Fever Sleep

The Colonial Pillow Series

Kurt Campbell 2007

Headrest in use, 1937

Photographer: Reverend E Kaltenrieder, Swiss Mission, WITS

Hitting One's Head on the Nail

We often talk glibly about 'a good night's sleep' or a revitalising rest when we speak of our dreamtime. We have become accustomed to see sleep as a good thing, a necessary act that refreshes, recharges and prepares us for the new day. Only rarely do we invoke the metaphor of sleep as a negative (as in 'the sleep of reason') and then with regard to a specific type of sleep, expressly contextualised in relation to what passes us by while we lie cataleptic and supine. Otherwise we specify the variety of sleep that is bad such as that which awakens us during a nightmare; again we are drawn to an alibi for our lack of rest: it is the nightmare that is bad, not the sleep.

Perhaps we need to be more conscious of our own unconsciousness. In forcing us to consider and pause to think about our lack of sentient activity – giving ourselves over to the subconscious or the blissful nothingness that seems to accompany some of our slumbers – Kurt Campbell challenges us to consider the nature of sleep and of our very human need to become unconscious of our lived lives and the world in which we live them. How does one sleep when all around there is disorder, chaos and horror?

By drawing on objects that have become the much-prized trophies of colonialism, on utilitarian objects that through a process of European acquisition have become so denuded of original meaning that they have become anachronistic ciphers for a form of sleep unfamiliar – even impossible to conceptualise – for the West, he questions the semiotics of the artefact that was once embedded into an imperial dream of ownership and appropriation and is now a touristic trope for exoticism and primitiveness. 'Imagine trying to sleep on that,' you can almost hear the returned overseas traveller of yesterday and tourist of today saying as they entertain their bored guests with the souvenirs of their African sojourn. Along with the age-blackened hardwood mask and the decorative (and curiously elongated) giraffe carved out of softer stuff, the wooden pillow ascribed to the African materiality of the past is one of the 'must haves' on any self-respecting visitor's shopping check-list. And there is ample opportunity to tick off that item as one passes through any of the African art centres, flea markets, curio shops and the like that seem to be targeted as much to the tourist imagination as it is upon the selfsame wallet.

We all know – and I have no doubt that the purchasers of such knick-knacks do so too – that these objects are not 'real'. That is to say they are not 'authentic' domestic items intended for ritual (in the case of the mask) or rest in (the case of the head-rest). Goodness only knows what the giraffe's utilitarian purpose is imagined to have been; if it is decorative, like a porcelain Meissen figure may have been in Germany; it makes for a comforting comparison to its purchasers I dare say. Rather, the remnants of the touristic shopping-spree are created to serve that market, invented for it even in some cases. I wonder if their potential buyers are happy or sad at the realisation that their purchase was made especially for them rather than being an object that has supported the head of sleeping Africans of untold generations through the ages? Perhaps the fictive nature of the object of their possession, it's obvious recent date of manufacture and the fact that it has been cunningly aged (I think 'french polished' would not fall naturally from the lips of the European collector in this case) adds to the desirability of this sign of the anthropological subject. I wonder if the absent but implied ingrained sweat and hair grease of time is not better when going through customs, of giving it as a gift to another?

Whose fictions are we dealing with when considering such objects? Who dreamed up such devices? The disparity between maker and audience is rarely so easily demarcated as here. The anonymous artisan (crafter even!) who carved the pillow perhaps has less cause for complaint than in other cases: the author of such objects seems to be more that of the European fantasist than that of the drowsy woodworker. Campbell exploits and draws attention to this disparity in intention in his current series. The perversion which sees objects fashioned after questionable European anecdotalism and the overblown 'romance of Empire' narratives recreated by the subjects of these fantasies in order to satisfy (and thereby justify) these conceptions *post facto* is starkly brought to mind when looking at Campbell's prints.

For these are clear and uncomfortably direct fabrications: That wood-grain is far too obvious; it must be paint. The forms evoked – ships or cattle or ancient money-tokens – are far too direct, too readable, to be real. Or are they? We cannot really know for sure because we are only presented with a trace of them, a cipher that will not permit decipherment by touch or smell or any other apparatus of a hoped-for reality. In facing the object as represented in print, uncertainties creep in, but until the thing visually described can be assessed in the realm of the 'real', the three-dimensional and most importantly, in the realm of one's presence, we cannot know for sure.

