WIM BOTHA

Pietà

Essay by Michael P Steinberg

STEVENSON

LAOCOÖN/PIETÀ: TIME AND THE IMAGE

Michael P Steinberg

For Svetlana Boym (1966-2015)

I

In April 1964, Michelangelo's *Pietà* left the Basilica of St Peter's in Rome to take its place in the specially constructed Vatican Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. The arrangement had been proposed two years earlier by Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York to Pope John XXIII and ratified by the latter's successor, Paul VI. The Fair attracted 51 million spectators in its twelve active months (spread between April and October of both 1964 and 1965), with the majority of its futuristic pavilions dedicated to the technological promises of major American corporations, including General Electric, Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, IBM, Bell Telephone, US Steel, Pepsi Cola, Dupont, RCA, and Westinghouse. Masses of spectators flowed through these exhibits in moving cars, boats, and occasionally on conveyer belts. And although the Vatican Pavilion offered the sacred past rather than the secular future, it deployed a similar technology, moving along the millions of visitors to the *Pietà* along three parallel levels of conveyer belts, here called "mobile walkways." Before the Fair closed, the Vatican announced that the sculpture would never travel again: its only conceivable response to the proliferation of invitations.

In a way, the 2004 installation of Wim Botha's *Mieliepap Pietà* in New York's Cathedral of St John the Divine – the largest Gothic cathedral structure in the world – signified a double return. Its raw material itself underwent a kind of historic return: the cornmeal or maize of which it was made is a staple African food but indigenous originally only to North America. And, forty years after the World's Fair, the entire installation

fig 1 Vatican Pavilion at New York World's Fair

riffed on its predecessor by replacing monumentality with modesty in every way – size, material, supporting platform, presentation. And no conveyer belts. As they are in Rome, spectators were invited to share in the sublime stillness of the image and statue.

2

Michelangelo was 24 years old in 1499 when he completed the *Pietà* in a single year, according to the terms of his contract. Just over six years later, in January 1506, he joined the team that excavated from a garden on the Esquiline Hill the late Hellenistic sculptural group (dated to approximately 50 B.C.) known as the *Laocoön* group: a depiction of the death of the Trojan priest Laocoön along with his two sons.

The version of the Laocoön story that made it well known is that of Virgil, from Book 2 of the *Aeneid*. Here, Laocoön is the priest who warns the Trojans that the horse at their gates may in fact be a Greek ruse. At the moment his advice is overruled by a crafty Greek in disguise, two serpents rise from the sea and attack his two sons. Attempting to save his sons, Laocoön dies with them, in physical and affective torment. Virgil's account emphasized that suffering, describing in particular the screams emitted by the three victims.

Ille simul manibus tendit divellere nodos
perfusus sanie vittas atroque veneno,
clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit:
qualis mugitus, fugit cum saucius aram
taurus et incertam excussit cervice securim.

At the same time he stretched forth to tear the knots with his hands
his fillets soaked with saliva and black venom
at the same time he lifted to heaven horrendous cries:
like the bellowing when a wounded bull has fled from the altar
and has shaken the ill-aimed axe from its neck.

fig 2 Wim Botha's *Mieliepap Pietà* in New York's Cathedral of St John the Divine

fig 3 *Laocoön* group

The *Laocoön* group's reception in the Cinquecento has been admirably traced by Maria Louro Berbara, in a dissertation entitled *Christ as Laocoön: An Iconographic parallel between Christian and Pagan sacrificial representations in the Italian Renaissance.*[1] Later depictions confer other allegorical inflections to the figure and the story. The subject and group inspired El Greco to paint his only mythological subject, executed between 1608 and 1614.[2] Here, the Trojan horse is depicted in front of the city gates of Toledo. William Blake returned to the image of Laocoön, as have Karl Marx, John Barth, and many others.

1 Dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1999
2 Berbera, pp 164–5

Beyond the parallels of Christ and Laocoön as sacrificial victims, the pairing of the *Pietà* and the *Laocoön* is both historical and thematic. Both depict the pathos of parents at the deaths of their sons. Michelangelo shows no physical pain: the body of Christ is in repose and Mary's serenity evinces the dignity of her grief. The intense bodily suffering of the three *Laocoön* figures, however, has proven central to the history of modern aesthetics and its discussion of form and content, beauty and truth, pleasure and pain.

