

# THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Sculpture as Socio-Political Critique in South Africa

University of Cape Town

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Declaration

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Art.

Michaelis School of Fine Art  
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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of an degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature

Signed by candidate

Date

December 2008.

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Hilary Bird and Douglas Bird.

Kirst, my star.

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# THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Sculpture as Socio-Political Critique in South Africa

## Preface

The title is borrowed from the classic novel by John Steinbeck published in 1939<sup>1</sup>. It is a story that ostensibly concerns the Joad family's move from the agricultural hinterland of America to the promised land of California. Steinbeck's intention is the sympathetic portrayal of the human cost of mechanised agricultural revolution. The story plots the collision of old value systems with new profit driven capitalistic drives (Thompson and Kutach, 1990: 143). The attendant ramifications see a great shift in the rural population to the urban areas. Much arable land is bought up by faceless consortiums and banks, leaving the farm dwellers little choice but to pack up and leave in search of work. In this manner a way of life for hundreds of thousands of unsophisticated, hard-working people comes to an end. These people embark on a perilous search for work, the ultimate futility of which leads them into a life of abject poverty and extreme hardship. In essence they form an under-class with few rights. Social divisions become entrenched and the battle lines between the dispossessed and the elite are drawn. Farm managers and owners are themselves squeezed by market forces beyond their control and exploit the migrants desperation (Thompson and Kutach, 1990: 144). Inevitably many of these refugees resort to crime in order to feed their families, and consequently are further harassed and dehumanised by the authorities. The title of the book is drawn from a passage where Steinbeck portrays the biting reality of an unjust system that supports vast wastage of food (Crockett, 1962: 196) while the poor starve. The sentiment is that the hunger in the people develops into an anger that becomes a wrath directed at the enforcers of the system. Steinbeck implies that this is the sowing of the seeds of revolution. The metaphor is a powerful one. It struck me that a similar story is unfolding in South Africa and the pace of its telling has quickened since political emancipation.

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<sup>1</sup> Steinbeck, J. 1939. *The Grapes of Wrath*. London: The Penguin Group.

I have titled this body of work accordingly because the content of each piece is drawn from the prevailing social and political climate in South Africa, much like vines draw nutrients from the soil. Naturally my reading of the South African reality is subjective and often intuitive, rooted in my own lived experience.

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aware artist is abundant and it is within this context that I create my work. My interest resides in the production of sculptures that in some way serve to elucidate aspects of a complex heterogeneous South African culture.

This dissertation will highlight instances where sculptors have explicitly engaged with socio-political content. I will look into specific examples of sculpture in which the express intent of the artist is to draw attention to or critique an event, figure or system of belief.

In Section One I examine a selection of sculptures that fall under the banner of struggle or protest art in South African art. The investigation will be confined to works produced during the decade of the 1980's that mirror or critique the fabric of South African society during the height of apartheid. My focus will be a discussion of the work of three sculptors, Jane Alexander (b 1959), Gavin Younge (b 1947) and David Brown (b 1951), whose work during the period can be perceived as a register of discontent.

In Section Two I take a closer look at contemporary artists whose work, with regard to themes and formal decision-making, reflects my own. It is my contention that for socially aware sculpture to find its mark in a wide context its production values require a slickness akin to advertising. This necessitates a simple, though not simplistic, system of symbolic encoding. I will examine work by Jacques Coetzer (b 1968), Daniel Halter (b 1977) and Brett Murray (b 1961) and attempt to uncover a unifying aesthetic sensibility.

Finally in Section Three there is an explication of the working method and thematic concerns that inform my practical body of work.

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There were 18 795 cases of attempted murder and 118 312 cases of robbery with aggravating circumstances reported during the same period (Mail and Guardian, Nov 20 2008: Online).

<sup>4</sup> Regarding Robert Mugabe see: Blair, D. 2002. *Degrees in Violence. Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe*. London: Continuum and Meredith, M. 2002. *Robert Mugabe: Power and Plunder in Zimbabwe*. London: Public Affairs.

See also: Crawford-Browne, *The Arms Deal Scandal in Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 31, No. 100, Two Cheers? South African Democracy's First Decade (Jun., 2004), pp. 329-342. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

## Introduction

My work attempts to highlight folly within South African society. The content and themes found in my production reflect the ways in which power is wielded by those who have it and for the consequences of this display. South Africa is, as a result of its fractious past and current inequalities, a breeding ground for artists who choose to make socially conscious work (Coombes, 1997: 110). Many artists working during the height of apartheid produced a catalogue of artistic response towards issues of relevance within South African society (Coombes, 1997: 110). Many artists at work in the townships produced records of the brutality of the regime in traditional media, while others recorded their responses to the resident inhumanity by employing installation and conceptualist strategies (Williamson, 1989: 8-10). It was under the mantle of apartheid that much local art came to hinge on a concern for the plight of ordinary people under a brutal regime. The struggle spirit was a powerful motivating force for many artists of the time and could be seen as a defining feature of art produced during those dark decades in South African history (Clark, 1992). I believe that this legacy in the creative arts of South Africa is still in evidence since 1994, the dawning of the new democracy. Contemporary artists in a post cultural boycott era South Africa enjoy access to the international art world (Goldner, 2002: 89). However there still remains the thread of localised activism prevalent during apartheid (National museum of African Art, 1999; online).

Of course there is no singular entity for artists to rail against anymore. Today, artists who make socio-political statements through their art are not acting in unison but direct their energies towards all manner of social ills, political farces or religious bigotries. Today our society is wracked with all manner of challenges and it is in this area that many artists choose to operate. From unacceptably high rates of HIV infection<sup>2</sup>, through rampant crime<sup>3</sup> to gross failures of leadership<sup>4</sup>, the ammunition for the new socially

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<sup>2</sup> According to the 2004 study made by Memoona Hasnain (*Antenatal HIV Screening and Treatment in South Africa: Social Norms and Policy Options, 2004, p77*) South Africa has one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world. Similarly Williams and Gouws state that 70% of people infected with HIV live in Southern Africa. Of the 11 countries with the world's highest HIV infection rates- 7 are in sub-Saharan Africa- which includes South Africa. (Williams Gouws, 2001: 1077-108).

