

in conversation

This email interview was held between Mandy Conidaris and Pierre le Riche in December 2013 after Mandy had visited Pierre's studio on 27 November.

MC - Your new body of artwork *Op Hierdie Rots* currently being exhibited on outoftheCUBE has its roots in *Broederbond*, your 2012 exhibition at The Lovell Gallery (see catalogue). You comment in your artist's statement that *Broederbond* dealt with aspects of homosexuality as deviation of Afrikaner masculinity, and is based, in part, on your own experiences. It must have taken courage to explore something as personal as sexual identity and turn it into a tangible art form. At what point did you feel ready to make these artworks? Do you remember a specific trigger?

PIR - Up until 2011 my work has always been quite personal and introspective due to the fact that I was struggling to find acceptance within the gay subculture of Cape Town on top of dealing with acceptance from family and friends, which caused doubt and instability within my own identity. It was only natural to explore this through my art-making processes. These explorations led me to the realisation that by making introspective art I was in fact disconnecting from the viewer. *Broederbond* was my first true attempt at making something as personal as sexual identity, as experienced within a subculture, an open and universal matter.

MC - On the surface, your installation *Broederbond* seems to present a more light-hearted approach to the subject, due mainly to your use of bright colours (such as those of the Gay Flag) and the pink covers you knitted for the *Voorkamer* furniture and rugby balls. Was this intentional?

PIR - Absolutely, from a design point-of-view I knew that most viewers would react well to a brightly coloured display, but the bright colours also functioned on a more metaphorical level: in certain cultures, like Afrikaner culture, a natural way of dealing with social deviations such as homosexuality is to sweep it under the rug and pretend it doesn't exist, but this installation made the subject unavoidable and was emphasised by the specific use of the brightly coloured gay pride rainbow: the viewer was forced to consider the context.

MC - And this sense of light-heartedness was enhanced by your yarn-bombing performance. Please could you explain what yarn-bombing is, and how you used it as a performance tool?

PIR - Yarn-bombing is a way of enhancing cold, unwelcoming objects or spaces by covering it or incorporating colourful knitted yarn into the space. In the case of *Broederbond* yarn-bombing was used as a playful subversion of the serious subject of Afrikaner masculinity and rather a social tool to encourage homosexual and cross-cultural acceptance. This was done by means of performance where I sat in the installation on a daily basis knitting colourful

covers for rugby balls whilst interacting with the viewer. The viewer was also invited to knit with me and this action, which led to interesting conversations, allowed me to get a deeper understanding of the viewer's experience of the artwork, and the life experiences they wished to share with me.

MC - Could you comment briefly on the significance firstly of the *Voorkamer* and knitting/gossip/yarn-bombing, and then of the way you see rugby as a metaphor for Afrikaner masculinity.

PIR - The *Voorkamer* has always been an almost sacred space reserved for adult social gatherings like afternoon tea or the occasional knitting/sewing party where gossiping was the usual topic of choice! I deliberately juxtaposed the ideas of knitting and femininity with the more masculine rugby in attempt to merge the two concepts. In Afrikaner culture you were not considered masculine if you did not engage with rugby whilst growing up. The professional rugby player depicted an almost super-Afrikaner male. Rugby also has many socio-political connotations to Afrikaner culture which you can read about in the *Broederbond* catalogue.

MC - At the time (during 2012) did you have any creative influences, e.g. the concepts, work or techniques of other artists?

PIR - In terms of technique I was definitely influenced by Gabriel Dawe's *Plexus* installations and also Steven Cohen's explorations of identity within queer and Jewish sub-cultures. I found his performance piece *Ugly girl at the rugby* (1998) particularly relevant to my own work.

MC - Moving onto your new work *Op Hierdie Rots*, visually it appears more sober than *Broederbond*. The metaphor of rugby is the sole subject matter here. Could you explain why you have shifted to cement as a medium in terms of this focus on rugby and Afrikaner masculinity?

