

Loss, absence and a continued bond

The images presented in this catalogue represent a personal quest for closure after loosing my daughter, Alexandra Jasmin Mazzoni in a motor vehicle accident in October 2010.

Karen Pretorius - February 2013

UNISA Art gallery - Pretoria



Above collective: Fig1. Karen Pretorius, Details from workbook illustrations. (2012).

Cover design and catalogue layout by Karen Pretorius

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Fig2. Karen Pretorius, *The place*
(2012).







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Fig 3. Karen Pretorius, Extract from artist book, *Closure*. (2012).



Above collective: Fig 4. Karen Pretorius, Details from workbook illustrations. (2012).

And those two realisations: that you are connected deeply to the entire cosmos and at the same time you are mortal and you are fragile and inconsequential; the search for meaning that human beings have been engaged with since the beginning of time is part of the reconciliation of those two things.

Bill Viola ¹

A mother does not let her child die.

Lena Holmberg

Artist Statement

When your child dies the bond stays as powerful as it has been in life¹. Knowing that your child is not returning to the physical world motivates an ongoing spiritual quest.

After my daughter Alex passed away in a motor vehicle accident on 10/10/2010 at the age of 18 years, the Karoo became a place of refuge. The Karoo has always been a haven of spiritual and visual enlightenment to me. It's serenity and simplistic beauty promises wholeness, peace and hope and it became the ideal setting for re-establishing myself in this new life sans Alex. A small and broken town called Phillipstown appealed to my brittle and fragile state of mind and I decided to invest in a house overlooking the Karoo landscape. I frequent this house that serves as a tangible memorial for Alex and a haven to assist the process of healing. The Karoo therefore became the context for my visual exploration as a setting that could assist me in dealing with my personal loss.

In search of visual inspiration representative of both my relationship with Alex and the Karoo, I became intimately involved in the lives of people and children of Phillipstown. For some people the Karoo landscape offers peace and a spiritual closeness to God and for others it represents a struggle to survive. I interpreted this contrast as a metaphor for experiencing both life and loss. The visual enquiry focused on the integration of life and loss, continuation of the bond with the deceased and the role of *genius loci*² in the search for wholeness. Lidia Capellino Breetzke (2010:29) argues that:

“The concept of ‘genius loci’ cannot adequately be described in words because it is a subtle element which one experiences more at the level of feelings or emotions. At a very practical level many of us can relate to ‘feeling at home’ in a particular environment or ‘feeling out of place or at odds with the place’ or one may appreciate the unique or special quality of a place.”

I was lured in by the broken character of Phillipstown and experience a sense of comfortableness and closeness to Alex in this particular place.

Within the context of this research, the artworks comment on loss and altered reality. Loss is depicted as shadows on empty desolate landscapes. Shadows are temporary, while the landscape has been in existence for millions of years. The fleeting nature of shadows is a reminder of our mortality and could be seen as visual metaphors for the spirits of those who have died.

Other works comment on a continued bond with the deceased, the search for knowledge of death and a location that may assist the process of healing. These works include photographs of hallways and interiors of my Phillipstown home. The photographs were inverted in an attempt to find anything that may be out of the ordinary and may serve as a clue to unravelling the unknown. Obsessive exploration became the means of investigation.

A concertina art book documents the progression of my enquiry and visually articulates internal and external dialogues in a search to understand the relationship between life, loss and absence. Visual imagery created intuitively and sometimes consciously refers to the duality of these dialogues.

Research methodology

The first step in the creative process was to identify Phillipstown as representative of a typical Karoo town. I had the opportunity to become involved with the community by participating in a community project presented by Kay Fourie³. This project enabled me to interact with the town's people and provided me with visual and audio resource material. The collection of reference included a variety of video footage and photographs of people, the town and surrounding landscape. The writings of E Van Heerden (1964) offered a background of the town's social history from 1864 to 1964. She refers to the hopes and aspirations for the survival and growth of the town. This contributed to an understanding of the historical development of the town. It further provided insight into the existing status of the town, such as the deterioration of infrastructure, exodus of residents and the struggle to keep the town alive.

