

Artist Intervention

Men Loving: New Killings

Men are being thrown from rooftops in Syria and Iraq. Accused by ISIS of being gay they are blindfolded, bound, and then pitched to the streets below where crowds of men and some boys wait with piles of stones. The killers photograph and sometimes video these murders from the buildings and pavements. These images are then published by ISIS and form part of a visualized ideology skillfully disseminated through their own and other publications.

The dissemination of these images is an act of calculated aggression. For those such as me they reinscribe the dread that survives the gains of protective legislation. For those who harbor prejudice the images are encouragement, and indeed for some they serve as recruiting bait.

ISIS was smugly proud to claim the Orlando killings as their work and Omar Mateen as their soldier. Right-wing Christian groups have aided ISIS by republishing these murders on their sites and endorsing their methods.

Seeing these killings leaves one feeling diminished, diminished because the extreme visceral violence depicted is not answerable by any direct action.

My immediate impulse is redemptive, to make good these killings. Of course that is impossible, but the urgency of the impulse remains.

I answered it by inverting the spectacle of censure that ISIS intended for these men by using the same photographs that ISIS put out to demean these men as the source material for a slow sculptural process of remaking the narrative.

I carve these bodies. It is an act of some intimacy.

Chiseling away at a piece of wood to make a human form from a flat blurred image is a slow process, requiring a considerable degree of identification with the subject. The eye must act as an intuitive and empathetic instrument, filling in detail where there is little and thus the slow, intense process of making these artworks is an essential part of their meaning. They have to be made by hand and the bodily control necessary to carve small-scale naturalistic figures is a literal and symbolic enactment of care.

For these sculptures I was forced to adopt the perspective of the perpetrators. They, after all, had made the only known record of the events. Usually perspective is a system of optics that places the subject in relation to the object, thus registering the relationship between the two. We absorb angle

of vision, distance, gesture, light, and a myriad other signs, compute the amalgam and then compare it to our own visual and spatial grammars of comfort. For example, it is no accident that “framed” work is usually hung at a median height of 1.5m in museums. This allows us to stand at ease, eyes level so that we might look without our bodies prompting us to acknowledge something awry.

The question is, how does one take this perspective and invert it?

We are all familiar with the use of linguistic inversion. *Queer, homo, faggot*, and in South Africa *moffie* have been selectively appropriated by gay men as terms describing shared experience.

To do something similar was my challenge and aim. In part the process and material do this. For the *New Killings*, series I angled the figures to the position of the cameraman. The fall is not arrested but its pause allows us, the viewers, the possibility of an empathetic gaze.

The air through which the body falls has been materialized and folds in symbolic swaddling.

Simultaneously I have been following the destruction of ancient monuments and artifacts in Palmyra and other sites. These destroyed or mutilated objects have shaped the language of the sculpture I am making. I am particularly drawn to the ruined fragment as a metaphor for speaking a lost or unspoken narrative, as if sentences or paragraphs have been dislodged from order.

The function of the works is commemorative in the mode of narrative columns, arches, or panels. I have chosen to work in this way in part because monuments have shadowed my work for some decades; the colonial and apartheid monuments in South Africa being markers to the elisions of history as much as to specific events of commemoration.

In particular, I have been concerned to insert histories of gay love into the reforming historical narratives emerging in South Africa under the series titled *Memorials without Facts* and *Men Loving*.

But in addition to my own continuing interest in the monumental form, it is of particular pertinence here due to the lack of a commemorative vocabulary for mourning these people.

The column has long been used as a commemorative object by artists and architects. The circular form allows a narrative to develop vertically and simultaneously in the round. The viewer moves around the form in time, looking up and around, down and into it in a manner that requires the body to change position and focus. Our “point of view” is thus fluid and rhymes to the craning of our necks and bend of hip as we adjust our focus to position, scale, and episodic detail. I have

chosen to work with the form of a fluted column combined with the narrative function of something like Trajan's column, confident models both.

But, I am interested in the provisional rather than permanence, so my object is a porous one. I have opened the flutes to complicate the unity of surface and thus disturbed places where the eye can rest. Indeed, what we see, literally, and from what point of view is central to the work

It is a palimpsest with echoes of classical culture, objects of war, grave memorials, decorative embellishments, quotes from folk traditions, and of course markings of the present tense. It is episodic both in the arrangement of narrative detail and in its fluctuations between the text, subtext, temporality, interior, exterior, the living, and the dead.

