

University of Cape Town

Title:

Valerie Desmore's Refusal(s): Art Practice as
Biomythography

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Wena wenzalo kaZondwayo

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This project is for all the women who have dared to live beyond the scripts of the world. I see your efforts, and I see your worth.

Abstract

The South African-born British artist and fashion designer Valerie Elizabeth Helene Desmore, who is said to have risen to fame in South Africa in 1942 at the age of sixteen, left South Africa in 1945 to pursue an art career in the United Kingdom. This move was prompted by the infamous South African race bar through which she experienced significant 'racial persecution'. Feeling rejected, her exile in the United Kingdom resulted in a career change from visual arts to fashion, only to return to visual arts again in her senior years. This oscillation between visual art and fashion culminated in an idiosyncratic body of work that this thesis, through the concepts of refusal and biomythography, examines. This is done by analysing her artworks as they tell her life stories. Argued via a critical consideration of how the artist's work bears rich articulations of self-determination, self-writing, and self-enunciation in bold and unapologetic gestures, the dissertation shows patterns of a visual trajectory marked by a series of refusals and her own avant-garde style. Using 'encumbered methodology' the thesis centres the artist's agency as well as her legacy, as prerequisites for any meaningful undertaking of art-historical writing. As such, the methodology and theoretical framework of refusal and biomythography combined illuminate a multitude of the artist's complex experiences, showing how significant multivocality has become in contemporary art historical practice. In turn, this further reveals how Desmore's choice to reciprocally reject (depart from) that which rejected her (denied her access) disrupted known workings of art historical exclusions. Desmore's audacious gestures complicate and refute the often-simplified understandings of Black South African Modern artists as passive participants and 'discovered subjects' in the making of their careers. By examining the work of one woman artist, Valerie Desmore, this research asserts a renewed, gendered positionality for Black South African Modern women artists more broadly. The thesis, therefore, presents efforts to re-member and re-assemble the life and work of an artist nearly erased from the art historical canon. Drawing on Black feminist and postcolonial methodologies the thesis lays bare the challenges of researching invisible, disparate and undervalued archival and historical materials.

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List of Abbreviations

APO	African Political Organisation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
DAG	Durban Art Gallery
JAG	Johannesburg Art Gallery
JCAF	Johannesburg Contemporary Art Foundation
MoMA	Museum of Modern Art
St. Martins	Central St. Martins College of Art and Design
SANG	South African National Gallery (falls under Iziko)
Slade	The Slade School of Fine Art
UCL	The University College London (UCL) / The Slade School of Fine Art
UNISA	University of South Africa
Wits	Wits University / The University of the Witwatersrand
WAM	Wits Art Museum
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association
Zeitz MOCAA	Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa

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Introduction

Valerie, go away and paint your life. And then come back in a few days, and you show me your work.

—Oskar Kokoschka (in Desmore 1998)

[...] positioning oneself somewhere on the axis of absencing has served, variously, as a reservoir of energy and permission for idiosyncrasy and, trite as it sounds, inner journeying.

—Martin Herbert (2017: 12)

Writing about refusal in *Tell Them I Said No* (2017),¹ art critic Martin Herbert describes ten artists who, at the height of their careers in the 1960s, became famous for retaliating against the expectations of the art world or quitting art altogether, yet remained tied to the art world in various ways. Going into depth about the kinds of implications these artists' refusals had on their careers, Herbert illustrates how it was not just a matter of walking away but how, for them, it was a way to somehow gain some sort of autonomy² from the dictatorship of commercial galleries, overdetermining patrons and conservative art institutions. He also illustrates how the gesture of walking away inadvertently complicated things for the artists, to the extent that some of them got totally written off the art scene or became notorious for it. Whatever the case, Herbert weaves out how these artists become mythologised as 'mad artists', framing their pushback as a kind of value for their mainstay or disappearance. He lays bare the complications of the refusals for artists of the epoch of the 1960s and 1970s, elucidating each of these artists' struggles with the workings of the art world. This, in turn, reveals new understandings of the notions of fame, networks and power.

¹ As with Trisha Donnelly, her 2014 show at London's Serpentine Gallery was the kind of career milestone that usually sees an artist perform for the press – confessing, perhaps, a fear of cheese or a desire to pickle a contemporary in formaldehyde. But Donnelly declined. There was no formal press release, no contact with the media. [...] As the book reveals she is not alone in having rejected such conventions. In *Tell Them I Said No*, Herbert examines ten artists who have withdrawn, some in extreme ways, from the self-promotion and courting of celebrity that is bundled up with our understanding of art world success," (*Don't look now: the artists who turn their backs on the world*, 2017)

² For Okeke-Agulu, the "autonomous practice" (2001: 40) of African artists speaks to how these artists have always seen themselves authors of their own art destinies.

Herbert's book echoes the focus of this research. In many ways, Valerie Desmore's career choice suffered a fate similar to those of the artists mentioned in *Tell Them I Said No*. In 1945, at the height of her young career, aged twenty, Valerie chose to go into self-exile to London to "escape [South Africa's] racial persecution" (Desmore 1997). A few years after arriving in London, she changed her career to fashion as she found the art field too prescriptive. Justifying her decision to study fashion at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in 1951, in a 1998 interview, she said, "[I] thought that fashion would not interfere too much with my attitude to my work when I eventually could paint again". In her mind, it was clear that she "didn't want to commercialise [her] work" and therefore "needed a job" (Desmore 1997), or rather a career that could give her a sustainable income.³ While these statements show acutely the systemic challenges Valerie faced working in the art field in her early career, they also indicate a great awareness of what her choice to change careers meant and the negotiations that these choices imposed. They exemplify the alternative ways in which she existed in the art world whilst remaining tied to it through fashion. This is what she used to carve a space of freedom for a later return to art on her own terms and in her own time.

While stories of this kind of refusal in the arts are more common today, or as Herbert illustrates, were the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s in the West, such reactions within the context of modern South Africa, not the least from a 'Coloured' Black⁴ woman artist of the 1940s, like Valerie, was an incredibly daring and unusual response to her complicated racialised situation. This meant that she was taking unknown risks. Indeed, to choose to leave her ascending South African art career and the subsequent choice not to participate in the London art scene when she realised, it was not working for her was a brave move into uncharted territory. As it is now known, these choices came at a cost to her and resulted invariably in Valerie becoming almost forgotten in South Africa, to the extent that even when she was finally remembered through the inclusion of her work in the exhibition *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Modern Black Artists* (1997–1998),⁵ her 'return' to the South African art scene made no great impact.

³ On her handwritten CV next to the date 1951, Valerie writes, "Studied fashion design at Central Saint Martins 'I needed a job and didn't want to prostitute my art'" (JAG Archives).

⁴ In chapter 1, I delve more into this pairing and its relationship to political identification towards Blackness. The sequencing of the words 'Coloured' Black is purposeful labelling that I also unpack in the same chapter. Candice Jansen, mobilising this term "Coloured Black" to write about photographers Ernest Cole and Cedric Nunn, suggests that these two photographers "deployed coloured as photographic practice in order to visualise racial critique". This pairing of terms is seldom seen and speaks to the nuanced perspectives of acknowledging their individual power at the same time their simultaneity as a pair. I also use the term 'Black' to refer to the broad encapsulating term that includes all people of colour in South Africa, for example, Africans, Indians, 'Coloured' and Chinese as described in the apartheid-era South African constitution.

⁵ *Land and Lives: A Story of Early African Modern Black Artists*, curated by Elza Miles. Johannesburg Art Gallery, November 1997 – 19 April 1998. Iziko National Art Gallery, 31 October – 13 December 1998.

Valerie's tumultuous career trajectory attests to the many workings of the systems of oppression and the numerous innovative ways she responded to her career limitations. It indicates how Valerie used strategies of what I explore in this thesis as 'absenting' to pursue an 'inner journeying' that Herbert refers to in the above quote. Valerie's choice to quit The Slade School of Fine Art (Slade) and change her career to fashion became an important purposeful deviation that gave her the space to discover her artistic voice. It is what she would later use to make art on her own terms, which in this thesis is explored as biomythography. Within this space of biomythography, of 'absenting' towards an 'inner journeying', there is a powerful manifestation of the notion of refusal. This thesis investigates how biomythography in Valerie's work is generated through a series of refusals that become part of her 'inner journeying'. In this sense, the notion of refusal, therefore, becomes Valerie's choice of self-determination and self-writing.⁶ The significant thrust here is that engaging refusal as a generative notion, and not only as a negation, extends the framework for constructing biomythography.

The decision to evoke biomythography is not an exercise of classifying Valerie's practice. It is rather a proposition to characterise the strategies she mobilised to produce work. Unlike monographs or biographies, a biomythography allows for the examination of the artist's work whilst acknowledging the limitation of art historical writing to capture the complex collapses of time, contexts, conditional limitations, and the creative strategies she used to remain connected to her creative practice. Biomythography offers a complex route into her world through her art, not as a direct telling of her life story but as an attempt to understand how she used her creative practice to reflect on the contexts of her time. Through the trajectory of absenting, refusal and biomythography, this thesis also explores how Valerie produced an incredibly powerful body of work that does not necessarily tell a straightforward story. It offers, instead, deliberately obfuscated visual codes that can only be understood by critically pursuing the multi-facets of her tumultuous life, non-traditional ideas, and subtly revolutionary working methodologies. In this sense, her life and work aptly evoke biomythography.

Though biomythography is a term that has only recently entered art historical writing and creative theorisation practice (Khan 2012, 2019), the term has a long tradition in the literary field. bell

⁶ In the later part of the thesis, as described in the methodology, I demonstrate how the notion of writing is explored from both her artistic work and her personal archive —dairy entries, random notes found in her notebooks and the many sketches also found in her notebooks.

hooks (1997, 2015) proposes that biomythography, as a necessary intervention in autobiographical writing, is based on two things. Firstly, that Black writers, even when writing autobiographies, hardly ever write about deeper personal things because of how certain ways of being for Black people in a conventional world are still tabooed. Secondly, that they also do not apply creative writing and experiment outside of straightforward accounts of their lives. hooks bases this on Audre Lorde's book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (1982). In this book, Lorde explores the notion of biomythography in the way that she writes about her life and the relationships she had with the women in her life, highlighting how she and those women worked together to surpass oppression in the 1950s and 1960s. For hooks:

[...] Biomythography encourages a move away from the notion of autobiography as an exact accounting of life. Encouraging readers to see dreams and fantasies as part of the material used to invent the self, Lorde invited us to challenge notions of absolute truth. Her insistence that there is no absolute truth when it comes to how we remember the past, that there is an interpretation of fact, has shaped my thinking about autobiography. (1997: xix)

This dissertation explores these overlapping functions of autobiography, biography and biomythography that hooks describes — particularly the intersectionality of some of the critical concepts mentioned above, as they transgress all three forms. In an interview with Karla Jay, Lorde explains what the book was about, saying it was an “attempt to create a piece of art, not merely as a retelling of things that happened to me and to other women with whom I shared close ties. I define it as biomythography because I was finding no other word to really coin what I was trying to do” (1984: 109). The use of myth as a strategy to gain a voice, in the way it allowed Lorde to speak to truths that would otherwise have been suppressed by the circumstances of her time, is interesting and has traction when one considers Valerie's art and life. It infers that, through the telling of seemingly generic histories, the truths about the various systems of oppression she encountered become simultaneously revealed and paradoxically concealed.

The deliberate focus on Valerie's art means that this dissertation is not producing a biography, which would have only been about her. Rather, it is reading her art as a creative form that she used to tell stories of her life, just as Lorde, in a more fictive manner, did. This intersection of things experienced, and things constructed makes possible the codification of visual motifs that Valerie used in her work. It is through a similar approach that this research has sought to unpack the work of Valerie, in the sense that her art is able to tell us the story of her time through both the real and the imagined. To consider the notion of biomythography makes it possible to understand Valerie's artworks as the nexus between her personal experiences, contexts, the politics of her time and how

these enabled (to some extent) or disabled (to another extent) her creative career. To read her work through biomythography also proposes her artworks as useful tools for unpacking the politics of the art economies that enabled, promoted, and made space for her.

Furthermore, by focusing on the three main concepts—absenting, refusal, and biomythography—this research considers the reasons for Valerie’s neglect to be related to several things. First, the racial discrimination she experienced in South Africa. Second, the systemic art scene’s exclusions that she experienced in London. Finally, her own choice to change, complicate, and expand her career—side-stepping into fashion and back to art in later years. This research indexes how she might have captured these moments in her art, thereby demonstrating endless refusals towards the art world, while simultaneously illustrating how she produced a biomythography about her life. Within this research, the concepts of refusal and biomythography are viewed as conceptual frameworks highlighting the complexities and inconsistencies of her visibility and invisibility, how she is both known yet not quite known. This is akin to what Zine Magubane (2004) calls “absent-presence” or what Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981) suggest as the “politics of choice”. As Herbert aptly proposes, this political choice also allowed her to “[position herself] somewhere on the axis of absenting [which] has served [her] inner journeying” (Martin Herbert 2017: 12).

