

in conversation

This email interview was held between Kay Fourie and Mandy Conidaris in October 2014.

MC - Kay, I first met you in May 2011 at a workshop held by Emma Willemse in the Karoo. At the time your commitment to artmaking during the course made an impression on me, in particular the very unique way you put together found objects. Could you tell us a bit about this aspect of your sculpture?

KF - The first sculpture lecture I attended (under Frikkie Potgieter) was a trip to a scrap yard. It was 31 years ago and it blew my mind. Ever since I made no distinction between my immediate surrounds and the art process in my head. Objects would jump at me and scream: Can't you see that I am half a sculpture?

MC - Four months later we met up again at Nieu Bethesda where we both exhibited in a group exhibition *Berge*. There you were showing cement sculptures integrated with found objects, such as the cement stools with old tractor seats, and you had made the little cement checkers board table with bones as checker pieces. The children there really enjoyed playing with it – it seems to be part of your way of being creatively, that you like others to interact physically with your work, and that you aren't precious about it?

KF - The mere fact that sculptures are 3 dimensional, makes them share our physical space, so interaction must be inevitable. It only makes sense?

MC - I guess this would follow through to the work you do with the children and youth of Philipstown, that you look for opportunities for them to engage in their town in a very active and physical way. In your artist's statement, you describe the *Car-door Project*, and say that the purpose of the project was "to foster confidence, pride and a good sense of 'self' in the children" who participated. I remember you said to me that it gave them a sense of their own presence in the town. Could you talk about the other project, the cement figures that run across the roof parapet? How it started and who participated?

KF - Every year in spring, we have a *Draadkar Grand Prix* in the town. Months ahead, children can be seen picking up tins and wire, dreaming up Toyota *bakkies*, Mahindra SUV's, Isuzu's and what not. On a certain date in October, all the kids bring their cars to the local garage, where the cars are judged on basis of appearance, moving parts, detail and attention. After the judging, the kids race the cars on a 2km route and the towns folks cheer them on. Prizes and food are distributed and everybody enjoys the buzz. We like to believe that this event has the potential to create more than fun in this poverty-stricken community with all its socio-economic problems.

This event was the inspiration for the rooftop group of figures running with their cars – the *Roof runners*. They also show a progression of the sculptural process. The first running figure

is just the armature of a sculpture, the next one covered with chicken wire, the next one is modelled in a cement/*papier-mâché* mix. The group of seven thus progress towards the last figure which is 'clothed' fully in brightly coloured mosaic and this progression can be read as the same kind of healing process that we hope the *Draadkar Grand Prix* has on this community.

With these projects, it is hard to say who started what, but I facilitated the sculpture making and other adults volunteered their time and effort to assist me. Karen Pretorius was amongst them. Teachers at the local primary school helped me to get a group of children who would benefit most from the creative process.

MC - Once one sees cement figures embedded with broken glass in the environment of the Karoo, one immediately thinks of Helen Martins and her Owl House sculptures. Was her work an inspiration for you in terms of choosing materials, and did the children know anything about the Owl House?

KF - Quite frankly, I never thought about showing them pictures of the Owl House, and Nieu Bethesda is 250 km from us, as good as overseas as far as the typical child in Philipstown is concerned. With the gallery Karen and I have started recently (Groenstraat Gallery), the plan is to do walkabouts with the local kids and open up the world of contemporary art to them.

The Helen Martins thing intrigues me: for starters I believe that Koos Malgas really made the sculptures, but Helen's role was of course crucial. She was the brain and the soul and the heart of the project/installation. That is the other important thing about their work: the value lies in the sheer volume of the work, it becomes sort of an installation. The value that the creative process must have added to these two people's lives is something that I marvel about. For me as a trained sculptor, their use of material/technique is a disaster (I will not go into detail) but with such a mind blowing result. Ok, in a nutshell: I hate the Owl House, I adore the Owl House. You try sort this one out. Sorry Mandy!!

