Beyond *Black and White:* Rethinking Irma Stern

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Observers of the South African art market are watching local and international sales of works by Irma Stern (1894-1966) with interest. While record prices have recently been achieved in Johannesburg (R13,2m for 'Gladioli' [1939] at Strauss and Co in 2010) and London (£3m for the 'Arab Priest' [1945] at Bonhams this year), other Sterns have failed to find buyers. The market appears ambivalent. Which raises several questions.

What does the market want? Who, in fact, *is* the market? Discerning art lovers? Several handfuls of investors, unenthusiastic about other asset classes, looking to park cash in art? Only South Africans (resident or ex-pat), or others as well? Do buyers setting record prices consider Stern an exclusively South African artist? Do they quietly consider her an insufficiently recognised, innovative German Expressionist? Has the demand been satisfied? Has Stern hit a bubble?

Nearly five decades after her death in 1966, these market-driven questions invite re-examining Stern's life and work, and consideration of the possible connection between popular and scholarly reception of her work and market-related interest in it. The question of Stern's relationship to German Expressionism is particularly important.

Approaching the literature, one is struck by the tension between local and international interpretations of Stern's work – particularly regarding its political nature – that emerged with South Africa's cultural re-entry into the global arena after 1994. "During the apartheid years of political isolation, Stern scholarship largely remained in the province of academics working within South Africa but post-1994, German academics have evinced renewed interest in Stern," notes South African Stern scholar Marion Arnold[2].

The catalogue of *Expressions of a Journey*, Standard Bank's 2003 Irma Stern exhibition in Johannesburg, bristles with tension between established South African Stern scholars and critics like Arnold and Neville Dubow, and international newcomers like German curator Irene Below.

In 'Between Africa and Europe'[3], Below, a feminist art historian, describes her aspiration to remedy the fact that Stern, who "was able to establish herself in the

male-dominated Expressionist avant-garde of the Berlin metropolis, until her exclusion from the German art world, by the National Socialists after 1933"[4], "was so totally forgotten by Germany that, in 1993, in an exhibition relating to the revolutionary November Group, of which [she] was a cofounder, her biographical details were identified as 'unknown'"[5].

Stern's involvement in Berlin art circles remains an important story.

Acquainted with leading Expressionists, including Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, Erich Heckel and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner[6], Stern was indeed invited to become a foundation member of the *Novembergruppe*[7] and is listed among those attending the group's first meeting in December 1918[8].

In 1917, Stern had been drawn to Max Pechstein, a leading member of *Die Brücke*, the Expressionist group in Berlin, and among the *Neue Sezession's* founders[9]. Stern attributed the start of her friendship with Pechstein to his admiration of her 1916 painting, *Das Ewige Kind*[10], over which she had just broken from her teacher Martin Brandenberg who'd sharply criticised it. Pechstein encouraged Stern with the New Secession's innovations, supporting her to develop her gifts in Expressionist terms[11], including her flamboyant use of colour[12].

Promoting Stern's career, in May 1918 Pechstein introduced her to Wolfgang Gurlitt, proprietor of Berlin's most prominent art salon, who immediately arranged Stern's first exhibition.

Stern corresponded with Pechstein, in Berlin and after returning to South Africa in 1920. The Irma Stern Collection[13] holds eleven letters and a postcard from Pechstein, written between 1917 and 1926[14]. Among her papers are six drafts or copies of Stern's letters to Pechstein while still in Germany, between November 1917 and May 1918. "[Y]ou have made me so contented, so eager to work and happy, with a few words you cast down all the dark hours of despair and inner conflict," she wrote to Pechstein in December 1917[15].

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When Stern learnt that two of her works had been accepted onto the 1918 exhibition of the *Freie Secession* in Berlin, her first public showing, she again thanked Pechstein. "I really can't tell you over the telephone how grateful I am to you for all the good things you have done for me!" she wrote to him. "I am truly always aware of it – how wonderfully you have helped me along – how you showed me what is true and good in my work and what is empty phrasing, and then how you have helped me with other people, have smoothed the path for me. – For I know what human impediments you have cleared from my way through your interest in my work!" she said[17]. (Stern reciprocated, sending Pechstein food parcels during the war[18]).

Stern had her first featured show in May and June 1919, at the Gurlitt Gallery[19]. Another of Stern's paintings appeared in the 1920 exhibition of the *Freie Secession*[20]. In 1920, before she returned to Cape Town after seven years in Germany, two lithographic portfolios by Stern appeared, including *Dumela Marena: Bilder aus Afrika* (Greetings, Sir: Pictures from Africa) published by Gurlitt[21].

Returning to Berlin and exhibiting again with Gurlitt in 1923, Stern was received as the Pechstein of Africa: "Although African by birth and still at home in the bush, she paints exotic humanity and landscapes in the European manner, seen through Pechstein eyes, as it were," said *Das Kunstblatt*[22]. (Noted by German critics, Pechstein's influence on Stern's work remained obvious until the end of the 1920s[23]. As Schoeman indicates, her "Zulu, Swazi and Mpondo paintings and drawings, her Madeira paintings and her work in clay during the 1920s"[24] are "reminisce[nt] of [Pechstein's] portrayals of Palau and the Baltic fishing village of Nidden and of his ceramics"[25]).

Stern's exhibition at the Gurlitt Gallery towards the end of 1926 was favourably reviewed. The *Berliner Tageblatt's* Fritz Stahl reviewed it together with exhibitions by Pechstein, Schmidt-Rottluff and George Grosz[26]. Max Osborn, influential *Vossische Zeitung* art critic, found "something quite extraordinary in her paintings [of] the figures and faces of that distant world, while being able at the same time to catch the mysteries of their sentiment and mentality"[27].