Thinking about Valerie’s refusals as a form of absenting helps us better understand her intellectual contribution to the art field. It shows the importance of what editors of the recently published compendium *Surfacing*, Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon, citing Patricia Hill Collins, describe as the “value of seeing from below” (2021: 3), which they suggest has offered great input in understanding how “those positioned at the margins see the world differently” (2021: 3) and are therefore able to generate a “post-colonial understanding of ‘being human’” (2021: 2). They insist that such “perspectives offer understanding and insight that speak not only about and to—but beyond—their own locations” (2021: 3). Certainly, the examination of Valerie Desmore’s work, the literature consulted (albeit scant), fieldwork completed, copious conversations with field experts and members of her family, have led to the conclusion that her eclectic artistic style inheres so much more than has generally been acknowledged locally and internationally. Evident in her work are the dynamisms of geopolitics; subtle confrontations with social contexts, complex identity politics, the politics of making, and the sheer dedication to producing art.

Rationale and Research Context

Since the dawn of democracy, South Africa has put much effort into recovering histories that were structurally excluded by the colonial and apartheid systems. These efforts have been pursued as a means to right the wrongs of the past. In the visual arts, tribute is being paid to Black artists whose participation in the field had previously been ignored —what Steven Sack⁷ in the 1980s called ‘the neglected tradition’. In light of this, Black women artists have received particular focus, recognising that gender, class and cultural discrimination play a big part in the glaring absence of their contribution to South African art historical writing today. This project of redress with regard to Black women artists has more recently been foregrounded as one of the most important national projects in the arts in South Africa. That being said, while the particular focus on Black women artists often garners much excitement, over the years, it has also received pointed criticism for its superficiality, blatant omissions, incomplete accounting of who these artists were, and the lack of in-depth research into their individual practices (Makhubu 2020; Chhiba and Ntombela 2021, Malatjie and Ntombela 2022). These gaps need particular attention, and this dissertation contributes to these efforts.

Writers, art historians and curators such as Christine Qunta (1987), Jacqueline Nolte (2005), Lize Van Robbroeck (2006, 2011), Portia Malatjie (2011), Nontobeko Ntombela (2013), Sharlene Khan (2006, 2008, 2017), Nomusa Makhubu (2020) and many others, have variously foregrounded the absence, or rather the under-researched history of modern Black women artists and the urgent need to address it. Such critique has been based on the fact that there is very little formally recorded knowledge about the contributions that South African modern Black women artists have made to the South African art canon.⁸ One of the artists whose history finds itself in this kind of dilemma

⁷ The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930–1988), was an exhibition mounted at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989. Although Sack does not include Valerie in this exhibition, the framing of his exhibition, however, refers to the neglect of Black artists in South Africa. As he explains, “While I have included work by 100 artists in the exhibition, I am certain that future research will reveal artists whose work and influence have been overlooked ... It is in the ‘official’ histories and art museum that this art has not been fully represented” (Sack 1988/1991: 7). “The Neglected Tradition acknowledges that part of the history of South Africa has been overlooked” (Till, 1988/1991: 5). For Ozynski (1998), “The Neglected Tradition, is an admission of guilt”, that guilt being the racial discrimination against Black artists by public institutions, enabled by apartheid laws.

⁸ By Art canon I refer to how the principles of art history have been heavily criticised by various writers, including Keith Moxey (2001), for not always incorporating or separatist approaches to material culture studies that define aesthetics in relation to the arts of non-Western societies. Against the singular grandiose art historical canon narrative, other partisan canons have been introduced to challenge this. These other canons acknowledge that the selection of art is inherently subjective and shaped by specific viewpoints, agendas, and cultural contexts. For example, feminist narratives focused on women artists often highlight the role of social justice movements, environmental concerns, or specific artistic techniques that are unique to women’s experiences, thereby disrupting the art of historical singularity.

is Valerie Desmore, who, though reintroduced as pioneering⁹ South African ‘Coloured’ woman artist in 1998, continues to be inconsistently documented. To date, little has been done to bring detail to her life and work beyond her inclusion in a few exhibitions.¹⁰ In an interview (2002-2006), she reflects on this ‘neglect’, insinuating that racialised bias could be the possible reason why even today, she remains overlooked. She says:

What I do feel at the moment, as an artist. I feel that the black government isn’t giving me the recognition I deserve. And before the black government was there, I wasn’t given... I wouldn’t have been given the... well, maybe I would have now, but I know that certainly under the white government, they certainly didn’t want me as a human being, and I feel that the black government doesn’t want me, anyway. They don’t want me. Don’t even have money to buy a painting of mine for the National Gallery. No! But they give it to a black artist and that’s how it is. And when I was young, I had to come to England, in order to get an artistic education because I couldn’t get it under a white government. It’s very hard to be in between. (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

It is crucial to note how Valerie articulated her feelings about experiencing double neglect - first by the white government in her youth and later by the black government. This statement offers insight into Valerie’s perspectives on South African politics in her later years. It illuminates how her racial, artistic, gender, generational, and class identity may have evolved as she aged alongside the shifting historical events in South Africa. It provides valuable insight into her viewpoints after many years of leaving South Africa. This question of the politics of representation in post-apartheid South Africa is linked to how the art world has struggled to overcome its historical divides. Quite known is the fact that the value attributed to Black artists’ work was given or taken away at the discretion of white-run institutions and their patrons. It is also linked to the question, who gets remembered and who does not, and in what way are they remembered? As such, research on Valerie is even more paramount because it reveals why so few of her works are in public circulation. To have no major exhibitions or writings on Valerie means that her historical

⁹ Professor David Bunn, in his letter to the Minister of Arts and Culture, Roger Jardine, explains the word pioneer as follows, “To be a pioneer, in the old, ideologically charged sense of the word, meant to break new ground, in a spirit of innovation, against a field of resistances.” He was explaining this idea, asking Jardine to pay attention to the exhibition *Land and Lives* that he thought told “the history of innovation and resistance”.

¹⁰ There are about nine public exhibitions where her work has been featured since *Land and Lives* – but they are all group exhibitions that do not pay sole attention to her work. They are: *Land and Lives* (1997-1998), Adams, Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand, curated by Warren Siebrits at Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art, Parkwood (21 June–14 July 2005); *Paintings – Methven to Mashile*, curated by Warren Siebrits, at Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art, Parkwood (6 June–21 July 2006); *Take Your Road and Travel Along: The Advent of the Modern Black Painter in Africa*, curated by Michael Stevenson and Joost Bosland, Booth 27, Joburg Art Fair, Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg (13–16 March 2008); *Transformations: Women’s Art from the Late Nineteenth Century*, curated by Nessa Leibhammer, Reshma Chhiba and Musha Neluheni at JAG (2010); *A Fragile Archive*, curated by Nontobeko Ntombela at JAG (2012); *South African Art 1940–1975*, curated by Antoinette Murdoch at JAG (2015); *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, curated by Antoinette Murdoch, JAG (16–19 November 2016); and *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black Women Artist in South Africa 1940-2000*, curated by Portia Malatjie and Nontobeko Ntombela, Norval Foundation (2022–2023).

contribution in the South African context is not only threatened by inconsistency but also by imminent erasure. As Lewis and Baderoon note, the “post-apartheid preoccupation with recalling identities has led many younger coloured and Indian commentators to feel unheard, unseen and unrecognised in a transformative South Africa” (2021: 5).

I first came across the work of Valerie Desmore while doing my Masters research (2010–2012) on the artist Gladys Mgudlandlu. I had focused on Mgudlandlu because, for a long time, she was believed to have been the first ‘non-white’¹¹ woman ever to take up art as a profession, and I was interested in how the visibility of Black women artists in South Africa had begun. However, I noticed that Valerie had appeared on the art scene in South Africa before Mgudlandlu disrupted this claim, so I decided to include Valerie in the exhibition that I produced as part of the Masters practical component. The exhibition was titled *A Fragile Archive* (2012). It was shown at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. I included Valerie Desmore to bring to light her exclusion in South African art history, highlighting the fact that public institutions owned only three of her works at the time (and this remains the case even today). Through this exhibition, I also wanted to show who the early South African modern Black women artists were more broadly. This particular focus was on those who have remained unknown or inconsistently recognised. Studying the work of South African Black women artists is crucial for me because, as a Black woman curator, I want to understand the historical contexts in which my work becomes situated. The need to understand and establish a coeval and shared history between myself and other Black women in the arts of South Africa’s past is what necessitates this PhD research project. By focusing on Valerie Desmore, I continue what I began at the end of my Masters.

The decision to focus on Valerie was further prompted by an email I received in early 2019 from Fiona Fleck, Valerie’s niece, who, after independently reading my Masters thesis, reached out to me looking for advice about the collection she had inherited from her aunt. The email came as I was deciding on a topic for my PhD. It seemed serendipitous that I would receive such an email from Valerie’s relative at this very point in the larger scheme of things. The email from Fleck also made me aware that my Masters research project was continuing to impact a particular art historical context. The Masters thesis probably gave the impression that I had a lot more information on

¹¹ Valerie has broadly been categorised as ‘non-white’ in earlier writings. ‘Non-white’, ‘Non-European’, among others reflect how language across different periods – colonialism to apartheid - would have contributed to the myopic ways of race categorisation – often in relation to people of colour more broadly; Indians, Coloureds, and Blacks. These terms often appeared in newspapers where Valerie was mentioned. These were terms used to describe everyone who was not white, mostly from all other ethnic groups, ‘Coloured’, African, Indian. Chabani Manganyi describes these words as “notoriously insulting” (1973/2019: 21).

Valerie's work when, in fact, my knowledge about her work did not reach far beyond the Masters exhibition. When the show was over, due to the low representation of her work in public circulation, there seemed to be very little to pursue in terms of Valerie's oeuvre.

Speaking to Fleck, I learned about the Valerie Desmore collections she and her cousin Simon Pickstone-Taylor (Valerie's second cousin) inherited. I then followed up with Pickstone-Taylor, who had reached out to the South African National Gallery (SANG) many years ago (1997), trying to promote Valerie's work. His collection makes up half of the bequest to himself and Fleck. There are over a hundred works in their custody. Some of these have only recently been shown in public for the first time through the show I co-curated with Portia Malatjie, titled *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists – 1920–1940* (2022–2023) at the Norval Foundation in Cape Town, South Africa.¹²

My engagement with Fleck and Pickstone-Taylor pointed to the rich potential of an in-depth research project on Valerie, not just in terms of the 'recovery of her history', but also in learning about the contexts in which she produced her work, where her work currently sits, and about the stories she told through her art. For example, understanding where the work currently sits meant learning about her public and private institutional visibility. When I started this research, there were only five works in public circulation; three artworks in public institutions, and two in private collections. Over the course of writing this dissertation, I quickly became aware of a few other collectors who knew Valerie and who own her work. Most of the works from these private collections have never been publicly shown, with some not locally based. In the methodology section below, I delve into how I have engaged with the different collections and archives.

Additionally, over the course of writing this dissertation, I also discovered a few works that have appeared in secondary markets through auctions, with the most recent auction held in 2018. Such appearances in auctions indicate sporadic interest in Valerie's work, with online auction prices ranging between a meagre \$100 to \$1000. To my knowledge, the highest selling price has been around R250,000 through a private sale in 2008 and a work that has now been shown in the recent

¹² *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940 – 2000* was a Black African Feminist exhibition featuring works by over forty Black women artists from South Africa and about 200 works. It reflected on the history of the period between 1940 and 2000. Titled after Bessie Head's novel of the same name, the exhibition centred Black women artists' intellectuality while offering a rare encounter with Black South African women's artistic practices. A self-reflexive practice of Black historical accounting, the exhibition gestured towards a form of cross-generational gathering and communion between Black women artists throughout history, from modernists to the contemporary moment. It acknowledged that Black women have left a rich legacy of artistic and theoretical practice.

exhibition *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2022–2023). This disproportionate value of Valerie’s work can be assumed to be partly due to the lack of public knowledge, the limited number of museum shows, and the academic writing on Valerie’s work. This then makes it possible for different people to ask for such disparately wide-ranging prices without any publicly traceable evidence of acceleration of value or provenance of her work. Writing about the scaffolding of provenance, Igor Kopytoff explains that it is the artwork’s “social structure in time [...] ownership, other matters and events” (1986: 66) that over time reveal their biographies. He explains that these biographies “can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure” (1986: 67), which he argues often reveals how objects get commoditised, i.e. where it was first shown in public and sold, from the first owner, second owner, and so forth; how, through this exchange of hands, an artwork accumulates resale value and becomes more valuable as a rare commodity. Thinking about Kopytoff’s comment on provenance as a biographical study of an artwork begs the question about the kind of prices Valerie’s works are seemingly fetching, given the lack of evidence of accumulated circulation and ownership; Kopytoff’s ‘social structure in time’. Wider critical engagement through writing and historical exhibitions would draw greater attention to Valerie’s importance as an artist and impact the provenance of her works and their performance in the secondary market. At the moment, we are witnessing unpredictable, random pricing that only illustrates how she is (dis)remembered or precariously valued within the South African and international art markets and art historical writing.

