

Review

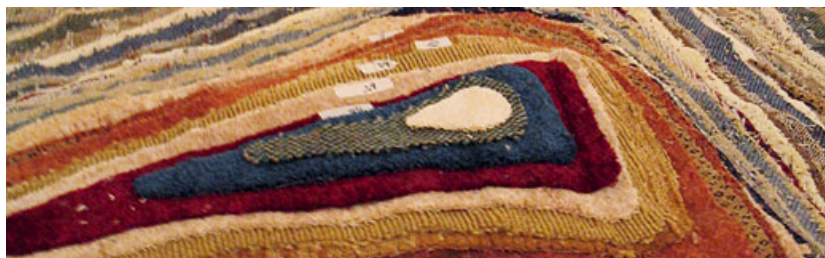
**SEAN SLEMON:**

**THE PREMISES, JOHANNESBURG, 1 SEPTEMBER - 30 NOVEMBER 2005**

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By Robyn Sassen

"Piling wreckage upon wreckage" became a Walter Benjamin-inspired catchphrase in the early 1990s, reflecting on art dealing with the detritus of apartheid. Sean Slemon attempts to pile evocations of space upon space, in a three-part project that comments on socio-economic imbalances in a post-apartheid urban environment.



The interface of visual culture with prosaic and scientific fields is not new. Curiosity spawned by the European Renaissance forged an application of it in some ways, and members of ancient cultures like the San understood it in others. In blending his awareness of geographical and geo-political distribution of space with his aesthetic capabilities, Slemon is earning a level of critical intrigue, and was recently the recipient of a coveted award, sparked off by his consecutive exhibitions in Gauteng.

The first part of this project took place in April at Outlet, in the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) campus. In this exhibition, entitled *The Mountain and the City*, Slemon virtually turned the negative space of Johannesburg's The Premises Gallery inside out, making mountains of its three dimensional shape. The exhibition also comprised a body of etchings. Not well printed, they presented an engagingly loose resemblance to topographical plots, in many cases leaving the illusion of a single line describing a space, by spinning into a tight, all-consuming vortex. The wall-mounted and floor-standing sculptures, monumental in gesture, were surprisingly small in actuality. One of the pieces on this exhibition, entitled *Maquette*, won Slemon the Sasol New Signatures award earlier this year.

The second part of the project was mounted in June at The Premises. Entitled *Uplift: The Mountain Premises*, this installation was smaller than its preview promised, but strong in its hip spin on an otherwise serious concept. Addressing curatorial space and its power over the physical movement of visitors, and working with the understanding of an inverted space, this part of the project comprised pieces of custom-shaped carpet in a range of colour and texture, but diminishing in size, piled on top of one another. The work filled the gallery floor in one ponderous gesture, competently leading to the next part of the project a month later.

The culmination of Slemon's project also used The Premises Gallery as platform. Entitled *Joburg One to Eleven*, this installation developed the notion of spatial containment to comment on topography, population and demographics. Designed to remap the city's 11 metropolitan areas, according to current statistics, it comprised a laminated plywood installation, together with wall-mounted references. While the references remained oblique in their relation to the conceptual process at hand, the floor piece begged discursive comparison with the carpet work: subtle and refined, it is less playful in its accessibility but more mature. It fits together like the large pieces of a child's jigsaw puzzle, movingly embracing the concerns of space and meaning. As an individual piece, which carries the tone of Slemon's project convincingly, this floor sculpture dovetails the socio-economic concerns of geography and those in art with considerable sophistication and freshness.