The key treatise here is the German philosopher GE Lessing's 1766 treatise entitled *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Comparing the sculptural group to Virgil's narration of their story, Lessing asserts that the sequential nature of narration, or poetry, enables Virgil to describe the figures' death agonies with gruesome realism. As a single image, however, the sculpture must represent the event in a single gesture, thereby limited to moderation not only temporally but because of the limited capacity of its viewers to absorb visual violence. For Lessing, Greek moderation was thus determined not by taste but by genre. In our own time, photography and most of all photojournalism

> have overturned this assumption, as in Sam Nzima's iconic image of the mortally wounded 13-year-old Hector Pieterson being rushed, futilely, to help on the day of the Soweto uprising – the image that South African viewers will most likely call a modern *Pietà*.

fig 6 *Laocoön 3*

fig 5 Wim Botha's 2014 bronze *Prism 10 (Dead Laocoön)*

fig 4 Hector Pieterson carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo, 16 June 1976

The positions of this image's two principal figures – the dying or dead body of Hector Pieterson borne by the panicked 18-year-old Mbuyisa Makhubo – recall the positioning and pathos of the *Pietà*. But the latter's serenity and capacity for consolation are absent. The Soweto image is one of unconsolability in the context of the slaughter of innocents. More *Laocoön*, in this respect, than *Pietà*.

Wim Botha's 2014 bronze *Prism 10 (Dead Laocoön)*, the companion work in many ways to his *Pietà*, offers a response not only to the Hellenistic sculpture but to Lessing's treatise as well. Its tripartite structure references both the figures and the plot of its model. As opposed to the *Mieliepap Pietà*, the strategy here is anti- or perhaps rather de-representational. The three figures appear either covered in shrouds or rendered abstract, or both. On the one hand, there is the black shroud of death. On the other, there is an explosion of movement, a life energy that seems to emanate from the inanimate bronze without the help of anthropomorphic verisimilitude.

Prism 10 (Dead Laocoön) is accompanied by a series of ink sketches; these relate to the bronze more as emanations than preparations, as enhancements of the sculpture's sense of motion. Ink touches paper with economy and lightness, even when the strokes achieve a complexity comparable to that of the bronze itself.

From the *Mieliepap Pietà* of 2004 to the bronze *Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)* of 2015, Botha's decade of work is also accompanied by a generous series of sketches. Here again, economy and abstraction generate together a sense of movement and life. Consider the lines of sketch no 30 and the leftward descending line from the outline of Mary's head to the right arm that holds the body of Jesus.

Marking the very boundary between figuration and pure abstraction, the single line tells the story of grief and grace, falling from Mary's thinking forehead to her consoling arm. In sketch no 28 the artist consigns to the page only the single ink line that, in the other sketch, will be the line of Mary's head and arm: grief and grace, suffering and consolation.

fig 7 sketch no 30a?

3

The estimated twelve million people who viewed Michelangelo's *Pietà* from the New York World's Fair's mobile walkways in 1964 and 1965 combined their encounter with a sacred work from the Italian Renaissance with a basic fantasy of technological modernity. This fantasy – the *Leitmotiv* of the Fair in general – is mobility. Mobility (from the sea to the railroad to the rocket) and information (from the radio to the web) form the two components of the technological modern. Positioned on conveyer belts, the New York spectators watched the scene of the *Pietà* in a manner comparable to passengers looking out of a train window or to spectators in a movie theater. Indeed, as

> an optical experience the *Pietà* would have been experienced as an object in motion, as if captured by a film or video. Only the pace would have been different: bathed in deep blue light, the *Pietà* received its rotating observers in a kind of sacred *Adagio*. To an extent, the active work of the eye, making still objects seem to move in both space and time, compensates for the passivity of the modern individual being moved along by technological manipulation.