Unlike Mgudlandlu, for whom an extensive public archive has, to a large extent, been consolidated,¹³ Valerie’s archive remains scattered, fleeting, and arguably *fragile*. This makes the need for thorough and detailed research on Valerie Desmore even more imperative. This dissertation is, therefore, a catalysing gesture, the first endeavour at curatively constructing a comprehensive archive of her work. This is intended as a study and theorization of her vast and significant contribution to the South African context specifically and the world’s context more generally. The ultimate aim of this research is to eventually place the resultant archive of this PhD in one of the South African museum libraries for future engagement by academics, researchers, artists, and, most importantly, the larger public, for whom all the efforts contained herein are dedicated. This should catalyse other projects, such as publications and exhibitions, like a large retrospective of her work in one of South Africa’s public institutions. Such projects are important

¹³ Through the research of Elza Miles the Johannesburg Art Gallery has a large file on the work of Gladys Mgudlandlu. However, scatterings of other documents exist in other public archives, such as in the South African National Archives and the National Library of South Africa’s newspaper archives. In my MA dissertation, I describe extensively about the many other sources I had to consult in order to get a global sense of Mgudlandlu.

because they contribute to unearthing the histories of modern Black women artists and the contexts that informed the visibility of their practice or lack thereof.

Research Methodology

There is no past waiting intact to be retrieved for preservation; no immaculate past waiting for our return; no past waiting for blame. There is only our interrogation of what we have come to know about history, and what we can make of and with this coming to know in our attempts to human the future.

—Zimitri Erasmus (2017: 26)

Given the often scant, scattered, fragmented, distorted, fragile and thus, under-theorised histories of Black artists from early twentieth century South Africa, it can be said that any exercise of engaging the oeuvre of an artist from this epoch is an endeavour in *archiving practice*. In this sense, *archiving practice* is about simultaneously and physically excavating, recuperating and putting together (re-membering) material sources while interrogating the material's authenticity and value, to better understand artists lived experiences beyond known historical erasures. For the artist with no existing critical theoretical study, it means gathering scatterings of any retrievable bits of information on them from a variety of sources. This is how theories signalled in and through these very scattered archives are then drawn. This is done whilst embracing the often unorthodox and unconventional nature of their formulations. If, however, some effort has been made to institutionally collate some sort of archive on these artists, quite often such archives are fraught with layers of tempering and editing. Here, we note what the authors of the book *Refiguring the Archive* – Carolyn Hamilton, *et al*, — explain:

For the archive is also always already being refigured; the technologies of creation, preservation and use, for instance, are changing all the time; physically the archive is being added to and subtracted from, and is in dynamic relation with its physical environment; organisational dynamics are ever shifting; and the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses — although at certain junctures, like the one in which South Africa finds itself now, formal conduits need to be put in place. (2002: 7)

Adding to this thought, as Erasmus (2017) aptly reminds us, there is no past neatly tucked away for us to pull out and engage with ease. Instead, we face the inconsistencies of some histories whose accounting remains more formally put together and consistently updated than others, testifying to the inequalities of historical accounting and archiving. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) warned many years ago that history is riddled with inequalities that systematically ‘silence the past’. He stresses that any renewed historical accounting needs to sharpen its focus on the processes of how “silence enters historical production given the distortions and unmultifaceted historical facts” (1995: 26). Trouillot makes this point because he believed that this silencing often happens “at the

moment of fact making (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives) and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)” (1995: 26). This was his call towards curbing the potential repeat of historical silencing, warning us of the danger of simply adopting the same historical archiving structures and research methodologies that are not interrogative of their architectural makeup and patterns of reinforcement. A biomythographical approach to history allows us to confront both the lines and the spaces in between.

The methodologies employed in conducting this research are therefore concerned with complex strategy and the nuanced ways for considering appropriate forms and sources. Given that this work is recuperative and excavatory in nature, it also makes it paramount to stay attuned to the riddles and obstacles designed to obfuscate the possibility of multivocal histories. As Audre Lorde once warned,

“We cannot dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools” (1984: 110), compelling us to think complexly about the kinds of tools we employ to engage history and its design. She proposes employing unconventional strategies of engaging the past while being able to make our own histories using a host of alternative tools. Lorde’s and Trouillot’s compelling arguments about how history is made and the potential of challenging its structures means that only intersectional and critical methodologies — what I call ‘encumbered methodologies’ — can be used to complicate how information is compiled, analysed, questioned, and interrogated, not only as ready-made repositories but as curative and self-reflexive work. Here ‘encumbered methodologies’, or what Bernard Akoi-Jackson (2019) has termed ‘disturbed methodologies’, suggest that not only are the methods many and multimodal, but they are also nuanced, reflexive, and sometimes challenge each other. They are both complimentary and complementary at the same time. They also dialectically engage with the subject, such that the ensuing conclusions may be radically unexpected. One example is the dilemma of making space within Blackness discourse for an artist like Valerie Desmore, who in practice, would probably have been vehemently opposed to it, based on her own enunciations of race.

In his PhD dissertation —a daring attempt at critiquing the canon— George Mahashe describes how curative and self-reflexive work manifests. He writes about the potential of a researcher who sees and operates from a place of being both the subject and researcher. He resolves that such a position makes it possible to employ methodologies that are “a form of reading against the grain, reading along the grain, [and more] important[ly], reading with a grain of salt” (2019: xi). For

Mahashe, this means that as a researcher, it is important to be “critical of how we come to know something” (2019: 11), and how this knowing implicates researchers differently and specifically, particularly those who come from the very same communities that their study is located within. Even though my position in this research is not one of a person researching their own community, what I understand Mahashe to be stressing is the importance of self-reflexivity in any endeavour of note, particularly if it has to do with histories that need reviewing. He shows us what being self-reflexive could mean. It would mean being sensitive to one’s positionality and how that positionality “ensures a unique perspective of issues associated with those positions” (Mahashe 2019: 12). In so doing, Mahashe reminds us to always ask, as an exercise of self-reflexivity, “For whom is the research? Who will it benefit?” (2019: 12).

These positions, therefore, potentiate what, in recent years, has been argued as Black Feminist research methodologies. Yula Burin and Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski explain this to be useful in “challeng[ing] and influenc[ing] archiving policy and practice [...] so that [...] public history and its teaching more accurately reflect the multiple heritages” (2021: 143) that are usually overlooked. Echoing this idea of feminist methodologies and multiple heritages, feminist academic Nicola Cloete argues:

Feminist methodologies surface the embedded power relations at play in all research, as well as in society, and requires the researcher not only to be aware of them, but to find ways to counter them in the production of knowledge. Increasingly, applying a gender-specific lens to the study of slavery has allowed for the inclusion of those outside the traditional spheres of research. (2016: 22)

While Cloete focuses on how the history of slavery can benefit from a feminist research methodology within the South African context, what she highlights at the beginning of this quote on how such research methods can affect all research is of importance. The putting together of this dissertation has been a difficult and challenging process which could only be overcome by employing multiple research methods that could cope with the varying forms of Valerie’s archives. These archives oscillate between institutional, private, and personal ones. As such, this research uses qualitative approaches in order to grapple with what Glenn Bowen (2009) proposes as a process of ‘triangulation’, through which analysis is derived from a combination of multi-modal searches, collections, and interpretations. To test this triangulation, I engage Valerie’s scattered histories through five groupings of archives. First, it is Valerie’s personal archive (what she kept as vital records of her life and career). Second, it is the private collectors’ archives. Third, it is the public archive (internet sources, public collections, and their extended archives, biographies of others linked to Valerie, etc.). Fourth, it is interviews with a variety of people, including a few art

field experts and collectors who knew or had worked with Valerie. These also include acquaintances who were able to give personal insights about their experiences of engaging with Valerie's world. Lastly, it is the archive captured in snippets of published art material; mostly related to books on South African modern art, in which art historical accounts offered important links to Valerie, even when she is not directly referenced.

As already indicated, some of these archives were not always readily put together and comprehensive for interrogation. Some had to be assembled (re-membered) through archiving processes, drawing upon various sources to strategically "seek convergence and corroboration using different data sources and methods" (Bowen 2009: 28). These specific methods of engaging with different archive forms were crucial in constructing the architecture of this dissertation, allowing for comparison and contrast of information to make a more informed assessment of the work. This was done while keeping in mind South Africa's notorious habit of perpetuating historical misrepresentations as facts. This is something Black art historians have continuously questioned (Qunta 1987; Khan and Asfour 2018; Mahashe 2019).

Though I delve more into these archives in Chapter 2, I am presently interested in how we encounter the archive in the way that speaks to what Njabulo Ndebele (1985) called a 'rediscovery of the ordinary'. Ndebele coined this notion as a caution against the potential distortion of the history of apartheid in literature that tended to focus only on grand demonstrations of violence. He warns that this, in turn, overlooked the ordinary people's daily triumphs in being able to overcome oppression and how these daily triumphs were manifestations of the multivocalisation of history. I am also interested in Carli Coetzee's (2013b) proposal of the term 'accentedness', which is not about the way we speak but offers tools to be able to approach the multivocality of history, such that what emerges are constellations of histories, rather than a hegemonic grand narrative. In this train of thought, Coetzee posits accentedness as not only focused on the retelling of the selected and polished narratives of those who claim to be victors but also the telling of stories by those considered so-called victims. It was, therefore, paramount to read and build research material for this study as 'a discovery of the ordinary' and an 'accenting' of the conglomeration of factual and interpretive gleanings of multivocal historical accounts. This helped me to manifest or potentiate hooks' and Lorde's propositions of recounting life as a form of biomythography. Since this research is interested in how scattered archives help us understand Valerie's biomythography and refusals, it became very clear, at the start, that the research methodologies employed should be encumbered, in that, the methods would be about ways of

encountering and ‘figuring’ out Valerie’s archive to understand how this biomythography manifests.

Thinking conversely about research made it even more probable to engage some of the ideological blockages that came up while conducting this research. Some of them had to do with existing historical divisions between previously disadvantaged groups — intra-racial divides — which held a lot of space within this project. These ideological blockages sometimes felt like a rejection by the archives for being a Black woman who seeks to recuperate the work of an artist who did not necessarily think of herself as associated with Blackness. In one of the voice-recorded interviews with her niece, Fiona Fleck, and her niece’s partner, Jan Dirk Herbermann, Valerie is asked a question about how she related to Black people; “The black Africans. Did you feel that you are sort of racially superior to them?”. Valerie Desmore replied, “No, I just feel that I’m racially different” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006). In another interview, she responded, “My family aren’t black” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006).¹⁴ Within this moment, I noted a characteristic of Valerie’s disassociation with Blackness and the intra-racial divide I mention above, which is also echoed in her earlier comment about not being wanted by the ‘black government’. Certainly, this dissociation may also be linked to her upbringing. Her father, Abe Desmore — who was an important ‘Coloured’ leader at the dawn of twentieth century in Cape Town — shared the same sentiment when he said, “The Coloured people have very little in common with the Natives. Their basic stock is not Bantu. With the first admixture of blood three hundred years ago, they were born into the culture and traditions of the white race” (Desmore 1937: 356). It could be argued that such might have influenced Valerie Desmore’s position on race, as things she learnt from home. As such, I understood these kinds of statements to specifically refer to the idea of Black(ness) as a racial construct and not a political ideology. It is moments, such as this statement, that necessitated introspection and self-reflexivity, making me ask: what I, a Black woman, was doing recuperating the “fragile archive(s)” of an artist who would have seen me as different from herself, and even most probably looked upon me with disdain?

Harbouring the potential of this ideological rejection revealed how sometimes archiving practices informed by race, gender and class inscriptions are prejudiced by a fractured history. Fractured not only in terms of the known divides between colonials and their subjects but because of what essentially defines colonial subjectivities — particularly when it comes to South Africa’s Blackness

¹⁴ I am also referring to a moment where she expresses things like “[The Black government] doesn’t want me. They don’t even have money to buy a painting of mine for the National Gallery. No. But they give it to a black artist” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006).

discourses of the early twentieth century. As Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon acutely attest, “The meaning of blackness in South Africa is itself contested and fractured. Apartheid’s compartmentalising of ethnic, religious and mixed-race groupings has had a powerful impact on how groups continue to identify themselves” (2021: 4–5). Conducting research on Valerie has, therefore, been complex and challenging. It was through employing feminist methodologies, as a Black woman, that possibilities of ‘feminist solidarity’ made engaging with such research plausible. These acts of solidarity are not similar to the culture of boycotting and public political rioting but are gestures that consider researching Black women’s work as a means of women supporting each other’s creative or political work and creating ecosystems that support these legacies. More broadly, by studying her paintings through this understanding of feminist solidarity, it becomes about engaging her personal and intimate narratives, in how they foreground her political attitudes.

Writing a reflection on her book *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela* (2018), Sisonke Msimang describes such feminist solidarity, or rather what she terms “feminist historical retrieval” (2021: 20), as a feminist biographer’s duty. According to Msimang, this responsibility sometimes requires feminist researchers to “protect” (2021: 15) the women they write about, especially against racist, sexist, patriarchal and classist views that tend to overdetermine how women’s narratives are encountered in public. This is not about heroising the women that Black feminists write about, but rather, to think about the fact that “All biographers must reckon with the ghosts of their subjects” (2021: 21), whilst “acknowledg[ing] and respect[ing] her humanity” (2021: 24). In this regard, Msimang declares, “I wanted to ensure, in some small way, that I contributed to an archival record which expanded the notion of who she [Winnie Mandela] was — and, by proxy, who Black women of her generation were” (2021: 28). Similarly, this dissertation attempts to engage Valerie’s archive as a potential expansion of who she was and how her work ultimately disrupted even her own understandings of race whilst speaking to broader practices of Black women within the highly volatile South African context, and by extension, within an equally fraught global context. Here I am reminded of Panashe Chigumadzi’s statement where she recognises that “For me [her], it has been Black women’s writing about women silenced by history that’s taught me the delicate art of storying the silence without speaking over it” (2021: 237). This PhD project is similarly this, an attempt to unmuzzle the silenced contributions of a Black woman artist, without writing over them. Instead, the strategy is to “give voice” (Ntombela 2013; Chigumadzi 2020) to Valerie’s overlooked history. Methodologies that achieve this are therefore paramount. This is not to say that no paradoxes exist around Black feminist solidarity when thinking about continued racial fractures in the broader contemporary public race debates in South Africa.

