

in conversation

This email interview was held between Zyma Amien and Mandy Conidaris in April 2013.

MC - Why did that particular image or body of artwork come into existence? What were the senses, ideas or concerns that prompted you to embark on this creative journey?

ZA - Whilst in my third year of studies at UNISA, I was sent a video clip of Sadik Alfraji's *The house my father built*, (once upon a time) by my lecturers Colleen Alborough and Sharlene Khan (independently). I watched this video clip for a few days and questioned why the lecturers thought that this video would have any significance for me. But I watched it over and over, and late one evening the title reminded me of my own grandfather's house that he built. I remembered the sad look on his face when the letter arrived in the post. How my grandmother insisted that they should not fight the law.

MC - Was this a specific trigger? Although a lifetime of hearing family stories had become almost part of you, was the video a starting point for the work?

ZA - Once I had this memory of my grandfather's displacement, I started looking for more information and writings on other displaced people. I searched the web and found writing and poems by Adam Small. His website led me to the poems written by displaced people in Sophiatown. Don Mattera was also displaced from his home. He wrote many poems, amongst them *The day they came for our house*. It seemed the appropriate poem for the body of work. I continued to brainstorm the words and each time I found words I could use and explore. (This poem is transcribed under the 'read more' accordion bar).

MC - What ideas do you feel you are trying to express with this work?

ZA - My concept is the displacement of my grandfather who was forcedly removed twice during his life time. I hope my body of work acts as a window on the events that took place during a certain time in our history, and hope that this may never happen again.

MC - The video has a poignant quality. How long was the original family video, and do you remember why you made the particular selection of imagery that you did during the editing process? What aspect of life in District Six and then the removals were you trying to express?

ZA - The film was recorded whilst District Six was demolished by a now-deceased family member. It was recorded on a 16 mm film and viewed on a projector. It was about a two-hour recording of the destruction of District Six over a few years. It also had some recordings of family outings. I edited the film down to five minutes. I selected the images showing the spirit and people of District Six and then the destruction and eventually just the

empty spaces of bulldozed homes. I wanted to express the power of the government, how they had dehumanized a certain group of people.

MC - Regarding your works *Zigzag patterned* and *Dispirited*, please tell us a little about your material choices and the significance of your physical making. In your catalogue essay, you mention the memory of the smell of Cobra floor polish. Is this one reason why you have used the parquet floor blocks for the cement castings, and where did they come from?

ZA - Parquet floor blocks covered the floor throughout the house my grandfather built after he was removed from District Six. I used the floor because I felt it was a suitable metaphor for feeling grounded, but for him the floor 'moved' from under his feet. The floor blocks I found at a second hand building store, because the house (he built) is still occupied.

MC - You also cast the fez in cement which would cause a head covering to become heavy?

ZA - I casted the floor and the fez using cement. Cement for me is a metaphor for home, strength, permanence and durability. My grandfather's fez formed part of his identity, which he thought was permanent, but with the forced removal, he lost his identity. If you look closely at the fez, it has holes and in some places the cement is thinner, alluding to the effects forced removal had on him.

MC - Where is this work now?

ZA - The work is currently part of the PPC Cement Collection. The floor piece is embedded into the ten metre boardroom table with the seven fezzes suspended above it. (See images on the exhibition page.)

MC - You describe your decision to use soot as the basis for the incised drawing *Dispirited* (2011), and say that this represents transience and disappearance. What is the most significant aspect of disappearance due to the removals for you in terms of your family history?

ZA - In *Dispirited*, I used soot on glossy photographic paper. The soot is a metaphor for transience and disappearance. For me it is about the loss of the spirit of District Six. Today it [this spirit] is all just a memory.

MC - How did your choices of image selection develop in terms of your technical and conceptual processes?

ZA - I examined my grandfather's embroidered fez under a magnifying glass. It revealed how the threads had started to fray. For me, this was what happened to my grandfather. I decided to translate this onto the glossy photographic paper and drawing paper. The

drawings were scanned into a computer and laser cut the images. The process of laser cutting burns the paper and leaves scars behind.

MC - Is there a particular metaphor underlying your choice of imagery? Do you remember why that developed?

ZA - This technique in particular was a metaphor for the scarring that the forced removals had on my family.

MC - It is a privilege for us to be able to show this video on outoftheCUBE, and as we agreed, it is a non-commercial exhibition as you feel it is part of our history and that no one should own it. What are your intentions/dreams for the future of this video?

ZA - My aim with the video is to use it as a form of education and a reminder of our history.

MC - Do you feel that the work you did on the video – the editing and inclusion of the poem - expresses your intentions?

ZA - The silent video with the poem certainly expresses my intention. I wanted to express how the past regime kept people voiceless and controlled. I was narrating what happened to my families in District Six.

MC - How do you assess your video afterwards from the perspective of its meanings to you, for example the memories it evokes of your thought processes during the making?

ZA - The video did not stir me as much as the memory of my grandparents with the letter in their hands and the drained look on their faces.

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

ZA - At the PPC competition, as well as the UNISA exhibition, many viewers expressed how the artwork had evoked sad emotions and some had even shed tears. I was happy with the end product, but I did not expect the response to video to be so powerful.

Thanks Zyma!