

RWANDA
PERSONAL
IMAGES

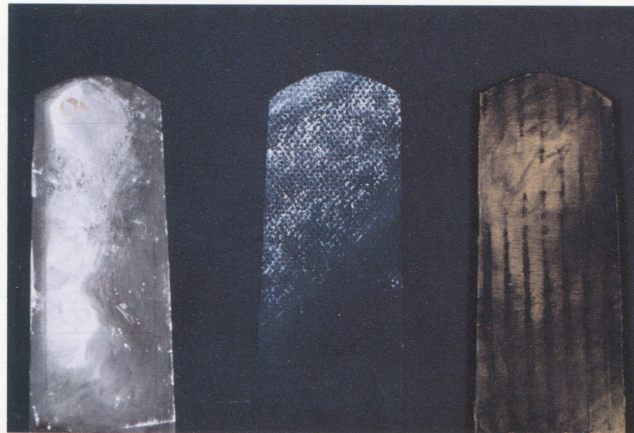


VIVIAN BOWER

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Cover detail, Rwanda Series #124, 1996, Pastel, 8"x 10'

"Hell is naked before him and destruction has no covering."

From The Book Of Job

Vivian Bower Rwanda: An Elegy

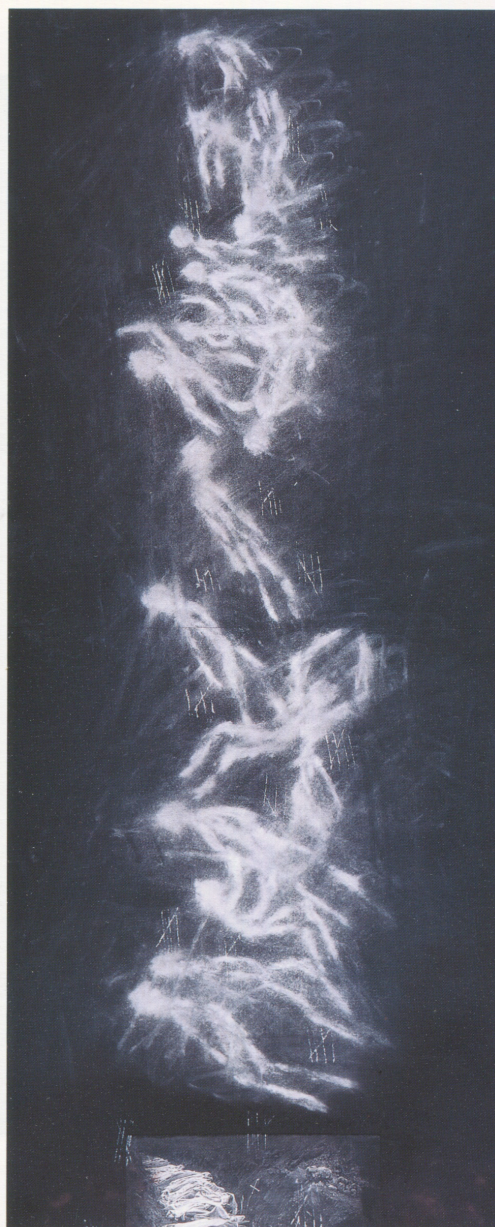
Upon occasion an artist who has traditionally worked in a particular medium according to a chosen subject will feel compelled to move in another direction. Such departures are often motivated through the artist's awareness of a troubling political situation. These events in human history are likely to have deep moral consequences for artists who are not merely absorbed in an aesthetic idea at the exclusion of other realities, but who are also sensitive to the world around them.

Vivian Bower is known primarily for her subtle and resonant depictions of landscape. To look at her work suggests a sensibility far removed from one that might address the atrocities in Rwanda. Yet Bower found it necessary to come to terms with what she was reading in the news concerning the genocide. One report cited that between April and June 1994 anywhere from 500,000 to one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were systematically exterminated at the hands of the Hutu extremists.