It was, therefore, essential to mobilise modes of research that foregrounded enabling theories of weaving the archive's nuance, in order to deal with these fractured, fragile and fugitive histories. Self-reflexive meditations on what it means to be a Black person navigating such unyielding archives were therefore necessary. This meant contending with how historical archives have, and continue to, divide us. It invariably meant reflecting consciously on feminist solidarities that unite us as previously oppressed subjects. It also meant contending with the fact that we are dealing with historical fractures that systematically ensured that Black people never got to institutionalise their own archives and have, therefore, never been part of the decision making about what was deemed valuable and worthy of preserving about their own histories. The late academic Bhekisizwe Peterson (2002) often bemoaned that this did not mean that Black people were not keeping their own archives. Peterson has been proven right by several post-colonial archiving projects of artists like Santu Mofokeng, in his *Black Photo Album* (1997) project, and academics like Siona O'Connell, who in her PhDs, researched her family histories through family albums, showing precisely that the institutional power of Black people's 'informal' archives does indeed exist. That being said, the older generation of Black people still do not have full access to these public archives and many do not have an idea about how they have been framed within them. As a result, one is constantly engaging with the archive of selected, mediated, edited and coded; —indeed cryptic — information that sometimes muddles the truth. Sometimes these codes are harder to decipher since many of the materials were often collected using extractionist, myopic, reductive and redacted approaches.

While it would have been easier to simply write speculatively on Valerie's work, the use of the scattered, fragile and thus, elusive archive was essential in this thesis as it optimised the multipronged methodological examination of theory and speculation in tangible and traceable ways, whilst dealing with the ambiguities of her work. These encumbered methodologies were also essential towards inserting and allowing Valerie's voice to guide how we read her work. Positioning this research as a project of imaginative biomythography beyond the fashionable speculative practices was, therefore, necessary to ensure that the multiplicity of archival formats that emerged were adequately and specifically consulted. This allowed an engagement that worked beyond a place of pushback against the lack of access to certain things instead of thinking "beyond the realities of oppression" (Lewis and Baderoon 2021: 3) towards a place that Saidiya Hartman (2018) would propose as 'critical fabulation', where fact, misrepresentations and the lack of information, still provide fertile ground to interpret history and re-imagine the future interrelatedly.

As such, I have employed African American and Black African feminisms as lenses of looking and reading with a ‘grain of salt’ (Mahashe 2019: 12), allowing me to excavate more than just Valerie’s undiscovered archives but to relate to Valerie’s personhood from a self-reflexive feminist perspective. This pays much needed attention to the intersections that highlight multiple historical accounts as opposed to charting a linear chronology. These intersections are nexuses where the interwoven personal, social and political stories and circumstances through which Valerie created her work emerge. Consequently, rather than attempting a straightforward biography or monograph, a biomythography resulting from these encumbered methodologies posits a more flexible approach to writing, speaking and sharing that enables nonlinear navigations of art history. Indeed, as Sharlene Khan explains:

Linear narratives don’t quite capture the craziness, complexities, ambiguities, constant tensions, humanness. Not just our personal baggage and failings, but how to speak when those meet the social, colonialism, apartheid, racism, religious, ethnic patriarchy, poverty, sex. (2019: 7)

The ways in which such complex narratives emerge — out of piles and piles of fugitive materials — is what I understand Audre Lorde to have named as biomythography. It is that which becomes a series of methodologies that are deliberately cognisant of these complicated, if not complex, intersections. This research project cumulatively becomes what Khan also describes as a “Remembering, as a piecing together, a stitching, a textured re-telling meant to capture spirit detail— for after all, too often the facts have been lies” (2019: 12). Thinking about this notion of piecing together, I lean again on Bowen in his argument that, “Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (2009: 27). The process of piecing together Valerie’s many archives into a sort of jagged archival compendium, took many forms. Often I had to return to the same archives, so as to make sense of, and become familiar with the multiple fugitive sets of information I was coming across in the archives. This was especially the case with Valerie’s personal archives, which were made up of huge amounts of ephemera. With each return, I was given the opportunity to glean new insights. However, a paradox arises in that, as I became more and more familiar with the content and the people in it, I became more and more intrigued about those parts that did not make it into these highly tentative archives.

Unlike public archives, personal ones are tentative. Like time capsules or snippets out of someone’s life, these fragile entities are porous repositories of —and encumbered testimonies to— the personal, social, cultural and political, where nodes of codified institutional content intermingle.

This nuanced engagement is emblematic of what I propose as encumbered methodologies, which can ultimately reveal the complex makeup of a person. Trying to engage a life as long and colourful as Valerie's, these time capsules meant that certain things only began to make sense after repeated returns to the same information, which needed to be corroborated with information from other sources. Sometimes, these sources manifested in the form of interviews with those who knew her. At other times, it meant researching the scattered offerings in public archives. In the end, what such 'archiving practice' has revealed is the kind of process that Walter Benjamin (2015) called 'graphic figurativeness'. In the elucidation of this notion, Benjamin uses graphic form and physical arrangement to inspire the design of his books, presenting a constellation of things that he collected over time. For him, these collections were not only archival material but topographical writings that speak to "relationships, spatial organisation, optical alignments and divisions" (2015: 221). The four years spent writing this thesis have afforded me journeys of collecting mnemonic and topographical writings from various, sometimes impossible, sources in order to make sense of Valerie's nuanced archives textually, physically and conceptually in its 'refiguring'.

Valerie Desmore's Personal Archive

As already established, no single public archive comprehensively captures the complex, textured and colourful life of Valerie. In 2008, upon her death, her niece, Fleck, and cousin, Pickstone-Taylor became the custodians of Valerie's art collection, among other things. This family archive includes artworks, sketches, preparatory drawings, her library of books (art books, cookbooks, novels), scrapbooks, newspaper clippings on her fashion shows, letters, personal identification items, scores of photographs of her work, cats and her family, random notepads, personal diaries and her music collection. It is through this time capsule that she meticulously put together her life. Finding this archive has been an important part of this thesis since so much of her voice has been drawn from the material found in it. It helped me understand what she thought was important about her life and career and the complex concepts she explored in her art. Fleck and Pickstone-Taylor's families hold most of Valerie's archive.

At the beginning stages of writing this dissertation, Fleck and Pickstone-Taylor shared with me quite a substantial amount of electronic information from this archive — mostly images of her work, a few newspaper cuttings and articles about her fashion career, her shows and her fashion design drawings. The information from this archive was then contrasted and compared to other archives in order to get a sense of her visibility beyond her own archive and to corroborate the

information for accuracy. I also conducted interviews for further corroboration, which I discuss in the sections below.

To begin this corroboration, I interviewed two key South African art experts, Elza Miles and Warren Siebrits, who have done some work on her. I also visited the two Museum libraries, JAG and SANG, where I found newspaper articles of her earlier exhibitions and the correspondences leading up to JAG's first purchase of her work. At JAG, I found the initial bequeathed list of works, seemingly sent from Pickstone-Taylor to Miles by email (Figure 1). The list only had names, mediums or sizes, though no images. I used this list and all the information mentioned above to begin developing a list (in Microsoft Excel) of her works. This list helped me map any visible themes I could read on the surface whilst also beginning to build an electronic and physical archive that I have been adding to ever since. Over three-and-a-half years, I was able to generate a reasonably comprehensive list of all her available artworks, which currently sits at 147 artworks (of both preparatory drawings and finished paintings). This list also includes a few works from public and private collections. Some of these private collections were discovered through Fleck and Pickstone-Taylor,¹⁵ and others are from connections I have built over the years.

¹⁵ Some of these images were of the works gifted and sold to private clients from when Valerie was still alive.

Valerie Desmore (1925-2008)

- 1.) Skateboarder - 1990 - Oil on board- 104 x 79 cm
- 2.) Wedding Flower - 1998 - Oil on board - 107 x 77cm
- 3.) Hanging Fish - 1960 - Oil on board - 71 x 112 cm
- 4.) Boy - 1990 - Pastel on paper, framed - 103.5 x 79 cm
- 5.) Man + Birds I - 1958 - oil on board 61 x 51 cm
- 6.) Man + Birds III - 1958 - oil on board - 91 x 61 cm
- 7.) Man + Birds II - 1958 - oil on board - 74 x 56 cm
- 8.) Blue pool - 1959 - oil on board - 102 x 92 cm
- 9.) Crab - 1960 oil on board - 71 x 112 cm
- 10.) Mermaid Feast - 1984 oil on canvas - 85 x 136 cm
- 11.) Black Madonna - 1985 - oil on canvas - 91 x 61 cm
- 12.) Red Madonna - 1985 - oil on canvas - 101 x 76 cm
- 13.) Tight Rope - 1987 - oil on canvas - 102 x 76 cm
- 14.) Shadows - 1995 - charcoal + pastel on paper - 120 81 cm
- 15.) The Hunger No I - 1984 - oil on canvas - 76 x 101 cm
- 16.) The Hunger No 2 - 1984 oil on canvas - 64 x 94 cm
- 17.) Injecting - 2001 - oil on board - 102 x 77 cm
- 18.) Dialysis - 2001 - oil on board - 112 x 92.5 cm

- 19.) 107 x 72 cm - paint on board - ? female friend
- 20.) 138 x 86 cm - paint on board - unfinished Blue, person lying
- 21.) 'Carnation in Vase' - on opposite side of - 'Crying child/Angry child' - paint on board - 76 x 62 cm
- 22.) Children fighting - 1958 - oil on board 112 x 72 cm Is this the same as Girls fighting?
- 23.) Dark Self Portrait - 1956 - oil on board - 61 x 51 cm
- 24.) Dialysis - Charcoal and pastel on board - 114 76 cm
- 25.) Faces at Window - 1959 - Oil on board - 107 x 71 cm
- 26.) Fright - opposite side of head on sheet - 1958 - oil on board.
- 27.) Grotesque Faces - 1958 - oil on board - 58 x 45.5
- 28.) Me - 1958 - oil on board - 110 x 61 cm
- 29.) Pastel Skate Boarder - 1990 - Pastel on paper framed - 102 x 76 cm
- 30.) Self Portrait - 1947 60.5 x 50 cm
- 31.) Self portrait with Cat - paint on paper - 108 x 77 cm
- 32.) Still Life ? painted over white - on board - 90 x 61 cm
- 33.) Two faces and blue, unfinished - on board - 102 76 cm
- 34.) Man on red chair with yellow back ground numbered 222 in my labels - oil on board
- 35.) Woman in Kimono - 1960 oil on board - 112 x 76 cm
- 36.) Zazie - 1962 - unframed on board - 112 x 61 cm
- 37.) Zazie & Lolita - 1965 - 91 X 60.5 cm
- 38.) Zazie on bed - 1962 - framed, unfinished painting on back - 123 x 73 cm
- 39.) Zazie on red chair - 1962 - 91 x 61 cm

- The next two are Lazer prints:
- 40.) The family 116 x 84
- 41.) Elizabeth 116 x 82

- 42.) Girls fighting - 1958 - oil on board - 61 x 93 cm
- 43.) Quentin - oil on board - 106 x 71 cm

Figure 1: The joint list of artworks bequeathed to Simon Pickstone-Taylor and Fiona Fleck found at JAG.

The building of this archive in this way helped me develop frameworks for this dissertation as I was able to see an overview of her body of work, understand the overarching themes, motifs, concepts and stylistic patterns, methods of making, and her complex engagement with the art world. In 2020, to further build on this archive, I took a year's sabbatical (January – December) from my academic job at the University of the Witwatersrand. I used the time to conduct a few field trips, the family archives being one of the main spaces where I intended to spend most of my time. However, the 2020 COVID-19 crisis posed a few significant hindrances. This resulted in being able to conduct only one research field trip to Cape Town in October 2020, followed by a field trip to the France family archive (Fleck France Archive) in 2021.¹⁶ Due to imposed travel bans between South Africa and France at the time, the latter trip to the second archive could not happen in 2020, which meant I could only complete some of my fieldwork in 2021.

Family Archive in Cape Town

Interestingly, field research in Cape Town revealed major argumentation and restructuring of the thesis. This was because, up until that point, much of the reading around her work had been speculative, given the scant archival and biographical accounts I had only come across. Furthermore, much of this material only focused on the politics of her race, which, though major, distorted her oeuvre. Over time, I learnt that the politics of race was beyond what she was focusing on in her art. When I visited the archive, I finally got a chance to find other materials on her. For example, I eventually got to watch a home video that the family had made on Valerie during her visit to South Africa in 1998. Though Simon Pickstone-Taylor had told me about it when I first met him in early 2019 and had long anticipated watching it, I could only watch it once it had been converted from VHS tape and stored on a USB. This was a significant exercise because VHS conversion services are now outmoded and hard to find.

