

in conversation

This interview was drawn from an informal conversation held between Vusi Zwane and Mandy Conidaris at The Caversham Press on 04 February 2014. At the time Vusi was working on his new print Birds, and other work was laid out in the studio for discussion.

MC - So Vusi, let's start with how did you come to Caversham?

VZ - It was 2010, I was in Roodepoort in Johannesburg and I got a phone call from Mmakgabo (Helen Sebidi). She was here with Malcolm, and they'd been speaking about me and Malcolm asked her to phone me. She was concerned about me, where my life was going, but I told her, no, I was just starting to working on a project. But she handed the phone over to Malcolm,

[Malcolm arrived in the studio with a very contemporary lampshade that had been made from one of Vusi's designs for Caversham Textiles. We had a general conversation about this, and how exciting the Caversham Textiles project had been for Vusi.]

VZ - That's one thing I love about Caversham, they are always looking to do something original. Everyone always criticizes Malcolm, they say 'why don't you put a sign outside to say this is The Caversham Press', but Malcolm's not interested. Everyone says to him, why don't you make things that give you money, but no! Malcolm is like me. When I started at FUBA, one of my teachers, Durant Sihlali used to tell us "don't look at money, look at your work. Once you look at your work and concentrate on it, then suddenly something will come along." And he was right, you might not be rich but your soul will be happy.

[We had a general discussion about how difficult it is for artists to get started. MC told Vusi that at outoftheCUBE, our focus was on early career artists that we felt worked in a committed way, who tried to make artwork of integrity.]

VZ - I'm reminded of when I worked in Johannesburg, in Florida. There was an art centre started by Thami Jali called the Amakhono Arts Centre. That centre had artists such as we are talking about, artists like Thami, Sandile Zulu, Nhlanhla Xaba, a few other young artists, they used to struggle. If you came there you could see piles and piles of work that we had created, we were working with different mediums and styles, Sandile was using fire, burning, I was using cow dung, and Nhlanhla was using sand, the ground.

MC - It must have been amazing to see all these kinds of works together.

VZ - So many people were interested in what we were doing, not looking for money but just creating art in a quiet place – like this [Caversham]. Unfortunately, the owner sold the place.

[We had a general discussion about work spaces for artists, how they are often transitory and close; or only available for a short period of time. We spoke of Artist Proof Studio and

the opportunities it offers; and the new space Assemblage in Newtown Johannesburg, and how it creates a space for young artists to work.]

VZ - I would like one day to travel between Newcastle and Johannesburg and help young untrained artists to get started, to offer training alongside working, then after two years I will let them stand alone, help them to go somewhere to get a certificate, just to help them along,

MC - Why Newcastle?

VZ - I was born there in 1957, right in town. Then in 1965 there were the forced removals, they moved us from town to the township that they'd built. I stayed there for 8 years, then in 1974 when my mother couldn't manage to send me to school anymore, I moved to Johannesburg.

MC - So now what about your role at Caversham, what do you do here? You are the Artist-in –Residence, but do you assist in outreach as well?

VZ - Well when I first came here there wasn't any designing [Caversham Textiles was only established in 2013]. I found that there was some outreach, and I joined them. We used to go to schools around here and teach them arts and crafts.

It was November 2010 when I came here. Malcolm said come down & help us. He's been asking me for years, when I came for workshops and working as an individual artist, he used to ask me to come & establish a textile printing department because I was already ... I was making artwork and I wanted to exhibit my work, so I used to make textiles to earn a living.

So I said to Malcolm, well I'm used to a busy world, Johannesburg, but here it's so quiet I was not inspired by a quiet place, because when you grow up in art, you find your material where people are busy, we used to sketch the people, but after some time when I used to come here I noticed that there is a difference between Johannesburg and this place, here it's quiet, there is peace of mind, I started to love this place.

I had been at Rorke's Drift between 2005 & 2006. After that, 2007, I stayed in Newcastle for a year then went back to Johannesburg. I was there between 2008 and 10, I was just there for the World Cup! I started to design things as the President said everyone must do something for the World Cup. I was not thinking about art, just about sport, Mandela's words, how sport can pull people together, so I was just focused on design and selling designs.

So when Malcolm called, I decided to come, because also I just needed peace of mind. In Rorke's Drift we don't have peace of mind, there are problems, so I just wanted a quiet place.

So when I arrived here we started the outreach and then the funding dried up, and we stopped. But I stayed with Malcolm and then last year we started to find this new way, I

started doing some designs and then we put our heads together and we all came up with this [Caversham Textiles].

MC - It's good to see the art translated into fabric design, even just that small section of Gabi's, it's beautiful and very unusual.