<sup>3</sup> Police statistics reported in the *Mail and Guardian* reveal that although incidence of violent crime is declining, there were still 18 487 cases of murder reported during the period April 2007 to March 2008.

## SECTION I

### Social Awareness in South African Sculpture in the 1980s

There are certain works that over time have become emblematic of the way in which artists can respond to overwhelming socio-political forces that affect an entire nation. These works have been assigned iconic status and have come to function as trenchant reminders of a tormented past. Monuments of resistance or quiet registers of awareness of a suffering nation, these works now operate as potent markers within a broader cultural history of South Africa. These objects have become important sites for the ignition of memory and a means by which future generations can vicariously access the aura of a time thankfully long since past.

Gavin Younge's *Botha's Baby* (1981), Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys* (1985/6) and David Brown's *Voyages* (1987) are pertinent examples. South Africa has been re-born and the beast of apartheid slain but these works continue to provoke. Their power is perhaps enhanced by the privilege of hindsight and the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

It is possible that only now, almost a decade and a half after the first democratic elections in South Africa's history, that we as South Africans can truly appreciate the breadth of despair caused by the implemented ideology of apartheid. Perhaps in the same way that we experience a delay in fright after, for example, a near-accident on the road. South Africans can, through the re-telling, re-remembering and re-casting of histories, come to a better understanding of the past and the roles we as individuals play in forming it.

I have singled out for discussion artists who have for the most part concerned themselves with sculpture as their prime method of communication. My interest is in how they convey through form and concept a deep concern for the people of South Africa, while registering a belligerence towards the political system that corrupted the distinction between victim and oppressor. The artists selected have employed methods that do not always conform to pure satire or caricature. The specific context in which

the works were originally made and viewed lent an immediacy rooted in the local, yet these sculptures appear to speak to a universal humanity.



fig. 1 Young, G. 1981. *Botha's Baby*.

In *Botha's Baby* (fig. 1) by Gavin Young a combination of seductive forms points to a complex web of societal relationships. The work steers clear of any accusatory sermonising or moral evaluations whilst drawing direct attention to very real social phenomena. Three central elements (the revolver, the baby-chair and the title) are

combined in such a way that the play of meaning is contained and direct. The work was made at a time when the South African armed forces were stretched to a point where national conscription became necessary to hold various fronts, in particular the protracted Border War in Angola (Baynham, 1990:425). Boys of 16 were required to register for two years of National Service that started immediately after completion of high school. This meant that young men of 18 or 19 were being militarised and sent off to war. At this tender age these soldiers would have been unlikely to have fully comprehended the political forces at work in their actions. In any event call-up was not negotiable, unless study at university was an option. If religious beliefs precluded joining the army then jail was the conclusion, otherwise exile was the only other route (Draper, 2001). It is here that Younge's work operates.

The *baby* in the title comes to represent all youth in South Africa as being the metaphorical offspring of then president Botha, nurtured on his ideology of violence. Through conscious exaggeration, the sculptor portrays the President's progeny as being raised in cold steel and force-fed a diet of violence as suggested by the inlaid revolver. Younge asserts that the prevalent political policy in South Africa was in the process of germinating a generation of young people not only brought up on violence but normalised to it.

My interest in this work is located in its clarity of conceptual delivery, aided by a technical proficiency and material integrity. There is a high degree of technical skill evident in the welded steel construction and though the finish is highly polished, the artist's hand is still observable. Thus it remains unapologetically a hand-crafted object.

Possibly the most resonant sculpture to come out of the South African struggle period is the *Butcher Boys* (1985) (fig.2) by Jane Alexander. Though controversial and provocative at its completion in the mid 1980s, it strikes me that its reach and aura are arguably more intense post emancipation (Nicol, 1996: 2). It is only now that we have collectively as a nation been through the TRC hearings that the full atrocity of Apartheid's mandate can be appreciated, conceivably aided through contemplation of these hideous forms. For when we gaze upon the three figures of plaster and bone we can almost smell the wounds of the oppressed and the perverse fear of the oppressor.

The work is highly emotive and transportive and a testament to the power of representation to unlock memory.

The agency of the *Butcher Boys* rests not in the viewer's intellectual response but in a visceral reaction; a product of the quiet menace that exudes from these monstrous forms. Paradoxically, and this is where the crux of the work conceivably lies, the viewer can be forgiven for sympathising for the mute beasts. Their bodies are depicted as muscled and physically brawny but are deprived by the artist of vital parts, like mouths and genitals. Hence the frightening beast/men amalgamations are rendered rather pathetic in their mindless and mute aggression. The potential for violence hinted at is indistinct and unfocused as they glare vacantly into the world. Awaiting instruction, these are the blunt instruments of a dirty war, reduced by projected and imagined despicable acts to a baseness of sub-human proportions.



fig. 2 Alexander, J. 1985. *Butcher Boys*.

Alexander has in conversation with myself stated that the work was not created with a specific socio-political comment in mind, rather it seems the spirit of the times pervaded the creative process and the forms emerged – almost unconsciously (Alexander 2008;

personal conversation). Though the express intent of the artist was not to engage with politics, my decision to discuss it is based on accumulated readings that are always rooted in the politics of the struggle period in South African history and as a result her work merited inclusion in Sue Williamson's seminal text on the subject, *Resistance Art In South Africa* (Williamson, 1989). The paradox of the *Butcher Boys* is that they are contextually entrenched in the South African political landscape of the 1980's, yet their resonance appears to have a timeless quality. I would argue it is because the work is not specific in its target, nor pure satire or caricature, that it rests in a formal position of ambivalence.

In contrast to Alexander and Younge, I will be less specific with David Brown's oeuvre and engage with a number of works of made during the 1980's. This is because Brown completed many sculptures around this time that made use of similar strategies to convey disaffection with features of the South African societal landscape.