The VHS home video recording was organised by the Pickstone-Taylor family for Simon Pickstone-Taylor's records as he could not join Valerie on her trip to South Africa since he was in the United States at the time. When it was recorded, Wendy Pickstone-Taylor, Simon's mother, invited a journalist by the name of Dhelia¹⁷ (whose surname I have no record of) to interview Valerie with the hope that she (Dhelia) would also air the story either on the radio or publish it in the magazine she worked for. From the video recording, it seems Dhelia also took a voice

¹⁶ Even though national travel restrictions were adjusted around August 2020, I could only go in October as it involved much negotiation around social distancing and navigating a way to minimise transmission risk since this was a family archive.

¹⁷ A journalist who worked for a local radio station and magazine.

recording of the interview. To date, however, I have not been able to find anything published by Dhelia based on this interview.

On the day of the interview, a dear friend of Valerie's, Lionel Bowman, a well-known pianist and academic at Stellenbosch University, had visited her to bid goodbye before her scheduled travel back to London a few days later. Consequently, Bowman ended up participating in the interview.

In the interview, not only do we hear Valerie speak about her work, but we also get to see her. This reveals so much about how she appeared, carried herself and commanded attention among friends and her then re-found family. Most importantly, we get to appreciate how she spoke about her work and the thinking behind it. Seeing this footage, instead of looking at photographs, made me understand why most writing on her tended to focus so much on her race and its relationship to her work. She most certainly could pass for white when one considers how she looked. After hearing and seeing her speak about the work, I had to significantly shift my assumptions from what I thought the work was about to what her discussion on the work implied.

This video provided a crucial link between her artistic journey and the concepts she used in her work.¹⁸ I finally got to engage directly, albeit via the VHS recording, with her own voice. This moment was important because, up until this point, my research was mostly based on the testimonies of others. Though I was willing to go with these testimonies — many corroborate what she says in the video — hearing and seeing her talk authenticated the story.

In the video, Valerie Desmore speaks about themes and motifs found in her work, such as family, sibling rivalry, violence, tragedy, matrifocal/matricentric figures, being consumed (metaphorically 'eaten up'), object-hood and subject-hood. These motifs often worked as metaphors that I could then link to the broader themes that her work evoked. The video also shed some light on the important role that the many years of psychoanalysis she had undergone played in the evolution of her work.

Though the video was not the only document I found in the Cape Town archive, it is one of the most crucial. The others were her works. They formed about half of the bequests that I spent time examining. Upon closer inspection of some of her artworks, I found traces of exhibition participation stickers stuck on the backs. Some of these exhibitions were not listed in her Curriculum Vitae, such as the Royal College annual art exhibition. When I searched for the

¹⁸ The voice recordings done with Fiona were most about family history, career trajectory, and not about her work per se.

catalogues of these exhibitions, I also could not find her name. I can only assume that she might not have made the final selection for those exhibitions. These are important clues. They provide evidence of what she meant when writing in her CV about how they hated expressionism in England. Another important thing I found in this archive were her art books. Some of these books have notes from the people who gifted them to her, dating as far back as the early 1940s. From this, I could discern some of her earlier artistic influences, such as Monet and, Van Gogh, among many others.

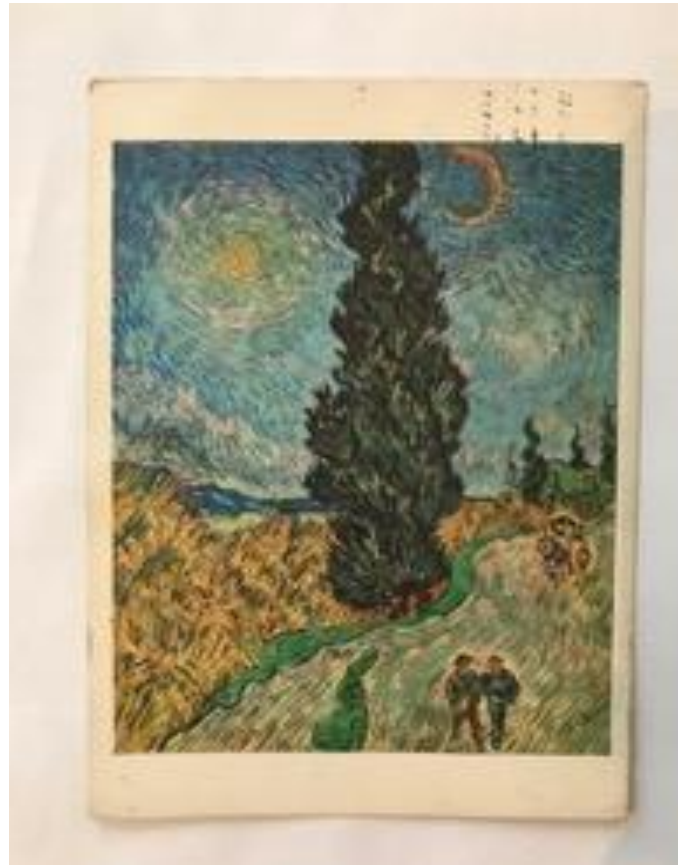


Figure 1(b): One of many Van Gogh postcards found in Valerie Desmore's archive

While ethical questions may arise concerning the practice of sharing the content of Valerie's personal archive (personal diaries or the particular home video, for instance), they were never intended for public dissemination. It is only through an engagement with such materials and objects that we get to unearth a truer sense of who she was. I believe this material possesses the most authentic parts of Valerie's inner thoughts — her inner journeying. As such, this scattered archive becomes the only trusted source of information that one can learn from and about Valerie Desmore. This is imperative, given the inconsistencies that bedevil her recorded history. Here, the

material presents a project of what Gabeba Baderoon describes as “‘Public Privacies’ [that] engage with the realms of intimacy and history through an analysis of autobiographies [...]” (2013: 5). It offers Valerie’s unedited autobiography, from which a complex biomythography may be written. The authenticity inherent in this recorded material, based on the particular technology, turns her voice into testimony, pushing this research beyond speculation. It allows for an interplay between fact and interpretations of fiction. Furthermore, in defence of ethics, not everything from this personal archive is shared. It is only those salient parts of her personal archive (her voice, for instance) that are revealed. I propose this to be partly a strategy of feminist solidarity; to safeguard some aspects of her personal archive and to utilise only those that enable a greater understanding of her thinking and process, which I put forth as biomythographical. Through her notebooks and recordings, so much insight is gained into her inner thoughts, something that seemed impossible at the beginning of this research, given the dearth of research and writing on her.

Family Archive in France

In June 2021, I finally managed to travel to Prévessin-Moëns in France, to access the second family archive. My trip was serendipitous, as it came in the form of an invitation to the Africa Season 2020 celebrations all over France. At the time, this was the only accepted means by which to travel, under COVID-19 regulations.

As expected, the French family archive¹⁹ gave me additional information and material. Unlike the Cape Town archive, which mostly had artbooks, artworks, and large-scale sketches, the French archive had a lot of personal documents such as, family photos, letters, newspaper articles, notebooks and diaries in which she often jotted down her thoughts, dreams, cooking recipes and photographic records of her art-making processes. I also got a glimpse of her collection of novels and cookbooks. Another important discovery was a series of voice recordings, twelve (12) in all, that Fiona Fleck had conducted with Valerie between 2002 and 2006. When I listened to these recordings, I noticed a stark difference between the voice and video interviews. In the video was a great deal of performativity.²⁰ One could almost make out the characteristics and traits of self-fashioning that Valerie would have employed throughout her life. As they were conducted in her home in London, the voice recordings often felt more homely, intimate and personal. I could hear more of the character that was often described to me by her close friends and family, of someone who had a sharp tongue and who spoke her mind.

This moment in the private archive was pivotal in understanding more about Valerie's work beyond any surface or aesthetic reading. Being able to interview her relatives in the comfort of their homes also gave me more insight on things I was not able to understand over the limited timed-online conversations we had had before.

Valerie's meticulous approach to self-documentation indicates her great sense of archiving and autonomy. This allows us to appreciate her world through her eyes, thereby assisting us to correct some of the misrepresentations that may exist about her work.

¹⁹ Though I call it the French Family archive - Fiona Fleck, her niece, is not French but had moved the archive from England to France where she and her family currently reside. In this archive, I was able to see the other half of the collection.

²⁰ Put in the comment from Wendy - pointing out how she said things differently in every recording.

Collectors

Other archives have come from her acquaintances and collectors such as Elza Miles (Port Alfred, SA), Conference Desmore (London, UK), Cecil Front (Cape Town, SA), Warren Siebrits (Johannesburg, SA), Gavin Watkins (Australia), and Marion Boyars²¹ (London, UK) each of whom own a few of her works. While some of them bought her work through secondary markets, some also knew her personally. These ‘collectors’ are spread widely across different countries and continents. I got in touch with some of them to help me develop a list of images and works that became the initial Excel document upon which I based a lot of the research. I also wanted to conduct short interviews with these collectors. Except for Conference Vital Desmore (her brother) and Marion Boyars (daughter of ex-partner), I was able to interview most of them. Most of these interviews were done in person and over virtual platforms. During this process, I also managed to gain access to more detailed documentation of provenance for some of the artworks. I was able to get such information from material on the exhibitions in which works had been shown. I also looked at their resale histories, particularly through auctions; for instance, the work owned by Siebrits and Feront.²²

The public archives

[internet sources, public collections and their extended archives, biographies of others that linked to Valerie, etc]

JAG and SANG are the only two public institutions in South Africa that have collected Valerie’s work. In fact, JAG acquired three of Valerie’s works around the time of Elza Miles’ exhibition *Land and Lives*, which started off the archive file that continues to be populated today.²³ Although SANG acquired Valerie’s work much later than JAG, in 2006, their library already had a substantial amount of newspaper clippings on her early exhibitions from 1942 to 1947.

Additionally, the considerable amount of published artists’ biographies of Valerie’s contemporaries like Albert Adams, Peter Clarke (eds. Hobbs and Rankin 2014), Gerard Sekoto, and Lionel Bowman, including her teacher Kokoschka, became another place where Valerie’s extended geographical context and biography can be found. Two novels — John Calder’s *Pursuit* (2006) and Barney Rosset’s *Rosset: My Life in Publishing and How I Fought Censorship* (2017) — are other examples

²¹ Arthur Boyars’ stepdaughter. Arthur was Valerie’s long time boyfriend, who she met when she first arrived in London.

²² <https://www.the-saleroom.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/chiswick-auctions/catalogue-id-srchis10560/lot-25e971ac-6653-403f-8259-a99b0116d703>

²³ *Street Accident* (diptych) (1959), *The Hunger* (1985), and *Girls Fighting* (1989).

that tell us about her social life outside the arts. Through Barney Rosset, for example, we come to understand that Valerie had a deep love for literature and a “deep admiration for Henry Miller” (2016: 180). Both Calder and Rosset give us a glimpse of her personal and social life in London showing how her archive is traceable through biographies of other artists and acquaintances. As Tracy Murinik attests, “She [Valerie Desmore] was on personal terms with many of the people who inspired her thinking” (1998). Through these anecdotes, we come to understand how she could have had access to someone like David Sylvester (who was seventy-two years old in 1997), one of the most influential art critics in London. In a letter to Miles Valerie claimed to have consulted Sylvester about the pricing of her work. This was for the sale of her artwork to JAG.

Numerous published writings and discussions mention Oscar Kokoschka’s mentorship of Valerie. However, my inquiry with the Kokoschka Foundation yielded no records of this exchange. It seems to have been an informal arrangement during his time in England rather than at his institute in Vienna. The Foundation’s archives appear to exclusively contain records of pupils who attended his Vienna school, with another South African artist, Albert Adams, being listed. To understand Kokoschka and Valerie’s relationship better, I have delved into Kokoschka’s biographies available in her book library. In one of these biographies, Kokoschka discusses the methods he used to guide his students to work from their inner selves which Elza Miles echoes in her book.

Interviews

I also conducted interviews with field experts, some of whom I met via other supplementary or totally unrelated projects. For example, when I travelled to London via an invitation in October 2019 to present at the 1:54 art fair, I used this opportunity to meet Paulette Farsides who knew Valerie. This friend gave me insight and perspectives into how she experienced Valerie as a friend of Fleck, when they would often visit Valerie for dinner parties and other kinds of social engagements. I had hoped to meet with her brother during my London research trip, but unfortunately, he was very ill in hospital at the time. He passed away three months later. The one other in-person interview I held was with Cecil Front,²⁴ a collector of Valerie’s, who I had come to know through research for the Norval Foundation show, *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

There are other video recordings that are, however, not in the family archive. For example, while visiting her family in South Africa, the SANG museum (Iziko) also organised a video recording

²⁴ Collector and UCT PhD student, and owner of Valerie Desmore’s work *The Family* (Fig 27).

with journalist Tracy Murinik and videographer Vuyile Voyiya. From this interview, Murinik later published an article in the *Mail and Guardian* (1998). I was however not able to find the video recording from Murinik, Voyiya or the Iziko library.

I also met up with Siphiwo Ralo, a South African collector and filmmaker who is believed to have video interviewed Valerie at the time he worked for The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in London in the early 2000s with the intention to promote her work. Unfortunately, Ralo was unable to retrieve the video and it seems it was never aired on BBC.

