

Monomotapa

*Monomotapa** is a suite of digitally constructed cartouche images, suggestive of those found in the fantastical antique maps depicting fabled destinations that no white man had yet seen. Textures, names and blurred lines taken from reproductions of actual maps of Africa and the New World, are combined with hazy vistas of shore lines and peninsulas. These vistas are in fact entirely fictitious landscapes, and are the product of macro (extreme close-up) photographs that Vári has taken of the surfaces of her self-portraits done in black and ochre ink on paper. (See the *Self Portrait ink series* above.)

Through this process, an intimately known “self” is transformed into an unknown “elsewhere”. Onto each of these stretches of alien land, the artist has grafted different views of the Johannesburg skyline, situating the city in the distant past; a miraged metropolis haunting the shores of an indeterminate, yet intimate geography. Thus transplanted, the city of Johannesburg - due to its gold mines also known as *Egoli*, the city of gold - assumes mythical dimensions, and becomes a Promised Land, an El Dorado of boundless riches, a projection of Europe's conquestorial instincts.

This notional landscape is framed within an elaborate cartouche of the sort that often adorns old maps. There is a triumphalist dimension to the cartouche which asserts dominion over the spaces it frames, appropriating territories in the name of distant powers and often bears the names of the monarch or sponsor and that of the mapmaker. It often features flags and coats of arms and scenes of military and naval conquests, and its ornate scrolls serve to distance or “other” the familiar.

Distorted as though through a crystal ball, *Monomotapa* shows the Highveld transmuted into a specimen of titillating exotica, presenting it as it would have been for a foreign power's delectation and appropriation.

However, Vári's cartouche encloses contested land, and turning its familiar heraldry in upon itself, introduces figures and devices inassimilable into this scenario. Two heavily armed Boers derived from the monument in Church Square, Pretoria, challenge its hegemony as does the reference to Cetshwayo kaMpande, the last king of an independent Zulu nation. The cartouche, a defiantly European device, is overlaid with African flora and fauna, baboons, warthogs, the Hadedda ibis so common in Johannesburg and even the locally reviled “Parktown prawn”, a fearsome-looking though harmless member of the cricket family. Armed, naked female indigenes (Vári's own figure as seen in her video piece *Vigil*) clamber over the frame in stealthy, crouching poses. The prognosis is far from benign: all featured parties appear prepared to defend their land against each other and alien intruders. Bristling clusters of rifles, razor wire and security cameras often crown the cartouche, and allude to the embattled condition of our citizenry, in a country where the integrity of individual and historical identity can still not be taken for granted.

Monomotapa posits a binding equation between the individual and the geography he or she inhabits, with the former being understood as a product of the latter. Landscape and history too become one, for the terrain Vári depicts is scarred by the events enacted upon it.

* The name Mutapa means "the conquered lands". The mwene (bantú term for "lord", specifically a conquering king) was the title giving rise to the state being referred to as Mwene Mutapa. This phrase has been preserved in documents as Munhu mu tapa, Manhumutapa and the Portuguese Monomotapa.

The origins of the ruling dynasty at Mutapa go back to some time in the first half of the 15th century. According to oral tradition, the first "mwene" was a warrior prince named Nyatsimba Mutota from a southern Shona kingdom sent to find new sources of salt in the north. Prince Mutota found his salt among the Tavara, a Shona subdivision, who were prominent elephant hunters. They were conquered; a capital was established 350km north of Great Zimbabwe at Mount Fura by the Zambezi.

The empire had another indirect side effect on the history of Southern Africa. Gold from the empire inspired in Europeans a

belief that Munhumutapa held the legendary mines of King Solomon, referred to in the Bible as Ophir. The belief that the mines were inside the Munhumutapa kingdom in Southern Africa was one of the factors that led to the Portuguese exploration of the hinterland of Sofala in the 1500s, and this contributed to early development of Mozambique, as the legend was widely used among the less educated populace to recruit colonists. Some documents suggest that most of the early colonists dreamed of finding the legendary city of gold in Southern Africa, a belief mirroring the early South American colonial search for El Dorado and quite possibly inspired by it. Early trade in gold came to an end as the mines ran out, and the deterioration of the Mutapa state eliminated the financial and political support for further developing sources of gold.

(source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monomotapa>)



Monomotapa Series

2007

Pigment Ink on Cotton Fibre Paper | 1000mm x 790mm each

Edition of 5 and 2 Artist's Prints



Monomotapa Series

2007

Pigment Ink on Cotton Fibre Paper | 1000mm x 790mm each

Edition of 5 and 2 Artist's Prints