Brown's oeuvre is characterised by an almost obscene distortion of the human form, his grotesque figures embedded in equally abstracted scenes incorporating bizarre contraptions resembling carts or ships. The distortion of the figure is similar to the *Butcher Boys* but tends more towards a tragic-comedic exaggeration, especially in the bronze figures of the latter 1980's. His larger works incorporate various elements and figures with movement implied either in the title or suggested by the use of wheeled carts as bases (fig.3). The movement or action is paradoxically frozen in a moment, while the viewer cannot help but imagine the chaos of the scene that Brown has managed to suspend (fig. 5).



fig.3 Brown, D. 1985. *Procession* (from the series by the same name).

The perversity of distortion in Brown's figures and contraptions can be viewed as being allied to the gross distortions of society evident in the apartheid state of South Africa. The scenes he presents us with can be interpreted as evocations of a national state of schizophrenia characterised inwardly by deep-seated ego-mania and paranoia, and outwardly by extreme mindless violence. These sculptures, like the *Butcher Boys*, operate as analogies for the gross violations of a repressive totalitarian governing authority. They also hint at the victimisation of the perpetrator by forces far beyond their control. These terrible figures are all brawn and little brain and are often depicted with exposed genitals, sometimes missing limbs, which is perhaps evocative of the perceived lack of awareness of the ordinary individual in society of the atrocities committed by state authorities (fig. 4).



fig. 4 Brown, D. 1985. *One man and his dog*. (detail)

It is Brown's dedication to the medium of sculpture, the very physicality of working with his chosen materials and an awareness of the expressive qualities inherent in the substances of his craft that I find inspiring. This, in conjunction with an awareness and concern for society is what I greatly admire. It is here that I hope there is some congruity with my own production.



fig. 5 Brown, D. 1985. *Voyages*.

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## SECTION 2

### Contemporary Aesthetics in Socially Aware South African Sculpture

My contention is that Brett Murray (b 1961), Jacques Coetzer (b 1968) and Daniel Halter (b 1977) produce sculpture that relies formally on the language of Pop Art to express or illustrate facets of South African society (or Zimbabwean in the case of Halter). Often a homage to Conceptual Art is in evidence in the elevation of the idea. Importantly however, for the most part these artists produce highly seductive objects. These often involve a high degree of hand finishing, revealing a fundamental disjuncture with the original Conceptual Art movement of the 1970's and a closer affiliation with the Neo-Conceptualism prevalent in the work of the YBA's of the 1990s. The YBA's are a loose grouping of young, brash artists who came to prominence after the *Freeze* show, exemplified by Damien Hirst (b 1965) and Tracey Emin (b 1963).

Art falling under the YBA mantle in British contemporary practice has greatly influenced young South African artists. Much of this work seems characterised by a sensitivity to popular cultures of the moment, cultures in which the artists were embedded themselves and thus well placed to confront, critique or expose aspects thereof. Unlike the three South African artists I'll be discussing later, the YBA's by and large didn't actively engage with politics or social issues directly. Their politics were made apparent in the manner of their expression and in their very personas. By contrast my chosen artists make specific conscious statements about culture, society, politics and religion. This brand of local work is perhaps more mediated by economic concerns, deliberate in its engagements and is devoid of much of the narcissistic exhibitionism exemplified (fig. 6) by Emin and so common in British contemporary art of the era.



fig. 6 Emin, T. *My Bed*. 1998.

I find similar conceptual and formal threads running through my production and that of Brett Murray. Much of his work appears to hinge on his investigations into the machinations of the European mindset in Africa and how this plays itself out economically, politically and socially in a post-apartheid, post-colonial, post-modern, post-identity South African landscape. Murray's work falls within the traditions of satire and parody. He takes on various contradictions, aberrations or farces in the South African socio-political landscape whilst always conscious of his position as a white South African male. ((Murray, 2005: 21).

Murray employs various strategies, many straight out of the political satirical cartoonists arsenal. He will often exaggerate a form or conversely use radical simplification, normally in conjunction with incongruous combinations of signifiers. The result is sculpture that is easily decoded and digested by the viewer, clear in its intention but often controversial in its uncompromising directness. Some of his work does indeed closely resemble cartoons, consisting of line drawings cut from sheets of steel to produce sculptural cartoons. His content freely confronts explosive issues of race and identity, often treading closely the boundaries of political correctness. He is able to do this as a result of the humour inherent in most his work (Murray, 2005; 22). This renders much of what he does a one-liner joke with a cutting edge. Much in the same way as Jonathan Shapiro's socio-political cartoons function to critique local public life through laughter and, sometimes, shock. Murray is a master of dark humour, aided by a piercing understanding and appreciation of the ridiculous contradictions and inequalities evident in South African society. Much of the humorous sarcasm or irony in Murray's work is taken directly from extant attitudes or events in the country. Often his work is a physical manifestation of the adage that when things couldn't get worse - all you can do is laugh.



fig. 7 Murray, B. *Africa*. 1999. Murray, B. 2000

One of Murray's most successful and controversial pieces is the public sculpture entitled *Africa* (2000) (fig.7) situated in Cape Town's St Georges's Mall. Here the artist appears to make a statement about the rampant commodification of African traditional culture. We see a 3.4m high bronze statue of a familiar African figure, the sort normally carved from wood and found in tourist markets across Cape Town. This kind of sculpture is mass-produced for a tourist desire to acquire a piece of African culture. Murray hammers home his point with the addition of multiple Bart Simpson heads that protrude from the figure. Bart Simpson is a character in the wildly successful American animated show *The Simpsons* (1989)<sup>5</sup>. He seems to draw a parallel between the epidemic of American cultural imperialism and the West's seemingly voracious appetite for all things exotic and African. One is not sure as to whether Murray is pointing a finger at the market demand for African products or if he finds the fault with the large-scale production in Africa of these artefacts to satisfy this demand.

The work finds its mark in the combination of two very simple elements that ordinarily would stand in opposition, associated as they are with disparate cultures and attitudes. Murray picks up on the simplification of form common to both. These elements become signifiers of entire systems of cultural operation and the artist draws our

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<sup>5</sup> This American animated satirical cartoon features the adventures of a dysfunctional family consisting of parents Homer and Marge and their children Bart (the main character) Lisa, Maggie and is flighted in over 60 countries (Gray, 2007: 130).

attention to what he sees as an unequal relationship between the West and Africa. The Bart Simpson heads read like some sort of rash or outbreak of warts on the figure thus enforcing the idea that Western forms of capitalism are perceived to be damaging to Africa. It is also possible that Murray, as a sculptor, points to the dilution of artistic and cultural merit in much African sculpture as a result of the economic pressures brought to bear on the artists to produce for the market.