The object is black, which both absorbs and reflects light dependent on the treatment of surface. The color has a memorial function but one of its primary mechanics is to slow the process of both apprehension and comprehension. Some parts of the work are difficult to see and the circular form of the work means that full comprehension is never possible from one position. Memory is thus integral to the act of looking.

I have labored the mechanics of looking here, the to and fro of viewing position, the necessary alterations of bodily posture, the constant requirement to change focus as surface is voided into blackness or light voices a detail.

I do this because it seems to me that the ebb and flow of empathy is in part contingent on these mechanics of bodily seeing.

It is not easy work, this process of empathetic construction. We know for sure that the killers and their deeds are evil, but we also know that this evil is sustained by a cruelly coercive masculinity, a masculinity that is enforced by instructive spectacle, which these killings are.

Within the crowds who gather to watch these killings there are any number of viewing positions, some proximate to my own, others opposed and probably a great many muddled between the demands of body and ideology. Negotiating the disparities of space, scale, detail, and reference in the sculpture is a process parallel to negotiating the bridges of empathetic identification.

Look at this crowd. Some of these men and boys are gay.

In the sculpture I have carved a spectator who is positioned to gaze at the blindfolded figure at the top of the work.

He was based on a lone figure in the crowd. There he stands.

I am alert to him for his separation, the slight bend of the knee that suggests indecision and the body aslant to the spectacle.

And what of the stone throwers, who wait with stones for the bodies to fall. They have to be represented, not to reinforce

the obvious cruelty of their individual actions but as the markers of an echoing trope.

The restoration of the ruins of Palmyra is also motivated in part by a redemptive impulse. Technologically this is becoming ever easier but has its own issues of taste and competitive politics. Leaving these and other questions aside for now, I am more concerned with marking the intersection of these two narratives of destruction.

Simply put, there has been a rush of offers to restore the ruins. There is little rush to mark the murders of gay men.

The ruin, in whatever state of restoration, is a prompt for narrative but it is not in itself narrative. Unless we mark the specificity of the damage, human as well as cultural, and link it to the politics surrounding it, we risk a generalized and escapist nostalgia, a nostalgia that allows us never to name the full damage and its causes.

Being specific about time is critical here. If we are restoring to 2014 or 2015 or 2016, these are years with multiple undertows of narrative baggage. That baggage needs to be fully named. It is unlikely that it is going to be named and corrected in the foreseeable future in Syria.

I have made these provisional memorials in a gesture of naming the portion of that baggage that pertains to the murder of these men.

The images that ISIS has published of these men violates their bodies but also their position within a social and familial fabric. They are unnamed and unnamable. Their bodies cannot be claimed and nothing about who they were can be celebrated or commemorated. How do we memorialize those whose lives are unremembered except as examples of unredeemable sin?

Under ISIS, connection and memory cannot comfort the living through the process of grieving. The living indeed are threatened by any association to these people, and thus connection is not spoken, and who knows what form grieving can take in these circumstances.

There was a time, which lingers, in which I identified love with HIV, in order to assert connection and affection in the face of a viral threat. In this instance it might be that I identify love with ruins if only to point out that gay love exists and though its protagonists cannot yet be named, their actions can.

Biography

Clive van den Berg lives in Johannesburg. He works in the studio and in the public realm where he designs museum installations and facilitates public sculptures. His series *Men Loving* is a decades long commemoration of gay histories and much of his studio based work is concerned with histories of love, particularly love between men in situations of censure. He is a director of Trace, a multi-disciplinary collective who have been responsible for the design of several of South Africa's post-apartheid spaces.



Figure 1. *A Pile of Stones*, oil on canvas, 150 × 200 cm, 2016.