VZ - It's very unusual, that's what I love, it's not manufactured.

MC - we are going to put on the COP 17 children's exhibition, what was your involvement in that?

VZ - Well, the COP 17 was a project commissioned by a conference in Durban [The Conference on Climate Control at the ICC in 2011]. They changed their minds so Malcolm told the children to come here. They had made prints about industries and pollution.

Then the group came up again in 2013, just after Mandela died, and made prints about what Mandela did. And we also printed them onto fabric and the children made cushions. We printed up the linos so the children would have something professional to take away.

MC - Shall we have a look at your work here?

VZ - Well the penguins, I've been working with the idea of extinct species. I chose these because there's a problem with the fish. I made them look like a family, a mother, father & child, they are training their child how to get food. I was going to do a long narrative but decided on only 3 images.

MC - I like the little fish that they have eaten in their stomachs.

VZ - Here I was showing that their stomachs are empty, now they come across the fish at the end of the day, and then they eat and their stomachs will be full. And since we are also looking at fabric design, I thought let me create them as though they are a cloth.

MC - And this one is a porcupine.

VZ - Oh the story with this one is so amazing because when I finished it I got sick, like needles were sticking into my feet but there was nothing there. I couldn't even put on my shoes, so eventually I went to a traditional healer. They helped me & told me you have a calling from your ancestors. They gave me bangles to put on and the pain disappeared. The porcupine's quills are also used by sangomas to heal people. Malcolm became interested in this, and I told him it wasn't the first time, some years ago when I used to come here I couldn't sleep at night, I had like nightmares but I was still awake. When I lay in bed I saw sparks and fire, so I asked Malcolm if I could work at night & sleep during the day. Malcolm said why? And I said I thought maybe it's these people that are underground [the graveyard]. So I went to Johannesburg & went to see Mmakgabo and we came back together to make a ritual. I said to Malcolm, it's because your place is a spiritual place, it's a place of people, not just a place of you & Ros, many people come here so it's like a blessed place, so we'd like to introduce ourselves to these people that are lying here. Then Malcolm

agreed, he said Vusi you are right, we never thought of that, so we arranged with Mmakgabo to do that, & then – we used to come together to work – so we came together & prayed, and once we had prayed I opened my eyes, and that night I managed to sleep.

So now I have two callings: the first as a call to art & the second as a sangoma, like Mmagabo. She is also a sangoma but she doesn't heal people [with medicine] but with her art, you can see her art is sometimes strange, spiritual. I think my art will follow these lines soon. Credo Mutwa, also the same, [an artist and a prophet]. He was in Johannesburg but in 1976 the youth in the community burnt his house down because they thought he was a wizard. He had to leave his community and live on the move. [Credo now lives in Kuruman in the North West Cape.]

MC - These rhinos, the last time I was here you were working on little rhinos with shields talking about conservation, that they were being slaughtered?

VZ - Exactly for teaching the people that these animals must be protected.

[General discussion on rhino poaching, and MC tells VZ about the outoftheCUBE RAGE page and that our commission is donated to RAGE.]

VZ - Well these works here are to do with the conservation of rhino. I use the shadow of the rhino because it tells us that they are killing these animals, and the horns refer to the dead animals.

MC - When you look you don't straight away see the rhino, it looks like empty night sky, but when you look closely you see the rhino and you've made it like a serving bowl, something you would eat out of, but what is the shape for you?

VZ - Well the shape, it's like something you would contain these animals in, something you would look after them in,

MC - so like a container for safety?

VZ - Exactly. That's why I also put this African design because it's to show that in this country we are lucky to have these animals, people from other countries come here to see these animals, they don't have them, so that's why I just use the bowl, we must lock these animals inside and keep them safe.

[General discussion on rhino poaching and the causes.]

VZ - And now this one, the one I'm working on now [*Birds*]

MC - What we sometimes do is put unfinished work on the site, like a work in progress, to show you are still working. I think a lot of people are interested in the artist working, about why you are making the work. Although we are interested in the final finished work, we are more interested in the actual working process and why the artist has chosen to work with this.

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VZ - Yes it's like going to buy ready-made food at the shop, and you don't know where it's come from, rather than food you prepare yourself, process is important at many levels.

MC - Thanks Vusi, thank you so much!

interesting links

Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi

<http://www.everard-read-capetown.co.za/?m=3&s=3&idkey=664>

<http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/goodlife/2013/04/26/artist-sebidi-guided-by-ancestors>

Credo Mutwa

http://www.gauteng.net/attractions/entry/credo_mutwa_cultural_village/

<http://www.citypress.co.za/lifestyle/the-rich-heritage-of-credo-mutwa-20120720/>