PIR - Cement has very strong metaphorical connotations to structures and foundations which I intentionally combined with Afrikaner masculinity in order to emphasise the pressures Afrikaner males experience to uphold the norms of this hegemony. Not only do I use rugby as a visual reference to Afrikaner masculinity, but also the aggregates added to the concrete: marble, pulverised sandstone and Dutch gold. Sandstone has particular reference to Afrikaner political structures as it can be seen as a prominent building medium in many important South African buildings such as the Union building and the *Voortrekker* monument.

MC - In *Strata*, you cast fragments of rugby balls into a cement block, and then you painstakingly excavated them as would an archaeologist on a dig. Why did you use this process?

PIR - The making of this work was quite an emotional journey for me, not only because of the sheer amount of time I spent excavating the fragments (which was incredibly frustrating at times), but also the care and time I spent creating the fragile concrete balls only to inevitably shatter them in order to cast them in layers of concrete. The excavation, like an archaeologist on a dig, is representative of my research and explorations to discover more about Afrikaner masculinity where the findings are fragments, which is metaphorical for the fragmented history we have come to call our heritage.

MC - In your *Kliptafel* series, again you use cement, but here cast as thin laser cut sheets to read as pages of a Bible – though the texts are from *Die reëls van die spel - Rugby/Voetbal*. You have commented that it refers to often the Calvinistic aspect of Afrikaner culture. Could you comment on your subversive substitution of the expected text? And then on the incongruity that arises because of the usual association with cement being hardy and durable – almost unbreakable in fact - and the fragility of the cement pages, how easily they may be damaged.

PIR - Calvinist principles teach that all Afrikaner men must be strong leaders and providers for their families, but above all, God-fearing. My deliberate substitution of the text creates a dialogue/reference between religion and masculinity, whilst the work as a whole explores how much power strong religious men can have in a socio-political environment. Of course these works can also be seen as a tongue-in-cheek referral to the new South African religion that is rugby!

MC - When dealing with an issue that is universal, even though as here it may be based in a particular culture, a good starting point is generally one's specific individual experiences. According to Arthur Koestler, "the artist's task is to *equate* the individual with the universal, to find the intersection between what he called the 'trivial' and the 'absolute' planes. The individual is the microcosm and the universal is the macrocosm. Joining them is essential for the artist's work to be of any value." What is your opinion on this statement?

PIR - I have to agree with Koestler. I think it is important for an artist to find a mid-point between what is universal for himself and the viewer, whilst still being considerate to the subject matter, mediums, and other factors. Making art can easily become a very self-absorbed, almost selfish, process. A good artwork depicts a pinpoint balance between the artist, the universal and the viewer.

MC - Looking at the idea of creative gestation, the intensity of creating one work often triggers the potential to follow other trajectories around the same issue. My sense is that the creation of *Broederbond* - although a completely resolved installation in its own right – also functioned as providing a time and space for generating the new seeds of *Op Hierdie Rots*, even though you may have been unaware of this at the time. Would you agree with that, and if so, at what point did you become aware of the potential for creating *Op Hierdie Rots*.

PIR - When I created *Broederbond* I was focusing solely on homosexuality as a deviation of Afrikaner masculinity and I always knew there would be the possibility of exploring Afrikaner masculinity as a separate subject due to its immense complexity. *Op Hierdie Rots* became a reality when I started experimenting with concrete as medium for creating art, but also as metaphor for the masculine.

MC - **Finally, afterwards, on reflection, do you feel that this body of work expresses your intentions?**

PIR - As you know from our earlier discussions this year, this body of work has evolved tremendously from my initial ideas, but although they might have shifted physically the conceptual intentions still remain. Ever since I agreed to do this show with outoftheCUBE I knew I wanted to explore Afrikaner masculinity. If anything the work has become more focused.

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

PIR - If there is one thing I have learnt from my public interactions with viewers during the *Broederbond* exhibition it is that the viewer's insights are invaluable for an artist to further his or her thinking process.

Thank you Pierre.