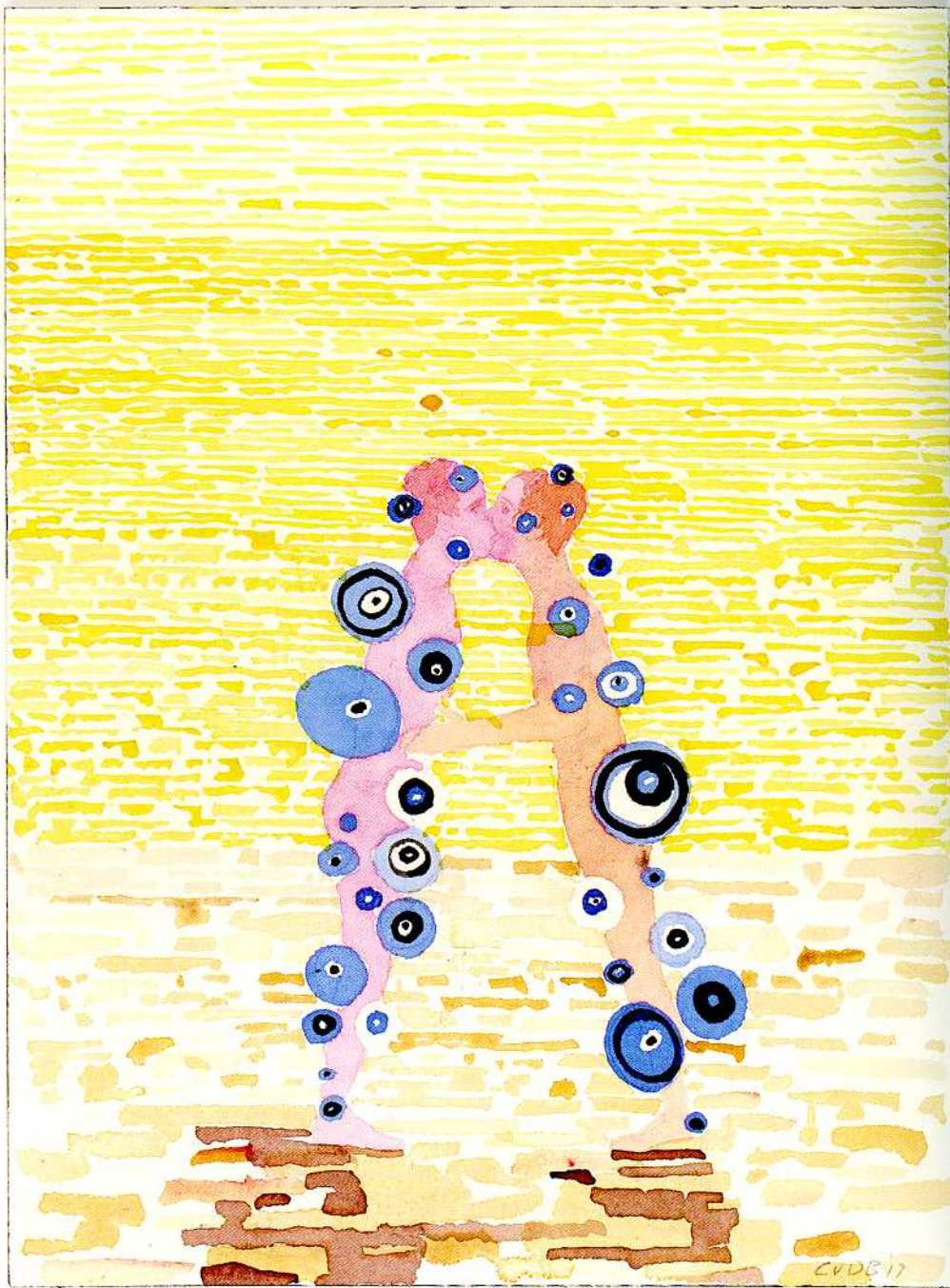
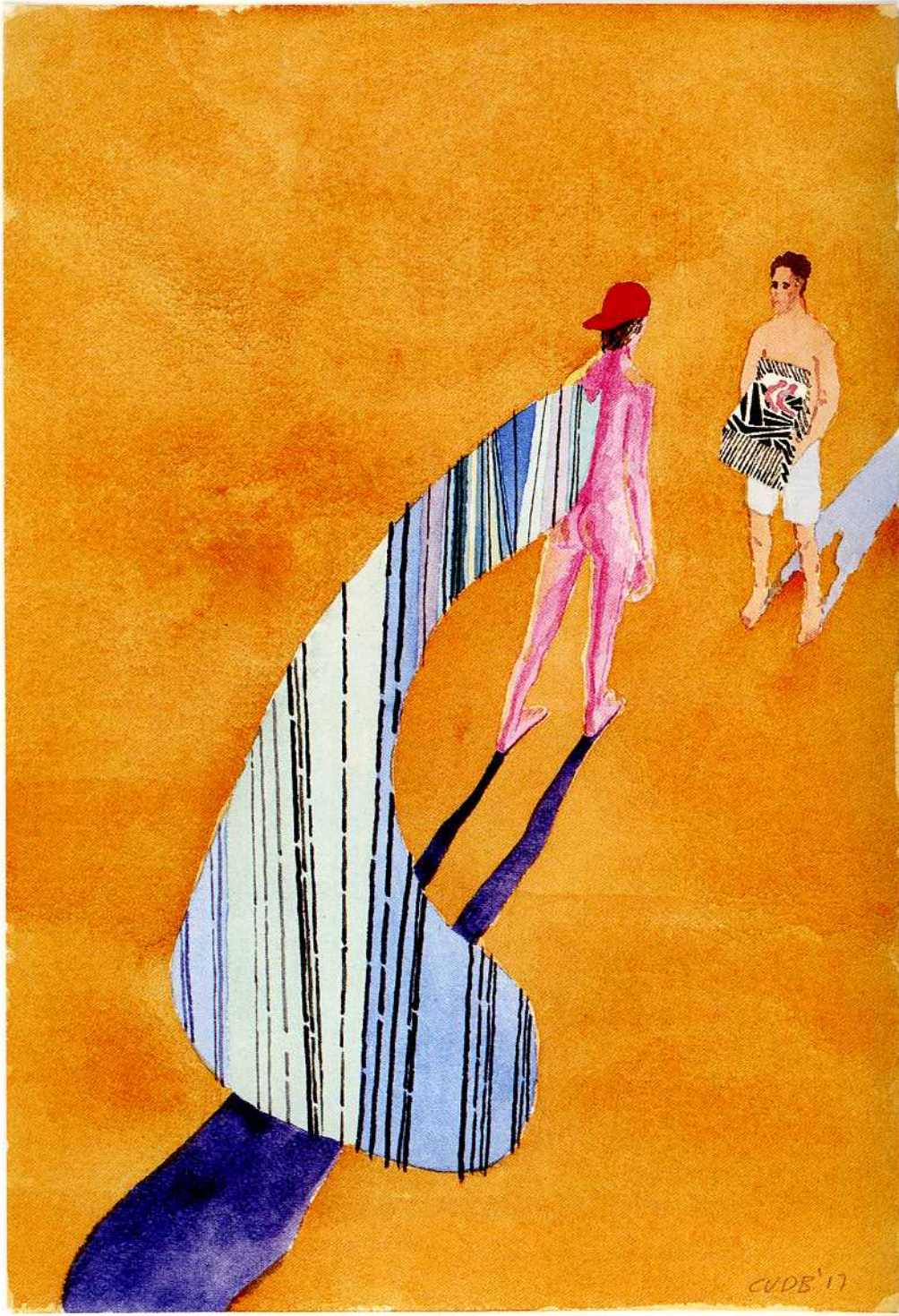