When, in 1927, Stern's first monograph appeared, number 51 in *Junge Kunst* (Young Art)[28], the series produced by Leipzig publishers Klinkhardt & Biermann, the text was written by Osborn, who had previously written the text on Pechstein for the first volume in the series[29]. As is clear from the publications in the series listed on the backcover of the Stern publication, other artists in the series included Picasso (immediately before Stern), Van Gogh, Cezanne, Matisse, Grosz, Otto Dix and Paula Modersohn-Becker[30].

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Stern's obliteration from German art history was not exclusively the result of her gender. On one of many childhood visits to Germany together with her German-Jewish immigrant parents, the South African born Stern was caught in Germany at the outbreak of the First World War. Watching the signs of impending war in Europe as an adult twenty years later, Stern was determined not to get trapped again. She decided not to visit Germany after her trip at the beginning of 1932. Post-war, she chose never to return. "I have buried the past … It hurts more than one thinks," she wrote in 1949 to Trude Bosse[32], her childhood friend from Einbeck, Germany, where Stern's maternal family had rented a house from Bosse's grandparents. "A country, its well-disposed people – all of this into a mass grave," she wrote[33]. These were not vague words: Bosse could not have missed the implicit reference to "well-disposed" members of Stern's own family who Bosse knew from her and Stern's shared childhoods and who didn't make it out of Germany before the destruction of its Jewry. "[E]verything that comes from Germany is like a bygone century to me, like the echo of a sunken world," Stern wrote[34]. For three decades after Stern's death, her reception internationally was further impeded by apartheid's cultural isolation.

Periodising the stages in Stern's life and work, Below positioned her representation of Stern in opposition to critics like Dubow and Arnold who, "within the framework of the (cultural-) political debates before and after 1994"[35], said Below, had defined Stern "as quite highly talented, though sexually frustrated, emotionally drained, humanely ambivalent, politically disinterested and suspect"[36] and perceived in her work "the vent of a physically unattractive, unloved and unhappy woman"[37]. Instead, Below recognised in Stern "a sensitive, acutely observant, qualified artist who, from childhood, came to grips with her life and her experiences in two extremely different worlds, in Africa and in Europe"[38].

"Some chose to see her in overtly politicised terms, suggesting that in her formative years she was sympathetic to left-wing politics and that this was carried through into her mature work by her embrace of African subject matter; a reinvention of Irma the Rebel into Irma the Red," he said. "Those who actually knew her might smile at this ..."

Below perceived a "politically awakened"[39] artist who had established "a closeness to the reality of life in Africa"[40] and whose "interest in the concrete demands of life on ethnic groups in remote parts of the country led to works that questioned current stereotypes"[41]. Referring to Stern's "own press releases in which she comments on her art and criticises the destruction of the 'original' ways of life of the indigenous population as a result of modernisation in the wake of colonialism"[42], Below delineated a shift in Stern's representation of ethnicity. Stern, she said, "increasingly distanaced herself from the "primitivist" concept of German Expressionism and its generalising and abstracting terminology"[43], the result of the European avant garde and German Expressionist's quest for "alternative images to the industrialised capitalist world"[44] which was "rooted in colonialism and the construct of the 'other'"[45]. According to Below, by "creatively processing" her diverse experience in colonial South Africa, Stern distinguished herself from European Expressionists' 'primitivism' "through her closeness to the reality of life in Africa"[46].

This shift is crucial in appreciating Stern's understanding of her art, and her place in South African and international art history.

Members of the South African art community could neither ignore nor embrace the development in Stern's international reception represented by Below and the Bielefeld exhibition. Instead, they responded defensively, including in the *Expressions of a Journey* catalogue, where Arnold dismissed the social commentary in Stern's work discerned by Below. "When travelling in South Africa or beyond its borders [Stern] looked for subjects that would constitute expressive pictorial statements because they could be interpreted in strong coloured and lively brushwork, not because they contained inherent social commentary," she insisted[47]. Dubow repeated his previous derisive criticism of the Bielefeld exhibition's representation of a politically astute Stern. "It is something of a paradox that Irma's return to Germany saw her both rediscovered and re-invented as an exotic feminist icon on the one hand, and as a social revolutionary on the other," he said[48]. "Some chose to see her in overtly politicised terms, suggesting that in her formative years she was sympathetic to left-wing politics and that this was carried through into her mature work by her embrace of African subject matter; a reinvention of Irma the Rebel into Irma the Red," he said[49]. "Those who actually knew her might smile at this," he'd said in a review of the 1996 exhibition[50]. Dubow defended his narrative of Stern's work being driven by "personal reasons"[51] rather than any political understanding. Stern's "attraction to African subject matter was hardly, in and of itself, a political statement," he said[52].

Stern "identified with her subjects in one specific sense: their grace was for her more than just a metaphor for freedom; it was the very incarnation of freedom that she sought and which was denied her in her private emotional life," said Dubow[53]. "Here was freedom, vibrancy, the elusive Paradise that she could touch, smell and paint. Here she could escape from her ungainly body," he said[54]. "Politicking had one primary function: to gain her the recognition that she felt, justifiably, was her due. But in the wider sense she was apolitical," he said emphatically[55].

