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Minnette Vári  
Quake 2007  
production still from digital video  
installation



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Quake 2007  
production still from digital video  
installation



Minnette Vári  
Vigil 2007  
production still from digital video  
installation

## Minnette Vári at the Goodman Gallery

by Landi Raubenheimer

Minnette Vári's latest show at the Goodman Gallery is eerie, ominous and strange. The unfriendly space of the Goodman is well suited to this show in that it sets the tone of foreboding and disorientation for this complex exhibition right from the outset. The entrance of the show is dominated by a series of self-portraits. Vári images herself repeatedly in ink drawings that resemble Rorschach tests. The portraits are blotched and stained onto paper and each time articulated by a bird figure on the head. At first, the birds seem foreboding, an omen of sorts, especially in the context of the brooding sounds emanating from the video installation in the next room. At second glance, the combination of human and animal form (which does not appear altogether resolved) evokes the idea of shamanistic ritual and 'primitive' notions of the relationship between humans and animals.

The video projection entitled *Quake* is carefully installed to project from above the viewer, excluding the silhouette of the spectator. The image on the 'screen' is large and flattened out against the wall of the space, with images of landscapes and cityscapes mutating into each other. The foreground is dominated by a mass of monotone liquid resembling an ocean. This water ebbs and flows to the rhythm of existential primeval sounds that remind one of *National Geographic* specials. *Quake* is a powerful installation, with sound playing a major role in creating a representation of urban growth that seems organic and mystic in its metamorphosis.

In *Vigil* Vári ventures further into existential and ontologist imagery. This installation presents a revolving viewpoint on societal development. Images of landscape, sky and trees alternate with flashes of 'wild women' and hunters who lurk and hover between the layers of depicted environments. The image of the wild woman is nowhere explicated in the exhibition, although it appears that this figure is a constant in the body of work. Vári's wild woman is not a savage, but rather seems to be cyborg, after the theory of Donna Haraway. She is silent, mysterious and ambiguous. On one hand this crouching figure evokes popular ideas around paganism and premodern religion, but on the other hand she has artificially bright red hair and powdery white skin which seem inorganic and futuristic.

The *Monomotapa* images, which are digital compositions, combine contemporary images of South African urban skylines with Victorian 'frames' that are part of the images. These 'frames' depict fauna and flora in a monotone tapestry texture, as well as the figure of the wild woman, which may be Vári herself. The reference to the Great Empire of Zimbabwe in the work is obscure but creates an interesting contrast to the cityscapes depicted. Vári's combination of mystification and technological progress in the images makes for a nuanced exhibition, which echoes concepts from Adorno such as the 'enchanted world' of premodern natural forces, and the 'administered world' of industry. What is perhaps problematic is that Vári does not seem to question this hybrid world she creates or alludes to. This is also refreshing however, in a smaller art community such as South Africa, where simplified conclusions around issues like colonialism seem to be used to validate much critically acclaimed contemporary art.

Vári articulates links between colonised sites such as the Southern African landscape, the female body and an urbanised future. The themes of humankind in relation to animals, and humans in relation to machines are portrayed in a layered, complex and sensitive way that resists falling into the traps of damning judgement of technological progress or colonisation.

*Landi Raubenheimer is a Johannesburg-based artist, independent writer and lecturer at the Design Centre in Greenside*

Opens: February 17

Closes: March 10

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Hours: Tue - Fri 9.30am - 5.30pm, Sat 9.30am - 4pm

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