Figure 2. *And Yet Love*, watercolor on paper, 30 × 23 cm, 2016.



Figure 3. *And Yet Love*, watercolor on paper, 30.5 × 23 cm, 2016.



CUDE '17

Figure 4. *And Yet Love*, watercolor on paper, 35.5 × 24.5, 2017.



Figure 5. *Figure in Disguise*, wood and wax, 92 × 28 × 30 cm, 2016.



Figure 6. *Landscape (kind of)*, oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm, 2016.



Figure 7. *Lovers*, oil over carved wood, 45 × 30 × 20 cm, 2016.



Figure 8. *Lovers*, oil over carved wood, 45 × 30 × 20 cm, 2016.

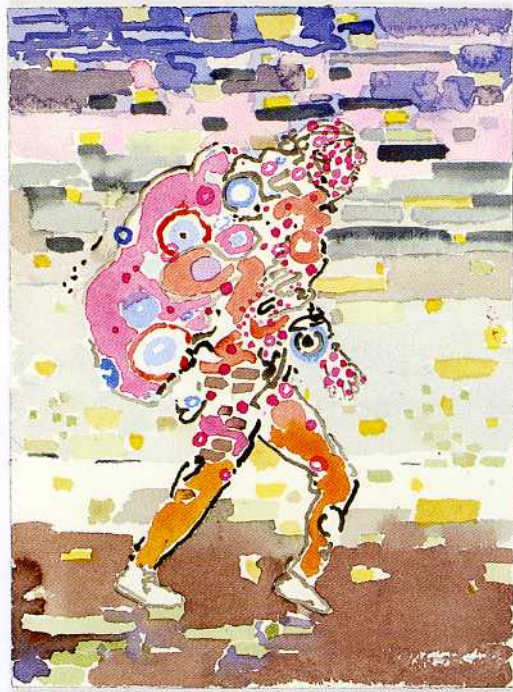


Figure 9. *Man Flees a Spectacle (in disguise)*, watercolor on paper, 30.5 × 23 cm, 2016.

