

The South Africa of 'Don't prick me!'

'The country boasts national parks, wildlife reserves and magnificent areas of natural beauty!' This claim is designed to entice travellers googling 'South Africa' into signing up for a safari. The implication is that no trip would be complete without a visit to a nature reserve full of elephants and giraffes. This contrasts sharply with the image of Africa evoked by the Dutch photographer Cuny Janssen in 'There is something in the air in Prince Albert'. All we see in this photograph is four birds in a small cage and a little boy leaning against that cage. It is remarkable not only because of the birds, but also because it is the only photo which contains cultivated greenery. In all her other landscapes we see only cacti and other prickly plants, aridity, and sharp rocks. Janssen alternates landscapes with portraits photos of children, many of whom seem to be retreating from the camera, as if they're saying 'Go away! Don't prick me!'"

Janssen often chooses to depict her subjects in this manner. In her book on children in Macedonia, she also alternates portraits and landscapes. But there the photos serve to underscore the contrast between the country's magnificent landscapes and the sufferings of war. In this book on South Africa, the landscapes and personages form a cohesive whole. These children are not growing up in a world of playful lion cubs and frolicking springboks, but in the harsh reality of barbed wire that runs rampant throughout the countryside like some indigenous plant.

This is not solely Janssen's view. Comparing her work with David Goldblatt's photos in *Intersection*, we see that he, too, has chosen to focus on arid landscapes where survival is more important than the romantic allure of the safari. These are bleak landscapes, and the reader wonders if it is due to that prickliness that South Africa has never produced a *tempo-doeloe* or 'time-past' literature, as Indonesia has. Could the severity of the land preclude such a nostalgic portrayal?

Both Janssen and Goldblatt show reality without frills. Goldblatt opts for the use of technical means. For years he renounced colour, for practical reasons: he felt that the material available in South Africa was simply not good enough for high-quality colour photos, while the cost of importing the necessary equipment was prohibitive. An even more intriguing issue here is Goldblatt's conviction that colour tends to romanticize reality. Better a hard black-and-white world, where grey is not a nuance, but a sign of drabness.

The recent photos in *Intersections*, by contrast, are in full colour. After the apartheid era, the use of colour was less of an issue. Although the variegations are noticeably matte, Goldblatt does occasionally highlight a particular object – such as a blue bucket in an area with little in the way of contrast – which renders the scene absurd rather than idyllic. As if a bucket, a planter with a wilted piece of greenery, and a red plastic chair leaning crookedly next to a table are chance objects, intended to suggest life in that spot.

In an interview published in *Intersections*, Goldblatt explains that his photos are about 'land distribution and possession, use and abuse: how we have shaped the land and how it has shaped us'. The two books mesh surprisingly well: Goldblatt's photos are marginally more 'attractive', Janssen's images less polished. And yet both show how South Africans have shaped their land – and how the land has shaped them.