The other people I contacted over email were Tracy Murinik,²⁵ Hayden Proud,²⁶ David Watkins,²⁷ Joe Dolby,²⁸ Marilyn Martin,²⁹ Vuyile Voyiya,³⁰ Emma Bedford,³¹ Tshegofatso Mabaso,³² Carol Kaufmann Bishop,³³ Tamar Garb,³⁴ Jackie May,³⁵ Marion Edmunds,³⁶ Joost Bosland,³⁷ Karel Nel³⁸

²⁵ Murinik is an independent writer and editor who conducted and recorded an interview with Valerie, and later published an article in the *Mail and Guardian*.

²⁶ Proud was the curator of paintings at the SANG, who was directly involved with the exhibition *Land and Lives* and the purchasing of Valerie's work *Portrait of a Malay Woman* (1945) in 2006.

²⁷ Watkins is an Australia/South African collector, who owns some of Valerie's work.

²⁸ Dolby is now a retired curator of the works on paper collection at the SANG.

²⁹ Martin was a curator and writer. She was Director of the SANG at the time of the *Land and Lives* exhibition.

³⁰ An artist, who was working at the SANG at the time of the *Land and Lives* exhibition. He videographed the interview conducted by Tracy Murinik (writer). Since the video has been lost, I am hoping to use an interview with him to gain a sense of what he remembers about Murinik's interview with Valerie.

³¹ Bedford was working at SANG as a curator at the time of the *Land and Lives* exhibition. o

³² Curator of the Contemporary Art Collection at SANG. She helped me locate activities around the artwork *Portrait of a Young Malay Woman* (1945), such as how it was purchased and images of the exhibition where this work featured, i.e. *From Pierneef to Gugulective* (2010).

³³ Worked for the auction house that sold the painting *Portrait of a Young Malay Woman* (1945) to SANG

³⁴ Tamar Garb is a UCL Professor. She put me in touch with one of her students, Bea de Sousa, who helped me find some of Valerie's registration records at Slade.

³⁵ Journalist and a friend of Simon Pickstone-Taylor, who wrote some unpublished material that I found in Valerie's archive.

³⁶ At the time she was a Carte Blanche journalist.

³⁷ Marion Edmunds worked for Carte Blanche at the time Valerie visited South Africa, and was one of the people invited by Wendy Pickstone-Taylor, Simon's mother, to publish something on Valerie about her visit to South Africa

³⁸ Nel is an artist and curator who was an intermediary between myself, Nessa Leibhammer and Nicholas Maritz, a collector of Valerie Desmore. He bought two works from Valerie, *My Family* and *Shadows/Now you know where I am coming from*, which were later deaccessioned by Warren Siebrits through the first Johannesburg Art Fair (via Stevenson) and direct sale. Both were sold to the same client, Dr Cecil Feront. Source - Five Hundred Year Archive (FHYA) research initiative, 2016, using JAG materials: Nicholas Maritz was a lecturer in the Departments of Mathematical Statistics, Business Economics and the School of Business Leadership at UNISA. He purchased artworks from auction houses, dealers and private collectors in South Africa, the United Kingdom, France and the United States of America. He has been a serious collector of pre-1994 South African art for many years, assembling three substantial, representative but interrelated collections: the art of white South African artists with some emphasis on Alexis Preller; the art of Black South African artists; the 'traditional' art of the South Nguni, North Nguni, South-, West- and North-Sotho, Tsonga and Venda peoples of South Africa (information provided by Karel Nel, 12 October 2014).

and Nessa Leibhammer³⁹. There were other people I never got in touch with but who were referred to me, such as Hans Niehaus,⁴⁰ Catheryn Kilgarriff,⁴¹ and lastly Edward Glennon.⁴²

The COVID-19 crisis, even though it caused much chaos and delays, taught me new research strategies that have informed my work in profound ways. Through various networks, I was able to source material, which would have taken me months to find, if at all. For example, the assistance I got from the then UCL PhD candidate Bea de Sousa about Valerie's studies at Slade in 1946 was pivotal and invaluable. So, while the COVID-19 restrictions were limiting in terms of travel, other research methodologies became possible.

All these nuances and exciting details about Valerie's life would not have been found, had it not been for the literal 're-membering' of material gathered and gleaned from diverse sources. These processes have taken me some way towards developing a complex archive that allowed me a comprehensive overview and assessment of the available materials that refer to Valerie Desmore. This has been a critical step towards the development of this dissertation.

Chapter Structure

The thesis is divided into two focus: theory and artwork analysis.

The overarching theories within this dissertation are discussed in the first chapters, followed by three chapters that delve deeper into visual analyses of Valerie's work. Framed as giving context to Valerie's background, the first two chapters provide a notably extended biography and literature reviews, focusing on the concepts of refusal and their implication on Valerie's archives. These are used as containers for debates relating to the encumbered archive's potential to offer newer forms of conducting research on modern Black South African artists.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are themed as a section on *Self Representation*. They are based on what is called a visual argument in which different visual clues are used to piece together an understanding of the work, hooks' (1998) 're-membering' and Benjamin's (2015) 'topography'. As such, these chapters engage images and theories that cut across different disciplines. These disciplines

³⁹ Nessa Leibhammer is a curator and a friend of Karel Nel. She helped me get in touch with Nicholas Maritz via Nel.

⁴⁰ Is believed to own Roza Van Gelderen's children's art collection from The Yellow Windows Studio that Valerie attended as a child.

⁴¹ Daughter of Arthur Boyars, who inherited one of Valerie's works.

⁴² The partner of Albert Adams. Albert Adams (also a South African 'coloured' artist who left for London after Valerie) was also a student of Oskar Kokoschka.

combine different visual argumentation, creative theorisation and archiving practices that are drawn from literature, history, art history, philosophy, social anthropology, etc., as tools that have helped explain her work further. Her own reference to psychoanalysis, fashion, ballet, music, and literature, evidenced through her library of books along with the surviving video and the few sound recordings, made the links even more workable. They give the much-needed clues and testimony to be able to understand the different things that influenced her art.

Zooming in on a few key works, these chapters also represent ideas that run across several other works. For example, in Chapter 3, the portrait *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27) is unpacked through three concepts: belonging, unbelonging and maybe, and their link to Valerie's family identity politics. This continues into Chapter 4, which also looks at two works *Shadows/Now You Know Where I Am Coming From* (1996) and *Violet and The Peacock* (1998), engaging the notion of homing and unhoming as moments through which Valerie wrestles with her family history. In these two works, she images her mother as a child, powerfully rendering a psychoanalytical inner grappling of this family history. Through the child's image of her mother, Valerie asks more profound questions about the idea of home, relating it to their family history.

Considering 'Self-portraiture' as 'Self-writing', Chapter 5, attempts to map out how psychoanalysis helped Valerie take different turns in her life. After ten years of psychoanalysis, and eighteen years in fashion, Valerie returns with a much more optimistic, vibrant colour palette, and a far more paired down colour palette to the red, white and black that produce a sharply complicated visual language; one which disguise (or perhaps making more visible) the inner turmoil that her subject matter represents. In some of these works, we see Valerie succinctly capturing her 'inner-journeying' to the extent of even contending with the ending of her life. A move away from the broad concept of 'family' like the work discussed in the previous chapters, this chapter, attempts to navigate a radical turn in her work, noting how she finally found her voice and style since returning to art on a full-time basis.

The last chapter 6, on biomythography and the archive, is a return to debates relating to the encumbered archive's potential in offering newer forms of researching modern Black South African artists more broadly. It is a reminder and demonstration of how the dissertation has considered the implications of archives in producing or engaging with biomythography.

Since the thesis focuses on Valerie Desmore's personal story and how it involves her family, this has, in turn, meant that individuals mentioned in the thesis share the same surnames. To avoid confusion, first names (instead of surnames) have been used except for authors. Although this is an unconventional approach in academic writing, it was necessary to navigate the familial space in a pragmatic manner. While writing the dissertation, it became apparent that this was the best solution to make the text accessible.

Chapter 1

Valerie Desmore's Art Career⁴³



Figure 2: South African artist and designer Valerie Desmore (1925–2008) at an event, 7th March 1961. Getty Images

Introduction

Valerie Elizabeth Helene Desmore was born in Cape Town on 29 June 1925 and died in London on 8 August 2008. She is celebrated as the youngest ‘Coloured’ woman artist to have held a solo exhibition in South Africa. Drawing influences from early South African impressionism, post-impressionism, and German expressionism, she gained fame as an artist in the early 1940s at the age of sixteen. However, due to limited opportunities for further education, she left South Africa for London in 1946.⁴⁴

⁴³ There are many short biographies of Valerie Desmore that are available online. Here are two sites where it can be found. <https://peoplepill.com/people/valerie-desmore>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerie_Desmore

⁴⁴ While in her CV she often wrote 1946 as the date of departure, the official travel permit says she must have left South Africa on or before 17 November 1945. A short press clipping published also states that she left in 1945. Her school registration for the Slade said she started classes in January 1946. We can only assume that perhaps 1946 is the date of arrival in London that she recorded and not the date of departure.

Early schooling years

Valerie's parents were teachers. Her father, Abraham (Abe) James Bourné Desmore, who was a "leading Coloured intellectual" and a well-respected school principal of Trafalgar School, played an important role in Valerie's schooling development. In 1935, Valerie's father,⁴⁵ along with his family, left for the United States to study for a Masters' degree⁴⁶ in Education at the Teachers College in Columbia University (1935 – 1937).⁴⁷



Figure 3: Valerie, her younger brother, and father Abe Desmore in New York at a park feeding pigeons, c.1937.

Figure 4: Valerie with her younger brother Conference in a pram, New York c.1937.



Figure 5: Valerie dressed as a rabbit for the Alice in Wonderland play at her school Horace Mann, New York, c.1937.

⁴⁵ He was also the 2nd Battalion Sergeant (Harmse 2017: 13).

⁴⁶ It is described as a Diploma in the Supervision of Elementary Schools.

⁴⁷ They left for New York in December 1934 when Valerie was nine years of age. She joined Central Girls' School in 1938, after returning from New York, where she had attended the Horace School while her father, Abe Desmore, who was the Principal of Trafalgar Junior School, studied towards his Masters at Columbia University. I deliberately start her biographical information at this point as these are moments that describe the beginnings of her art career.

While in New York, she, for the first time, went through a totally unique learning experience after winning a scholarship (of R400) to enrol at Horace Mann School, a private elementary and secondary school in New York. Horace Mann School is “a coeducational experimental school set up by the Teachers College of Columbia University to test progressive educational theories under the observation of Teacher College students”.⁴⁸ During this time, she experienced a different schooling system from what she had been exposed to in South Africa, described by Miles as “informal and stimulating” (1998: 89). Speaking about Valerie’s experience at Horace Mann, her niece Fiona Fleck recalls her aunt saying that:

She appreciated and benefited from a more modern approach, contrasting with Victorian-style education in South African schools. Her father was an educationist, I suspect the school was progressive, offering encouragement and promoting gifted children rather than the disciplinary model. I understood this from her accounts, but I would be keen to read other accounts and documentation. (personal comms. 2019)

This unique schooling moment was not to be repeated as things drastically changed when Valerie returned to South Africa in 1938, where she struggled with racial discrimination. Elza Miles describes the racialised tensions Valerie experienced, highlighting particularly how these tensions intensified after her return from two years in New York. According to Miles:

Back in Cape Town, two years later, she started to paint and the hazards of racial discrimination began to mar her life. Being coloured, she was constantly turned away from schools [...] [this] proved emotionally unsettling to Valerie whose formal education was subsequently stopped. (1998: 89)

When Valerie and her family returned to South Africa at age eleven, her parents tried to find a school that would match her American schooling experience. In those days, white schools were sought after for their superior education. It was, thus, common for the affluent in ‘Coloured’ society to try and put (through passing) their children into white schools. Gavin Lewis, discussing this type of situation, says, “Those few rich, educated and light-skinned enough could and often did meet their aspirations by ‘passing’ into the white community, a process which siphoned off many of the natural leaders of Coloureds” (1987: 9). Valerie’s life was burdened by the same racially

⁴⁸See <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bronx-borough-New-York-City> [accessed 1 August 2019] It acquired its name (for the 19th-century American educator Horace Mann) in the early 1890s. In 1914 the boys’ division of the school moved to the Riverdale section of the Bronx, where it became a pioneer in the country day school movement, but the girls’ division remained in the same location. In 1940 Teachers College took over the Lincoln School, an experimental school previously operated by the Rockefeller-funded General Education Board and merged it with the girls’ division of Horace Mann. Teachers College discontinued the combined school in 1946, after which the elementary and girls’ divisions closed down and the boys’ division continued under a separate charter. Horace Mann absorbed the New York School for Nursery Years in 1968 and the Barnard Elementary School in 1972; in 1975 the high school again, became coeducational.

complicated identity of being the lighter skinned one in her family. Since she was often read racially as white, her parents used to encourage her to pass for white.

