

in conversation

This email interview was held between Janet Botes and Mandy Conidaris in September 2014.

MC - Janet, you are an artist who works in many different media – not only drawing, painting, mixed media and sculpture, but also installation and land art, and more recently digital prints. The sub-link between these seems to be always aspects of the natural world. Could you say when and how your passion for nature developed?

JB - In the same way as my worldview, career and belief system were developed - through experiences! I am very lucky that my parents took us on holidays all throughout my 'growing years' at the coast, in the waterfall-rich kloofs of Mpumalanga, and other beautiful natural places. My grandparents also have a farm in the Northern Cape, so most of my Christmas holidays were spent walking barefooted on the red sands of the semi-Kalahari and following the tracks made by *toktokkie* beetles and other critters. At the same time I grew up in Vanderbijlpark, where air pollution and water pollution are two major issues, so I developed a strong concept or very passionate belief of what is 'right' and 'wrong' for me in the way we relate and interact with our natural environment and fellow living beings - whether they are big (the Big Five) or small and seemingly insignificant (tiny insects).

MC - You have spoken about "individuals who see themselves as disconnected beings, as separate from nature, rather than a thread in the web of life". If we leave aside issues such as the practical opportunities for the viewer to experience the work, of all the media you work in, which do you feel best expresses your intention to raise an awareness in the viewer around respecting and appreciating the natural world and why?

JB - When you say 'practical opportunities for the viewer to experience the work', I assume you're referring to the way performance art and land art (when done in a public space rather than a remote area) often allows the viewer to deeply experience or even become part of the work. Because this IS the most powerful way to raise awareness or make them 'feel' it - asking or allowing the viewer to help you create the work, to become an integral part of it. I often ask my audience to help me create my installations or performances (during an exhibition in Vanderbijlpark I asked them to hit rocks together to make the sound for my performance, and during my first solo exhibition I asked people to help me create my installation by placing a white pebble in a place that makes sense to them). This way it becomes more tangible to them as they 'touch' earth (the rocks).

That aside, I think the reason I work in so many different media is not only because no single medium effectively answers all my needs and expresses fully what I want to say, but also because people are reached or 'touched' by different types of art - I almost want to give anyone something that they can relate to. One person might not be moved to appreciate

nature because of the way I represent it in my paintings, but LOVE my digital work and what I communicate through them, while another person are really moved by my performances or photographic landscapes.

MC - You talk of art having the ability to strengthen the energy connections between the individual and the processes of the natural world – seasons and cycles; and that art can facilitate healing. In conversation with art critic and environmentalist Suzi Gablik, Jungian analyst James Hillman defended the criticism that therapy is so inwardly focused that we have lost attention to the world around us (1997:181). He maintained that another view could be that whatever an individual does alone in a room in therapy or in art must affect the world, as it comes out like a ripple (1997:183). Could you comment on these views?

JB - Absolutely. I want to start by looking at the notion that we lose attention or connection to the world around us when we get too inwardly focused. The world around us is a reflection of what goes on inside of us - when you focus inward and heal the 'chaos' or 'damage' that your experiences have made on your happiness, you are able to deal much better with the chaos or damage in the world around you - which in turn impacts on the world when you react with compassion or nonviolence rather than judging, reacting fearfully or over-emotionally to a situation. When people do get caught up with therapy and healing in a way that makes us lose touch with those around us and the world at large, making us isolate ourselves excessively, this to me indicates that we just need to heal further and work through our need to self-isolate and over-indulge in what we call 'therapy' but might rather be a resistance to connect to others or do the practical things required to fix our lives.

So, next I want to affirm the ripple. I believe that things are interconnected - very much like a spider's web. When you push or pull on one strand of the web, even lightly, the rest moves too. Whatever you do in your life has an effect on things around you, even far away from you. Because of technologies such as the internet, air-travel and even the post office, our ability to have a far-reaching impact has become even quicker and bigger - the food on your plate might have travelled thousands of kilometers to reach you, which means that you have indirectly paid the wages of a worker in another country, and bought the food on the plates of his kids. In the same way, you could smile at the people helping you in a supermarket and brighten their day in a way that makes them treat their kids with love and respect after work, whereas a rude customer could ruin the rest of their day and cause them to be tired and impatient after work. Those are the more practical and visible examples of how we affect the world around us - which brings me to healing and therapy. If you as a person can be whole and happy, you'd treat everyone and everything around you with acceptance and compassion. You would brighten the lives of those around you, instead of being impatient and rude to people who then do the same to the people around them. In art, this same principle works in two ways. (1) When an artist is creating work that truly expresses their emotions, vision or intention, this artist is usually fulfilled and happy, and

this shows to the people around them. And more importantly (2) the thoughts, energy and ideas that are placed into the art - the 'blood, sweat and tears' - can affect the viewer in a deep and healing way that affects the way that they respond to the people, environment and situations in his or her life.