Research artists

Jo Ractliffe

Ractliffe draws on a range of photographic and art practices. In her themes 'revelation of absence', Ractliffe (1999) states that she attempts to "work in an area between the things we know and things we don't know". Similarly my enquiry utilizes and exploits photography and photo manipulation as media. Ractliffe describes her theme of 'revelation of absence' as "exploring these oblique and furtive 'spaces of in between-ness'. In the sequential works, my intentions were to create a sense of both absence and presence in the ghost like shadows juxtaposed with the barren desolate landscape. These images are somewhere in between reality and dreams.

Michael Borremans

I am interested in Borreman's methodology. Borreman claims to 'mess around' and that in his process of creation he intends for the artwork to lead to nothing. (Ribas, João 2007). Following a similar process of 'messaging around' or chance experimentation I explore process itself as content with no clear intent as to what the final artwork will look like. There is no apparent similarity in form or media in my work to that of Borremans's, but it is the ideology of the process with which I identify.

The process

The techniques, processes, media and presentation support the concept of loss, absence and the search for enlightenment. The concept of framing became important. Some artworks are composed in a landscape format to depict the vast empty Karoo spaces, relating to absence. The portrait format



Fig 5. Jo Ratcliffe, End of Time (1999).



Fig 6. Karen Pretorius, Details of Absence series. (2012).



Fig 7. Michael Borremans, *The Load (III)*. (2009).



Fig 8. Karen Pretorius, Extract from artist book, *Closure*. (2012).

reference the concept of passage, a journey, as well as the portrayal of an event such as death or the journey from life to death and the acceptance thereof. I experimented with media typically used in Karoo houses such as enamel paint. Enamel paint is used extensively to paint wood and walls in an effort to protect these structures from harsh weather conditions. A shiny layer of enamel paint forming a skin when applied to a surface underlines the concept of covering or hiding life's scars and protection from further deterioration. Enamel paint was applied to a sculptural artist's book, then photographed, taken apart and re-photographed again to use as background images for digital drawings incorporated in the final artist's book.

The processes in this visual enquiry were driven by a desire to find suitable imagery to express loss and absence. Media included paint, photography and digital illustrations. The photographic prints were manually manipulated by means of adding and subtracting chosen elements, thereby embedding process as content in the work. These manipulated images were once again photographed. The process was an exploration of media without any preconceived ideas on the final visual outcome. The visual outcome of each set of experimentations, although mindful of content, was nevertheless unexpected. This process was an intuitive exploration led by concepts such as: subtraction, addition, excavation, embedding, layering and time and process itself as concept. The outcome was a result of chance and intuitive explorations led by my inherent relationships with both my daughter and the place. This process echoed my personal spiritual journey – there are no clear answers regarding death and no clear path in coping with loss.

Conclusion

The artworks present questions on the meaning of loss and absence in context of my personal coping strategies after experiencing the loss of my daughter, Alex. The emphasis was placed on the art-making processes – manipulations, experimentations, chance effects, juxtapositioning of images and framing. All these working methods underpin the concept of searching for meaning. The final artworks were therefore created by means of an investigatory, rather than a meticulously planned process. As the theme of loss is explored in context of a personal journey, an accompanying artist book in the form of an abstract diary seemed an appropriate addition.

¹ From personal experience it is natural to continue the bond with a deceased child, this is confirmed by various authors amongst others: Harper, M, O'Connor, R, Dickson, A and O'Carroll, R (2011: 206) stating that: "Most of the participants spontaneously reported a continuing bond with the child after the death, albeit in different ways." and Parker, D (2011:224) concluding that "The mothers reported faith and prayer in their lives was important. Because of their faith in God, they have been able to cope with the loss of their child and remain connected to their child."

² "In Roman mythology a Genius loci was the protective spirit of a place. In contemporary usage, 'genius loci' usually refers to a location's distinctive atmosphere, or a 'spirit of place'." (Vogler, A, Vittori, A. 2006).