There is a story, for example, of how they would send her on errands like buying them tickets to the cinema since they (as the parents) were not allowed to enter the cinema on account of their race. Valerie would find herself going to buy the tickets while her parents stood in the nearby shaded area waiting for her. Upon her return, she would hand them the tickets, and they would sneak into the show. Fleck and Pickstone-Taylor describe these types of incidents as humiliating and scary for the young Valerie. Valerie also recounts doing something similar at restaurants (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006). Grappling with this, Fleck explains that “This was the only way her parents could get the best education for the child, knowing that she was talented.” The challenge, however, was that even though separate education was only institutionalised in 1948, the colour bar,⁴⁹ which delegitimised ‘Coloured’ children from attending white schools, had already begun to be operationalised. By then, the laws for separate education and “preferential treatment for white education” (Lewis 1987: 29) was already affirmed as far back as 1905 through the School’s Board Act. For the ‘Coloured’ communities in the Cape specifically, Mohamed Adhikari explains:

While many coloureds were growing wealthier and acquiring the means to sustain the standards of middle class respectability, their civil rights were being eroded. Their assimilationist overtures were rejected by whites and they were increasingly subjected to racial discrimination. Their marginality, moreover, prevented coloureds from asserting themselves politically or penetrating the institutions, associations and more prestigious professions of the dominant society to any meaningful extent. Thus, no matter what degree of ‘respectability’ or personal accomplishment coloureds achieved, they were nevertheless automatically branded as social inferiors by whites and were forced to accept a second class citizenship. (1993: 97)

This is to say that even though apartheid had not yet been fully enforced during Valerie’s childhood in South Africa, the state was nonetheless governed by racially discriminatory laws along a so-called race or colour bar. This race bar ensured that children of different races were not getting the same education. In a notepad (Fig 6) found in Valerie’s archive, she writes that St Mary’s Dominican Convent, and many other schools turned her away because of her race. In one of the interviews with Fiona, Valerie speaks about one such moment of rejection:

When we got back to South Africa, I was eleven and I’ve been going to Saint Mary’s Roman Catholic Convent, which is a white convent. I’d been going there since I was five years

⁴⁹ Whites demanded a “colour bar” to protect their access to certain jobs. Initially formulated to reconcile white workers because of Sir Alfred Milner’s (the high commissioner) decision to import Chinese labour, the colour bar was formally established in South Africa under the Mines and Works Act of 1911 and its amendment in 1926. The colour bar also existed in the UK.

old. I was still in Junior School. And my parents fully expected that I would go back to my old school in July. So, he took me in to see the principal. I was nervous sitting there and she said, "No we can't have Valerie back because she is coloured." Yeah. It frightened me. I was horrified. And what is more, it took a long time to find another school for me. (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

some ³ schools that rejected me ~~#4~~

- St Marys Dominican Convent school 11yrs^{old}
- Cape Town High school 11yrs old
- Ellerslie girls school 14yrs old
- Sea Point ^{girls} high school 14yrs old
- Batsford ^{high} school 14yrs old

+ various other ^{not fully} schools that ^{take} took me

Girls Central School, Vredehoek.
Took me 11yrs — 14yrs.

Miss Rzas. little yellow windows.
A studio for ex pupils of her
school girls central. 14yrs — 15yrs.

St Marys Dominican Convent.
4yrs — 9½yrs.
Refused to take me

Figure 6: Handwritten list of schools that rejected Valerie Desmore.

Early Art Training

Valerie's parents never accepted these rejections and continued to look for a white school. After some time looking for a school, in 1938, she was enrolled at the Central Girls' School.⁵⁰ This was an important turning moment for Valerie for several reasons. First, Central Girls' School was the first place Valerie encountered art at age thirteen, echoing the similar freedom as the schooling system she had gone through in New York. Modelling its curriculum around creative practice, Central Girls' School put "particular emphasis [...] on the teaching of art" (Belling 2012: 213). This schooling moment was the foundation of Valerie's early visual language and passion for art.⁵¹ Journalist Jackie May (1998), in her unpublished article, found in Valerie's archive, states:

Within the dynamic and exciting atmosphere of Roza's school, Valerie discovered painting. She loved it: 'I took to painting like a duck to water'. Roza had introduced her to impressionism and post-impressionism. Valerie loved the colour and expression of Picasso, Matisse and Cezanne. She borrowed styles from them to predict the social horrors and the schizophrenia of being a half white and a half black child in a racially discriminating society. (Fig 111–113)

Second, Central Girls' School was also radical for its multi-racial approach to openly enrolling 'Coloured' children into what was largely a white (Jewish) school (Belling 2013: 213). How the school was made up, Veronica-Sue Belling further notes that:

The school attracted the flood of [Jewish] immigrants who were coming into South Africa to beat the Quota Act of 1930. They are said to have settled around the area of the school in Buitenkant, Harrington, Maynard, Canterbury, and the little streets on the fringes of Roeland Street in District Six. (2013: 213)

Belling, who in her PhD dissertation writes about Roza Van Gelderen, the headmistress of this school, notes that "Van Gelderen and Purwitsky were also progressive in terms of their social conscience and their school, admittedly in pre-Apartheid days, included so-called Coloured girls such as the first Coloured artist to exhibit at a gallery, Valerie Desmore" (2013: 214).

⁵⁰ Sometimes referred to as the Central Girls' School (Miles 1997: 89).

⁵¹ This teaching model was based on A. S. Neill's Summerhill School in England. To explain how the Summerhill school worked Belling says, "Like Summerhill, their school had no rules, but the children were expected to honour those principles which govern mutual trust and consideration in any community. In the morning, the pupils studied the normal school subjects, except that the subjects were not taught by a single class teacher, as is the custom in Junior School, but by a subject teacher, as in High School. Even more revolutionary was the afternoon program, consisting of two periods, when the children in Standards IV–VI (age 10–14) were allowed to choose between a whole range of subjects, both academic, vocational and practical. The only condition was that the children should be obliged to stick to their choices for at least a month. They had a debating club and a journalism club that produced a regular Friday newspaper. Sex education was introduced, which was quite revolutionary in those days. For these lessons, they used their subject mistresses but also roped in visiting professors, artists and other experts. Emphasis was placed on the teaching of art, one of Van Gelderen's passions. Van Gelderen pioneered children's free-expression painting in South Africa. A groundbreaking exhibition of children's art was mounted in Cape Town, Johannesburg and London" (2013: 213).

Central Girls' School was, therefore, a pivotal moment for Valerie, who had spent most of her schooling life being kicked out due to her race. For the first time in her life, Valerie Desmore was admitted to a 'white' school without having to pretend to be white.

Third, through Van Gelderen, Valerie was introduced to the Cape Town arts community — to artists and the Cape Town exhibitions culture.⁵² For example, Valerie's first exhibition participation was via Central Girls' School's annual shows (Fig 7–11). Van Gelderen often exhibited reproductions of important international artists in the school hall to expose the children to the classics of international arts i.e., impressionism, expressionism, etc. She also wrote about art in the Central Girls' School newsletter (Figs 67b and 68) and in an arts column (under an alias name) in the local newspaper. Van Gelderen was also the first woman headmistress of the Central Girls' School, previously known as Hope Mill, which had been a combined school.⁵³ As a renowned children's art teacher, writer, lesbian and feminist, she often used her position and connections to expose her school to the local art world at large. All these things expanded Valerie's understanding of art and exposed her to the broader art world at a very young age.



⁵² She was the first Jewish Woman principal of a government school in Cape Town, South Africa. The school was in operation between 1926c – 1940. See Veronica-Sue Belling (2013: 212). While at the Central Girls' School Valerie became closely acquainted with Roza Van Gelderen, which in turn, strengthened Valerie's link to the Cape arts community of the time. I am wary of this reference to white patrons so early in the thesis as it has "the tendency of the white establishment to perpetuate a situation which Biko identified where the white person is the perpetual teacher and the Black person is a perpetual pupil" (Gule 2021: 34). I want to find a way to contend with the factual information about white aid while nuancing how that form of aid is systematic, contextual and cannot be devoid of whiteness overwriting of Black artists agency and subjectivity.

⁵³ A school for girls and boys

Figure 7: *Cape Times* newspaper article titled "School Girl Exhibitor" on Valerie Desmore's first exhibition in 1942.
 Figure 8: *Cape Argus* newspaper article on Valerie Desmore's first exhibition in 1942. Valerie is standing next to Sir Herbert Stanley who opened her exhibition.



Figure 9: The *Cape Argus* newspaper article on Valerie's school's exhibition.

Figure 10: *Cape Times* newspaper article titled *Art and Development of the Young Mind* which was about Central Girls' School's art exhibition.

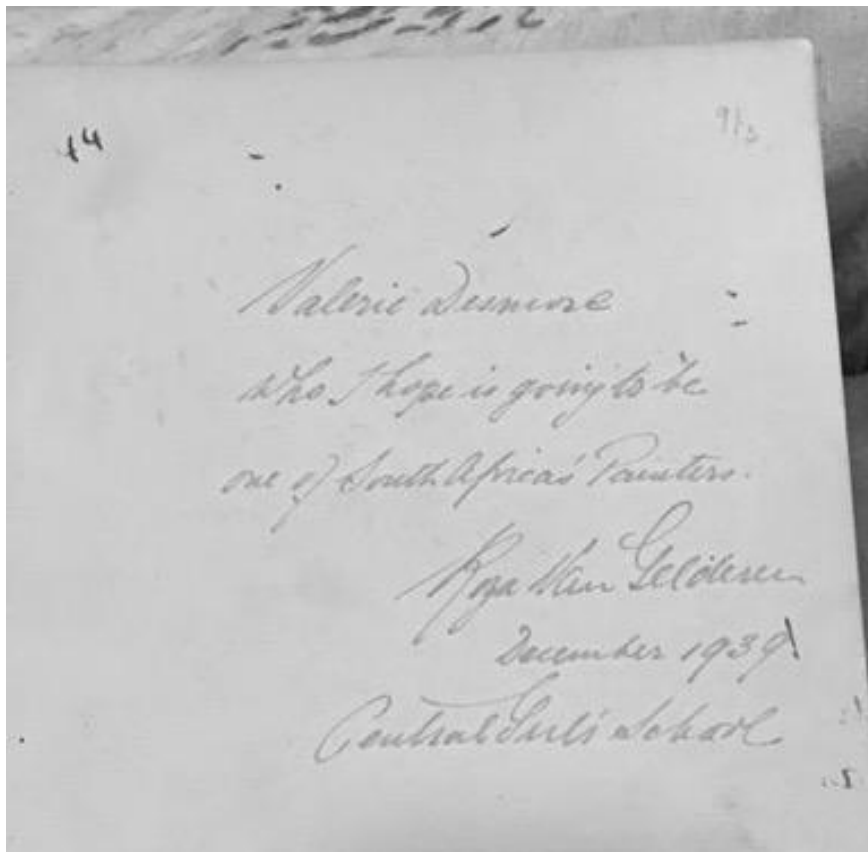


Figure 11: (above) *Cape Times* newspaper article about Central Girls' School's art exhibition. (below) A note inside from Roza Van Gelderen found in one of Valerie's books

Choosing To Become a Full-Time Artist

Unfortunately for Valerie, the Central Girls' School moment was very brief. In 1940, two years after Valerie joined, the School shut down.⁵⁴ In an attempt to keep Valerie in school, on one occasion, Van Gelderen, pretending to be Valerie's mother, tried to enrol her in a convent school (Fleck 2019, Miles 1998). Valerie was soon kicked out of that school, too, when she was discovered to be 'Coloured'. What this essentially meant was that Valerie's father's insistence on enrolling her in schools for white children, encouraging her to pass for white, never fully materialised, given how she was repeatedly kicked out of these schools as soon as she was discovered not to be white. This essentially meant Valerie never finished school,⁵⁵ which further prevented her from pursuing a university degree⁵⁶ in South Africa.

After experiencing many such rejections from white schools, Valerie was fed up and decided, aged fifteen, to focus solely on becoming an artist. Luckily, Valerie's parents' insistence in modelling her into white culture by enrolling her on several other extramural activities, such as ballet, private elocution lessons, and a short stint of painting lessons with Irma Stern,⁵⁷ meant Valerie could explore other avenues to further develop her artistic talent. These were aspirations of the Black middle classes in becoming "modern and modernist [...] the political and intellectual aspirations of emerging black middle classes" (Van Robbroeck 2011: 115). They are part of the "assimilation, which entails the wholesale adoption of Western religion, education and lifestyle in the (as it proved, mistaken) conviction that this would eventually lead to equal rights and citizenship for all" (Van Robbroeck 2011: 115). Valerie joined the Yellow Windows Studio,⁵⁸ which was also owned and run by Van Gelderen and her partner Hilda Purwitsky. Since the Yellow Windows Studio was open to a diversity of artists, this is where Valerie became better known to influential artists like Irma Stern, Wolf Kibel, Lippy Lipschitz and Gregoire Boonzaier, some of whom she had briefly met through their occasional interactions with Central Girls' School or as members of the then-

⁵⁴ Bellings writes that "According to a Departmental rule, that prevented a woman from becoming principal of a coeducational school, Van Gelderen was automatically precluded from continuing as principal. Reasons advanced for the amalgamation were that of economy... However, Purwitsky and Van Gelderen believed that the move was a deliberate ploy to get rid of Van Gelderen and her progressive ideas. They blamed the Broederbond, a conservative Afrikaans Nationalist organisation, that held sway at that time on the School Board" (2013: 215).

⁵⁵ Contrary to this claim, Jackie May believes that Valerie left Central Girls' School because she was old enough to attend high school.

⁵⁶ This is also part of the reason her father pursued his Masters at Columbia University.