And finally... there is a collective consciousness, something we can all feel in one way or another, whether at a big event, in our dreams or in moments of inspiration. And we can all feed from, and gain insight or wisdom from, this collective memory - whether consciously or not. And whatever personal work, healing, therapy or creation that you do feeds into this collective consciousness, which is again shared with others.

MC - Picking up on a few comments that Strijdom made in his opening speech to your exhibition at the StateoftheART gallery space (2014). Although when in the art world we speak of the works of environmental artists being site specific, we usually mean they are/have to be situated in a particular place in the land, Strijdom said that your work becomes "site specific" in that you spent time meditating about that space before you begin work. Could you speak a little about that period of consideration, namely your thinking process before you start making a work?

JB - This period of consideration differs for each work of art. Sometimes it could be a very subconscious thinking or contemplation that only reveals itself fully while I'm creating - I get these 'aha!' moments where things fall into place just a little too perfectly for it to be mere coincidence. Other times I really do sit and think the site and theme from different angles. I bring found objects like leaves, twigs, sand and found insect wings from the natural site into my studio where I can look at, feel and touch them before and while I'm creating an artwork. I mention both feel and touch, since feeling is not just about the texture, it's also about any thoughts or emotions that come up when you look at and think about the site. As any artist could attest, your thinking processes are not only limited to your actual time spent in the studio - you might also think about the artwork or the theme while you're in the bath, eating dinner or doing your laundry. Part of the process of some of my works involves going to a site that inspires me for repeat visits in order to fully realize or envision the artwork. A lot of works are so much 'in progress' that they do not yet exist in physical space, but only live as ideas that cannot be fully expressed yet.

MC - Regarding digital prints, or in your case digital collage, I'd like to share with you part of a conversation I had with Yolanda Warnich, an artist who is a digital photographer yet also a painter, who is currently experimenting with the crossover between the two. She is inspired by Turner, and we spoke about the way he made preliminary sketches outside, returning indoors to his studio to paint his formal works. We decided that this working process - of 'sketching', whether with charcoal or camera, then artmaking in the studio, whether with oil on canvas or Photoshop - is in itself a traditional working method of artists who use the land as subject. Could you comment on this?

JB - Firstly I want to say that I have now become really excited about what Yolanda said, and I'm eager to see her work. And the way that she says that Turner worked represents the way that I work too. But I suppose your question relates more to whether digital collage or digital art can be seen as traditional or fine art. Each period's artists use what is at their disposal, what is abundant or what is relevant to their time and environment. Prehistoric artists used pigments with animal fat, blood and urine to make cave paintings that documented their rituals, rites and lifestyle. In Egypt papyrus was used as substrate because the Papyrus plant was abundant along the banks of the Nile. When photography or the daguerreotype was invented in 1840 some artists started creating photographic work, but others changed the way they painted since photography could create realistic images. It would be a shame if we as artists did not use the new tools available to us now, and I see video art, digital collage, and other 'new media' work as fine art when it's created with the intent of challenging people's perception, awareness or appreciation. I see it as traditional because we're applying the same sensibilities and elements such as colour, composition, line, perspective and even texture to create the work. 50 years from now, digital art might not be seen as non-traditional because the contemporary art forms and sculptures might be created as holographic projections, and anything printed on paper would be seen as traditional.

MC - As an extension of the above question: much of your work deals with the landscape, in particular the disconnection between the individual and nature/the land. Regarding your way of working for the *Nuances* series – being literally in the land while capturing your source imagery by camera, but then by necessity creating the resolved artworks digitally at your computer, do you ever feel that sense of becoming distant from the land yourself while you are in the making process – a kind of gap between art and nature? Or do you find your immersion in the creative selection of collage elements and the 'digital stitching' reaffirms your sense of land?