Writing in the Standard Bank catalogue, Alan Crump revealed the 'wider sense' in which South Africans, like Dubow, perceived Stern as 'apolitical': "Stern, though always having leftist leanings, only partially embraced the political arm of socialism," he said[56]. "Her art was political in … that it embraced and elevated a culture deemed inferior by the white minority, but she was never one to take up the cudgels in her art for a political cause," he said[57].

> Asserting that "[Stern's] attitudes to what she called her 'Native' subject matter do not fit comfortably into our present value system,"[58] Dubow simultaneously signalled what Arnold described generally as "the pressure of political circumstances"[59] determining "new angles of enquiry" in Stern scholarship and reception[60], and the "politicking" specifically underpinning his own angle. "[F]rom a politically correct post-colonial perspective it is all too easy to see Irma's engagement with Africa in a critical light," he said[61], as she'd "'colonise[d]' that part of African experience that she could use in her work [and] unashamedly seized it and brought it back to her studio where the exotic raw material was processed into her art"[62]. Reading Dubow on Stern, the impression lingers that one is, in fact, reading Dubow on Dubow: that the "politically correct post-colonial perspective" he indicates is less about Stern and more about himself, a post-colonial, post-apartheid, white, Jewish, male South African. That Dubow's Stern narrative partly functions as a projection of his own identity and grappling with the impact of South Africa's racist history is suggested by his dismissal both of the Bielefeld exhibition's emphasis on "the Jewish side of Irma's German-Jewish origins"[63], and what he characterised as the accompanying "perception"[64] that Stern "[was] oppos[ed] to the rise of National Socialism"[65], as being the result of "a new generation of Germans struggling to come to terms with the dark chapter of their history"[66].

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Readings of Stern based on narrow definitions of Socialist-supporting art or 'politically correct post-colonial perspectives' limit receptivity to a more comprehensive reading of Stern's social and political astuteness, and disallow meaningful contextualisation of her relationship to German Expressionism.

This is apparent even in the context ostensibly concerned with such contextualisation; namely, *Journeys To The Interior: Unseen Works by Irma Stern* 1929-1939[67], the 2006 Stern exhibition at Cape Town's South African Jewish Museum, curated with the Irma Stern Museum.

In contrast to the Standard Bank *Expressions of a Journey* exhibition's 2003 somewhat

hostile engagement with the 1996 Bielefeld exhibition, the Jewish Museum exhibition took as its starting point issues raised by Below ten years previously. According to Andrea Lewis, then a researcher at the Jewish Museum and author of the publication accompanying the exhibition, by "strip[ping] any post-colonial or post-Apartheid definitions"[68], the exhibition "stages the debate around the very formal foundation of Stern's art: German Expressionism … [and] deals with Stern's close identification with [its] tenets"[69]. Considering Stern in the context of her involvement in the Novembegruppe and the "enduring effect" on Stern of *Die Brücke and Blaue Reiter*[70], Lewis directly echoes (albeit without referencing) Below in arguing that Stern "was even able to establish herself in the male-dominated Expressionist avant-garde of Berlin, a space rarely reserved for women at that time"[71].

Lewis successfully identified the essential question: "as Stern's ties with Germany were increasingly broken in the 1930s, how was her art affected?". "[D]id the events in Germany indirectly force Stern to turn to a more African context as a benchmark for her art?"

Also consistent with Below, the exhibition considered Stern's work between 1929 and 1939 in relation to "the history of modern art in Germany, and the effect of the rise of Nazism on modern art and on the life and work of Irma Stern"[72], and linked her life and work in South Africa to the political realities unfolding in Europe. Exhibition sponsor Robert Kaplan noted that "had Irma Stern remained in Europe she would not have survived as a Jewess and an artist"[73].

Lewis successfully identified the essential question: "as Stern's ties with Germany were increasingly broken in the 1930s, how was her art affected?"[74]. "[D]id the events in Germany indirectly force Stern to turn to a more African context as a benchmark for her art?" she asked[75]. According to Lewis, Stern's work during this period remained continuous with German Expressionism. "Pechstein's powerful influence on Stern endured. She continued to propagate the style of German Expressionism in South Africa, even though the Nazis were systematically destroying any last vestiges of Expressionism in Germany," she said[76]. Noting that this was the case at a time when "German Expressionism and 'primitivism' were no longer mainstream creative topics in Germany, as the notion of the 'New Objectivity' [Neue Sachlichkeit] began to dominate the art scene before the ascent of the Nazis"[77], Lewis considers possible reasons for Stern's enduring relationship to German Expressionism. "Did Stern cling to German Expressionism … because, in South Africa, she was isolated from the evolving art world in Europe? Or because she was clutching at her vanished German heritage, and Pechstein who represented it? Or did she find a lasting artistic style that was compatible with her sensibilities?" she asks[78].

Why Stern remained committed to German Expressionism in the late 1930s is an important question, the answer to which provides one possible explanation for the ambivalence towards Stern's work in the current market. While sufficiently informed by Below to pose key questions about Stern's relationship to German Expressionism, Lewis's reversion to Dubow's quintessentially-apolitical-and-personally-unfulfilled Stern narrative, however, renders her incapable of adequately answering them.

Mildly reworked for palatability (gone, for instance, are references to Stern's "ungainly body"), Lewis's interpretation of Stern ("a complex individual who … used her exuberant art … to compensate for her own frustrations and futile search for intensity in her relationships"[79]) remains entirely derivative of Dubow's. "As she travelled through Africa, her works increasingly manifested a passionate longing for the antithetical mirror image – that which was outside of herself," she says[80].

