

in conversation

*The following email interview was held between Colleen Alborough and Mandy Conidaris in July 2013 after several informal conversations.*

**MC - You were born in Johannesburg and grew up here?**

**CA - That's** correct. I've lived in Johannesburg all my life.

**MC - *50 Stories* was a 2010 commission for a room in the new 12 Decades Hotel at Main Street Life, at Maboneng Precinct, in Fox Street, downtown Joburg. You were given the decade 1966 – 1976 to research and make work about. The *50 Stories* suite of 50 prints relate to icons of that era, from the Springbok Radio logo to the Top Star Drive-In. What prompted you to choose the planning, development and construction of the Carlton Centre as one aspect of your subject matter? And what provoked your decision to create 50 small scale prints that ran as a frieze around the walls of the hotel room?**

**On the surface, *50 stories* seems atypical of the type of work you are more commonly associated with, namely video installation and monotype. But you have worked with the traditional printmaker Collin Cole, and the subject matter of *50 stories* is still Joburg-based. Would you say it deliberately represented a lighter side of life, in that it provokes nostalgia among many of your viewers, or was this an unexpected side-effect?**

**CA -** I hope you don't mind, but I am going to answer the above 2 questions simultaneously as my answer is interrelated. For this project, I wanted to look at the cultural and socio-political mood of the time between 1966 and 1976. This was a very problematic era in South African history, with many of the most stringent Apartheid laws being passed and violently policed during this period. The artwork is for a hotel room, so I had to consider how I could impart information of the socio-political events happening in this era whilst also being mindful of using interior design elements to create a comfortable, restful space. So there had to be a subtlety in how I included information on Apartheid into the work.

I decided that using only black and white as "colours", both in the choice of printmaking as medium and the décor for the room, could extend the metaphor of the segregation of Apartheid. The artwork's 50 images are in black and white, and look like newspaper prints. The hotel room has 2 black walls and 2 white walls, against which, the black and white prints hang. All the fabrics of the room are also black and white.

Between 1966 and 1976, at the height of Apartheid, South Africa was also experiencing an economic boom. The construction of the Carlton Centre epitomised this economic boom, being the highest building ever to be built in central Johannesburg at that point in time. I liked the fact that the Carlton Centre has 50 storeys and felt this structural element of the building could become a metaphor for *50 stories* that I could tell about the events of that era. So, the body of work tells the reader / hotel guest little "stories" about Johannesburg.

I also liked the title of “stories” because I found that the information gathered during my research was tainted with influences of Apartheid, and at the risk of generalising, I felt that the tone of journalism during this era was somehow “sanitised”. Perhaps this could be seen as a more optimistic form of journalism coming out of that era which was globally more conservative compared to today. However, when viewed from the 21<sup>st</sup> century where we are accustomed to media content filled with graphic images and full details of horrific events, this style of journalism from the late 60s and early 70s seemed tame and overtly optimistic in comparison. And in this optimism, I felt a level of denial (and censorship?) around the atrocities of Apartheid happening during this era.

So the resulting artwork has a tone of “light heartedness” to it, for all the above reasons. But in this way, I think it captures the cultural ethos of that period, and to an extent, reflects how the atrocities of apartheid were “hidden” from (or from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, censored in) the South African media.

*50 stories* definitely evokes a level of nostalgia in viewers who were (mostly white) youths living in Johannesburg during this period. It was a period of protected, cultural freedom for white citizens and many young white adults spent their youth in the cinemas, restaurants and clubs based in central Johannesburg. However, this youthful freedom was certainly not the general experience of most of South Africa’s youths of this time. This period was perhaps also the calm before the storm of the 1976 riots and the turbulent period that followed in the next 2 decades of South African history. After the 1976 riots, South Africa could no longer deny or cover up the extent of the atrocities of Apartheid and media reportage started to change.

The 50 prints are installed in a 360-degree horizontal line around the hotel room. This installation echoes the panorama viewing deck of the Carlton Centre, where you can still go today and get a 360-degree view of Johannesburg. Viewing something from above, getting the bigger picture also parallels our position now, where we have the benefit of looking back on history, on this particular decade with more perspective and knowledge.

**MC - You would have been a child in the 1970s. Do you have any personal memories of the Carlton Centre during the 1970s, or were most of your memories later?**

**CA** - Yes, we used to go to the Ice Rink at the Carlton Centre. I also remember my folks going to dinners at the Carlton Centre. Mostly though, I remember what a buzz of activity “town” was. And what a big deal it was for me as a child to go to “town”. I loved to catch the bus into “town” and walk with my parents on the streets of Johannesburg. I also remember going to the Top Star Drive-In. Of course, I fell asleep as we arrived, but nonetheless, it was exciting to look at the view of Johannesburg from the top of a mine dump!