Much of the work by artist Jacques Coetzer operates on a similar level to that of Murray. The viewer is seduced by a colourful slickness and simplicity of form, which acts as a sugar-coating for a sometimes hard-hitting sentiment. While the two artists certainly share a delight in using humour to locate tragic-comic contradictions of South African life, it is Coetzer who, in his work, is more in touch with contemporary popular culture. We find in his work simple and widely recognisable symbols and signifiers combined in ways that render them both bizarre and meaningful. For instance in *Soap Opera* (2004) (fig. 8) we are presented with a video loop of an American flag inside a washing machine, *Corporate Giant* (2005) (fig.9) is a giant human figure constructed from South African Brewery beer crates and in *VX Braai* (2002) (fig.10) an electric barbeque is combined with car lights. What is of interest to me here is the generation of meaning through this amalgamation of everyday forms such that they are transformed and elevated. Coetzer seems comfortable in his position as a white male South African and is thus able to easily and humorously critique that position and thereby stretch his comment beyond his particular experience. Many of the forms or objects he uses or refers to are quintessentially South African and thus their associations would not be lost on a local audience.



fig. 8 Coetzer, J. 2004. *Soap Opera*.



fig. 9 Coetzer, J. 2005. *Corporate Giant*.



fig. 10 Coetzer, J. 2002. *VX Braai*.

In 1996 the South African art scene was burgeoning and making waves internationally (Goldner, 2002:89). It had been two years since the first elections and many local artists were getting their first taste of the international art circuit. Coetzer made the work

*Jungle Jet* (1996) (fig. 11) which keyed into the mood of the time. A flattened and simplified form of a jumbo jet, possibly during take-off, is made up of lengths of reed. Affixed are lights in the appropriate places. The way the reeds make up the body of the plane mimics the drawing style of renowned township artist Tito Zungu (b 1946) (fig. 12), whose most prominent theme was aeroplanes drawn onto envelopes (Coetzer, 2006: 83). There are a number of interesting plays at work in the piece. Firstly the title plays on the common Euro-centric view of Africa as consisting of wild jungle, and figuratively, of the people being unsophisticated and rural. This is underscored by the use of reeds on the plane, exposing a paradox. Namely, the plane is literally made of the jungle (wood) but is nonetheless a plane consisting of technology synonymous with the west. Secondly, Coetzer's own identity is at the forefront of a reading of this work. The artist appears to be making reference to the eager and voracious appetite in the West for the exotic 'other' synonymous with Africa and its art. He subverts this, playing it against itself in *Jungle Jet*, but in a humorous self-aware manner. The work appears to express the idea that African aesthetics is on the move and bound for abroad, on it's own terms.



fig. 11 Coetzer, J. 1999. *Jungle Jet*.



fig. 12 Zungu, T. 1971. *Untitled*.



fig. 13 Coetzer, J. 2002. *White Minority*.

In *White Minority* (2002) (fig. 13), Coetzer conscripts the Pac-Man<sup>6</sup> graphic into a basic pie-chart that could be read as the demographic of South Africa. The Pac-Man could be the black majority while the white minority of the title might be the white wedge. The black and white of the shapes come together at a jagged edge. There is ambivalence here as to whether the black Pac-Man has sharp teeth and is about to consume the white minority, or if it's the white wedge that has a prickly border to protect itself from the voracious appetite of the black majority. It is this ambiguity that charges the work. Issues of race are still very hotly debated and tender in South Africa, rendering the work pertinent.

Daniel Halter was born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) three years before the installation of the first African president of that country. His life has spanned the worst years of the war for independence through the euphoria of emancipation to the gradual decline and destruction of Zimbabwe in the mid 1990's to total melt-down over the last 5 years. It is possible that in the next two years Halter will see the first democratically elected president installed after the reign of Robert Mugabe, that father of African independence turned tyrant. Halter left Zimbabwe to study in Cape Town,

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<sup>6</sup> Arcade game first released in Japan in 1980 by a company called Namco. This game became hugely popular in America and later across the world. (Collins, 2008: 115)

during which time his family was driven to emigrate as a result of political instability and a drive to restore equity of land ownership skewed by Zimbabwe's colonial history. Halter is now in permanent exile from his home country and his domicile is now South Africa. It is within this context that he makes his art.



fig. 14 Halter, D. 2006. *Untitled (Zimbabwean Queen of Rave)*.

I will not delve into specific examples of his work, as Halter's entire production is characterised by an unstinting investigation and expose` of the ironies and horrors of contemporary Zimbabwean life. He does this in a playful manner, not unlike Murray and Coetzer. Like them, an important feature of his work is humour and juxtaposition within which he wraps an often wry or ironic statement around current Zimbabwean affairs. Halter is also very aware of popular culture and makes use of signifiers easily decoded by those familiar with its language. Of relevance is 1990's pop-culture, being the decade of his coming of age and the decade when the tide literally turned from hope to despair in his homeland. Halter uses rave anthems as sound-tracks to video (*Untitled (Queen of Zimbabwean Rave)* 2005) (fig. 14), sculpts giant ecstasy tablets (*Stone Tablets/Bitter Pills* 2005) (fig. 15) and constructs installations using a pool table (*Exchange* 2005) (fig. 16). The use of these signifiers keys into a prevalent nostalgia amongst people in their late 20's and early 30's for their youth in the 1990's. But Halter points to an irony; the decade he references to saw young people of his generation partying rampantly with all the free-spirited attendant pass-times while the majority both in

South Africa and Zimbabwe struggled. It is here, located within these ironies and disjunctures that he finds the space to make socio-political statements. His work operates as a kind of struggle art that utilises Post or Neo-Conceptual strategies of communication to deliver its punch. That is to say that although craft is an important feature of his work it is only a means of communicating the idea, which is paramount. (Halter, 2006; 25)



fig. 15 Halter, D. 2005. *Stone Tablets/ Bitter Pills*.



fig. 16 Halter, D. 2006. *Exchange*.