According to Lewis, Stern's interest in Africa and its people ("who permeated physical beauty and lack of inhibition"[81]) resulted from her own 'non-conformity', "as a woman", to "stereotypical expectations"[82]. "Africa allowed her to escape from the constraints of the world around her and take refuge in self-expression," she argues[83]. Hooked into Dubow's narratives of Stern being both apolitical and driven by the quest for an outlet for her personal frustrations, and describing Stern as "self-absorbed"[84] and "oblivious to events and people around her"[85], Lewis detects in her "pictorial language"[86] a "striking"[87] "visible absence"[88] and 'non-acknowledgement'[89] of "unspoken fears, disappointments and foreboding that arose from the traumatic events of the decade … and [t]he effects of poverty, dispossession and ultimately war, either in Africa or Europe"[90]. Blinded to the political elements of Stern's work, Lewis is unable to meaningfully contextualise Stern's relationship to German Expressionism which she has herself highlighted.

To more fully understand the innovative relationship with German Expressionism which Stern cultivated in the years leading up to and during World War II, one can more usefully turn to *Remembering Irma* by Mona Berman, published in 2003[91]. Noting Below's rejection of theories that Stern was "a white colonial elitist painter seeking the ideal, the primitive and the exotic in 'the other'"[92], Berman signalled an important aspect of Below's work. "Her approach follows Richard Feldman's view that Irma's work offered real social commentary on life in South Africa," Berman said in a footnote[93].

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Below was indeed aware of Feldman: "Stern's theme in the second half of the 1930s was the reality of life of black and coloured people in South African cities, possibly inspired by her friend, the Socialist Yiddishe writer, Richard Feldman," she said[94]. Below's interpretation of Stern as politically astute is cognisant of the changes Feldman discerned contemporaneously in her work. Below notes that Feldman "criticised [Stern's] thematic limitation to life in the areas outside colonial modernisation, and would have preferred … [her] to be a socially critical painter"[95]. "Irma Stern," said Feldman in 1935:

> "is no social artist. She is little concerned with the native away from his natural surroundings. She has not yet seen the proud Zulu as kitchen boy, the joyful Swazi broken in spirit as he emerges from the bowels of the earth, the mighty Basuto as a beast of burden. Our artists, be they writers or painters, still fight shy of the painful and the tragic. They still divorce the ugly reality of our social structure from the beauty that remains unspoilt by industrial man … If Irma Stern has hitherto given us Idylls of the Black, we may hope that even greater work will emerge from her brush should she turn from the maidens of Pondoland to the hard-worked girls of District Six of Cape Town, from the green hills of Swaziland to the Mine Dumps of the Witwatersrand"[96]

Where Arnold extensively quotes this criticism of Stern in support of her own analysis, Below goes further, noting, for example, that Feldman subsequently "praised [Stern's] work in 1936 for the familiarity with which she depicted local situations from which foreigners were barred"[97]. And "in a 1941 critique, Feldman saw the artist on new paths," said Below[98], quoting Feldman: "[Stern's current] oils are works of art of social and historical value. They will tell future generations of the

tragedy of the country's outcasts, of those who are neither White nor Black, and telling the story of their social degradation, these pictures will also convey the story of an existence in a state of perpetual semi-starvation and ill-health"[99].

Born in 1897, Richard (Rachmiel) Feldman emigrated to South Africa, aged thirteen, from Lithuania100. A Zionist and a Socialist in Lithuania, Feldman became a prominent member of the South African Labour Party. For eleven years from 1943, he was Labour's representative for Johannesburg City on the Transvaal Provincial Council101, "almost a lone voice … in his relentless opposition to the National Party[, he] tirelessly urged government to provide a health, housing and education programme for the voiceless majority," says Mona Berman[102]. A member of the Central Rand School Board, Feldman helped found the Peretz School for Africans and the Morris Isaacson Education Fund which had its origins in the Peretz School and of which he was an executor. Both bodies aimed to provide education bursaries for black students[103]. Active in progressive South African politics and projects, Feldman consistently pursued the ideal of the Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskalah*, of being a Jew at home and a South African on the street, "insist[ing] that specifically Jewish concerns could not be separated from South African concerns in general"[104]. A founding member of the local branch of the Zionist Socialist *Po'alei Zion* movement, he was also instrumental in establishing the South African branch of Ort[105], the education and training organisation. Feldman regularly published newspaper and other articles on politics and culture[106].

Stern gave Feldman four reproductions to illustrate Schwarts un Vays, including for the front cover. (The second, expanded edition of the book, published in New York in 1957, only used one image, on the jacketcover). The 1935 edition encapsulates the fact of Stern and Feldman's friendship and mutual interests.

Feldman's home was a central meeting place for Johannesburg's Yiddish-speaking and cultural communities and a sanctuary for liberally minded groups including particularly the Labour Party[107]. His social circle included poets, writers, artists, musicians and actors from the Yiddish theatre. Even a cursory examination of Feldman's papers[108] reveals the rich intellectual nature of this community, actively exploring Freud and Marx in their personal lives, engaging local and international politics, general and Jewish concerns and their interplay. Familiar with intellectual salon culture from Berlin (where Stern's maternal aunt Grete had a salon that attracted many of the most influential of Berlin's art world[109]), the Feldman's world was Stern's obvious cultural home in Johannesburg. (When, in 1931, Feldman married Freda, she too developed a warm and independent relationship with Stern.)