**MC - Moving onto other work, you deal extensively with the dark side of Joburg life – unnamed fears and anxieties - in most of your work. Technically and visually your work is mostly associated with intricate and complex installation work. For example, your 2010**

**Standard Bank Gallery exhibition, *Balance*, featured a sculptural video installation, and your current participation in the exhibition *Verge* at Fried Contemporary (Pretoria) has several wall installations. Could you speak a little about your choice of materials and visual metaphors?**

**CA** - Yes, I have been exploring the darker side of Joburg life, namely unnamed fears and anxieties we can feel when moving around the city. In 2010, I came across this great quote from the play, *A Delicate Balance* (1966) by Edward Albee. In the play, the characters Harry and Edna arrive unexpectedly at their friends Agnes and Tobias's house, with a request to stay for a while, as they need to escape an unnamed terror. In explaining this terror, Harry and Edna state:

HARRY: There was nothing ... but we were very scared.

EDNA: We ... were ... terrified.

HARRY: We were scared. It was like being lost: very young again, with the dark, and lost. There was no ... thing ... to be ... frightened of, but ...

EDNA: We were frightened ... and there was nothing.

I think this quote often epitomises the fears we feel about Johannesburg. So, in my work I try to explore the relationship between real and imagined fears. My recent artworks consider the extent to which we can sometimes feel controlled by invisible, unnamed terrors. In mapping imaginary landscapes, the works aim to reflect upon the negotiations and manoeuvres we make within the complex, at times disconcerting and chaotic space of South Africa, and more specifically, the urban terrain of Johannesburg.

I use cotton waste, a cleaning material used in printmaking studios, extensively to construct the artworks – in the video installation, animation and prints. As a waste material, it performs an essential utilitarian function yet is seemingly insignificant, ostensibly “nothing”. Upon closer inspection, we see it is made of thousands of shredded cotton threads, forming a large mass of nebulous chaos. Throughout my installations, the cotton waste represents the element of unknown fears and the threat of disorder. As with imagined fears, ill-defined yet wholly present in our minds, the formless piles of cotton waste become subterranean underworlds, hindering the movement of the figures that wander across its terrain. The figures in my installations appear to be lost, on an endless struggle to escape the nameless terrors and break free of the anarchic mass.

By uttering the fear and searching for ways to describe the phantoms, the works endeavour to present a way to deal with the feelings such fears inspire. A sense of play is used to confront these nameless terrors. With a spirit of mockery and laughter, I hope to highlight an element of the absurd present in the strange worlds of imagined fears, as well as the sense of the absurd that we sometimes feel when living in this crazy city of Johannesburg.

**MC - What role does process play in your image creation?**

**CA** - Process is very important in my work. I find the creative process to be a meditative and contemplative physical process. For me it is in the moving of one's body while engaging in the task at hand of creating an artwork that allows an internal, thinking process to happen.

I search for ways to include elements of the handmade and the making process, as a means to import haptic, tactile qualities into the digital realm. In the stop frame animation, the sets and characters are made from cut-out drypoint and monotype prints. The landscapes of the sets are composed of cotton waste. By integrating products and materials from the printmaking process into the animation, traces of the handmade become integral in creating a more tactile digital product.

The medium of stop-frame animation also lends itself to creating a more organic, "mortal" digital product. A stop-frame animation is produced by taking photographs of the characters' tiny movements over space and time. These photographs are then seamed together in editing software to form a moving visual sequence. Because each character or individual body part needs to be moved incrementally, traces of the artist's physical presence and movement become part of the work.

The element of animation is extended in the printmaking process as I use printmaking as a way to storyboard and map out the narrative for my animations. The monoprint (or monotype) lends itself to producing multiple iterations of an image, and in this way, the series of monotypes with successive "ghost-prints" become a form of early animation. Individual acetate figures and body parts provide a versatile means to modify each following print. These drypoint fragments can be shifted into new poses, altering the composition of the monotype while the "ghost-image" retains the trace of the characters' previous positions in the early stages of the image's development.

Traces of the creative process are further incorporated into the soundscapes I create for my animations. For the animation *Balance*, musician João Orecchia recorded the sounds in and around my studio while I was working. This included recording the sounds of my equipment, such as the printing press, the CPU of my computer and the lens of the digital camera. All these sounds were then montaged together in digital software to produce a haunting soundscape that evokes a sense of a disconcerting underworld.

**MC - How do you assess your image afterwards from the perspective of its meanings to you, namely the memories it evokes of your thought processes during the making?**

**CA** - This is difficult to answer definitively as my response to my artworks can change over time. During the making process, I can sometimes make an artwork without being fully aware of its significance. Occasionally it can take a few years for me to realise what themes or deeper issues it was that I was exploring at that point of time of making that artwork. So I think the meaning of the work evolves over time and with the benefit of hindsight. But a particular artwork will also always hold within it the thought processes that I had during the

making of the work. What is interesting is how these thought processes evolve and develop as time passes.

**MC - Is the work's significance to the viewer important to you?**

**CA** - Yes, very important. The viewer's interpretation of the work becomes another layer of meaning in the work. And if I use interactive components in an installation, the artwork only comes alive when a viewer enters the space. So for me, the viewer is an essential part of the creative process. Exhibiting artworks creates a type of exchange and opens a dialogue with the viewer. Often while looking at an artwork or experiencing an installation, wonderful conversations can strike up between viewers - sometimes complete strangers to each other - yet in these conversations, viewpoints are shared and discussed. I really enjoy this element of the creative process when art makes you look at the world from a different perspective. I hope that my work can have that effect on people.