³ Kay Fourie completed a 4 year BA Fine Art Degree at the University of the Freestate, with a distinction in her major subject; Sculpture. She participated in exhibitions at Bloemfontein's Stegman Galery at the UFS and Oliewenhuis, Pretoria (Art Association) and Art Festivals around the country. Commissions for sculptures are varied: from a pewter relief for the local pigeon club to a life-size nude for a crude oil trader in Hamburg, Germany. Kay facilitates numerous community projects in the Phillipstown region of the Northern Cape.

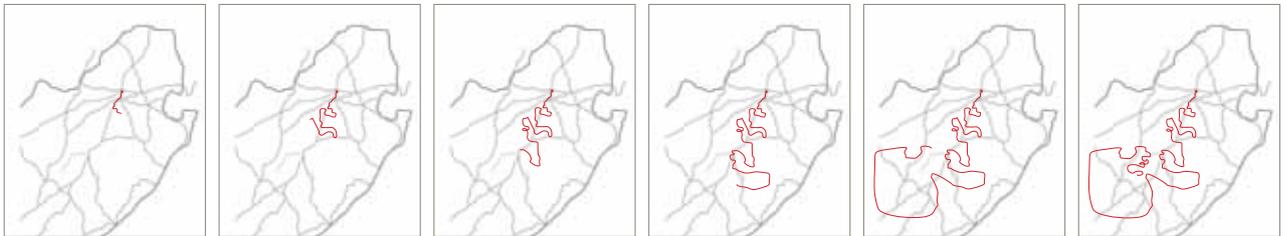


Fig 9. Karen Pretorius, Extract from artist book, *Closure*. (2012).

Passage



Fig 10. Karen Pretorius, *Passage 1*. (2012).



Fig 11. Karen Pretorius, *Passage 2*. (2012).



Fig 12. Karen Pretorius, *Passage 3*. (2012).



Fig 13. Karen Pretorius, *Passage 4*. (2012).

Absence



Fig 14. Karen Pretorius, *Absence series*. (2012).



Altered reality



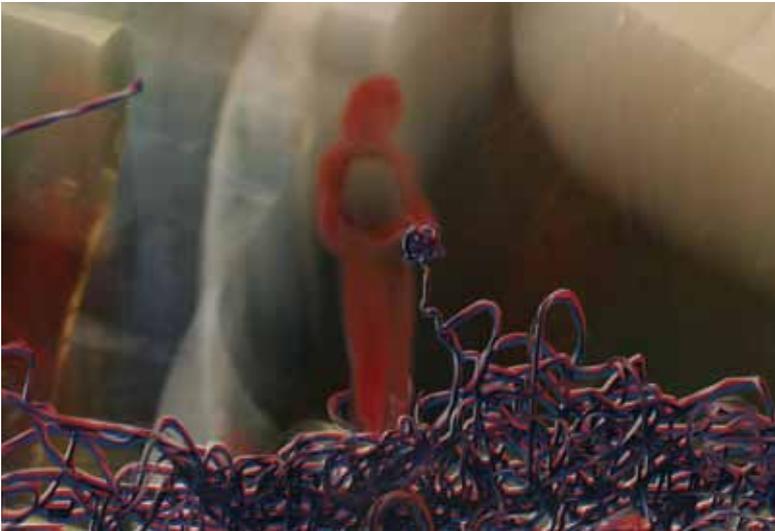
Fig 15. Karen Pretorius, *Altered reality* series. (2012).



A Continued bond



Fig 16. Karen Pretorius, Extracts from artist book, *Closure*. (2012).