Mona Berman is Richard and Freda Feldman's daughter. Drawing on Stern's letters to her parents, of which she is custodian, and her own memories of Stern dating from her earliest childhood, Berman describes Stern's and her parents' friendship. Berman also helpfully published a CD of the letters[110]. "[Stern] was warmly accepted by Richard, who became an ardent admirer of her work," says Berman[111]. "As early as 1926 Richard wrote a review of Irma Stern's new work, recognising her artistic talent and extraordinary use of colour. It was the first positive critique written about Irma at a time when her work was reviled in South Africa," she records[112]. "[T]he Irma that appealed to Richard [was] fearless, sure of her purpose as an artist and passionate enough to travel to the centre of Africa to portray and document the people as she saw them – with dignity, vitality and vibrant colour," she says[113]. According to Berman, Feldman viewed Stern's work as "offer[ing] real

social commentary on life in South Africa"[114].

Black and White

In 1935, Feldman published a collection of short stories, *Schvarts un Veys*[115] [Black and White], written in Yiddish, the language the Lithuanian immigrant continued to love and study. "He wrote about poor working-class people, black and white, migrant workers and emigrant Jews, and the crucial problem of race relations," said Mona Berman[116]. "He wrote about … shamelessly exploited … miners from rural areas who came to Johannesburg, the city of gold, to seek their fortune … Eventually they returned to their villages sick and dispirited, having lost the will to live," she said[117]. According to Yiddish scholar Joseph Sherman, Feldman "faithfully"[118] recorded "the wealth of African tribal lore"[119]. "His lifelong passionate social concern is the main impetus behind his short stories, which depict, for virtually the first time in Yiddish literature, the life of South African blacks, whom Feldman made a serious effort to know and understand both on the mines and on the farms," said Sherman[120].

Stern gave Feldman four reproductions to illustrate *Schvarts un Veys*, including for the front cover. (The second, expanded edition of the book, published in 1957 by the Central Yiddish Cultural Organization in New York, only used one image, on the jacketcover). The 1935 edition encapsulates the fact of Stern and Feldman's friendship and mutual interests. By enabling consideration of Stern's work in relation to Feldman's Yiddishist socialism, it also provides a key to tracing her trajectory from seeing Africa through Pechstein's primitivist, idealised eyes to representing African subjects increasingly realistically, informed by her friendship with Feldman.

This shift is encapsulated in her image 'The Water Carrier' which Feldman used initially to accompany *Die Chosena* (The Wedding[121]), his story about a Zulu wedding, and subsequently on his 1957 jacketcover.

Feldman attributes the origins of this story to seeing a wedding when he and Freda visited the Valley of a Thousand Hills in Natal on their honeymoon in 1931. "This is not the story of that wedding, but it did give me the idea of writing a story of a Zulu Wedding," he says. Juxtaposed as it is in the book to Stern's image, the story implicitly refers, also, to her description, in her *Umgababa Buch*[122], of the dancing at a traditional marriage feast to which she was invited, in 1922, when visiting a Zulu settlement in Umgababa, Natal:

"The men broke loose – yellow dust flew up – the earth thundered. Fright and fearfulness spread. Gradually the noise abated, and now the measured rhythm of the song accompanying the war dance sounded forth. The men formed a double circle – the wiry bodies tense, listening. The dance leader waved a staff to which an animal skin was fastened. The dance began. Slow, measured movement, inflexible rhythm, panting power, wild cries, flying limbs, movement set free. The people turned into passions: one of them into a raging tiger, whirling about like the sea churned up by the wind – another had the lost expression of a flower drooping under the weight of the dew. They became tremendously strong – each one of them lost the

consciousness of his physical identity – arms and legs had become mere means of expression, the confused eyes saw nothing, the mouths expressed passion"[123].

Berman notes that "the characters in Richard's stories could well have been painted by Irma and, likewise, Irma's portraits of Zulus and Pondos may have sparked ideas for his stories"[124]. In this instance, Feldman's description of the wedding dance could certainly have been based on Stern's:

> "Now all the men engage in dance .... The music mounts in crescendo. Primitive 'piano' and tom-tom strive, now in competition, now in cooperation, to stimulate the dance, to inflame the passion, to kindle ecstasy. Every dancer has a tale to tell, an experience to revive, a dream to fulfil. Every step and gesture tells of battle and of victory. … Imagination becomes heated. Fancy grows apace. Mighty feats of heroism that words cannot describe are come to expression in rhythmic movements. It is the dance of the men. It gives one measure of motion to all, but the movement of each expresses himself alone. It is a dance in which the self becomes visible, in which feeling, experience and fantasy unite in harmony"[125].

Rewriting part of Stern's representation of Africa but within his own analytical framework, Feldman historicises it.

Feldman's awareness that he was generally perceiving the wedding through the eyes of an artist and, specifically in relation to his dialogue with Stern is suggested by his description of Chatileni, "loveliest of all the Xolulu maidens" whose beauty was as "if moulded and carved by a master hand"[126].

Rewriting part of Stern's representation of Africa but within his own analytical framework, Feldman historicises it. Aiming to represent African lore in its own context and on its own terms starting to be affected by modernisation and urbanisation, he aims further to give it anthropological and sociological depth:

> "The 'Kingdom of the Hills' is astir. A wedding takes place this day. … [It] … is an event of importance in the life of the Tribe … The world is beautiful, and kaffir-corn beer to drink will be plentiful, and meat enough for all to eat; young and old will mingle in dance … In one of the huts the Nadlolo elders are engaged in the drinking of beer and the smoking of long pipes. From time to time old men of the Xolulu tribe come in to pay a formal call – giving the simple greeting of a hand-shake"[127].

