

**in conversation with the artists: Neva Duncan and Helens Parsons**

***This email interview was compiled from conversations in December 2012 with both artists, which led to an email interview with each in March 2013.***

**MC - Our questions relate a little to what the artwork looks like and how you made it, but most importantly refers to why. We are mostly interested in your conceptual working process, or the triggers to your creative process, in other words, why did that particular image or body of artwork come into existence?**

**ND -** Originally, I wanted to challenge the use of rhino horn to cure impotence until I realised (with research) that this is a myth. I disagree with the way animals are treated to serve human wants.

I am concerned with the increase in rhino poaching, the manner in which rhinos are poached, that there is a possibility that the rhino could become extinct and I have to ask myself the question: what am I going to do or not do to prevent it?

**HP -** I started this work because of my love for nature. The extreme rate at which rhino poaching has escalated in the past couple of years left me feeling that the situation is so out of control that none of the efforts to prevent it seems successful. I could not help but feel that extinction is a real possibility.

**MC - Do you remember a specific trigger?**

**ND -** I don't remember an exact idea or image but I do visit Greenpeace sites often. When I started researching rhino poaching and visiting the various sites, especially the IUCN – I was shocked when I saw that there were species that were already extinct here in Africa. What if rhinos do become extinct? What would I tell my grandchildren if they ask me what I did to prevent it? The same way that my parents cannot answer me when I asked them what they did to prevent apartheid? We are responsible for what happens in our time now, while we are here.

**HP -** Whenever my computer's screensaver starts running it would scroll through my personal photographs and every time the photos that I have taken of rhinos in National Parks appear it would sadden me deeply. I would remember that moment when I had taken the photo and wondered whether that specific animal is still alive. It inspired me to embark on a journey of expressing my feelings regarding mortality and loss of control.

**MC - Did you have any creative influences, e.g. other artists? (ideas or techniques)**

**ND -** I remember that Cai Guo-Qiang's *Head On* (2006) influenced me in the way that he approached sculpture in a quasi-realistic manner that in itself acted as a metaphor for the Berlin Wall, the way the wolves rushed blindly, without thinking. I saw this as a metaphor

for what humans do generally, as well as what we are doing to rhinos – we rush blindly ahead without looking at the consequences of poaching every rhino.

Also Cai Guo-Qiang's *Nine Tigers*, using a tiger to depict a traditional Chinese story, but I felt that it did not directly confront the way tigers are being mutilated in the name of traditional Chinese medicine.

Alan Alborough's process-oriented work, as I enjoy the making and process aspect of art more than the final presentation.

**HP** - William Kentridge's work called *Breath* (2008) inspired me. The pieces of paper that were blown away seem to fit perfectly with my theme of destruction and loss of control. For me it was as if we are trying to catch/save the pieces in a situation that has become completely out of control.

I was also inspired by the by Susan Sontag's writing in her book *On photography*.

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

**ND** - I did not have a final presentation or exact image planned, but I did have a notion that I wanted to tackle this with large sculptures. Originally I intended to cover the structure of the rhino sculpture with conveyor belting offcuts (a material associated with mass production, which is how I felt the rhino was being treated).

Usually I have a loose idea of what I want to do and then I will make the work first, and through trial and error see what develops. Then I drew up my plans according to the best method I could find to make the rhino wire framework.

**HP** - The process is a method of discovery for me. It is where trial and error sometimes produces unexpected results that capture one's intentions perfectly. For me it is a process of refining until one discovers the core of what you really want to say.

**MC - How did your conceptual process inform the specifics of your image creation? Is there a particular metaphor underlying your choice of imagery?**

**ND** - I wanted to make large sculptures that would act as a commemoration to a rhino that had already been poached, and wanted to subvert the memorial stone with my materials. However, that all changed after a few months, when someone suggested that I cut up the rhino sculptures instead of covering them. I realised that building and then just covering sculptures of rhinos does not show how they are disappearing, instead it suggests that they are still here. However, cutting the sculpture up is a direct metaphor for their diminishing numbers.