## SECTION 3

### Work Section

#### *The Grapes of Wrath*



fig. 17 Bird, S. 2006. *Grapes of Wrath*.

There is massive urban population growth in South Africa, fed by an exodus from rural areas (Western, 2001: 617). Rural localities is where service delivery is perceived to be weakest and it's here where the cycle of poverty continues. In the melting pot of already overflowing urban suburbs and informal settlements, traditional ways of life are melding with 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and economics. There is a rising resentment and dis-ease among the people evidenced in almost weekly marches and public sector strikes around poor service delivery (Ceruti, 2007: Online). Crime is felt to be the only option for many who are desperate and hopeless, confronted daily as they are with the actual, visible, opulence of the elite (Ceruti, 2007: Online).

In the hearts of those still disenfranchised the grapes of wrath are indeed growing heavy for the vintage. Crime in South Africa is a pervasive daily reality for many people, from the poorest in the townships to the wealthiest in the green suburbs. It is my opinion that violence has become a defining feature of the South African societal landscape.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is an attempt to grapple with and visualise some of these dynamics at play in a South African context. The work consists of eight balaclava-clad heads suspended from the ceiling in mimicry of a group of people. These heads become expressions of the complex nature of criminality and the fertile ground from which it flourishes in an economically divided country. People sometimes find themselves with no option but to engage in criminal activity. The hollow shell reflects the face-less, nameless and unknown criminal entity.

The heads hang from the ceiling in a cluster and through their shape and the deep blue of the woollen balaclava they resemble a bunch of grapes, and as such reference the work's title. The use of the grape as an icon bears special relevance to the Cape where the wine industry is world renown. The growing of the vine has become more and more a mechanised process in recent years and thus the reliance on farm labourers has diminished increasingly (footnote). The desperation of unemployment is nourishment for all manner of social ills.

Wrath is the vine which draws its strength from the prevailing climate and the layers of sullied soil within which it can only thrive. The produce of such a vine is long in the ripening and sweet with vengeance. This work was conceived and made in the aftermath of the murder of promising young South African actor Brett Goldin in 2006 (Hofmeyer, 2006: Online). The balaclavas are intended to hang in a cluster to mimic a group of men. The shell is used to create a sense of emptiness within that hints at the unthinking and unconscious criminal act. The blue balaclava was selected to avoid racial associations and for the similarity it affords to the colour of some grape varieties. The work hangs from the ceiling to create a sense of sinister weightlessness.

## Heart to Heart



fig. 18 Bird, S. 2006. *Heart to Heart*.

*"As long as we take the view that these are problems for women alone to solve, we cannot expect to reverse the high incidence of rape and child abuse...and domestic violence. We do know that many men do not abuse women and children; and that they strive always to live with respect and dignity. But until today the collective voice of these men has never been heard. Because the issue has not been regarded as one for the whole nation. From today those who inflict violence on others will know they are being isolated and cannot count on other men to protect them. From now on all men will hear the call to assume responsibility for solving this problem."*

*Nelson Mandela, 1997, National Men's March (Katz, 2006: 253)*

I make use of the iconic heart shape traditionally associated with romantic love. The plaques are identical but are sexed through the use of colour, baby blue as symbolic of the masculine, pink its female counterpart. The hues used are often found on children's clothing and merchandise and hence hint at purity and innocence. This innocence is immediately undercut by the addition and subtraction on each plaque that serves to further entrench the gender association. The male heart has a large fish-hook

protruding from it while the female heart has been gouged into a furrow that resembles a vagina.

The work references the widespread sexualised violence against girls and women in South Africa, which is of staggering proportions (Usdin, Christofides, Malepe and Maker, 2000: 55).

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## Traditional Weapons



fig. 19 Bird, S. 2008. *Traditional Weapons*.

This work consists of a grouping of wooden phalluses carved from a range of woods, from light pine to dark Imbuia. Each phallus is individuated through the type of wood used and by differences in length, girth and curvature. They are all carved by hand and thus will be subject to differences in form accordingly. These phalluses taper towards the base, where they form a rounded end grip. Although the form is not a highly realistic representation, they are immediately recognisable as penises. However, they also resemble rudimentary clubs. This resemblance and the inference of the title makes obvious reference to weapons, and an implied potential violence. Accordingly, the work not only seeks to re-examine the notion of male violence against females and the entrenched power of the penis, it seeks to situate the habitualised and normalised violence firmly within enforced patriarchal hegemonic culture. The work seeks to be culturally inclusive in its indictment through the tonal range found in the phalluses. Thus the statement is made cross-culturally. The allusion to the club, or specifically in a South African context, the *knobkemie*, serves to ground the work in the local. The tonal range

is designed to render the works accusation applicable to all cultures and creeds in South Africa and beyond, as this sort of violence is not peculiar to any one culture or economic bracket.

The work expresses the idea that culture (and religion) are arbiters of a learned inequality and bigotry which has its roots in a dogma completely out of touch with the ideals of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It also hints at the notion that patriarchal domination is entrenched through the performance of masculinities designed to reiterate traditional hierarchies of oppression.

*"[Ours] is a culture in which sexualised violence, sexual violence, and violence-by-sex are so common that they should be considered normal. Not normal in the sense of healthy or preferred, but an expression of the sexual norms of the culture, not violations of the norms. Rape is illegal, but the sexual ethic that underlies rape is woven into the fabric of the culture."*(Jenson in Katz, 2006: 149)

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## Zuma Biscuits



fig. 20 Bird, S. 2007. *Zuma Biscuits*.

This work satirises some of the more outrageous comments made by Jacob Zuma during the course of his trial for rape in 2006<sup>1</sup>. Although acquitted, he did however reveal himself as being guilty of holding highly contentious views. He revealed himself as potentially morally and ethically flawed both through his actions and through some wayward reasoning. His rhetoric can be viewed as deeply misogynistic, homophobic and narrowly tribal and as such, counter-productive to South Africa's fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS and rampant violence against women and children. I have used the commonplace Iced Zoo Biscuit, very popular in South Africa amongst children, as a ground for highlighting the seductive nature of his rhetoric and his position of influence

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<sup>1</sup> These are examples of the kinds of comments made during the trial: "You cannot leave a woman if she is already at that stage (of sexual arousal)." - Former deputy president Jacob Zuma, giving evidence in the Johannesburg High Court during his rape trial.

