

Q&A: Five Minutes With Pioneering Artist Sue Williamson

What was it like when you first entered the contemporary art world versus what it's like today?

My official entry into the art world could be pegged at 1984, when I completed an advanced diploma in fine art at Michaelis, UCT. For my diploma work, I made the mixed-media series 'A Few South Africans', portraits of women involved in the struggle for liberation from apartheid. At that time, the cultural boycott was in place, and as far as the international art world was concerned, South African contemporary art did not exist. The art world then was generally considered to stretch from New York to Cologne, Germany, with a few outposts along the way.

Since then, of course – although most of the buying power still resides in the northern hemisphere – there has been an enormous upsurge in interest in the peripheries. The opportunities for South African artists to participate in residencies, projects and exhibitions all over the world have multiplied every year, and although most South Africans still would not be able to name five practising artists, the growing interest in contemporary art among the public is demonstrated by the crowds that throng the galleries in Cape Town every First Thursday, when these establishments stay open after dark.

If someone is new to your work, which work would you suggest they start with to get a sense of your practice?

My work has always engaged with social issues, and much of it can be viewed online. Perhaps a viewer might start with '[There's something I must tell you](#)'. This is a six-screen video installation that is a follow up to 'A Few South Africans'.

It's a series of conversations between the veteran activist women of the

Mandela generation, and their granddaughters and young female relatives. Very often, younger family members never really know the full story of what the older generation went through, so it's a discussion about that, and about whether the older women feel it was worth it, and what the younger women think of South Africa today.

'A Few South Africans' and 'There's Something I Must Tell You' were shown together at the Slave Lodge in Cape Town a couple of years ago, and they will be exhibited together again next year in a show called *Feedback* at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College in the US.

Tell us a bit about your work at from the 2018 FNB JoburgArtFair.

At the FNB JoburgArtFair I will be showing part of a large installation called *Messages from the Atlantic Passage*, which is based on research into the shipping records of vessels that loaded captives taken from West Africa and transported them to the Americas to be sold into slavery. That journey, repeated more than 30 000 times, was known as The Atlantic Passage. My work presents three voyages, with the name and details of each person on that voyage engraved into a bottle.

The bottles are suspended in nets, or hanging from chains, over three loading 'tanks', filled with water. Water drips down from the nets. Each tank has the name of one ship, with the detail of that voyage, the date, and the number of people who embarked at the start, and disembarked at the end. A scanty memorial at best, but one that uses the limited information we have.

What's next for Sue Williamson?

A lot. I am working with a young artist called Siyah Mgoduka on a new video, which we will shoot in the next month. I am also presenting *Messages from the Atlantic Passage* on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India in December 2018, where it will be staged in a vast, high-ceilinged storeroom. The floor will be flooded and a deck will be built over it, so it will be like walking on the deck of a ship, looking up at the nets, with the

hanging bottles and the dripping water. I'm very excited about that.

I am also doing a new installation for the Kochi Biennale, called *One Hundred and Nineteen Deeds of Sale*, about Indians brought by the VOC to Cape Town in the 1600s to work at the Castle of Good Hope. That kicked off at the Castle on 14 September 2018 before it goes to India. For that, we are writing out deeds of sale extracted from the Cape Town Deeds Office on linen shirts and lengths of cloth sent from India. In Cape Town, it will be part of the Live Art Festival, in a section called Intimacies and Biography. Then there's a portrait for a special issue of French *Vogue* to be exhibited at La Monnaie de Paris, which I must finish by October. And a video made in Rwanda that's at post-production stage.