

in conversation

The following email interview was held between Stefanie Schoeman and Mandy Conidaris in September 2013.

MC - Stefanie, you said that for four years, prior to studying visual arts, you worked with Industrial Rigging. Can you say briefly, what were the elements of that profession that drew and held you enough to want to integrate it into your subsequent creative work?

SS - The potential of utilising unused space. I have been and probably always will be intrigued by the adventurous possibilities of presentation that rigging opens up; not only is there loads of potential in creating work that is not bound to conventional methods of display but it also allows for a different kind of work entirely!

MC - Was there a particular trigger for the very first work you created around the techniques of rigging and your care of the Earth?

SS - It was very much a 'cause and effect' kind of situation where the industrial world of rigging had me longing for a closer connection with the Earth. I decided to go and study art – to break away from rigging somewhat – and in my final year realised the potential of combining the two worlds when I suspended my entire body of fourth year work as a comment on the delicate balance of our natural eco-systems, in particular wetlands.

MC - Reading your Artist's Statement, your work has a strong metaphorical base beyond the environmental issue. It seems as though you have an almost human relationship with the Earth, almost as though the physical ground is a reliable and trusted 'person' in your life? If so, would that be a further reason for you to want to protect it?

SS - Yes! Absolutely. I often feel that the Earth is the most worthwhile place to focus my attention and energy on; my most constant and trusted friend, source of inspiration and mentor.

MC - You talk of trying to find a 'stillness' in a 'changing landscape'. Your works - natural elements captured for a moment in time in the form of your sculptures - seem to represent that, although by their very nature of being suspended they are never completely static, or if still, have the potential for instant movement. Is this potential for movement a part of your concept?

SS - Definitely yes. Potential (even unexpected) movement is the one constant of the (uncertain) world we live in. And if we are not open to movement ourselves, we break in the storm instead of swaying with the wind.

MC - Stefanie, on outoftheCUBE we are showing images of two of your installations: *Earth* (The Seasons/The Elements) which was exhibited at The Lovell Gallery Cape Town, and

Strain which was installed at the entrance to Kirstenbosch Gardens. Both seemed to be comfortable 'resting places' for your work. What are your feelings about seeing your work in these two very different environments?

SS - Interesting question and a thought that is always in the back of my mind. I know that context plays an important part in an artwork's 'life' and also realise that work in galleries often conforms to layers of inherited meaning (galleries being loaded spaces and all) that is not necessarily authentic to the work itself. In The Lovell Gallery the works are immediately read as 'artworks' – it cannot be any different. Whereas in Kirstenbosch people wondered more what it is about. Why is it there? And this feels like a very good thing to me! I like stretching the boundaries a bit and giving the work an opportunity to exist in the world at large where it has to *make* meaning for itself.

MC - Regarding your choice of materials, could you explain a little about the string you use, and how you dye and knot it? And the biodegradable aspect of your work?

SS - My installations are almost entirely biodegradable as I use mostly natural materials (apart for the sealant on the wood of the grids from which the works are suspended). I used to make my own wax string by melting beeswax and dipping the cotton threads in the wax; the wax makes the strings stronger, more durable and easier to tie knots in. I now buy the string (still cotton) ready and waxed from a local Cape Town store that makes string in larger quantities. The yarn I source from Vinni's Colours an inspiring Durbanville based business run by Vinni Nielsen and a crew of local woman. Vinni realised through her passion for knitting that South Africa is in need of a cotton yarn – as opposed to wool which almost floods the market – and so she started her own business. They hand dye all their yarns and she also has a 100% natural bamboo range which I use as far as possible and this is even more sustainable and sure to make a positive impact in the SA craft market.

MC - My reading of your making and thinking processes is that everything about your work speaks of the transitory nature of life and lifecycles. You collect natural objects – stones, bones, wood, leaves – hold them in your possession for a while, create a larger form (your sculpture) from them and then re-release them into the world. Could you comment on that?

SS - Well I try to use materials that are as re-releasable (or re-usable) as possible. Obviously the stones, bones, leaves and wood can just as readily go back to where they came from and the string; although it might take a bit longer to de-compose, will get there in time. It's really about practicing what you preach ;). I remember in my fourth year reading a very shocking article on how much space artworks take up in landfills; from a survey conducted on landfills around popular or big gallery spaces and art schools. I vowed to never be one of the contributors.

MC - Once a work is installed, how do you assess it afterwards from the perspective of its meanings to you, namely the memories it evokes of your thought processes during its making?

SS - I usually immediately go into critique after installation and make note of how I can improve my work. When I feel satisfied that I will commit to and edit my findings, I have to leave and let them breathe a bit. They definitely capture memories and thoughts during their somewhat repetitive making process; tying knots, tying rocks and so my thoughts usually run chapters during their making. This is however part of what makes them a meditation to me and in a sense they are also about letting go of obsessive thought patterns; or at least being aware of them – letting them be.

When I come back to the work I try to really experience them, interact with, lie down and just stare at them. My absolute favourite is to watch other people, especially children, interact with them.

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

SS - The viewer's experience of the work is important to me; if they spend time with, interact, observe and hopefully even connect with the work, that will be significant to me!

MC - Finally, one of my favourite quotes around the environment comes from Suzi Gablik's *The Re-Enchantment of Art*. She quotes Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman who says: "The world does not ask for belief. It asks for noticing. Attention, appreciation, and care." It seems as though you are doing just that with your work.

SS - This is certainly true for my intentions yes.

Thank you Stefanie.