

# FAIL DEADLY

VINCENT BEZUIDENHOUT

## THE DISCUSSION IS FINISHED

by Chad Rossouw

In Vincent Bezuidenhout's *Building 5100, Pelindaba* we are faced with some scraggly trees and dying grass in green greys and sepia. There is no building, nothing distinctive, this could be anywhere. A second image, *Critical Facility, Pelindaba*, shows even less. An aperture in a roof allows a hint of light into an interior. It illuminates nothing but a seam in a concrete wall.

Pelindaba is a nuclear research facility, just outside of Pretoria, near Hartebeespoort Dam, where at least six atomic weapons were built in the '80s. It seems a bland statement, belying the raw power of those weapons. And the photographs that try and document the program seemingly suffer a similar disjunction.

The images above grapple with this problem in two areas: The first is, like any consideration of the past, the object of study is absent. The past is gone, and there are only the traces and remnants left to tell the story. When it comes to photography, these traces are all that can be documented. The problem however is compounded in telling this particular narrative, because of matters of access. Areas associated with the program, such as the remote Vastrap Ballistic Test Facility, are still used by the military. Pelindaba is still an active facility, providing medical and industrial uranium. Appropriately, a loose translation of Pelindaba from Zulu is 'the discussion is finished.' The traces, as slight as dead grass and concrete walls, need to somehow become emblematic of something bigger than themselves. They need to swell and spread to fit the history.

The second area follows on from this. Photographic representation, for all its veracity and accuracy has a conceptual limit. It is a commonplace that the verisimilitude of a photograph is constructed and contingent. The truth effect of a photograph relies in part on the will of the photographer: the photographer's desires, biases, aesthetic sensibility, intentions and aptitude. However, with a few exceptions, this construction is contingent on things in the world. This presents an illusion that the things in the world speak for themselves. It's an easy illusion to grow accustomed to, when the world is accessible and productive of things. When it is not, when access is denied and information shrouded, then we hit the wall of what photography is capable of doing.

Bezuidenhout's photographs try and tell a story that exists outside of the images. They make for frustrating images. And yet at the same time they expose the issues of absence and access. The photographs become about the limits of photography. This would be navel-gazing if the limits here were not circumscribed by other boundaries. This is made clear in another work, *Pelindaba*, which comprises a stack of 800+ documents sourced from the NSA and the CIA's archives regarding South Africa's nuclear weapons program. The documents are severely redacted, to the point of absurdity. What we are seeing is the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government, the purposeful and often useless obscuring of information as a central tenet of governance. The stutters and impediments in data flow is a way of maintaining power, through the control of information, regardless of the value of that information. Hannah Arendt describes this power as stemming from the fact that the ability to lie and the ability to enact changes on the world (the heart of politics) stem from the same source: our ability to imagine counterfactually, to picture the world differently. Lies and secrets, are a necessary part of the political imagination. At the same time, the concurrent control of information presents an illusion of power. The historian Luise White in a paper entitled *Telling more: Lies, Secrets and History* suggests that the absence of information can be as revealing as the information itself. It forces one to think about the motivations of the people withholding and their intended audience. The lacuna can become an absence suggestive of the structure of the whole.

Other pieces of 'Fail Deadly' then start to look at these areas outside of the holes. Appropriated images and artefacts, aerial photographs and ephemera scatter through the exhibition. They become clues as to the texture that surrounds the nuclear program, both in South Africa, and in the broader world. This is humorously demonstrated in the work *The Picture Collection*. In an intervention piece several years ago, Bezuidenhout inserted sheaves of the redacted documents into Picture Collection (a kind of analogue image search) of the Mid-Manhattan Library, New York City. He inserted them into the folders categorized as explosions, radiation, security, documents, colonialism, bombs, Transvaal and others. He then scanned a single image from each of these folders. Picture Library comprises prints of these scans, making up both an ambiguous record of the earlier intervention and a random, idiosyncratic sampling of the popular imagery, the context, of the nuclear weapons program.

The key images of the show are the *Black Landscapes*. These inkjet prints consist of two layers. The first initial print is a landscape shot near the locations of the nuclear facility. These are then overprinted in solid black, and the interactions of the two layers of ink create a ghost image. These works are a direct meld between the more traditional photographic works and the redacted documents. One is reminded in the almost votive display of pure black of Kasimir Malevich or Ad Reinhardt. Malevich, in particular, described his Black Square as a 'zero of form'. It is a grand refusal, and a dismissal of representation, not only in its reduction of form, but the boldness of black, where any possibility of representation is blocked.

The painting was rich with idealism, but with the passing of time, it seems more infused with nostalgia for political absolutes. One of the notable things about the painting on the other hand is how badly it has aged. Peter Schjeldahl in the New Yorker describes it like this:

The painting looks terrible: crackled, scuffed, and discolored, as if it had spent the past eighty-eight years patching a broken window. In fact, it passed most of that time deep in the Soviet archives, classed among the lowliest of the state's treasures.

The storage of things changes them, and here we see the passing of time, and with it its changed meaning, literally inscribed into the surface. Even the refusal to represent gathers cobwebs of unintended meanings. The ghost images of the Black Landscapes reflect this accumulation of meaning regardless of the impossibility of representation. 'Fail Deadly' is ultimately a work of failure and impossibility, of limits and redactions. And yet in what it can't show or tell it reveals threads of South African history and identity.



Vincent Bezuidenhout is a visual artist and photographer born in Bloemfontein, South Africa. He attended the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, where he obtained a Masters Degree in Fine Art with distinction.

Bezuidenhout was the recipient of the 2010/11 Tierney Fellowship, which led to his first solo exhibition entitled *Separate Amenities* (Whatiftheworld Gallery, 2012). In 2013/14 Bezuidenhout was awarded a bursary to attend the Photoglobal Programme at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He currently spends his time between Cape Town and New York City.

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