The various versions of Botha's *Pietà* and *Laocoön* remain decidedly low-tech. Their materials are cornmeal, bronze, paper, ink, and oil. But the juxtaposition of the various representations—cornmeal and bronze, sculpture and paper/canvas, with the sketches understood as emanations rather than as preparation—suggests a complex engagement with the modern, including the modern's retrieval of ancient icons. The sketches respond with motion to the stillness of the sculpted forms; they show the sculptures how to move, how to be seen as moving. The work of the eye makes still objects live and move in time, as if to make music out of images. (Thus the birth of cinema – of the moving image – is unthinkable without music: the art form defined by time and motion.)

fig 8 sketch no 28a?

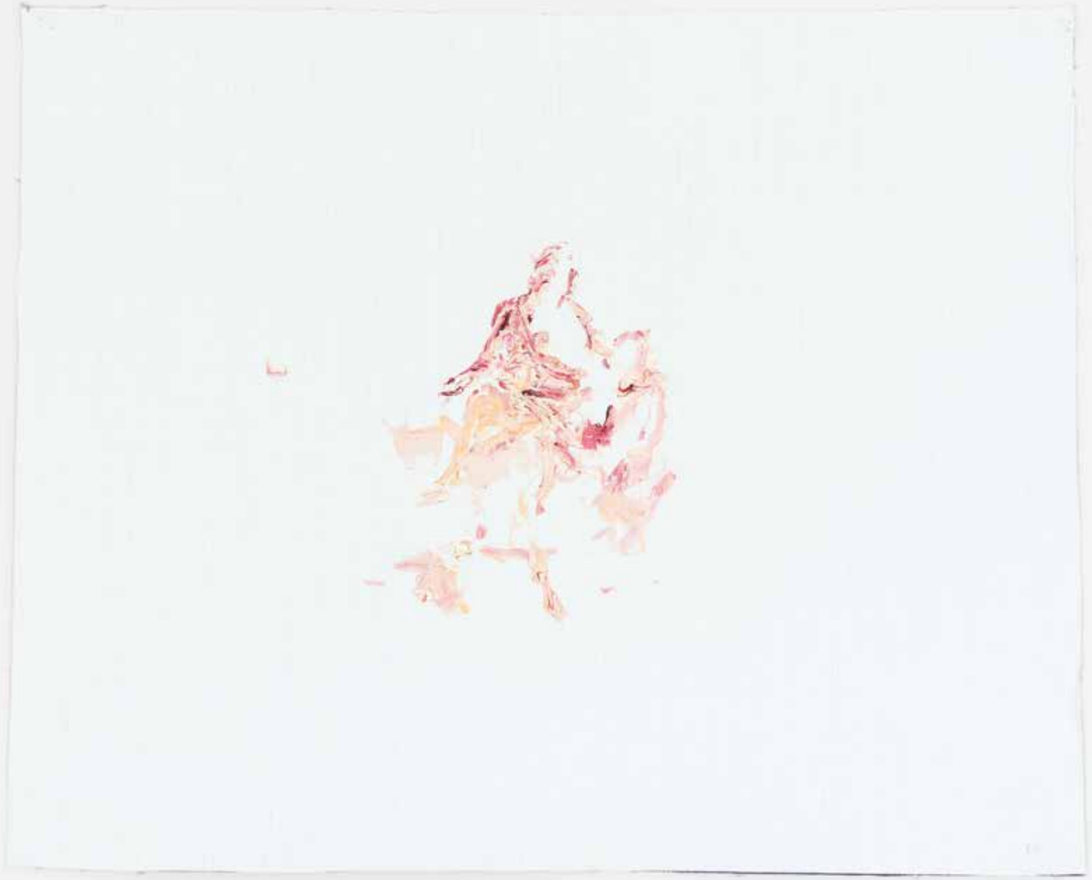
The founding theorist of the transient image as the mark of the modern is the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire. His 1859 essay "The Painter of Modern Life," which inspired the modernist painters of the subsequent decades, addresses a sketch-artist of the transient: the more or less forgotten Constantin Guys. It was, for Baudelaire, the sketch that best captured the experience of the modern that he called "modernity" – *la modernité* – thus inventing the word itself. Modernity, for Baudelaire, is a mode of experiencing the modern as the world in motion. Modernity, he wrote, is one side of art, the art of the fleeting, the transitory, and the contingent – the other side of which is the absolute and the immovable.

