

Diane Victor  
*Birth of a Nation*, 2010  
Suite of 10 prints published by David Krut Publishing

By Steffan Horowitz

Diane Victor's series, *Birth of a Nation* published at David Krut Print Workshop in Johannesburg in 2010, is comprised of 10 drypoint prints inspired by Greco-Roman mythology. In these prints, Victor takes canonical stories and recontextualizes them in an attempt to create her own satirical version of a South African national narrative. Packaged within this narrative is a poignant yet biting commentary on the state of contemporary South African society and the struggles that have become an integral part of quotidian life in the postapartheid nation. The various prints address relevant South African issues such as environmentalism, political corruption, violent crime, and sexual and gender-based violence.

Take, for example, the piece entitled *The Rape of Africa*, which is a clear reference to the story of the abduction of Europa. According to the Greek myth, Zeus (or Jupiter in the Roman version), upon transforming himself into a handsome white bull, takes his place among the herd of Europa's father. Eventually, Europa climbs onto the uncharacteristically tame animal's back, at which point Zeus (still in bull form) flees to the sea with the girl and swims to the island of Crete, where he reveals his true identity and ravishes his companion.

Victor's *The Rape of Africa* takes this myth and turns it on its head; using it instead to comment on the relatively recent and ongoing ravishing of Africa's resources by China. In particular, she is concerned with the growing trend of hunting African rhinos for their horns, which are used in Chinese traditional medicine. In this print, the white bull is replaced with a rhinoceros and Europa with a female Chinese soldier. An AK47 rests against the beast's side and we can make out a number of bullet wounds along its shoulder. In this case, the power dynamics have been reversed with the girl dominating the dead or dying creature.

In a somewhat related vein, the artist's appropriation of the Mithraic bull-killing scene highlights similarities with the Zulu Ukweshwama ritual, in which young men kill a bull with their bare hands by snapping the animal's neck.

Meanwhile, Diane Victor's retellings of such tales as *Daphne and Apollo* and *Leda and the Swan* (which Victor has changed to *Leda and the White-Backed Vulture*) tackle the subjects of rape and gender-based violence while employing the artist's own image in place of the myths' female protagonists. In Victor's interpretation of the first story, Apollo is replaced with a sleazy male figure, his shoulders hunched and his exposed gut spilling over his belt. The man's eyes are staring aggressively at Daphne who is in the process of being transformed into a South African Highveld thorn bush (acacia), instead of a laurel tree. The recontextualization is perhaps meant to press the viewer to consider South Africa's pervasive domestic violence and the social and cultural realities that have facilitated its becoming so commonplace.