Describing the traditions expressed in the wedding ceremony as having been subject to change within living memory, Feldman represents African lore and community as occurring within the transforming sphere of history, not the idealised sphere of nature:

> "The older men are engaged in conversation. They recall how of old weddings were different, how the ceremonies in bygone days were something more than the feeble affairs they were to-day, something grander than these half-hearted imitations of a heroic past. In those days a wedding would be attended by the warriors of the entire Zulu nation, who would exhibit their prowess. … A shrunken ancient is talking. It is M'Kubeni. All listen with rapt attention. M'Kubeni can tell of marvellous events. No-one's memory extends as far back as M'Kubeni's"[128].

Through M'Kubeni, Feldman indicates the historical change experienced by the Zulu tribe. Describing his sister's wedding and remembering the test set then for the chief's twelve bodyguards, when he was still a child, M'Kubeni recalls a time in Zulu national history when the men were fearless. "Giants they were – those young men, great giants, utterly devoid of fear," he says[129]. "Nor man nor beast had power to terrify them. The Zulu nation was filled with pride that it had brought forth heroes such as they"[130]. Feldman represents the community as being on the cusp of change, brought by Europeanisation, that will reduce the tribe's power and instil fear: "Shoseni, the bride, comes forth from among her women. She will lead the dance," he says[131]. "A girl follows her, holding a large black umbrella over her head. (It is the only piece of European ism here, this umbrella, ill fitting the scene, but intriguing the people with its novelty)"[132]. Standing in for the urbanising European, the umbrella represents the threat posed by his off-stage presence to a still wholly traditional community.

Travelling through Namaqualand and Swaziland in 1933, Stern had been dismayed by the changes she had herself witnessed:

> "It was a shock to me to see how the natural picturesqueness of the native in his kraal had almost entirely disappeared. Six years ago I saw him a joyous, untrammelled creature, the spirit of Africa at its happiest and most colourful. Today he has submitted to civilization. He wears Everyman's clothes and boots. He looks odd and drab in this garb, and its unnaturalness seems to have cramped his spirit. The joy of life is no longer there. He seems unhappy in the burden of civilised living. To those of us who saw beauty in the native in his natural state the change is sad"[133].

Familiar with and influenced by Feldman's work and analysis, Stern had increasingly come to see African society, including the effects of rapid Europeanisation, in material, rather than idealised, terms.

Justifiably disillusioned with Europe with Hitler's rise to power, Stern looks for an alternative to European 'civilisation' in what others consider darkest Africa. In the process, she inverts the colonial relationship to Africa, equating Africa with civilisation and Europe with barbarianism. (Bosse understood that Stern "felt very Jewish" and considered the Germans to be barbarians).

Stern's project, however, remained distinct from Feldman's. Her gaze was focused on events in Europe. Stern's 1933 trip to Namaqualand and Swaziland was deeply significant for reasons related to her engagement with Germany. This becomes clear when read in terms of her crucial statement, in a letter of 24 April 1933 to Bosse, written less than three months after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany: "I get terribly frightened when I think of Germany's future – so much hatred that has to be overcome and so much blood that still has to be shed! The foreign countries stand shuddering with horror and wonder about the barbarism of the twentieth century," she wrote[134], clearly identifying with "the foreign countries'" horror. "I am going to the "savages" [den Wildern] and probably I shall meet cultured people there," Stern, shortly on her way to Namaqualand and Swaziland, told Bosse[135]. The brevity of her epistolary style belies the seriousness of her thinking. While mistakable for a throw-away line, Stern's comment about 'savages' embodies a profound critique of Western civilisation (one that prefigures Adorno's despairing dictum that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz). Justifiably disillusioned with Europe with Hitler's rise to power, Stern looks for an alternative to European 'civilisation' in what others consider darkest Africa. In the process, she

inverts the colonial relationship to Africa, equating Africa with civilisation and Europe with barbarianism. (Bosse understood that Stern "felt very Jewish" and considered the Germans to be barbarians[136]).

Stern's reference to 'savages' and her subsequent description of the changes she witnessed in Swaziland could be read, decontextualised, to confirm perceptions of her as a white, colonial racist pursuing an idealised, exotic 'other'. However, they assume an entirely different significance when, recognising the significance in Stern's life and work of her German-Jewish identity, they are read in relation to her fears of Nazism. German Expressionism's turn-of-the-century primitivist search for innocence was a reaction, among other things, to European industrialisation; now, for different political reasons and liberated from its idealising, exoticising impulse (in part through her contact with Feldman), Stern sought alternative environments and societies untouched by European 'civilisation'. Rather than the disappointed response of the colonial unsuccessfully seeking the exotic subject, Stern's dismay at witnessing the rapid changes in Swaziland – at encountering Feldman's 'umbrella' – is the depression of the German-Jewish modernist failing to find an environment untouched by the European 'civilization' responsible for the hatred unfolding in Europe.

In the years leading up to and throughout the war, Stern's quest for the cultured 'savage' in response to European barbarism took her to still-strongly traditional Zanzibar and Congo. Disappointed in her search for communities in South Africa untouched by Europeanisation, she found what she was looking for in her first trip to Zanzibar…

The depression could only grow with the Nazi's increasing assault. For example, branded an 'unacceptable' artist, Pechstein was expelled from the Berlin Academy and the Secession. Osborn's books, possibly including his Stern monograph, were *among those* targeted and burnt by the Nazis in 1933. (In the same year, Osborn co-founded the *Jewish Kulturbundes* to try provide income for Jewish artists, banned from performing for German audience.) 326 of Pechstein's works were among the 16000 items, representing the work of 1400 artists, deemed 'degenerate' (for having, amongst other things, been influenced by Jews and Africans) and confiscated from public art collections[137].

