

Karen Von Veh

The Pain of Martyrdom: Diane Victor's Ghostly Victims

In 2018, for the Aardklop Art Festival, Diane Victor created *The Fourteen Stations* as a deeply moving commentary on femicide in South Africa. Referring to the fourteen stations of the cross, these are ghostly portraits of women who were killed by an intimate partner, projected onto bleak cement walls in an ascending ramp. Viewers could stop at each image and meditate on the trauma and pain these women suffered. At the top of the ramp viewers were able to look over the edge down towards the floor where they could see a huge drawing of a woman sleeping with a skeleton (death). The drawing was made in fly ash, which is a very toxic by-product of coal mining and causes the deadly lung disease, silicosis. The portraits on the ramp are smoke drawings, made with the flame from a candle on glass. The installation as a whole is an evocation of the transience of life, demonstrated in smoke and ash.

The Fourteen Stations is a development on an earlier Gothic window styled triptych entitled *No Country for Old Women* (2014/15), which presents a harrowing account of the scourge of violence towards women and children that abounds in contemporary South Africa. In both these works Victor's female subjects are turned into contemporary martyrs, mementoes of helplessness and wasted potential. The portraits in their pared down simplicity are haunting and evocative whereas the figures in *No Country for Old Women* display images of beatings, death and evisceration, yet even these are softened by her technique of drawing with candle smoke onto glass, creating a delicate, hazy effect as if these women, set within their coffin like frameworks, are already in the spirit realm. Unlike the brightly coloured stained glass saints shown victorious in Gothic church windows, these victims appear insubstantial and helpless. The ghostly effect memorializes their martyrdom rather than glorifying their lives, yet this technique is able to transform affliction and pain into something that is as beautiful as it is affective.

In this paper I analyse how Victor is able to manipulate the ghastly realities of violence and femicide into an empathetic cry for justice. I consider the way she manages to grapple with the horror of realities that underpin her subject matter. I show how she is able to transcend this earthly pain through the sensitivity of her medium and technique so the viewing experience becomes an emotional connection rather than a horrified withdrawal. The undoubted visual and emotional impact of Victor's work means that the social message she portrays will reach a wide audience and, one hopes, may eventually impact in a meaningful way on the damaged fabric of South African society.