JB - I definitely feel a disconnection and resulting inauthenticity in my work when I spend an excessive amount of time in front of my computer. Just like we need to brush our teeth and eat breakfast every day, I need to constantly return to the particular landscape, or any other landscape, in the process of creating an artwork, to re-capture, re-experience, and remember the feeling I'm trying to convey and to encourage for my viewers. In a way I'm not creating the work with the intention of my viewer sitting in front of it, I'm creating the work so my viewer becomes enticed to visit the landscape to see what I saw, to feel what I felt. The digital process or technique I'm using to create the work is the most effective for me to use the photographs (which are imbued with the 'spirit' of the landscape) in a unique and expressive way.

MC - There has also been much debate around the notion of the gap between the individual and art, or between art and life. Another point that Strijdom made was that the environmental artists of the 1960s "freed themselves from gallery space and the reason

for that was that they felt that the real space, the wildness, the calmness, the stillness and the beauty exists outside the gallery space. They freed themselves from curators, they freed themselves from how big the walls can be and they believed that to be creative and absolutely open, you have to move outside of the gallery space.” In other words, one goal of the environmental artists is to re-integrate life and art, life in this case being nature. He continued, “But there's a catch 22 situation with that, in that you have to bring what you do outside the gallery space back into the gallery space for most people to see.” Work in galleries and museums is often considered to become removed from real life in that a gallery/museum space may be considered elitist and exclusive. Could you briefly describe any ways you have found effective in overcoming this hurdle?

JB - One such a way is illustrated in a performance or interactive piece that I did during the exhibition *Scrapes & Scapes* at Bodutu Gallery in 2011. Close to the end of the exhibition I walked around with a box of rocks in the area around the gallery - which is the campus of the Vaal University of Technology - and gave passersby a rock, explaining to them that they should go into the gallery and add the rock to my existing installation piece (created from rocks, leaves and branches), changing the artwork in any way that feels right to them. This made it a more integrative process and experience, and since the actions of my participants in the gallery was captured on video, I could see the way they interacted, played, and enjoyed creating or changing a quite abstract creative expression by only using rocks. Sending people into the gallery space with a specific task or intention also gives them some confidence or sense of ‘belonging’ there.

MC - **As artists today, there is much potential for our work to exist in a virtual world, including the artist’s own website and social media. The Internet is a vehicle that millions are familiar and comfortable with, and there are many platforms available to expose an artist’s work. As an artist who has exhibited in the land, in gallery spaces and more recently online – with your StateoftheART page and your upcoming outoftheCUBE exhibition, do you see online art sites as an added way to re-integrate art with life, to ‘narrow that gap’? Or do you feel it adds another layer to the disconnect?**

JB - People who disconnect from ‘physical’ life through spending too much time online is definitely a modern-life challenge and very real issue, but it is something that can be overcome. Through balance and self-discipline anyone can use the internet as a tool to inform and enrich their life. Have you seen TED talks? And Upworthy videos? I think online art sites are an incredibly valuable way to expose people to beautiful and thought-provoking art. And as I said about artists using the tools to their disposal, we need to use the internet to educate and expose people to art. And here’s where it gets interesting - each person you can find their balance between spending time online vs. in their physical day-to-day life, and I find the balance between the time spent in the landscape vs. in the studio, and everyone finds a balance between therapy vs. integrating their healing into their daily dealings with others... each of these moments of balance feeds into the collective consciousness. Also

each person who shares their art, their insights, their inspiration and their incredible experiences of connection on the internet, makes it so much more possible for others to find, enjoy and learn from it, and thus enrich their lives through it.

MC - Suzi Gablik commented that if art is considered 'aesthetic', it becomes restricted, merely a channel for the expression of beauty (1997:187); but in fact the fuller meaning of 'aesthetic' is the ability to feel or perceive *. Hillman likens 'the contemplation of beauty' to 'the contemplation of the eternal' – his view of *aesthesis* being "noticing the world" (1997:188). This ties in so well with Don McCullin's quote on your own website:

"Photography for me is not looking, it's feeling. If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures."

Any last comments?

JB - To what you just said: AMEN!

Thank you Janet!

* <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/aesthesis> aesthesis - the ability to feel or perceive.