

‘Burnt’ - A Series of 15 Photographs with collage and oil paint

*Erika Hibbert**

I decided to be rid of the documents and records that linked me to our past life in Johannesburg. I wanted to throw out everything that for so long I had been carefully filing away – keeping, in case I ever needed to refer back to that life again. Or in case I ever decided to return to South Africa and needed evidence of our ‘good standing’ – like formally closed accounts and fully paid up water and lights bills.

I wanted to make room for new things. In my small house this was a practical decision, but on another level this was an important emotional decision I had arrived at: I felt like I had spent 5 years being very careful. Tiptoeing, I had been careful with other peoples’ feelings and careful to meet my own personal responsibilities. I wanted to release myself from some of that – break from being grown-up and mature and together. I had been careful to not express my extreme anger and frustration at all the ways our life had gone wrong. I had felt it would damage our children, embarrass other people and alienate me from the people I love back in South Africa.

I took everything – tax returns; love letters; banking statements; grocery lists; legal contracts; deeds of assignment; greeting cards; utility bills; address lists and business cards; royalty statements; newspaper clippings; medical records... and made a fire in my backyard. I stood and watched it, realizing it was beautiful. I fetched my camera and photographed the burning evidence of our lost life.

When I saw the photographs I was relieved to have salvaged something from the cleansing fire. The photographs eased a sense of regret I already felt at the loss of the ephemera that had stood for our past. It was interesting, the way bits and pieces of the lives defined on those papers were exposed in the photos. The photos of the burnt documents contain words that tell about our past life – just hints, poignant clues, to a complex system of relationships, and commitments, and contracts, that supported our life. It fascinated me when I discovered them. I was fascinated by the exquisite way the fire ignited them and glowed and then dulled and left a grey powdery ash.

* Erika Hibbert’s artwork is mostly executed in charcoal, graphite, oil paint and photography and is linked to drawing, painting, and printmaking. Erika Hibbert paints a sign to express an existential background. Her work approaches the boundaries of the wonderful and the disastrous, torn between the desire to void, and the necessity to acknowledge, the human condition. Erika Hibbert was born in South Africa and spent most of her life in Johannesburg. She spent 5 years in Botswana before relocating to Atlanta, Georgia in 2009. Hibbert is a fellow of the Ampersand Foundation, NY/JHB, and her work has been shown in Africa, Europe, Asia and North America. She can be reached at erikahibbert.com

It reminded me of memory and of the way remembering can bring back bits and pieces of experience although the fullness of the experience is always gone.

I thought the photos of the burnt things were important for the work I make. They are about destruction – but they are beautiful. They are about loss – but they refer back, like memories that sooth the loss.

Mostly the photos of the fire remind me of Gito's cremated body.

I have always worked with photographs as references and reminders for my artwork. I had never used photography as an end product in my work before 'Burnt'. I found the photos of the burnt documents so engaging that I knew that they would become part of a series of works. But I felt that I needed to make some intervention into them. I felt, after weeks of staring at the photos, that I must mess with them a little. I knew to use the bowl form. It is my form for saying everything – like short hand for 'Life'. To a large extent the bowl has replaced my use of the human form. I love its elegant simplicity. Bowls are about humans making culture out of nature. The bowls function is vessel, harbourer, and holder of life. The bowl serves to put my work into a context. It is like saying – ok, this canvas will be the edges of the space I will work in, to talk about life, (or this novel I am writing, or this music I am composing). I use the bowl to refer, in an abbreviated way, to the limits and edges of the aspects of life that interest me. The bowls ellipse is the passage into the experience and also out of it. In the bowl as a 2D representation (the way I use it most) the ellipse refers to a pit – and a grave. The ellipse refers to the human eye – reason, art, culture, greed, desire. The ellipse references a pill – the bitter pill of life itself, but also the sweetening tricks that make life seem meaningful or important – the little self induced states that make one feel better - painkillers. Then the ellipse also becomes a stage, for the display or performance of some life affirming or life-defying act. Finally, as regards the bowl: the contents. In other work I have explored the essential material elements that define some aspects of the human condition. So I worked with seeds, blood, tears, milk...as the contents of bowls. In these 'Burnt' works the bowls are all empty (or only filled with the ash of the fire image behind).

I collaged the bowl diagrams from old medical journals. I chose pages to reference Gito's body. Such a network of intricate, beautifully orchestrated, layered complexities... overshadowed by the ridiculously fragile and ultimately transient nature of the human body. The deep irony that engages me so completely: everything is matter and nothing matters. I am completely caught up in the physicality of *stuff*, but my obsession exists only in relation to things that are intangible and abstract – like love and longing and memory and hope. In my art I obsessively indulge in the materiality of our existence. I *make* things and that in itself is such an affirmation of the physical - yet I want to rage against this ultimate injustice: we bear the weight of knowing about our death. We are completely at the mercy of our fragile bodies – totally regardless of our headspace – It doesn't matter how much we know or how much we want, or how good or how bad we are. It is all reduced to things like how a stranger's bullet perforates your trachea.

In the 'Burnt Series' I have stubbornly filled-in the bowls ellipse as a kind of sulky refusal of entry or exit from these containers of life. The blocked oval forms are arenas in which bits and pieces of our past life are displayed. I think the series can be read a little like an old-fashioned museum display where each fragment is presented solemnly. The seriousness is bizarre and the careful expression of each object in this laborious and illustrative painting style mocks my mourning, I think. These little references to our lost life are not really important to anyone else. Even our children would like me to think less about the past and it would probably do me good... but I display these fragments in their arenas and insist that they be considered, and that each loss be acknowledged, and that they *be* important. Maybe it is part of my repressed anger. The specificity of the painted objects – like personal memories – are clear, distinct and particular. I have selected images of objects that are weighty with vested meaning for me. But they are, at the same time, random and haphazard, because they have been sifted out from a massive store of experiences that spanned our 13 years together. These bits can only ever refer in the most cursory way to the wealth of experiences accumulated over those years of our life together.

Finally, they will become so much *more* random when the 'Burnt Series' is seen, and when viewers make their own meaning out of them. Is all my careful pondering, sorting out and selecting, looking and painting, lost as the viewer makes the works their own? I want to resurrect our life. Now I make fires and record them. I seek out fires and I explore burnt out ruins whenever I come across them. I think it is a way for me to probe the things I am not brave enough to act out. I would like to burn down cities in my rage. *Fire* can be wild enough to express my horror and my hatred and my dismay. But I am not able to do that. I just make some timid paintings about the destructive power of fire and it soothes me a bit.