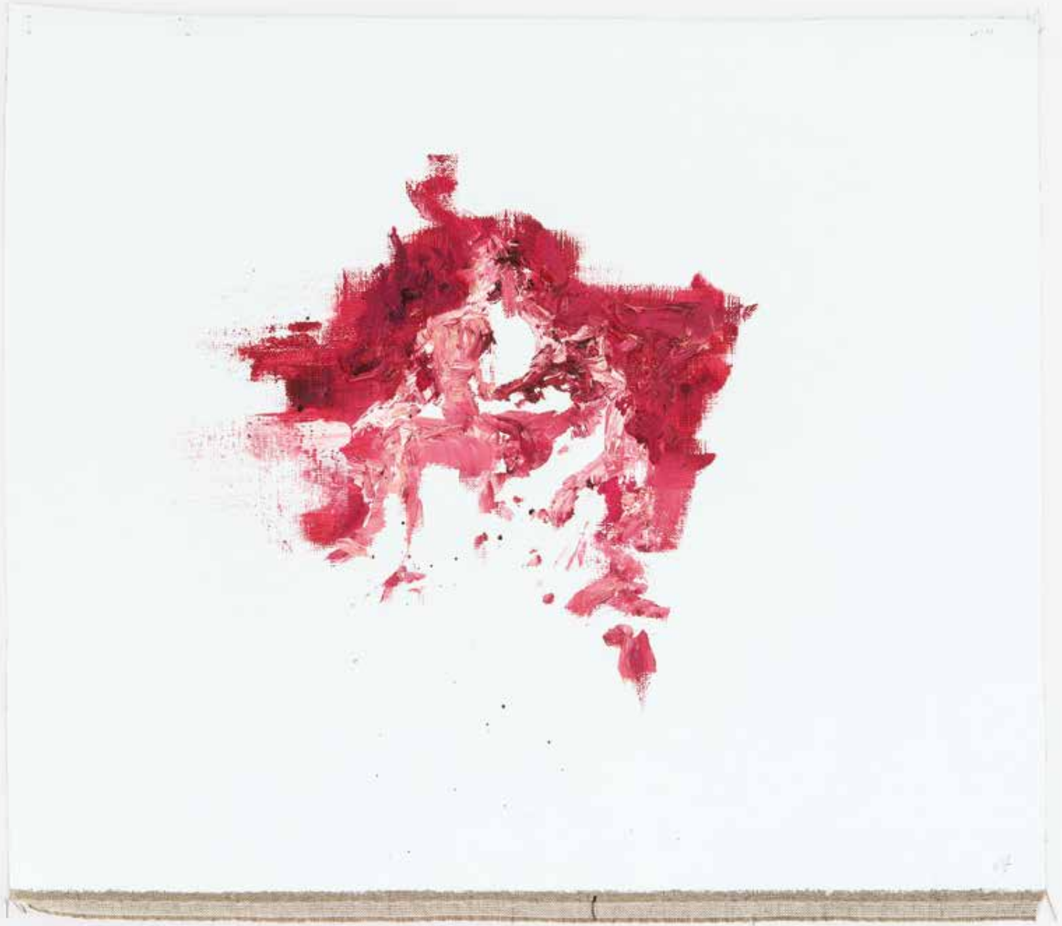
fig 9 Paris sketch by Constantin Guys

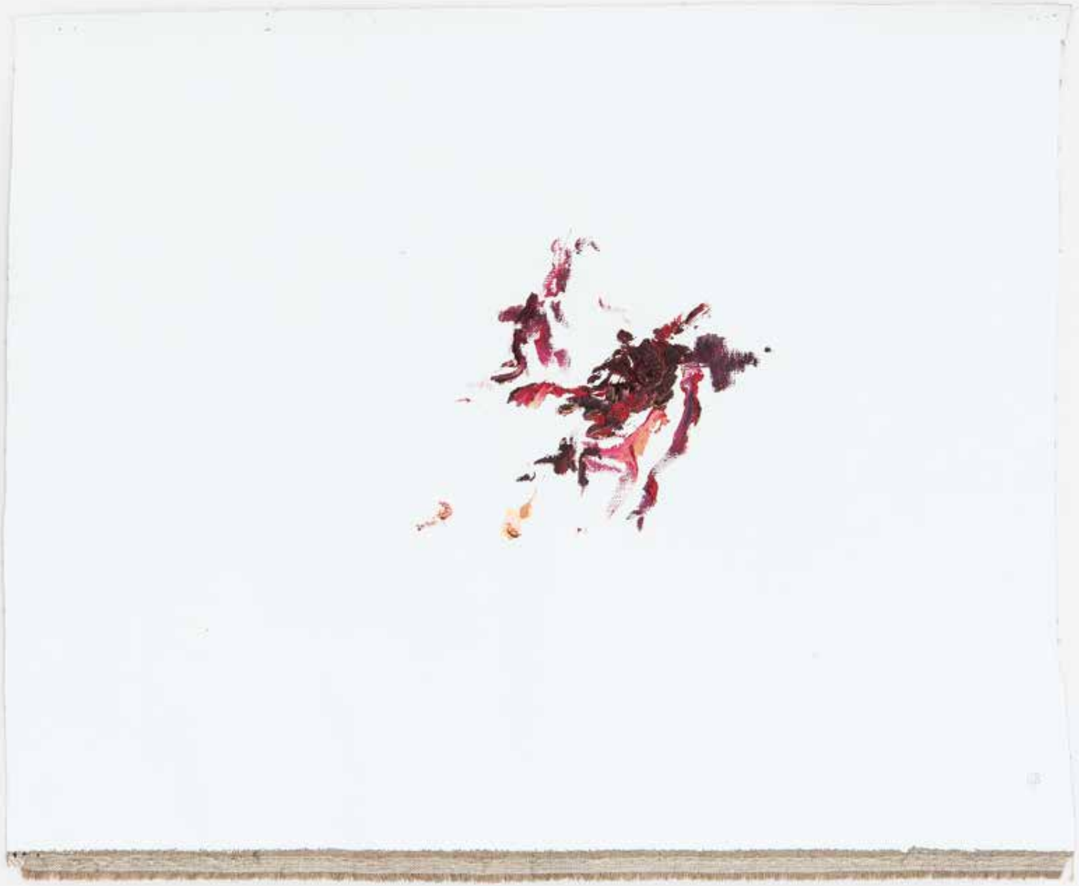
Baudelaire's modernity constitutes a theory of experience and of art; it is also a theory of history. History moves. Through the passage of time, it creates distance from earlier periods, experiences, and objects. This distance is both temporal and emotional; it can create both loss and recovery. An image of trauma – the *Pietà*, the *Laocoön* – moves us by momentarily cancelling temporal and emotional distance, thereby returning us to the moment of trauma and its promise either of consolation or unconsolability. The ephemerality of the sketch, on the other hand, reminds of the reality of time and its passage, which in turn promises both the recovery from trauma and the fading of life and its images, both hope and death.

