



FUGITIVE ARCHIVE: A RESPONSE TO THE BUSHMAN DIORAMA

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Of all the exhibits in all the museums in Cape Town (possibly anywhere in South Africa), the Iziko South African Museum's Bushman diorama has generated more debate and argument, as well as pleasure and interest, than any other. This compelling view into a putative world where men and women lived at peace in the early colonial landscape has been the site of expansive and imaginative discussions by tour guides and the public about the shape and nature of the San, their relationship to their environment and to human origins (Ross 1994; Davison 1993). At the centre of the diorama, a man stood poised – the hunter – bow in hand, alert, ready to aim his arrow. Around him 12 painted plaster body casts of men and women, sitting or lying, made up, as the label described, a typical campsite of the nineteenth century. In the background was an evocatively painted Karoo landscape at dawn or dusk. The diorama drew on an archive – indeed is a powerful representative of an archive, an ineffable archive – of the popular image of the Bushmen, assembled from the fantasies of writers, filmmakers, mystics, scientists and museologists, all of whom helped create out of the Bushmen an analogue of humanity at its origins. As a truth, the diorama seemed more real by being, almost entirely, made-up.

My own view of the diorama has been deeply equivocal (see Skotnes 2001; Skotnes 2002). Like many people, I have been compelled by the theatricality of it; by its ability to draw in the viewer and encourage a suspension of disbelief; by a deep desire to be absorbed into the landscape and imagine a time and place when people were part of a wilderness and alert to the geography of the earth and the seasons and patterns of existence governed by the actions of nature. Such feelings are reinforced by the beauty of its construction – the perfection of the casting technique, the attention

*Bushman diorama, Iziko South
African Museum.*

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