What I find remarkable about Vivian Bower's drawings and related wall installations is the personal sensitivity that is instilled in these works. In many cases, the individual symbolic heads carry the elegance of abstract rendering found in the late Rudolf Baranik's "Napalm Series" from the seventies. Bower reveals her subtle ability to manipulate light and dark, to isolate her subjects in discreetly manipulated monochrome fields, and to create appropriate visual symbolic effects. Her head paintings suggest the trace of poignant lives—innocent women, children, and men—cut down and violently terminated, made anonymous in a single blow. Rather than trying to reveal the cynicism of politics, Vivian Bower goes straight to the point. These are real human lives that are destroyed.

These personages are also landscapes, but not in the literal sense. They represent landscapes of human absence, landscapes as tragic as those of Kiefer, but more intimate. They are about our responsibility to maintain vigilance in relation to one another, yet they are more than existential metaphors. Through the Rwanda drawings, we are given a renewed alertness as to the tragic consequences of what happens when we lose sight of the humanity of others. Vivian Bower offers an elegy of a recent event in world history, an inconceivable event, a genocide that cannot be denied. Her Rwanda series is a statement that makes us reflect on the essential connection that we share with others. Such humanism in art is a powerful and indispensable political statement, yet one that is never divorced from aesthetic understanding.

Robert C. Morgan



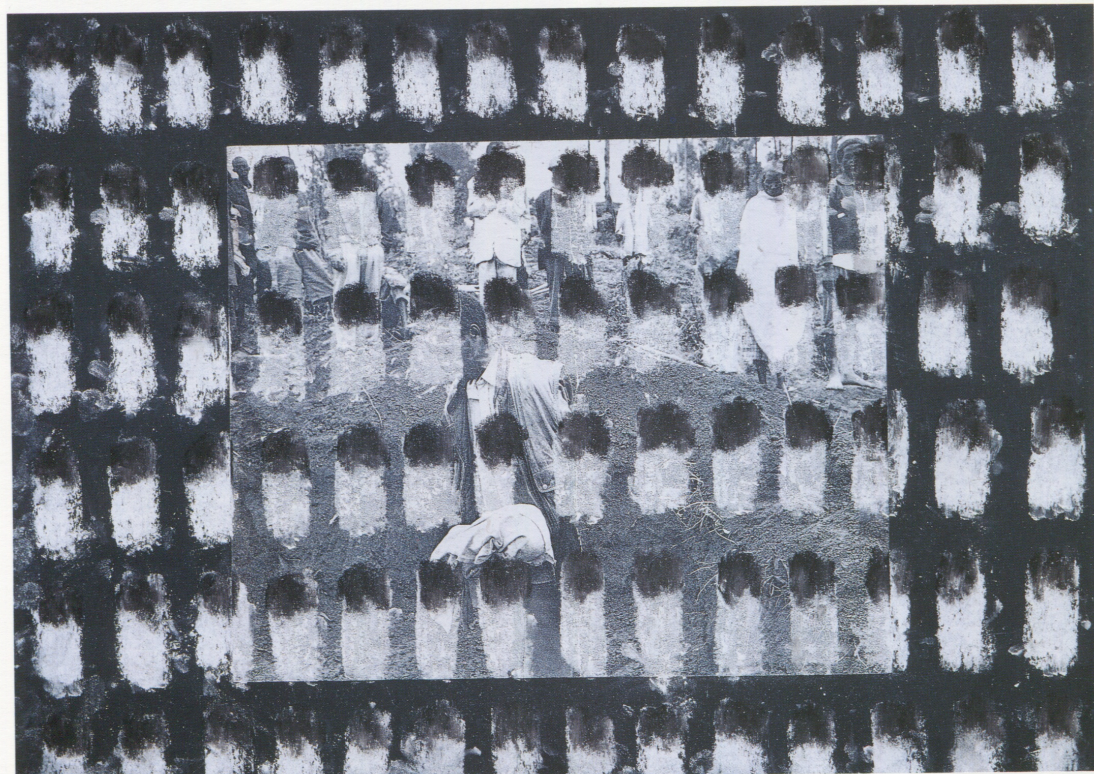
Rwanda Series #81, 1995,
Pastel/Xerox, 31 1/2" x 12 1/2"