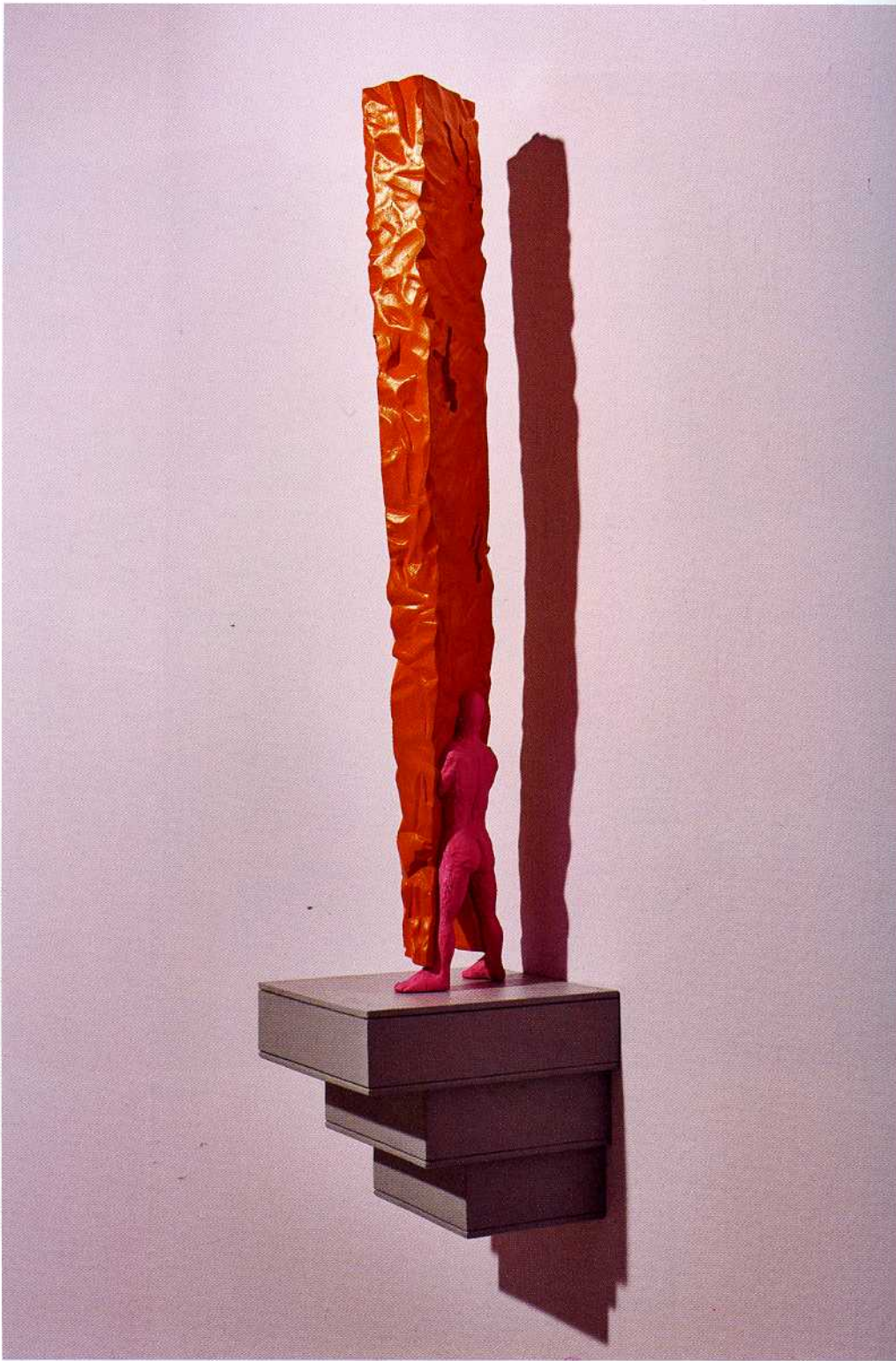


Figure 10. *Pink Bearing Orange*, 130 × 27.5 × 29.5 cm, installation back view, oil over carved wood, 2016.



Figure 11. *Pink Bearing Orange*, Oil over carved wood, 130 × 27,5 × 29,5 cm, 2016.



Figure 12. *What Happens in the Sky*, oil on canvas 250 × 150 cm, 2016.