**HP** - I worked with personal photographs that I took of rhinos in National Parks that I visited. Since a photograph represents a *moment in time*, I explored the way in which I could use the time aspect to capture destruction, extinction and a loss of control. My experience with animation has me constantly thinking about movement in time.

I cut out the photograph of a rhino and moved it across a flatbed scanner as the scanner scanned the image. It was about holding on to that moment when the picture was taken and trying to extend it. It was almost as if trying to immortalise it. The distortion that was created because of the movement also represents the distorted perception of the medicinal value of rhino horn.

Then I blew the pieces away until none were left. For me, pieces blowing away represent a loss of control.

In my video I combine these two 'animations' as a juxtaposition of destruction over time in an effort to try and hold on to something that is disappearing. The scanned image also represents the poaching statistics. The image grows bigger as the statistics grow bigger.

**MC - How did your choices of image selection develop?**

**ND** - Rhinos are hunted and poached in abusive ways. Looking at images of poached rhinos is highly emotive; I wanted to convey the rhino in the same helpless gesture, in a lifeless posture, with the same feeling of dead weight that I saw in the imagery.

I also wanted to make a rhino sculpture that would represent each of the subspecies, so that I could see the differences between each. To me, this made each rhino species equally important rather than just making generic sculptures. For example, the Sumatran rhino was based on 'Bina', a shy female rhino in the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. I felt that this made my Sumatran rhino more of an individual.

The rhino horns that are reconstructed signify the sought after commodity that carries so much value whilst the rhino – a living being is treated like nothing. All that remains of a poached rhino is the horn that is a trophy on the wall, a medication in a tonic or the handle of a jambiya.

**HP** - In the beginning my focus was more on the issue of poaching and the politics surrounding it. When I decided to focus more on my personal experiences and feelings a dramatic shift occurred. Suddenly the issue became more than statistic and politics and more a journey of mapping my own experiences.

**MC - Do YOU feel that the work expresses your intentions?**

**ND** - YES, watching the videos of my rhino sculptures being chopped to pieces is a similar feeling to seeing a poached rhino – I have a hollow stomach and a lump in my throat.

**HP** - I think it does.

**MC - How do you assess your work afterwards from the perspective of its meaning to you, e.g. the memories it evokes of your thought processes during the making, and is the work's significance to the viewer important to you?**

**ND** - This has been a huge learning curve – in making large sculptures, learning about process-based work, marrying concept with technique and materials, video and the effect of sound, the writing process and making a catalogue, an appreciation for the amount of work that goes into presentation and gallery installation – most of these I have never done and assumed I could not do. It is a humbling experience and I realise that there is still so much to learn. It is a tough yet necessary learning curve that forced me out of my comfort zone and to reassess the way I look at artworks and their subject matter. I have a deeper understanding and appreciation for conceptual art.

I can't change the world and I can't stop rhino poaching but I can definitely comment on it, and at least I'm not banging anyone over the head with my opinions.

Yes. I want the viewer to walk away from the work knowing why there is so much hype about rhino poaching – that these issues are not just the media making a scene, or a couple of tree huggers getting on a bandwagon over nothing. This is something to be involved in and the more people that do get involved, the more changes can be made. We are influenced by the thoughts and opinions of those around us all the time. If rhino poaching is still occurring, there are people who think this is an acceptable practice. However, if these people were surrounded by more people who spoke up against poaching then they may be persuaded to stop poaching. It's idealistic but it's a start.

**HP** - During the making process one get caught up in the technical details that can be so time-consuming. After some time has passed I enjoy it more and it has become a metaphor for more than just rhino poaching. There are many other issues in our country for which I experience the same frustrations and sadness.

I believe that every person brings their own perspective to an artwork and my work is an open invitation for the viewer to experience it in their own personal way.

**Thanks Neva and Helena!**