"Under normal circumstances, if a woman is dressed in a skirt, she will sit properly with her legs together. But she would cross her legs and wouldn't even mind if the skirt was raised very much." - Zuma.

"I had no problem having sexual intercourse with her, bearing in mind that she had needs." - Zuma.

"She consented. She actually took the initiative. When she got into that bed she encouraged me." - Zuma.

"It would minimise the risk of catching the disease." - Zuma, explaining to the Johannesburg High Court why he took a shower after having sex with an HIV-positive woman. (news24, 2006: Online)

as a politician. The biscuits become symbolic of the ideas that he expounds and of the responsibility he as a leader has abused.

Formally the work draws on the pop aesthetic of bright punchy objects. The choice of wood as the medium was informed by the long tradition of wood carving in Africa.

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## Chief Whip



fig. 21 Bird, S. 2008. *Chief Whip*.

The chief is a leader, ordained to command his subjects as he sees fit. His directives are law and sacrosanct. In business structure the term chief is used to denote a person at the top of a chain of command, chief executive officer, chief security officer, or, editor in chief. These are usually positions of power and influence. In politics, the title chief whip is given to a high-ranking member of a political party in a legislature whose principal task is to ensure that members of the party remain disciplined and vote as the leadership desires. The model is taken from British politics and has its roots in the fox hunting tradition, where a member of the party was responsible for whipping-in the group, i.e., keeping the hunting party unified (Gladstone, 1927: 519). Chief whips in the South African political sphere do not enjoy a squeaky clean image. Indicative of the widespread problem of ineffective leadership in South African politics is the fact that a number of ANC chief whips have been prosecuted for corruption and various other crimes. For example, Mnyamezeli Booi implicated in fraud and corruption; Tony Yengeni convicted of fraud, Playfair Morule found guilty of culpable homicide and driving under the influence and reckless driving and Mbulelo Goniwe dismissed for abusing his position to gain sexual favours (Tabane and Sokupa, 2006: Online).

Politics is still very much a macho business, all the more so as the line between big business and political clout dissolves in the scramble for self-enrichment. This work operates on the perceived link between the male sex organs, virility, and social power. Masculine power is the weapon or means by which the masses, or underlings, are kept in a position of subservience ensuring their complicity in any desired scheme. Fear, the result of the threat of violence, is hence the most expedient tool with which to maintain privileged hierarchical structures.

This work is carved from dark Imbuia wood and includes an actual *sjambok* that I purchased from a beachfront stall in Durban. The work recalls the tradition of African woodcarving and the wall-mounted plaque serves to aggrandise and memorialise the masculine. This plaque format hints at the trophies or memorial plaques found in museums, churches or men's reading and smoking rooms of old.

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fig. 22 Bird, S. RSR. 2007.

This work parodies the position of Ronald Suresh Roberts. Author of the biography of South African president Thabo Mbeki entitled *Fit to Govern: the Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki* (2007). The book has failed to make any serious contribution to the politics of South Africa and appears to have been nothing more than a propaganda exercise ahead of the election of a new president of the ANC and SA (Brink, 2008: Online). Roberts has made himself unpopular in the media and has been castigated for his biases and personal agendas, even coming under suspicion for serious academic plagiarism (Brink, 2008: Online).

Roberts has however, been drawn into the art world and in Cape Town at least, he has enjoyed some kind of celebrity status, even being called upon to officially open exhibitions. This work not only looks critically at Roberts with regard to his politics, but also examines the forces that have seen fit to use him within the art world. It seems unclear at this point who is using whom and to what end.

The hair-dryer is a cheap one, and was selected because of its colour. The coil of extension cable on which it is placed is intended to mimic a coiled up snake. The coiling of electrical cable is a fire hazard and is generally to be avoided if good safety practices are followed. The coil creates an electrical field that generates heat and could, if left long enough, set the plastic insulation alight.

*Pop Pop Pop!*



fig. 23 Bird, S. 2008. *Pop Pop Pop!*

Violence as entertainment, entertainment as violence. This work makes visual the ever-increasing linkage between these two human pastimes. The base takes the form of the characters that constitute the abbreviation AK-47, and is carved from Imbuia. The Russian manufactured Kalashnikov semi-automatic assault rifle is more commonly referred to as the AK-47. It is the most widely used small arms weapon (Kahaner, 2007: 3) and because of its ubiquitous use by freedom fighters it has become strongly associated with guerrilla warfare and of a popular revolutionary spirit. The popularity of this weapon is as a result of its relative cheapness and its reliability under varying conditions. Set into these character panels are dozens of rods which support bronze cast popcorn, in such a way that the popcorn appears to float above the text. The use of the popcorn as a signifier of lightweight entertainment culture has its roots in my previous work. Popcorn is traditionally a snack enjoyed while watching a movie, or when at a theme park. It is a light snack in three ways. The popped corn itself is an object of little physical mass, thus secondly, even consumed in quantity it generally does not satiate an appetite. In addition popcorn has direct association with light entertainment (traditionally consumed while at the cinema for example). The piece

then forces an actual union between violence and lightweight entertainment, in an attempt to call into question societies' infatuation with violence.

The characters are hand manufactured and the popcorn has been cast in bronze from actual popcorn and then nickel-plated. The complicated yet consistent forms of the popcorn required casting directly, and were all dipped in molten wax to avoid disintegration in the casting process. The plating was required to unify the forms after the brazing of the rods and also to prevent darkening due to oxidising. The nickel has the added association of money, and further emphasises the fact that war and entertainment are often all about money.

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## Black Ram



fig. 24 Bird, S. 2008. *Black Ram*.

This work is an expression of the perceived hypocrisy embedded within the Christian doctrine, divided as it is on issues of race, sexuality and gender equality (Seesholtz, 2006: Online). Value and faith reads as contingent on a moral judgment and a dogma steeped in prejudice.

