

in conversation

This email interview was held between Johann du Plessis and Mandy Conidaris in October 2014.

MC - Johann, I'd like to start by discussing some of your earlier works*, as the works in the outoftheCUBE exhibition *Room with a View* seem to represent further steps along the same creative path. Aspects of this interview also stem from our conversation earlier this year.

In our conversation in August, you shared with me your journey through the diagnosis of cancer, waiting to have your treatment decided on, and then the debilitating processes of chemo- and radiation therapy and their impact on your body and soul. The artworks from your exhibition '*flash!-back(s)*' in April of this year at the AVA Gallery in Cape Town explore the way you subsequently dealt with the trauma of those memories and with the rebuilding of your life after physical healing. These works, though, are not art therapy, but more an expressive response to your experiences. Could you share with us your view on the restorative power inherent in creative work?

JdP - I find that the creative process takes me (and the viewer) beyond the visual, to reflection or self-reaction and in doing so to the condition and essence of humanity.

MC - The '*flash!back(s)*' images were not literal landscapes but composites, described* as a reworking and manipulation through a process of remembering and enacting. Although you spoke of an emotive journey, the images were captured during an actual physical journey from the Eastern to the Western Cape. Did the open spaces of the Karoo and the countryside you travelled through prompt you to start tapping into your emotions? Or were you already thinking about exploring your experiences in artwork?

JdP - I studied Architecture before I did my BA Fine Arts degree and this has always been a major influence in my artworks - calculated, pre-planned and controlled. I had therefore decided before the journey what I was going to do for the '*flash!back(s)*' exhibition with the works being the last part of the healing process.

MC - About those same works, you spoke also of a process of reflection - "reflections of moments in time and space, allowing ideas to form meaning through different layers of reality". For me, the technical process you used, the panoramic layering of photographic imagery collaged with elements of drawing, could refer to a kind of metaphorical psychological space where disassociated fragments and images unexpectedly make their presence felt – in other words, these digital land-scapes could mirror the world of the mind/body-scape, where sudden flashes of memory reinforce and reaffirm the impact

that your experiences had on you. Would you mind commenting on my response to this aspect of your work?

JdP - The works became a catalyst for my 'journey' / 'recollections' of 2012/13 – a world filled with horror, hallucinations and the battle and hope to 'engage' again with the outside world leading towards safety and normality.

MC - Moving on to *Room with a View*, these images have a much more intimate source – instead of from the vastness of the land, the photographs were taken of the night sky from the balcony of your home in Mouille Point, Cape Town. You described this act of artmaking as an attempt to rehumanise your environment after these experiences, to “raise the white flag towards safety”. With the common association of the white flag being the notion of surrender, could you elaborate a little on this evocative statement?

JdP - In a contemporary world where global issues and disasters have become international 'symbols', I attempt to show in the works for the *Room with a View* exhibition that mysticism, peacefulness, silence, the 'non-obvious', the 'unseen', the night, the cosmic, the universe and the search for the Ultimate Beauty can all contribute to 'raising the white flag'.

MC - Gamwell says “The skies of the Romantic landscape offered the perfect place to synthesize science and the spiritual.” Knowing that you were behind the camera and viewing the night sky in a meditative state, it seems as though you were doing just that – looking at your physical medical experiences and trying to integrate them with your own understanding of the metaphysical world. Could you comment on that?

JdP - In creating artworks we can 'speak' about the unspeakable which deals with emotions, the 'experiencing' of that which is seen as 'illogical' or 'weightless'. My works deal with how I relate to the relativity of human life; how I (and the viewer) try to humanize the surroundings to become more reassuring and thus giving us self-assurance, comfort and logic. These works reflect moments in time and space, or rather through time and space – letting go of the 'now', allowing ideas to form meaning through different layers of reality – an interplay between the passing and dissolving of time.

MC - Similarly, the poem you present in your artist's statement speaks of contrasting states of being – a “double” world - where each state has equal though opposite significance and because of this, each is in a relationship with the other. Regarding your imagery, there is almost a sense of 'standing within and gazing out'. As we have said, the subject matter has been captured from your living space, and then during your digital manipulation of the image, the night skies begin to mimic astrological mapping, the universe. Would you say that this reflects another aspect of your double world – the intimate and the cosmic?

JdP - The reworked and manipulated images are less of a documentation of a specific place and more of a process of reflection through remembering (photographs) and re-enacting (drawing and collage) – an emotive journey through time and space.

MC - In terms again of opposite states, I'm reminded of piece of writing by Diarmuid O'Murchu who explores the notion of quantum relationships: "it is suggested that observation gives way to relationship, a complex mode of interacting, fluctuating until a sense of resonance emerges, whereby the individual parts – giver and receiver, observer and observed – lose their dualistic, independent identities, but rediscover [an] ... interdependent relationship of the new whole." I wonder if this has any relevance for you in relation to your artwork?

JdP - Visually, the works have a meditative quality which flows smoothly throughout the series. The artworks are conceptual, leaning towards abstraction, 'speaking' of the unspeakable, dealing with the emotive, the 'experiencing' of that which can be 'seen' as 'illogical' or 'weightless.'

MC - On a more technical level, you have decided to show the white borders to make it clear to the viewer that they are photographs – what prompted this decision?

JdP - I decided to have white borders to make the works appear more ambiguous, 'fooling the viewer's eye' / 'trompe l'oeil.'

MC - Finally, I saw these images on Facebook and approached you to exhibit them on outoftheCUBE. That represents a shift from the act of taking the photos in your own living space prompted by introspection, to placing them on the Internet in an online exhibition, with the relatively intimate and supportive bridge of your Facebook page. Could you speak a little about your view on the pros and cons of viewing art online?

JdP - I really like the idea of a virtual, online exhibition - it makes the work more accessible to a far wider audience, avoiding high expenses of transportation, insurance, framing etc.

Thanks Johann!

SOURCES

*(see gallery discussion and images on <http://www.ava.co.za/flashbacks-a-solo-exhibition-of-new-work-by-johann-du-plessis-15-april-8-may-2014/>)

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