

Jürgen Partenheimer

By Catherine Bindman



Jürgen Partenheimer, spread from *Folded Spirits* (2012).

Folded Spirits (2012)

Nine lithographs and linocuts, with occasional watercolour and pencil drawing by the artist. Accompanying eight poems by Lebogang Mashile. 47 x 38 cm. Edition of 15. Printed by Mark Attwood, Leshoka Legate and Jacky Tsila at The Artists' Press in White River, South Africa, co-published by the artist and David Krut Projects, Johannesburg, Cape Town & New York, 2012. The solander box for the book was created by Lunetta Bartz, Johannesburg and produced by Buchbinderei Adolphs, Düsseldorf. €8500.

When the German artist Jürgen Partenheimer first arrived in South Africa in September 2011 for his two-month residency at the studios of the NIROX Foundation outside Johannesburg, he immediately began to reflect on the revelations offered by this new experience in a diary consisting of drawings as well as verses and notes in both German and English. “Whole days in the clouds,/ the landscape, the books,” he wrote in the diary, which has just been published by Snoeck Verlag of Cologne.¹ The difficulties of life in South Africa did not escape him:

*The pictures of this country
are heavy, troubled and
garish, dragging reality.
No transcendence
in the dust of poverty or
at the tables of opulence.
Hagglers and avenging angels.²*

Partenheimer’s preliminary visual impressions in the diary—drawings in

pencil or ink—established his restrained aesthetic response to this vivid and unsettling territory. Shortly after his arrival, the artist visited David Krut and Alastair Whitton at David Krut Print Workshop (DKW) at Arts on Main in downtown Johannesburg (an arts center in a converted early 20th-century warehouse), and discussed ideas for two projects that would complement the body of drawn work produced during the residency. (Partenheimer’s *South African Diary*, consisting of some 60 drawings and watercolors, was exhibited at NIROX Projects, the foundation’s exhibition space, also at Arts on Main, in November 2011.) On a subsequent visit to South Africa in May 2012, he completed work on a suite of six prints in collaboration with Jillian Ross and Mlungisi Kongisa at DKW and on *Folded Spirits*, an artist’s book adapting images from his diary, with Mark Atwood at The Artist’s Press in White River.

Of the celebrated South African poet whose work became part of *Folded Spirits*, Partenheimer wrote, “A discovery/

Lebogang Mashile/poetess of the tenebrous light.”³ But this is a bit of poetic license—Mashile’s work was hardly obscure—and, as with his previous residencies in Europe and South America, Parteneheimer had explored the literature of the country before he got there and had decided he wanted to meet her. The eight poems in the book are taken from two collections of Mashile’s work: *In a Ribbon of Rhythm* and *Flying above the Sky*.⁴ Here both Parteneheimer and Mashile eschew formal narrative and representation in favor of austere evocative abstraction.

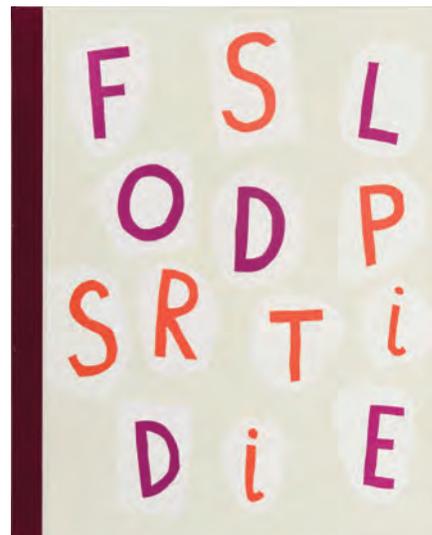
Folded Spirits thus points to the ultimate compatibility of two powerful artistic sensibilities, a successful dialogue emerging from different cultures and expressed in different forms. Mashile addresses pervasive issues of poverty (“The sweat on your back/ The cracks on your heels/Are plastered to the walls...”) and incorporates African clichés (“I wonder if they suddenly/Dream of elephants/Laugh in Technicolor/and carry rivers in their hearts”), but, like Parteneheimer, she is primarily interested in an interior realm. Mashile was exceptionally generous: she allowed the artist to discard the original titles of her poems, print them in his chosen font in different sizes, and sow the texts throughout his images in any way he liked. In his ascetic dispositions, the words are mostly set apart from the images, with the motifs sometimes isolated at the margins of the sheets. As the book comes to an end, however, he admits individual lines of the poetry into the space of the printed images. “I collect rhythms, shapes/spaces and energies It is more about spirit than similarity,” he writes in the diary.⁵