Cut off from Europe, both intellectually and in reality, Stern's friendship and correspondence with Richard and Freda Feldman assumed greater importance. They shared an understanding of the crisis facing Jewry and its direct consequences in their respective lives. "Today mother and I went out to Lady Phillip's farm in Somerset West to try and arrange some important matter for the Austrian and German Jews – she is an intimate friend of General Smuts," Stern wrote to the Feldmans in July 1938[138]. (Stern had subsequently inserted the words "try and" in the letter). The Feldmans would undoubtedly have known that Stern's maternal grandmother and aunts were trapped in Germany, as well as the fact that in January 1937 Herzog and Smut's United Party government had introduced the Aliens Bill which prevented further German-Jewish immigration into South Africa. "Shall let you know if anything comes out of it – would be most important," she said[139], knowing, in turn, that her friends required no explanation as to the significance of a positive outcome of their meeting.

In the years leading up to and throughout the war, Stern's quest for the cultured 'savage' in response to European barbarism took her to still-strongly traditional Zanzibar and Congo. Disappointed in her search for communities in South Africa

untouched by Europeanisation, she found what she was looking for in her first trip to Zanzibar, as she describes to the Feldmans in a letter dated 22 October 1939:

"Had the most fantastic time in Zanzibar – a heap of new friends – partly white – partly brown. A life so full of interest and fun – I am sorry I am back [in Cape Town] – as I find it more than dull and *uncultured* [my emphasis]. I brought with me treasures some you can not see – as old as mankind full of wisdom . I also brought with me lots of visible ones – quite apart from my pictures – which I think – you will love as much as [I] do – they are full of caste and secret knowledge – I brought with me an old Arab door… "[140].

Stern promptly had the door built into the entrance of her home, The Firs, symbolically incorporating the culturally rich environment she found in Zanzibar into her life in Cape Town.

To be blinded to Stern's political awareness and the issues evoked by her German-Jewish identity is to miss Stern's real achievement in these years. At a time when Stern's former friends and collaborators in Berlin had been expelled from the academies, banned from public display, displayed in the Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich in 1937, gone into exile or imprisoned in death camps, Stern purposefully and physically went into the heart of the African societies whose art had been so influential in modernist art from the turn of the century. Having sought and found alternatives to European 'civilisation' in 'savage' Zanzibar and Congo, Stern energetically represented them in her work. Stern's production in these years should be considered a continuation of German Expressionism, however belated, to the extent and if for no other reason than that it is profoundly *degenerate* art, a term she consciously and ironically embraced in the 1940s when she explicitly described her 1922 portrait of Cape Town Jewish intellectual and historian Louis Herrman as 'decadent'[141]. Stern actively renewed German Expressionism's ideological premises, and did so at a time when they were a particular target of the Nazis. Rather than 'clutching' at a lost cultural moment, as Lewis suggests, Stern reinvigorated and breathed new and unexpected life into German Expressionism.

… by being alert to her politically astute nature rather than being fixated on her supposed personal frustrations and 'ungainly body', it becomes possible to see Stern's work leading up to and throughout World War II, including her Zanzibar and Congo expeditions, as functioning, in part, as her conscious political response…

By interpreting Stern through Below's eyes, by being alert to her politically astute nature rather than being fixated on her supposed personal frustrations and 'ungainly body', it becomes possible to see Stern's work leading up to and throughout World War II, including her Zanzibar and Congo expeditions, as functioning, in part, as her conscious political response, not as Below suggests to "the deteriorating political situation in South Africa"[142], but to Nazi anti-semitism and its effects on her family, friends and collaborators.

That Stern and her Jewish friends understood the political implications of her work is clear from Joseph Sach's 1942 monograph, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*, which Stern had commissioned him to write[143]. According to Sachs:

"While other artists treat the aborigines as an exotic and decorative subject, Irma Stern has, to some extent at least, achieved a human identification with the

> native: she has tried to penetrate into his soul as a human being, *to obtain a feeling of common humanity* without which an inward portrayal is impossible … In all her work Irma Stern seeks the inner meaning as well as the outer form. The moral aspect of her art is emphasised by her choice of subjects on different planes of civilization and in different social strata. She paints individuals separated by gulfs of culture and social status, by race and culture, and a vast disparity in achievement and opportunity. Yet *the common humanity of all these types breaks through* – not without a struggle which leaves its impress on the faces of her characters"[144].

Writing at a time when the notion of a common humanity was at the ideological heart of a world war, Stern and her Jewish and other friends in Johannesburg and Cape Town were actively promoting this world view in their cultural work and political lives. This can hardly be read as a colonial racist project.