Bullet Cushion | Archival Pigment Print | 2007 | 50 x 50

And then there is the matter of the nails and screws and coins that protrude. Are these artistic additions made after the utility value of the head-rest has passed? Could they be related to some strange, exotic ritual or – shades of Rider Haggard! – savage cruelty or torture? These pillows could clearly not support sleep. But then I suppose the ones that sell on flea markets could not either. Except that is for the sleep that they support in enacting soporific fantasies that regenerate ideas of Empire, colonialism, savagery yearning to be civilised and the other rot that fuelled and sustained (and perhaps continue to fuel and sustain) the West's interaction with this continent. For the intellectual projects that produced such wonderful and awful objects of the subconscious must have been napping in this case one can reasonably suppose.

Like the tantalising after-images that we grasp after upon awakening, these prints act as cloudy but intangible signifiers for an ungraspable state of reality. The artist explicitly denies the viewer any access to the objects he portrays in any but the mode of the two-dimensional image on paper. For all we know they may be computer-generated simulations. But their very lack of verisimilitude to anything we have experienced tend to frustratingly imply a reality that lies outside the image: unobtainable and voiceless.

In this process Campbell forces us to consider the nature of all the received wisdom about Africa that we hold dear and unchallenged; his gesture is a reminder that European artists' imageries of a strange flat-topped mountain (always so squashed in the middle) and the curious, barbarous people who dwelt around it acted as a powerful visual aid to the act of othering and to the fact of colonisation.

Andrew Lamprecht is a lecturer at the Michaelis School of Fine Art. He is a theorist, critic curator and occasionally a practitioner of art.

Pretty Disturbing

The first time Kurt shared his concept for this body of work with me and showed me a few of the sculptures, I experienced a sensation that I can only describe as disturbing, yet intriguing.

I found myself looking at images conveying a message that was unforgiving and hard hitting. The message was: even in sacred places and spaces, the realm of slumber, or the pillow of rest, there are dangers lurking. Nothing escaped the violent and oppressive nature of colonisation. These are familiar notions, yet generally they are not acknowledged openly enough. With this body of work, Campbell forces us to think about it.

The most fascinating thing about this body of work is the inherent beauty present in each piece.
On one level the work serves as a reminder of the present-day harsh realities of Africa, while on another it provides clues about the unwritten or forgotten history of Africa. Yet, as disturbing as these images and notions might be, Campbell's works maintain a sense of dignity, balance and poise, and as a result are both shocking and beautiful. The supple lines of the headrests are juxtaposed with the menacing objects used in the works. This provides a visual conflict that at first seems radical but soon leads the viewer to experience pleasure in these forms.

The prints become objects of desire - something that one wants to own and look at whenever one can.

Charl Bezuidenhout is the owner of Worldart Galleries. www.worldart.co.za

Ordinance Headrest | Archival Pigment Print | 2007 | 50 x 50

Nightmares and Beauty Rest: Sleeping through Art History
(and representations of sleep in Art History)

As a student, on cold wintry mornings, the warm womb of the History of Art lecture theatre was a good place to go back to sleep. The darkness was intermittently pierced by a kaleidoscope of colour from the slide projector, beaming dreamlike impressions of the work of artists of the past. Stirring to Fuseli's 'The Nightmare', Modigliani's 'Reclining Nude' (1919), Brancusi's 'Sleeping Muse' (1910) or Goya's 'The sleep of reason' (1796-97) one was never completely sure if one was awake or still dreaming.

Many of the representations of sleep in art history are studies in peaceful serenity; the majority of subjects, of course, are beautiful women at rest. The slumbering women give the viewer the opportunity to admire the subject without confrontation - the gaze is not returned. Into this category fit large numbers of sleeping nudes, a tradition which goes back as far as Greek and Roman times, for example 'Sleeping Ariadne'. This sculpture, originating in the Hellenistic School of Pergamon, shows Ariadne asleep on her draperies, her head cradled between her arms, her face a mask of peaceful sleep.

In the Renaissance, Giorgione's 'Sleeping Venus' (1507-10) sets the standard for reclining nudes and shows the serene Venus at rest, her desirable languid body relaxing against sumptuous drapery in front of an idyllic rural landscape. In Titian's 'Pardo Venus' (1535-40), the sleeper Antiope, innocently unaware of Jupiter's advances, is similarly eroticized.

Brancusi's 'Sleeping Muse' (1910) echoes the calm expression found in the works by Giorgione and Titian. Here the quiet face, pared down to its simplest elements, rests lightly on its side, its eyes closed on gentle dreams.

