

ROBERT SLINGSBY

CROSSING THE LINE

FAY JACKSON



ABOVE LEFT Robert Slingsby, *Ari*, 2013, Charcoal and chalk pastel on Arches 300 gramme cotton rag paper, 1325 mm x 990 mm. Courtesy of Barnard Gallery.

ABOVE RIGHT Robert Slingsby, *Amer*, 2014, Charcoal and chalk pastel on Arches 300 gsm cotton rag paper, 1275 mm x 1725 mm. Courtesy of Barnard Gallery.

There is a quietness as I enter the room. Eleven sets of sombre monochrome eyes gaze at me from the pristine white walls of the Barnard Gallery, Cape Town. The earthy realism of the large-scale portraits is rendered in muted shades with infusions of rich blue, red, and yellow; a distinct departure from Robert Slingsby's trademark abstraction, vivid palette, and intricate symbolism.

'Crossing the Line' (2013) is Slingsby's third solo exhibition at the Barnard, a series of starkly beautiful charcoal and chalk pastel drawings produced over the past eighteen months upon repeated sojourns to local rural communities in south-western Ethiopia.

Despite the aesthetic potency of the work and the poise with which Slingsby has portrayed individuals from the Karo, Mursi, and Hamar tribes, there is a duality between the beauty of the work and the struggle that belies it.

The boundary that the title observes, that is 'the line' in question, also holds a dual significance. Firstly, it denotes a precise geographical marking. Upon Slingsby's second visit to the remote region of the Lower Omo river valley he

found that what had once been virgin landscape, including the deep tangle of jungle along the riverbanks, had been entirely demolished to make way for ploughed fields. An immense womb now lay, spanning the distance between two main Karo settlements, awaiting the seeds of development to be sown. A distinct line had thus been formed between ancestral land and the land now fallen into the hands of foreign investors.

The title also refers to the fallout not only from this specific site, but also from the broader acts of Anthropocene man. The term Anthropocene represents a new phase in the history of both humankind and of the Earth, when natural forces and human forces become intertwined, the fate of one determining the fate of the other. It heralds a new age, one dominated and irreversibly transformed by human activity. In this case, the aspect in focus is the neo-imperialist invasion that threatens these communities and their ancient traditions, so inextricably linked with the land on which they have existed for centuries, with extinction. It acts as a metaphor for what is

happening, not just in Ethiopia, but also across Africa and South America, at the expense of indigenous tribes.

One cannot, of course, ignore the politics of a representation of 'otherness'. The boundary between these faces and their exquisitely rendered portraits, hanging thousands of kilometres away from the site of an unstable landscape characterised by a money-hungry and violent contest over natural resources, exists as a chasm itching to be filled with obfuscation.

Slingsby's roles as humanist, artist, annalist and activist allows the work to straddle the line between documentary photography and art, not only paying homage to the tribes whose ancient traditions are under threat, but also pointing a finger at policies which allow progress and profit to be prioritised over the preservation of heritage.

Robert Slingsby's 'Crossing the Line' (2013) will be on display at the Barnard Gallery from the 6th February until the 13th March, 2014.

Fay Jackson is a Cape Town based freelance photographer and writer.