The black sheep is perceived to be isolated and intrinsically inferior to the rest due to its difference and hence is cast out from a system where conformity is a sign of righteousness. Thus the work points to a paradox within the church through hinting at the nature of Jesus Christ's own racial demographic. It also points to the postulation that he was a non-conformist and strong leader, arguably even militant in his assertions.

The work consists of an easily available plastic toy painted black on a white cross base made from supa-wood.

## Holy Cow!



fig. 25 Bird, S. 2007. *Holy Cow!*

This work is intended to be humorous and playful, however there is a sense of foreboding in the frozen moment. The two toys have been animated through their coming together and yet within the violence of the piece there is stillness. As if patiently waiting for death by suffocation, the cow could seem calmly resigned to its fate. The cow is symbolic of abundance in many cultures, while the snake is generally accepted as an embodiment of evil. The term 'holy cow' is used to describe that which is sacrosanct and beyond reproach. The expression can also be used as a surprised exclamation.

## *Made In China*



fig. 26 Bird, S. 2008. *Made in China*.

Chinese economic imperialism in Africa is assumed to be accelerating at an unprecedented level (Brookes and Shin, 2006: Online). Support for various factions during wars of independence over the last 4 decades has smoothed the way for Chinese big business to engage in major economic deals with African leaders (Brookes and Shin, 2006: Online). Often these deals are linked to China's insatiable drive to secure alternative means of acquiring fossil fuels or other natural resources. The country is in the midst of a massive economic lift, and, unable to produce enough raw materials domestically it is in the process of scouring the globe for cheaper alternatives. Africa seems ripe for the picking. Africa appears to welcome China's interest with open arms, regardless of the possible lack of trickle down benefit for the local communities and with seemingly scant regard for China's reputation for human rights abuses (Adams, 1998: 74). Africa could be seen as the new global cash cow, with some leaders

complicit in illicit deals. Western business practices have undergone much change in the last few decades, principally in the drive towards greater transparency and accountability to the public. In this way unscrupulous Chinese firms may have the upper hand on their Western counterparts when dealing with African leaders who may expect bribes and kick-backs (United States Embassy to South Africa, 2006: 5). As a result the country has unprecedented access to markets that the West will not openly touch because of political pressure. *Made In China* is an attempt to visualise the uneven relationship between Africa and China. The grey primer of the cows is a perfect ground to highlight the red ants which one could imagine to be searching for soft flesh.

The work consists of plastic cows and ants actually mass-produced in China.

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## Birds in Space



fig. 27 Bird, S. 2008. *Birds in Space*.

This essence of this work is ambivalence. There is clear allusion to the events of 9/11 and the title reveals a debt to the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi's (b 1876 - 1957) essentialised forms of flying birds. Brancusi used simplification of form to expose the essence of his subjects. His *Birds In Space* (fig. 28), of which there were many versions, were based on an earlier sculpture of the *Maiastra* (Andreotti, 1980: 138-9). Of significance to my work is that the *Maiastra* in Romanian folklore was said to be a beautiful golden bird which exhibited magical properties (Guggenheim, 2008: online). In my work the simplified aeroplane tails are immortalised and mythologised on their wooden plaques, it is thus unclear as to whether the spectacular event itself is being memorialised or if the very act of aggression is glorified. It is within this framework of uncertainty that I place those events in 2001<sup>2</sup>, seen by some as an inexcusable act of despicable terrorism and by others as a just response to aggressive American foreign policy.

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<sup>2</sup> For further information on how the press has attributed meaning and informed opinion regarding Sept. 11 see Ervand Abrahamian's article *The US Media, Huntington and September 11* in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Jun., 2003), pp. 529-544 and published by Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

The choice of bronze was informed by a desire for the maximum gravitas of material to play off the toy-like form of the aeroplanes.



fig. 28 Brancusi, C. 1932-40. *Bird in Space*.

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## Currency



fig. 29 Bird, S. 2007. *Currency*.

This work is a wry comment on the massive hype surrounding South Africa's hosting of the World Cup soccer tournament in 2010. Enormous sums of money are being poured both into the upgrading of existing stadia and the construction of entirely new venues (Gleeson, 2006: online). The South African taxpayer is footing much of the expense with the guarantee from government that the economic benefits through increased trade and tourism will offset this with the lasting effect of increased foreign investor confidence (Mail and Guardian, 2006: online). Considering our dire socio-political climate this seems an unlikely blue sky scenario. The red dye on the R10 notes renders their proper function and value redundant, referring to the dye released in cash boxes after or during cash-in-transit heists. These notes have the hope of the world cup printed onto them but consequently in that very act have been rendered useless.

The number 20 on the notes has been printed onto the notes using a rubber stamp specially made for the purpose. Money belongs to the government and it is illegal to

deface or destroy it, apparently only they are legally able to throw it away (The South African Reserve Bank, 1989: online).

### *DeadWrong*



fig. 30 Bird, S. 2006. *Deadwrong*.

The expression 'dead-wrong' can refer to a statement or position that is patently or categorically incorrect or reprehensible in some fashion. It's a double negative and is conclusive in its statement of falsity. In this work the negative of the dead is overshadowed by the faster flashing wrong. Thus the notion of lifelessness is called into question. The word *wrong* then takes on a positive polarity and becomes life affirming. The meaning of the expression 'dead wrong' is in this way spliced and the separate halves play against each other. This dichotomy is further enhanced by the difference in colour employed for each neon word. The red has obvious associations to blood, anger and violence, while the light turquoise blue/green, suggests serenity, calm, and peace.

The use of neon as a medium signals a debt to many other artists who have pioneered its usage, most notably Bruce Nauman (b 1941)<sup>3</sup>. Both in its use of wordplay and neon *DeadWrong* recalls a body of work by Kendell Geers (b 1968). In 2003 Geers made a number of text based neon signs where a faulty letter would reveal a different word.