But the representation of sleep has not been limited to the peaceful and sublime. Artists have often approached the representation of sleep with trepidation and unease. While initially there is a great similarity between the peaceful sleep of the muse and what appears to be quiet sleep of the child in Andreas Serrano's 'Fatal Meningitis II' (1992) Serrano's work – from his Morgue series - is far more distressing, as both its title and series title indicate. Unlike Brancusi's freely breathing subject, only the closed eyes of Serrano's subject are visible where the shroud has been slightly parted, allowing an intimate glimpse of this pitifully young victim of meningitis. Serrano's 'Fatal Meningitis II' fits neatly within the venerable Western tradition of death masks and paintings of the dead which present the deceased as if asleep.

Sleep and death are indeed common partners in art history and the two states are frequently conflated by artists in their representations. For example, the idealized depiction of the "merely sleeping" dead is often enhanced by the drapery or bedding on which they lie. In Henry 'Wallis's Chatterton' (1855-6) the pale poet lies elegantly draped over his bed, a picture of quiet sleep (with none of the violent effects associated with suicide by arsenic in evidence).

Yet ironically, while death is sometimes depicted harmlessly as a state of mere somnolence, sleep is on occasion depicted as a state of fear, the subject dreaming fitfully or responding in agitation to a nightmare. The word "nightmare" is derived etymologically from 'Mara' a folkloric evil spirit that terrifies or suffocates the sleeping person. (This in turn was probably a folkloric response to the phenomenon known as "sleep paralysis".) Thus Fuseli's first version of 'The Nightmare' (1781) shows a pale woman asleep on her bed, her head and hands outstretched, with an incubus on her chest and a ghostly horse peeping through the red curtains. The mare and the demon appear from the shadows, their bulging eyes part of the vivid and terrible dreams of the sleeping woman.

Nightmares are also the subject of Francisco Goya's 'El sueño de la razón produce monstruos' ("The sleep of reason produces monsters") which shows a writer or artist asleep at desk, dreaming. Welling up from the unconscious, dark forces of the irrational - represented by bats, owls, creatures of the night and monsters - encircle him as he lies asleep.

Safari Headrest | Archival Pigment Print | 2007 | 50 x 50

Kurt Campbell's headrests, sadomasochistic versions of the traditional African wooden pillow, give nightmarish and violent representations of sleep a particularly local and contemporary spin. Nails and bullets await the head of the user. The headrests' cradled shape is oxymoronic: such sharp objects suggest sleeplessness rather than sleep, torture rather than rest. At best, these "pillows" would produce a feverish, troubled and hallucinogenic sleep. Gone are the luxurious silken draperies of art history - Venuses and muses would sleep uneasily here.

The title of Campbell's exhibition - 'Fever Sleep' - points to a kind of sleeping sickness. Sleeping sickness is a deadly disease of Africa, characterised by headache and exhaustion. But beyond this, in his reworked traditional African headrest Campbell finds a vehicle to critique not only colonial dreams but ongoing postcolonial conflict. The materials which adorn these faux wood surfaces (bullets, nails and coins) point to civil warfare as well as the colonial legacy.

In these headrests Campbell suggests that there is no longer a comfortable place to lay one's head and rest.

Svea Josephy writes about and teaches photography at the Michaelis School of Fine Art.

Vessel Headrest | Archival Pigment Print | 2007 | 50 x 50

Interview with the artist.

Nasan Pather and Kurt Campbell. Cape Town 2007. Michaelis School of Fine Art.

Congratulations on your solo exhibition Kurt! This has to be a watershed moment?

Thank you, Nasan. This is a very exciting time for me. It is really a good feeling coming to the end of a long period of working and actually looking at the work as a whole in a gallery space!

Can you explain exactly how the images in your prints were produced?

The images you see are in fact part of a very long process. Looking at the framed images one might almost be tempted to consider it a rather small show. The reality is that each image is created from a sculpture which I first build. The sculptures, once deemed complete, are photographed and then destroyed or buried.

The only trace left of the sculpture is in fact the print. I think only having the printed "trace" on exhibit opens up more possibilities in the mind of the viewer, instead of being presented with the actual objects themselves. The idea behind this came from recent visits to Africana museums. I was intrigued by a particular headrest featured in a prominent book on African traditonal material heritage. When I actually travelled to the museum housing the artefact and viewed the headrest in the "flesh", I was rather disappointed. It was less glossy and far more scuffed. I then realised the role that the printed image can play in the perception of objects. In other words, I came to the realisation that often the images featured in books on African Art or catalogues are preferable to seeing the real thing! The objects presented out of context, and in a distorted scale, is exciting and very mysterious for me. The reality almost limits...

I work with this notion, foregrounding the idea of my headrests as portrayed in the prints. The sculptures are a means to this end.

So the headrests or sculptures themselves will never be shown?

