

Karen von Veh

**Classical Mythology as Satire
The Realities of a 'New' South Africa in Diane Victor's *Birth of a Nation* Series**

In 2009 South African artist, Diane Victor, travelled to Rome and was struck by the sense of civic pride, history and glory that imbues the remnants of Classical Antiquity. She began to imagine what such a cultural history might express if transposed into a South African context. The result is a set of rather cynical sepia drawings (later developed as drypoint engravings) titled *Birth of a Nation* (2010). This series demonstrates how Antiquity's 'afterlife' can be subverted to demonstrate how *little* our nation has to be proud of. Victor's mythological satires are parodies not only of well-known classical antiquities (such as the wolf with Romulus and Remus) but of their reinterpretation during the Renaissance and Baroque periods by artists including Michelangelo, Bernini and Rubens. Michelangelo's *Punishment of Tityus* (1532), for example, becomes an accident victim tormented by a tow truck driver (known as 'vultures' in South Africa) demanding exorbitant payment. The humour in these parodies does not detract from the darker satirical content that emerges, as each story is manipulated to engage directly with the fears and shortcomings of the new post-apartheid South African nation. In this paper I engage with the parodic reworking of these myths and their source imagery to show how Victor interrogates and complicates their original content, with the purpose of exposing South Africa's vulnerability to ongoing follies, the exploitation of our resources and the fact that this 'new' nation has emerged into an imperfect world.