<sup>3</sup> See *Eat/Death* (1972), *Human/Need/Desire* (1983), *Suite Substitute* (1968)

For example in *Terrorealismus* (2003) (fig. 31) a small gallery space contained an installation of three neon signs reading *terror*, *border*, and *danger*. The first letter of each word flickers revealing the hidden word thus exposing another layer of meaning to the original text. In *The Annunciation* (2004), the words *holy* and *fuck* appear flashing in neon alternately. *SI/Laughter* (2003) operates in a similar fashion to *Terrorealismus* with the first letter flickering to reveal the word *laughter*.



fig. 31 Geers, K. 2003. *Terrorealismus*.

My work serves as an attempt to highlight a positive end to a negative beginning, it hints at an inherent hope even in the bleakest circumstances. I have made use of neon signage to create a work that cannot be ignored. It's flashing is insistent and almost annoying in its relentlessness. There is also the reference to the flashing lights of emergency vehicles, in particular police lights. This serves to highlight the danger inherent in a society so ravaged by trauma and pain.

*Lost That One (Self Portrait)*



fig. 32 Bird, S. 2007. *Lost That One (Self Portrait)*.

The box resembles a museum display cabinet, or vitrine, the kind that might house relics or precious historical artefacts. In this way the spot lit<sup>4</sup> tooth is elevated in status to a valued object of cultural significance and thus refers directly to the church reliquary. The title implies that the tooth has been lost to the original owner. The tooth itself becomes the embodiment of that loss, or of the violent event that caused its removal.

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<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the associations of what Greenblatt calls 'boutique lighting'- and a 'heightened sense of acquisition' in relation to that which is being displayed in such a manner. (Greenblatt, 1990: 28)

In this way the title makes reference to a loss that resulted in the removal of the tooth, a fight perhaps, in which victory went to the opponent. The work is of a very personal nature, the tooth is my own tooth, not actually lost but certainly knocked out. This work finds similarity in many artworks from various movements with disparate artistic aims. Homage is paid to Joseph Cornell (b 1903-1972) with his adoption and adaptation of museum display techniques through which the ordinary becomes the extra-ordinary (Noble, 1983: 197). The piece is similarly indebted to the display cabinets and vitrines of Damien Hirst (b 1965-) (fig. 33). The ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp (b 1887-1968)<sup>5</sup> come to bear on the reading of this work, and there is a link to the work of Piero Manzoni (b 1933-1963), in particular the *Merda D'Artista* (1961) (fig. 34)<sup>6</sup> where the artist sells a by-product of his own body. In addition the *The First Living Work of Art* (1961) by Timm Ulrichs (b 1940) (fig. 35) also merits mention. Here the artist exhibited himself in a vitrine, paving the way for later artists like Gilbert (b 1943) and George (b 1942) to completely collapse the distinction between art and life. More recent work of special relevance is the sculpture *Self* (1991) by Marc Quinn (b 1964). The artist cast a replica of his head using his own blood, which was then displayed in a refrigerated display cabinet.



fig. 33 Hirst, D. 1993. *Mother and Child, Divided*.

<sup>5</sup> See the ready-made snow shovel titled *In Advance of a Broken Arm* 1915 or *Porte Chapeaux (Hatrack)* 1917.

<sup>6</sup> In May 1961 Manzoni sealed 90 metal tins- each containing 30 grams of his own excrement. Each tin had the following printed on – 'Artist's shit, Contents 30 grams net, freshly preserved, produced and tinned in May 1961' and was to be sold at the current price of gold (Silk, 1983:65).



fig. 34 Manzoni, P. 1953. *Merda d'artista*.



fig. 35 Ulrichs, T. 1961. *The First Living Work of Art*.



fig. 36 Quinn, M. 1991. *Self*.

In this work I face my own violence and resultant loss and I memorialise its futility. It could serve as a investigation of the aspect of masculinity which requires one to 'take a beating like a man'. The tooth in the vitrine is my own, knocked out in a fistfight with an Englishman in England. The fact that it is my own re-enforces my attempt to come to grips with the contradiction of my own frailty as flesh and bone and my previous youthful and devil-may-care sense of invincibility.

## White Lies (No Heroes)



fig. 37 Bird, S. 2007. *White Lies (No Heroes)*.

Can there still be heroes within a culture that perpetrated massive crimes against humanity? (Asmal, 2000:1) This work links to the *Grapes Of Wrath* in that it embodies the paradox of the victim/transgressor although this time the 'criminal' is the mindset that tacitly condoned or turned a blind eye to the crimes against humanity committed prior to democracy in South Africa. These pigs are either unwilling or unable to speak, it's unclear which.

*They Came, They Saw, They took (They never fucked off)*



fig. 38 Bird, S. 2007. *They Came, They Saw, They Took (They Never Fucked Off)*.

The colonial era in African history is characterised by brutality and degradation. The colonial powers exploited human resources and natural resources (United Nations Centre against Apartheid, 1973:1). European nations grew wealthy from what could be described as widespread theft from Africa and are still to an extent doing so with unfair trade relationships. In addition it is an oft repeated refrain among African leaders of all sorts to blame any current social or political problems in Africa on a legacy created by corrupt and criminal colonial powers (Phimister, I and Raftopoulos, B, 2004: 385).

The white balaclavas with red stripe recall the St Georges flag<sup>7</sup> of England. Balaclavas within the context of my body of work become signifiers of criminality. These balaclavas are not in use, hung as they are on hooks as if in retirement. However, they are placed on memorial plaques to forever parade their dark history.

<sup>7</sup> Originally the St George's Cross was the official flag of Genoa. In 1190 England and the City of London adopted it as their flag in order to ensure the safety of their ships in the Mediterranean as the Genoese fleet was known for its military prowess. During the crusades of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries this emblem also emblazoned the uniforms of English soldiers. In 1277 the St George's Cross officially became the national flag of England and Wales. (Reaside, 2008: online)

## Conclusion

I've attempted to trace a trajectory in sculpture by discussing work created by specific artists since the mid-1980's that resonates with my own in 2008. My intention has been to highlight specific works and artistic practices that position my production in an historical and socio-political context. In so doing I hope to expose a particular thread of social engagement in contemporary South African sculpture. I believe the artists chosen for discussion are committed to the idea that art can have a positive role to play in society, while their work clearly shows an excitement for the materiality of sculpture and a delight in the hand-made.

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