Stern is herself partly to blame for her work indeed being misread in this way. Shortly after the war, she less actively pursued the kind of work that was implicitly concerned with representing a common humanity. She did so in reaction, now, to the rise to power in South Africa of the National Party whose pro-Nazism Stern had witnessed. (Writing to the Feldmans in May 1942, two days before leaving for her first trip to the Congo, Stern included in the letter a press clipping from *Die Burger* newspaper. "Have a cutting from our Nazi paper," she said[145]). The fact that she did not, however, produce the kind of ethnic work that would have won her friends in the new governing circles is testimony to the fact that the shift in her work was not the result of her support for apartheid but, rather, the result of her fears of Nazi-inspired Afrikaans nationalist anti-semitism. Writing to the Feldmans in September, 1949, Stern referred generally to life under the changed political reality as "unbearably poisoned through all the mental and social barricades"[146]. "I am anxiously seeing what other hair raising news the papers bring and when the first word against the Jew strikes the soil here," she said[147], referring specifically, also, to her fears, shared by many South African Jews starting to deal with the knowledge of the fact and extent of the destruction of Jewish communities throughout Europe, that the changes would be accompanied by formal anti-semitism. Desiring to avoid official attention, Stern became more politically quiescent. Supportive enough of the aims of the Treason Trial to donate a painting to its fund-raising campaign, she refused Freda Feldman's request in 1958 for a second painting. "As to the picture for the Treason Fund I have given them one here [in Cape Town] and don't particularly want to be mixed up more in this business. So I am sorry no," she said[148]. As Berman notes, "well aware of the fate of fellow artists in Germany during the war, and having already expressed fears regarding anti-Semitism in South Africa, [Stern] was clearly uneasy about the attention she might draw to herself if she continued to donate paintings to the Treason Fund"[149]. This is the Stern, towards the end of her life, who Dubow describes.

Against the backdrop of the conflicting scholarly representations of Stern and her work in and around the various Stern exhibitions and publications over the last decade, the market has perhaps intuited that, while currently still moored to limiting local interpretations, Stern's work truly comes into focus when contextualised not only in relation to German Expressionism but as a late attempt to keep it alive. When Stern breaks free once and for all from readings based on Dubow, et al., when her work is finally recognised in the context delineated by Below, observers of the South African art market may witness another spate of record prices.

NOTES

1 For their assistance during my research for this essay, I would like to thank Lana Bronstein who gave generously of her archive (personal and actual); and Michelle Pickover, curator, and Zofia Sulej, archivist, at the Wits Historical Papers Archive.
2 Arnold, 2003, 42.
3 Below, 2003.
4 ibid, 34.
5 ibid, 31.
6 Esmé Berman, 56.
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8 Joan Weinstein, The End of Expressionism: art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918-1919. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p 252 n 16. Quoted in Schoeman, 62.
9 Dubow, 1991, 9.
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11 Schoeman, 50.
12 Esmé Berman, 5.
13 The Irma Stern Collection, MSB 31, South African Library, Cape Town.
14 Schoeman, 58.
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18 Schoeman, 59.
19 Dubow, 1991, 9.
20 Schoeman, 64.
21 ibid.
22 The Irma Stern Collection, MSB 31/18:1. South African Library, Cape Town, Sept 1923. Quoted in Schoeman, 82.
23 Schoeman, 50.
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28 Stern, 1927.
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30 ibid.
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32 Quoted in Dubow, 1991, 106.
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36 ibid.
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38 ibid.
39 ibid, 34.
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41 ibid, 35.
42 ibid, 34.
43 ibid, 35-36.
44 ibid, 32.
45 ibid.
46 ibid, 37.
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48 Dubow, 2003, 54.
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52 ibid.
53 ibid, 55.
54 ibid.
55 ibid, 54.
56 Crump, 2003, 26.
57 ibid.
58 Dubow, 2003, 54.
59 Arnold, 2003, 39.
60 ibid.
61 Dubow, 2003, 54.
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63 ibid, 53.
64 ibid, 54.
65 ibid, 53.
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69 ibid.
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73 Robert Kaplan, Foreword. In Lewis, 2006, p 11.
74 Lewis, 15.
75 ibid.
76 ibid, 29.
77 ibid.
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79 ibid, 15.
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81 ibid.
82 ibid.
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84 ibid, 15.
85 ibid.
86 ibid, 14.
87 ibid.
88 ibid.
89 ibid, 15.
90 ibid, 14-15.
91 Mona Berman, 2003.
92 ibid, fn 8, p 181.
93 ibid.
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96 Feldman, South African Opinion, 17 May 1935. Quoted in Arnold, 1995, 73.
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99 Richard Feldman, Forward, 31.1.1941. Quoted in Below, 36.
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102 Mona Berman, 59.
103 Sherman, 72.
104 ibid.
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107 Mona Berman, 64-65.
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109 Dubow, 1991, 79.
110 Stern, Irma Stern Letters.
111 Mona Berman, 51.
112 ibid, 42.
113 ibid, 43.
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115 Richard Feldman, Schwarz un Veys, 1935.
116 Mona Berman 45.
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122 'Umgababa Buch', 1923. In Irma Stern Collection, MSB 31/1:15. South African Library, Cape Town.
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124 Mona Berman, ibid, 45.
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127 ibid, 1-3.
128 ibid, 3.
129 ibid, 5.
130 ibid.
131 ibid, 10.
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135 ibid.
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138 Stern to Freda and Richard Feldman, 19 July 1938. Irma Stern Letters.
139 ibid.
140 Irma Stern to Richard and Freda Feldman, The Firs, 22 October 1939. Irma Stern Letters.
141 Arnold, 1994, 99.
142 Below, 36.
143 Lana Bronstein (Joseph Sachs' niece), personal communication, Johannesburg, 19 April 2011.
144 Sachs, 51, 55. My emphases.
145 Stern to Freda and Richard Feldman, 23 May 1942. Irma Stern Letters.
146 Irma Stern to Richard and Freda Feldman, 18 September, 1949. Irma Stern Letters.
147 ibid.
148 Irma Stern to Freda Feldman, 13 November 1958. In Irma Stern Letters.
149 Berman, fn 46, p 183.

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