The process

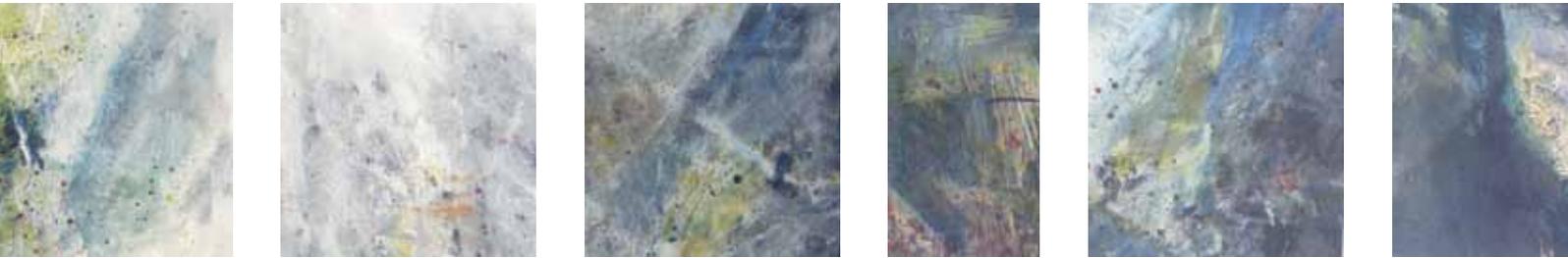


Figure 17. Karen Pretorius, *The process*. (2012).





Fig 18. Karen Pretorius, *The herald # 1*. (2012).

Fig 19. Karen Pretorius, *The herald # 2*. (2012).



Previous work

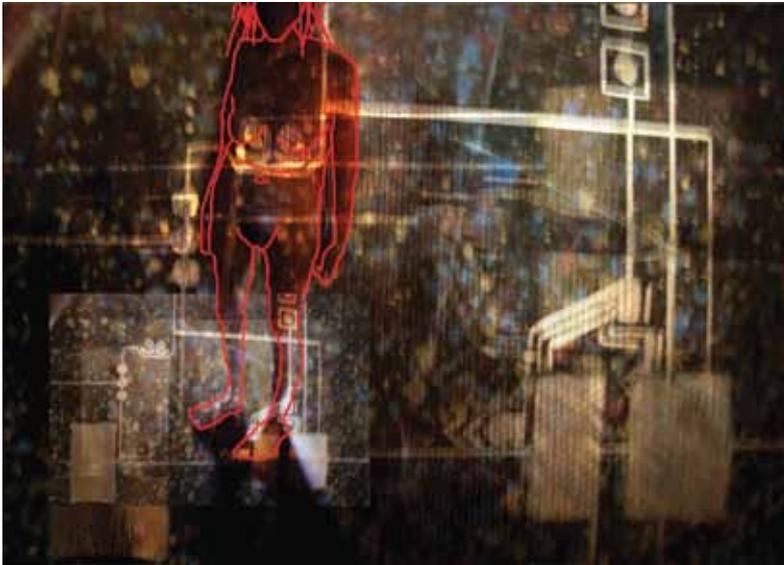


Fig 20. Karen Pretorius. Untitled. (2011).



Fig 21. Karen Pretorius. Untitled. (2011).

I considered it appropriate to include the following images of work done in 2011, as this is when my visual inquiry into the subject of loss and absence began.

Biography

Karen Pretorius was born on 21 March 1960 – The same day as the notorious Sharpeville massacre. Her father was in the military and they were constantly required to move between various towns in South Africa. Karen matriculated at Voortrekker Hoogte Hoërskool in 1978 and enrolled for a Diploma in General Nursing and Midwifery at One Military Hospital which she completed in 1982. Her only child, Alex Mazzoni was born in 1992 in Durban. In 1995 she married Steyn Pretorius, a graphic designer from Pretoria and partnered him in establishing a small graphic design agency called NuDog Design. Since then Karen has specialized in publication design and have been involved with numerous projects for publishers such as LAPA and Briza. In 2010 Karen enrolled for the BVA degree at UNISA. 2010 was also the year when her daughter Alex, passed away in a motor vehicle accident. Her 2012 exhibition theme of 'loss and absence' explores her personal journey after the passing of Alex.

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Alex 2010

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