The illusion would obviously be shattered! Think of the set of your favourite sitcom. When one actually visits a film set it is quite interesting to realise that the walls or staircases used in the production are not real or are only high enough to be seen by the camera as real. I think of my sculptures in the same way. They are like props used to create a narrative. The print is the final part of the process. In the art world, many people who do purchase material heritage never use them save as pieces of art. My prints function in this way and at the same time comment on this fact. I like to see the frames used for my prints as a form of display case that inhibits tactile interaction and foregrounds the visual function of the work.

You are nevertheless working with forms traditionally produced by sculptors. Do you see yourself as a sculptor?

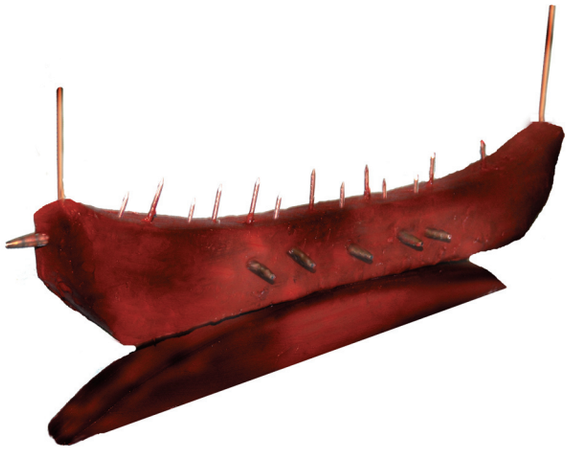
I really like the idea of the traditional sculptor, sourcing materials and fashioning forms. I certainly do create sculptures and without some experimenting in that field I would never have come to this point. I like the idea of working three dimensionally towards the printed output, a virtual form if you will!

Words like ominous, disturbing and haunting come to mind when one views your work. However, these adjectives cannot be applied to all your images. Can you elaborate on this range of emotions that you hope to evoke in your viewer?

That's a tough question, Nasan, because I believe that the viewer must always have space to find his/her own views and emotions when engaging with the work, rather than the work being too heavily framed by a text...but it was important to me for people to understand the forms as both headrests, but also as metaphors for colonisation. Two of the forms reference galleons and caravels with a suggestion of arrivals and departures, linked to trade, slavery and war. The materials used in the constructions of the headrests are very important. They include bullets, coins, building spikes and nails referencing foreign colonial influence, an uneasy relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

Your prints create the impression that the headrests are made of hardwoods, as is traditionally the case. However, when I visited your studio, I was surprised to discover that the actual objects were made of hobby clay.

A very important aspect for me, Nasan, is the idea of illusion. I have etched wood grain markings in clay and coated the clay with varnish of various shades. The idea of the valueless hobby clay simulating prized hardwood is a comment once again about how the printed image, devoid of context can be very different from reality. It maintains its power regardless of the "truth".



Driftwood | Archival Pigment Print | 2007 | 50 x 50

Perhaps, I should have posed this question to you at the outset, but could you explain your choice of title for this exhibition.

'Fever-Sleep', hopefully works as a title for the show. Working with headrest forms, traditionally used for both sleep and as a way to contact the world of spirits and ancestors, the reference to sleep, I hope, is clear. The "fever" refers to the uneasiness of the historical legacy that remains as a product of colonisation. It suggests that a problematic legacy remains in the modern world and continues to trouble many. I like to think of my work as a form of resistance art, even though it is perhaps rather subtle in its way of communicating. I believe that restlessness will always remain in Africa relating to the Colonial project. I like to think that people on both sides of the project are restless. Sometimes a bad sleep or a rest filled with trouble can be a positive thing if it leads to resolution or confronting problems in the waking hours...

You play on the idea of headrests as conduits between two realms. Your headrests are also shaped like the hulls of ships. Are you equating voyages of conquest with dreams and nightmares?

Often journeys of conquest are founded on idyllic dreams but are nightmares for those at the receiving end of these expeditions. In the Bible, the famous story of "Jacob and the Ladder" records the incident of the travel-weary youth finding a rock to use as a pillow for the night, as he finds himself in a foreign land. During this rest, God communicates very vividly with him and blesses him in his dream. When Jacob awakes he takes the rock he used as a pillow and creates a monument from it, an altar to remind him of the place and the dream. I like the idea of my headrest prints functioning as altars of remembrance or resistance to both ancient and modern forms of Colonisation. For many, it was only in their sleep that they could be free. For some, sleep is the only way that they can be confronted by their conscience.

Nasan Pather lectures Theory of Art at the Michaelis School of Fine Art.

Spike Headrest | Archival Pigment Print | 2007 | 50 x 50

Judas Headrest | Archival Pigment Print | 2007 | 50 x 50

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