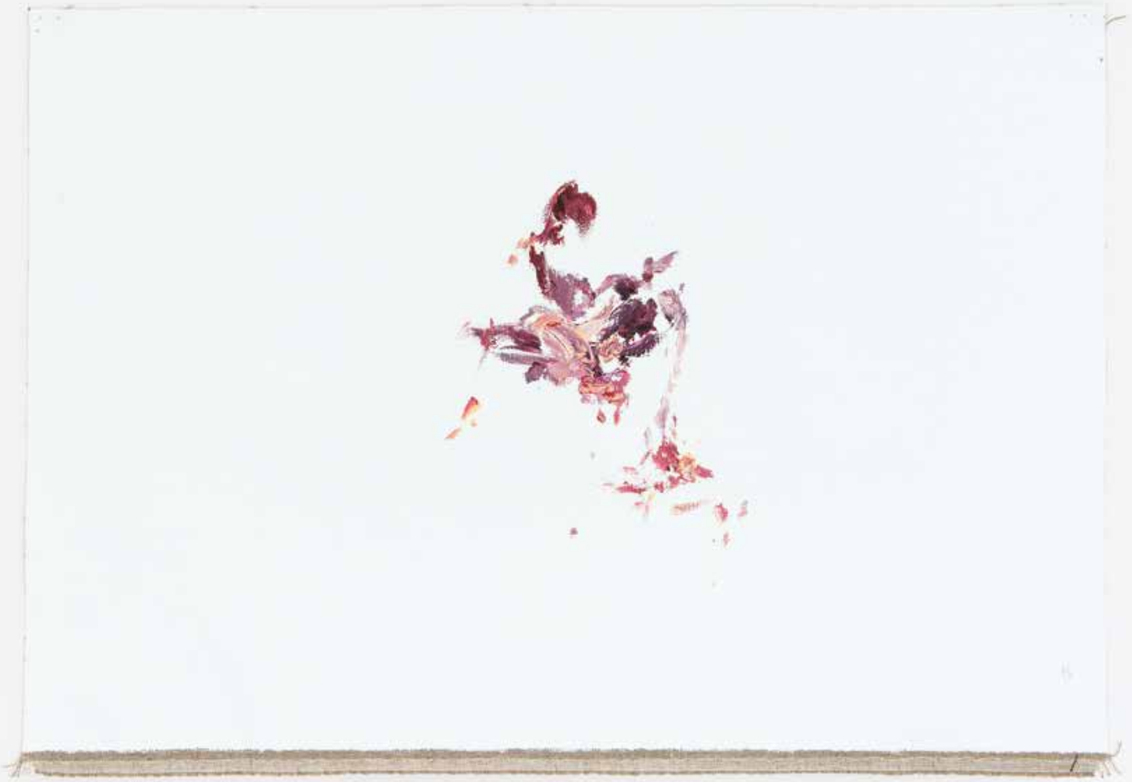
Michael P Steinberg is Vice Provost for the Arts and Professor of History, Music and German Studies at Brown University. He is the author of studies on Hermann Broch, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin and Charlotte Salomon, among other publications.

More's the pity









Untitled (line drawing)

Mercy paintings

Prism 13 (Dead Pietà)

Full caption list…

WIM BOTHA

Botha was born in Pretoria in 1974, graduated from the University of Pretoria with a BA (Visual Art) in 1996, and lives in Cape Town. He has received a number of prestigious awards, including the Helgaard Steyn Prize for sculpture in 2013, the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 2005, and the first Tollman Award in 2003. Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown (2014); Kunstraum Innsbruck, Austria (2013); and the Sasol Art Museum, Stellenbosch (2013), as well as Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, and Galerie Jette Rudolph, Berlin. Notable group exhibitions include *The Divine Comedy*, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, and other venues (2014); *Artists Engaged? Maybe*, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon (2014); *Lichtspiele*, Museum Biedermann, Donaueschingen, Germany (2014); *Imaginary Fact: South African art and the archive*, the South African Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013); the Göteborg Biennial, Sweden (2011); *Memories of the Future: The Olbricht Collection*, La Maison Rouge, Paris (2011); the 11th Triennale für Kleinplastik, Fellbach, Germany (2010); *Peekaboo: Current South Africa*, Tennis Palace Art Museum, Helsinki (2010); *Olvida Quien Soy – Erase me from who I am*, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (2006); the seventh edition of *Dak'Art*, the Dakar Biennale (2006); and the touring exhibition *Africa Remix* (2004-2007). Botha's work is in the collections of the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town; Johannesburg Art Gallery; Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth; Unisa, Pretoria; University of Johannesburg; South African Reserve Bank; Absa Bank; Sanlam; Sasol; BHP Billiton; Spier; Gordon Schachat Collection; Museum Biedermann; Sammlung Stahlberg; Olbricht Collection; and the Jochen Zeitz Collection; among others.

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STEVENSON

CAPE TOWN
Buchanan Building
160 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock 7925
PO Box 616
Green Point 8051
T +27 (0)21 462 1500
F +27 (0)21 462 1501

JOHANNESBURG
62 Juta Street
Braamfontein 2001
Postnet Suite 281
Private Bag x9
Melville 2109
T +27 (0)11 403 1055/1908
F +27 (0)86 275 1918

info@stevenson.info
www.stevenson.info