“Seeds & Tracks/Sources and trails, roots and traces.”⁶ The idea that we leave seeds and tracks wherever we go informed the title of the original project at NIROX and also forms the basis of the images in *Folded Spirits*. Parteneheimer’s reticent and deliberate mark making conveys the sense of a powerful visceral response distilled into something intimate and subtle. In the nine lithographs and linocuts that comprise the book, abstract forms—some suggesting twigs, leaves, or seeds; others, nothing recognizable—are dispersed on pale grounds. There is considered beauty in these pages, among them a curiously wintery spread showing tracks of irregular pale-pink lines on a light-gray ground—these cannot be tracks in the snow (surely not in Africa)—but Mashile’s words on the page speak of “Winter mornings hoping/That somewhere past forever/the world is listening.” On another spread, bare twig-like forms resemble ranks of little winter trees.

Color is generally subdued throughout the book—pale pinks and grays, tempered ochers—but then suddenly bright color will be scattered across a white ground in a

series of red blobs, or appear in wobbly lines of applied watercolor. There is nothing predictably “African” about any of this—and as South African writer Bronwyn Law-Viljoen has observed: “Reevaluating, to some extent, his resistance to representation ... he created a body of work in South Africa ... that, if it does not quite ‘represent’ objects, nonetheless demonstrates a conscious articulation of what it means to show, or to speak, through marks on paper.”⁷

Parteneheimer says that his abstract, minimalist forms frequently confounded the South African students and artists he encountered during his residency. Accustomed to working largely within a narrative storytelling tradition focused on issues of identity, they initially responded by attempting to uncover hidden meanings and identifiable motifs. In addition to his surprise at this reaction, the process of working with printers Mark Attwood, Leshoka Legate and Jacky Tsila at The Artists’ Press seems also to have been something of a revelation as well as a pleasure. Although prints have been part of his work for 30 years, Parteneheimer is less interested in print techniques as such than in seeing what emerges from their essential properties as he works with them. In *Folded Spirits*, the flat planes of the lithography and linocut serve the stillness at the heart of his aesthetic, creating controlled surfaces without textural distraction or distortion. In the *South African Diary*, Parteneheimer describes the process of making prints as if he is discovering another new landscape: “Like atolls, islands and the



Jürgen Parteneheimer, cover of the artist book *Folded Spirits* (2012). Edition of 15. Co-published by the artist and David Krut Projects, Johannesburg, Cape Town & New York.

jetties of foreign/landscapes, they emerge from furrowed/ ranks. Evidence and traces/ an archaeology of imagined pictures,/ exposed and ready for printing, /crowning their presence.”⁸

The artist’s expressed love of children’s books is also evident in *Folded Spirits*, especially on the cover of the box that houses it, where the title appears as a jumble of colorful linocut letters. Within the book short sentences and single words are deployed alongside images that might be



Jürgen Parteneheimer, *Folded Spirits II/1* (2012), four-color linocut, 26.75 x 20 inches. Edition of 15. Printed by David Krut Workshop, Johannesburg, published by David Krut Projects, Johannesburg, 2012.

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described as whimsical. Inevitably, and against one's better judgment, those pale pink tracks of indefinable origin bring to mind the hunt for the Woozle in *Winnie the Pooh*. ("Tracks," said Piglet. "Paw-marks."... "Oh, Pooh! Do you think it's a-a-a Woozle?" "It may be," said Pooh. "Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. You never can tell with paw-marks.") In spite of Partenheimer's insistent obliqueness, the work is immensely rewarding—not least for the fancies conjured by the still spaces and mysterious trails of his discovered landscapes. ■

Catherine Bindman is a New York-based art critic and editor.



Jürgen Partenheimer, *Folded Spirits I/1* (2012), hardground etching, sugarlift and spitbite aquatint, linocut and chine collé, 37.75 x 30 inches. Edition of 15. Printed by David Krut Workshop, Johannesburg, published by David Krut Projects, Johannesburg, 2012.

Notes:

1. Jürgen Partenheimer. *Seeds & Tracks and Folded Sprits: South African Diary*. (Cologne: Snoeck Verlag / Kienbaum Artists' Books, 2013), 73.
2. Partenheimer, 16.
3. Partenheimer, 12.
4. Lebogang Mashile, *In a Ribbon of Rhythm*. (Cape Town: Oshun Books, 2005) and *Flying Above the Sky* (Johannesburg: Lebogang Mashile, 2008).
5. Partenheimer, 24.
6. Partenheimer, 16.
7. Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, "Juergen Partenheimer: Notes Made While Listening," *Art South Africa*, volume 10.4, June 2012.
8. Partenheimer, 70.