Rwanda Series #37, 1995, Pastel/Xerox, 25 1/2" x 19 1/2"



Rwanda Series #119, 1996, Pastel/Xerox, 23"x 30"



Rwanda Series #36, 1995, Pastel/Xerox, 11 1/2" x 16 1/2"

Rwanda: Personal Images

We deny death, even in its face, just as we try to deny the human capacity for cruelty. Photography however, provides irrefutable proof of both, and Vivian Bower turns to it using Xeroxes of newsprint photos of the Rwanda holocaust physically and metaphorically in the 250 pastels and prints that comprise her "Rwanda Series." These images of death and mutilation, which obsessed her for two-and-a-half years following the outbreak of violence in 1994, form a profound and passionate chapter within the ongoing narrative of her work.

Most of the pieces in the series are located on an esthetic continuum between two extremes: direct use of photographic reportage and complete pictorial imagining. Sometimes, both are present in one work, as when a photograph of a mass grave filled with bodies in bags lies below a glowing stream of stick-figure bodies, like fallen angels tumbling out of heaven. Often, collage is used, juxtaposing newspaper accounts with pieces of photographs and surrounding them with words or abstractions of single or multiple tombstones. Brutal as the content is, the atmosphere in the work is subdued and haunting.

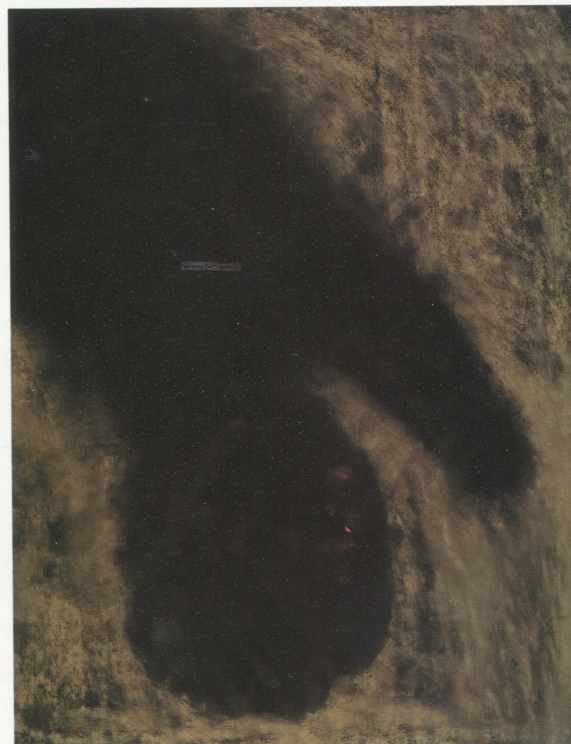
So many people were killed and mutilated in Rwanda that they were transformed into anonymous masses of human flesh. In one instance, where Bower uses a whole photograph of a mass grave, the bodies are barely distinguishable from one another. The light from the picture faintly illuminates script concerning the history of Rwanda's divisive society. In another piece, one peers through a velvety gray scrim containing barely distinguishable words into a brightly illuminated black and white world of photographed death and destruction. Except for the news clippings collaged here, this area is difficult to decipher—a gift to the viewer, of course, for this imagery is hard to take. The artist forced herself to look at it as long as she could bear handling the material. She uses the beauty of her pastel surfaces to seduce the viewer into facing it with her.

More generalized images offered Bower some respite from the horrors. One such work is covered with dusty red pigment. A small stick-figure floats deep and low in its red space under a gentle shower of handwritten words, actually the same word repeated 31 times: "mutilated." In another, a black head, softly glowing, emerges from gray mists, eyes white with fear, paw-like hands try to avert attack. Again through the mists, the word "mutilated" is repeated in orderly rows of fine white script, the order further underlining the brutality as it stands in mocking contrast to the chaos it describes. Making no direct references to the Rwandan

massacre, yet very clearly essential to the series, is an isolated white, encrusted head — neither skeleton nor flesh — floating in a fiery red space.

In certain pieces, Bower deals with unimaginable numbers by using rows of tombstones or clusters of stick-figures, while in others she uses single images as metaphors for the masses. Finally, this is work which forces us to witness an event which is as close to unbearable as any in human history.

