x 60 mm



*Gauze 2007*

Artist's hair  
420 x 540 mm



Detail: process



*Handkerchief, 2007*

Artist's hair  
420 x 540 mm



Detail: process



*Perpetuate, 2007*

Archival prints on art paper  
210 x 270 mm

dale washkansky

The present is a cause, a morphological structure of the past that is reliant upon a dedication to remembrance. Meaning can therefore be interpreted as an effect. In order to restructure the present into a more recognizable form I have made use of state iconography to search for the wound of violence that has caused a formal fracture which is disguised by the elastic façade of presentation. I have also used my body as a means to access the historic trauma within a South African context, that has caused the mal-formation of the present in which I find myself. The resultant imagery is superficially decorative because it presents the failure of description when attempting to describe the pain of a wound that one tries to forget.





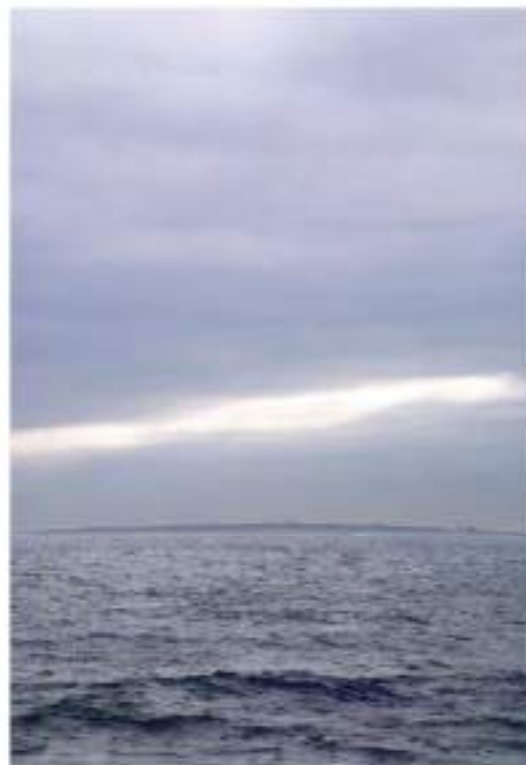
*Keeping Mum, 2007*

Lightjet prints  
2400 x 900 mm



*Echo, 2007*

Copper-plated protea with lacquer  
440 x 220 mm



*Running Slur, 2007*

Lightjet prints  
1800 x 900 mm



*Untitled Paper Series, 2007*

Mixed media, archival prints on art paper  
270 x 420 mm

natasha norman

lip synching

i bleed it out / go / stop this show / choppy words and a sloppy flow / shot-  
gun opera / lock and load / cock it back and then watch it go / mama help  
me / i've been cursed / death is rolling in every verse / candy paint on his  
brand new hearse / can't contain him / he knows he works / fuck this hurts /  
i won't lie / doesn't matter how hard i try / half the words don't mean a thing  
and i know i won't be satisfied / so why try ignoring him / make it a dirt dance  
floor again / say your prayers and stomp it out / when they bring that cho-  
rus in / i open up these scars / i'll make you face this / i pull myself apart /  
i'll make you face this / i open up these scars / i'll make you face this now



NOW SHOWING AT CINEMAS



10:34 ACT 27 Apr 2007  
20:00 - 21:00 *Comcast Weekly* P14  
Week - 25:00 *David The Gnome* P11





*Dope Show: T.V. Stills Freedom Day 2007*

Lightjet prints, acrylic, vinyl and wood.  
Each image: 420 x 594 mm



*Kids with Guns, 2007*

Plastic toys, resin casts  
size various




*Figurines, 2007*

Found objects, Kloof street, Cape Town  
100 x 80 mm



*I Love You With My Gun, 2007*

Two-colour stone lithograph on cotton paper  
410 x410 mm



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