MC - In your own work, you also sculpt in clay and we are showing some of your portraits. They are each so individual. Who were your models – were they also the women on your farm? What were you trying to express with this series of sculpture portraits?

KF - Portraiture as a genre is nowadays a bit of an orphan in the art world, but it has always had its place. I am extremely fascinated by the expressive potential of the human face. I want to explain it, to reveal the secret, get to the bottom of things; but after finishing each portrait, the mystery only deepens. My models are people that I know well and who are part of my life, including the women on our farm.

MC - In 2002 you began a series of linocut portraits of the women on your farm – the *Blondie and Delia* Project. What prompted this, and how did the women react to having their portraits made in such an expressive medium?

KF - They are very shy and do not have a notion of their own value or power. It was great to see these women marvel at the mere fact that anyone should take such interest in them. The process and end result blew their minds.

MC - In 2012 you looked again at the folk in your environment when you started making work for Katie du Toit's group exhibition KAROO 2052, to protest against fracking in the Karoo. One of the exhibition briefs was for artists to look at ways that the Karoo might be changed 50 years on should fracking occur. For this project, you began looking again at a family, the Beukes family, in your environment, which resulted in another linocut portrait series: The *Them Thys-goed* Project. In your artist's statement you give a brief but evocative account of a fragment of their life today, finally wondering where it will lead post-fracking. These portraits are slightly different in that each is a 'double portrait' – the format has 2 printed fields - the individual's face in one and an aspect of their life in the other. Could you say what prompted the decision to make two sections per image and how it relates to the story told in your artist's statement?

KF - Two sections per image allowed me to treat subject and image as a manifesto, whereas both in one image would have fallen into the 'moment in time'-trap. You can imagine it: cute little girl with her teddy bear, etc. Combining the very traditional portrait study with the equally traditional still life in one work somehow adds up to something more contemporary. Proving the old song line "two wrongs don't make no right" *uhm, well, wrong*

MC - KAROO 2052 represents a further involvement with your personal environment or space. The F.U.C.K. linocut was submitted as your first work for this exhibition, and features another portrait, this time of a *boerbok* – and I say portrait due to the quirky expression of dismay you have given the face of this animal – whose speech bubble contains a *olieboom* seedpod instead of words. Could you tell us a bit about the symbolism behind these two choices of visual imagery? And knowing that the seeds of the *olieboom* are highly toxic, how do you relate this toxicity to the issue of fracking?

KF - The *boerbok* is synonymous with rural South Africa, and even more so with the Karoo. This goat may have a comical appearance, but it is an extremely intelligent animal, as well as being agile and cunning. It has got a mind of its own. If a *boerbok* could speak, it would curse like a sailor, thus the speech bubble.

The *olieboom* seeds are indeed highly toxic: 1 tiny seed could kill an adult cow. A seedpod contains almost 80 tiny seeds and the pod itself is a hostile-looking thing with nasty thorns. When I laid my eyes on them, it was love at first sight (visually speaking, because they are so expressive in their anger). The work F.U.C.K is in essence about rape and in this case, rape of the earth.

Rape.... anger...cursing, am I making sense?

MC - You have recently set up the *Groenstraat Galery* in Philipstown and held an exhibition there with Karen Pretorius. Could you tell us about this latest project?

KF - Karen and I are partners in this project. It is very exciting and daring or maybe a bit stupid ... who would put up a contemporary art gallery in the middle of nowhere? Our 3rd exhibition is in November and I can truly say we have had lots of interest, feedback and sales, even! The gallery is situated on the premises of the only garage in town and the car doors spoken about in this interview are right above our door, as well as the Roof runners. Somehow it makes sense.

MC - Any further plans for the future?

KF - We want to keep developing *Groenstraat Galery* into an interactive, working, approachable space. Part of our manifesto is a new exhibition every 2 months, with a workshop to precede each exhibit. We want to make conceptual, contemporary art accessible to everybody who is interested, even (no, especially) for the kids of Philipstown's shanty town.

Thanks Kay!

Thank you Mandy!