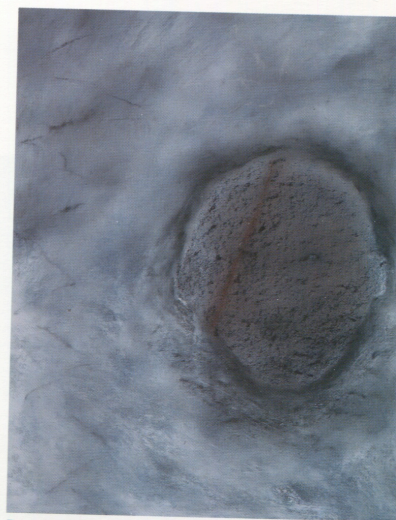
April Kingsley



Rwanda Series #44, 1995, Pastel/Xerox, 25 1/2" x 19 1/2"



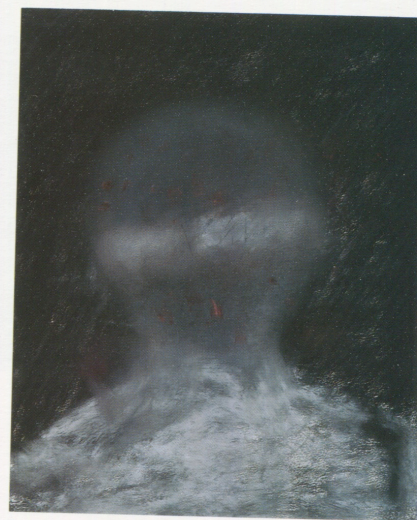
Rwanda Series #92, 1996, Pastel, 26"x 20"



Rwanda Series #98, 1996, Pastel, 30"x 22"



Rwanda Series #106, 1996, Pastel, 17 1/2"X 14"



Rwanda Series #107, 1996, Pastel, 17 1/2"X 14"



Rowanda Series #113, 1996, Pastel/Xerox, 29 1/2" X 22"



Rwanda Series #23, 1994, Pastel, 30"x 22"

Vivian
Bower:
Biography

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

- 1997.....Castle Hill Gallery, Truro, Ma
1995.....Gallery B.A.I., New York, NY
1986.....Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1997.....DNA Gallery, Provincetown, Ma
1996.....Provincetown Art Association & Museum, Provincetown, Ma
1996.....The Studio at Curly Willow, East Hampton, NY
1995....."The Lyrical, the Expressionist and the Poetic"
Denise Bibro Gallery, New York, NY
1995....."Trees" Provincetown Art Association & Museum,
Provincetown, Ma
1992.....Berta Walker Gallery, Provincetown, Ma
1990.....Rising Tide Gallery, Provincetown, Ma
1989.....Rising Tide Gallery, Provincetown, Ma
1989.....G.W. Einstein Gallery, New York, NY
1988.....Victoria Monroe Gallery, New York, NY
1988.....Center For the Arts, Vero Beach, Fl
1987....."Collector's Choice" Spencer Museum, Ka
1987.....Provincetown Art Association & Museum, Provincetown, Ma
1987.....Victoria Monroe Gallery, New York, NY
1986.....Provincetown Group Gallery, Provincetown, Ma
1985.....Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York, NY
1985....."Summer Pleasures" Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York, NY
1985....."Land, Sea, Sky" Joseph Lessing Gallery, New York, NY
1984....."Work of the Same Nature" Witkin Gallery, New York, NY
1984....."Personal Views" Janus Gallery, Los Angeles, Ca
1984....."A Sense of Place" Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY
1984....."American Women Artists: Part 2" Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, NY
1984....."Clouds and Trees" Witkin Gallery, New York, NY

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS:

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ma

SELECTED COLLECTIONS:

Morgan Bank, New York, NY
Chemical Bank, New York, NY
The Hallmark Collection, New York, NY
Amerada Hess Corporation, New York, NY

AWARDS:

1991-1992..... New York Foundation for the Arts
1983-1984.....National Endowment for the Arts