⁵⁷ See Sue Belling's PhD dissertation (2013: 226). She had a short stint of being tutored by Irma Stern.v

⁵⁸ In 1941, she opened a children's art studio in Buitekant Street in Cape Town, known as The Yellow Windows Studio. She supported and promoted immigrant artists, such as Wolf Kibel, who came to Cape Town in 1929, and Irma Stern. See <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gelderen-Van-roza-and-hilda-purwitsky>.

radical collective called The New Group.⁵⁹ This group is said to have supported⁶⁰ Valerie's first solo show at the Herbert Stanley Argus Gallery in Cape Town, from 22 – 28 January 1942. She was sixteen years old when this exhibition acclaimed her as the first 'non-European'⁶¹ artist to have a solo exhibition in South Africa. Names like child artist,⁶² child prodigy,⁶³ wunderkind⁶⁴ or teenage artist⁶⁵ were used to describe her unique and exceptional talent. Despite the limitations of school, her artistic career thrived. Valerie worked from the Yellow Window studio for five years, between 1940 and 1945, producing work that she exhibited in her solo and other group shows across South Africa. She is said to have had four solo shows in South Africa altogether, three before immigrating to the United Kingdom and the last one in 1947, a year after she had already left.⁶⁶



Figure 12: The ship (ship name unknown) Valerie Desmore took when she left South Africa in 1945

⁵⁹ The New Group was established in 1938. The initial six members of this group were Gregoire Boonzaier, Terence McCaw, Alexis Preller, Frieda Lock, Lippy Lipshitz, and Walter Battiss (Berman 1970: 91). Others like Maurice Van Essche, Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, (among many others) seem to have joined much later. See Anna Tietze's *A History of the Iziko South African National Gallery: Reflections on Art and National Identity* (2017) and Esmé Berman's *Art and Artists of South Africa: An Illustrated Biographical Dictionary and Historical Survey of Painters and Graphic Artists since 1875* (1970).

⁶⁰ The specific details of this group's support for Valerie are unknown. However, many newspapers state this group supported many exhibitions of local artists as a way of raising funds towards supporting Britain's Bombed Cities' Relief Fund. This meant half of her exhibition proceedings went to supporting this fund and the other half provided funding for Valerie's overseas study. See "Child Artist's Work." *The Cape Argus*. Monday, January 19, 1942; Child Artist's Work. Exhibition at the Argus Gallery, *The Cape Times*, January 19, 1942.

The other support she got was from her family.

⁶¹ The term 'non-European' was often used to refer to artists of colour. Gladys Mgudlandlu though often referred to as an African artist was also named a non-European.

⁶² See *The Cape Argus*, January 22, 1942

⁶³ In an undated notebook, she writes a short biography stating, "exhibited 6 times as a child prodigy in South Africa".

⁶⁴ See Murinik, Tracy. 1998. "Valerie Who?" *Johannesburg Mail & Guardian*, and December and interview Between Valerie, Jan Dirk Herbermann and Fiona Fleck(c.2002)

⁶⁵ See Eyene (2011: 97).

⁶⁶ The last show was essentially the portfolio work she had sent to the Slade School of Art as part of her application. When the work was returned to South Africa the Borough Gallery that represented her in Johannesburg put these works on show.



Figure 13: Valerie Desmore arrived in London with a few of her friends.
In the photographs, Valerie kneels in the centre of the front row.
The names of accompanying friends are unknown.

Arriving in London

It was through the sales of her artworks in solo and group shows that Valerie was able to raise enough money to afford schooling in London. However, since she was still young, her father acted as her financial guarantor (Fig 72). This, along with a portfolio of work produced from the Yellow Window studio and a reference letter from Dr Felix Gross⁶⁷ (Fig 76), enabled her to secure a space to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, in the United Kingdom.⁶⁸ Many newspapers claimed that her studies were funded by the New Group. Other archive records⁶⁹ say she was sponsored by Oskar Kokoschka. In an interview with Fleck, Valerie stresses the need to correct this claim saying: “My parents had sent the Slade principal my work. And he promised to take me on as a student if I came to London [...] a lot of people think I was given money to go over and given scholarships like you say when I paid for it myself” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006). In fact, Valerie speaks about how it was her grandmother who planted the seed of her making money from her art while she was still in Van Gelderen’s school, because of how well her work was doing in the school’s exhibitions at Central Girls’ High School. In their interview, Fiona and Valerie (2002–2006) discuss how she started making money from her art:

Fiona Fleck: And then, how did your parents react when they realised that you were talented in art?

Valerie Desmore: Well, Roza told them I was talented. And they knew Roza was having little exhibitions and selling the best work. And so, my grandmother said why shouldn’t

⁶⁷ Managing Director of the International Press Agency, Cape Town.

⁶⁸ I found the original application to study at the Slade with my father as her guarantor (see Figure 71). Recommended for admission by the Slade Professor, Randolph Schwabe, 6 November 1944.

⁶⁹ In the JAG archive I found communication exchanges that suggested this. In fact, the biography that accompanied documents motivation for the purchase of her work states this explicitly.

she [Valerie] have a bit of that money that Roza was making? And why shouldn't she have an exhibition of her own [...] She was the one who started the ball rolling and then one day while I was sitting in the car with my dad at Salts [...] Umm [...] Salts something market [...] Salt River market. My father said, "how would you like to be famous by the time you're 20?" and so my ears perked up, I said "yes".

She was twenty years old, in 1945, when she moved to London.⁷⁰ This was just after the Second World War.⁷¹ Michael Stevenson and Joost Bosland write about the motivations that led some Black South African artists of the early twentieth century to pursue art education overseas saying:

The difficulties experienced by young black artists in the 1930s through to the 1950s are brought into relief by considering the comparative experience of young white artists in South Africa. There were numerous art schools, albeit mostly conservative in sensibility, where they could study, and, until the late 1950s, most young white artists continued their studies in London or Paris. For these artists, studying in Europe constituted further advancement, whereas the young black artists travelled abroad in search of the basic art education that apartheid and colonialism forbade [...] For the aspirant black artists, not only were educational opportunities in Africa severely limited, but there was also no financial support for their endeavours. (2008: 16)

It is therefore not surprising that Valerie chose the route to London in her bid to escape the limitations of the South Africa of her time. In some correspondence between Valerie and Miles Valerie gives testament to this, saying: "[in] 1946 — I came to London to study at the Slade and to escape racial persecution in SA. I have never gone back"⁷² (Fig 103). This feeling of not belonging marked her for the rest of her life. Things were not easy in London either. Upon her arrival, Valerie found it difficult to fit in.⁷³ For example, while she lived at the Young Christian Women's Association (YWCA), she recalls not attending their morning prayers as she did not grow up Christian. "I didn't go for prayers. So, I just stayed in bed longer than the others" (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006), says Valerie. It was also around this time that she decided to quit the Slade altogether and spent most of her time at the cinema escaping art school. "What I used to do was not go in sometimes and just go to the Odeon cinema⁷⁴ and watch all the films. So, I got to see

⁷⁰ When she arrived in London she stayed at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) until she could afford to stay on her own.

⁷¹ Though Valerie's study permit was for five years, under the 1948 Act Citizenship of the UK and Colonies she later became a naturalised British citizen.

⁷² This document is archived at the Johannesburg Art Gallery library, on a handwritten Curriculum Vitae.

⁷³ Surprisingly, Valerie's disappearance from the art milieu did not cause any public debate in South Africa, even though her travels to London were widely publicised, and were also partially supported by The New Group. The choice to leave the Slade School of Arts would surely have sparked public discussion. As an artist who, in her four-year career in South Africa, was written about continuously in the press, one would assume that tracking her London artistic career developments would interest her art followers, the press and her buyers. Only one or two small mentions in the press that attempt a follow-up. See *Cape Times* (1946)

⁷⁴ The first Odeon cinema was opened by Oscar Deutsch in 1928, in Brierley Hill, Staffordshire (now West Midlands), although initially called "Picture House". The first cinema to use the Odeon brand name was Deutsch's cinema at Perry Barr, Birmingham, in 1930.

some good films” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006). While Valerie was bunking school, newspapers reported on good progress in her studies, such as the report of the *Cape Times* (1946)⁷⁵ that said:

The talented Valerie Desmore, now at the Slade in London, has been fortunately unfortunate. Her drawing equipment was stolen. As drawing boards cannot be had in London she was allowed to do brushwork in the antique room. Usually, students are not permitted to use anything except the pencil for a couple of years. In the antique room, Valerie painted a renaissance head. It created something of a sensation and she was promoted officially to the brush department on the spot.

To Valerie, it did not matter that she had been able to accelerate the time she spent at different levels at the Slade, as she still “felt unsuited for the conservative academic approach and soon, in her dissatisfaction, became a student of the Viennese expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka” (Stevenson and Bosland 2008: 104), and as Murinik (1998) echoes:

Desmore describes herself as an expressionist, and found herself bored and frustrated with the types of academic canon being taught in many of the art schools when she got to London. She was far more attracted to more ‘anti-establishment’ avantguardists, and particularly the German Expressionists and Vienna Secessionists who, by the time she arrives in Europe, were being demeaned as ‘degenerate artists’ by Hitler.

Recalling how she left the Slade and moved to Kokoschka, Valerie says:

I went to the Slade and I was a bit disillusioned with it. It was too dry for me. Too academic. Not at all my style. And I didn’t know where to go with my art. I must’ve come to a Cul-de-sac. So, I happened to see the work of a painter, Czech, he is like Austrian painter, Viennese, who was one of the greats among the expressionist painters of a secession. And this man Oskar Kokoschka was persecuted by Hitler, not because he was a Jew, but, because Hitler regarded his work as degenerate. And he was one of the degenerate artists whom Hitler forbade to work. Great artists like Nolde, Kirschner, Kokoschka were forbidden to work in Germany. They’d be put into concentration camps. So, they all left. Kokoschka came to England. I saw his work and I wrote him a fan letter, because I felt that really this person could help point the way that I could go. And he was wonderful. And he was the person who said to me. “Valerie, go away and paint your life. And then come back in a few days and you show me your work”. And that continued for several years. This way of working opened up my art again. And I knew I was going in the right direction. (Desmore 1998)

After quitting the Slade programme (1946–1947) and in the period of studying with Kokoschka (1948–1957),⁷⁶ Valerie also took up various other jobs to make a living, including hat and clothes

⁷⁵ After Valerie left for London, there was very little reporting about her in the newspapers. The reduced amount of attention she received from South African newspapers highlighted that she also didn’t receive much attention in London.

⁷⁶ I am using the CV found in the JAG archive that she submitted when they purchased her work. Other CVs say she met Kokoschka in 1948. Details of her programme with Kokoschka are difficult to find. I was not able to find any records of her from the Kokoschka Foundation nor from her own personal archive, even though there is so much

modelling (Fig 14–17). She is even said to have been “photographed by famous photographers, such as Anthony Buckley, who later did portraits of the royal family” (personal comms. Fleck, 2020).



Figure 14: Photograph 1 of Valerie’s modelling gigs c1950s.

Figure 15: Photograph 2 taken by a famous photographer, Anthony Buckeley, for one of Valerie’s modeling gigs



mention of this in various documents. I’ve even gone as far as searching through the accounts of Albert Adams, another South African artist who also came to London shortly after Valerie and studied under Kokoschka too, to see if there are details from his experiences that link back Valerie’s experience with Kokoschka. There are, however, a lot of sketches dating from this period, which could be assumed were done during this period with Kokoschka.

Figure 16: Photograph 3 of Valerie Desmore's modelling gigs.
Figure 17: Photograph 4 of Valerie Desmore's modelling gigs.

While these jobs sustained her for some time, they were not a real lucrative source of income. As time went on, it became increasingly clear that she needed to find a more stable income. In 1951, Valerie took up fashion design classes at Central Saint Martins School for a year, with the hope of making a living from fashion design work in order to supplement her art career.⁷⁷ Ironically, this resulted in her building a successful career in fashion, with her own fashion label under her name for children's clothes that she promoted through self-organised annual fashion shows for three consecutive years, between 1962 and 1964 (Fig 18–21 and 76–102).⁷⁸ Fiona Fleck, her niece, attests to this:

Her work shot to fame, it was shown in many kids' fashion shows in the UK and featured in fashion magazines and newspapers. She was considered to have developed a new and fresh look for kids aged 4 to 7. I do not remember much, I know she used to give me clothes and bought them for me sometimes. I was very small when she had this fashion label, though, and don't recall anything about it. I see from her biographical notes that she had a collection in her name in 1962, 1963 and 1964, after which she joined Marks and Spenser. (personal comms, Fleck 2020)

Describing her own clothes, Valerie is quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* (14 May 1963) saying, "Children like to look pretty and yet not too different from their friends. They like to wear clothes with a grown-up look [...] I try to give ease of movement to uncrushable and washable cotton for summer clothes, adding to this a splash of colour which children love". This approach to fashion earned her fame that is evidently captured in many magazines and newspapers raving and celebrating Valerie Desmore's fresh designs of children's clothes for their mimicry of adult clothes.⁷⁹ In December 1962, The *London Sunday Times* newspaper published an article which described it as, not an "OVER-dressing" (caps in the original) but rather, "the best sort of compromise". The *Daily Telegraph* (14 May 1963) commended her designs for setting a new trend, saying, "The simple look for children's clothes is at last becoming the accepted thing".

⁷⁷ Another African woman designer Afi Ekong also attended Central Saint Martins School of Fine Arts and Central School of Arts Holborn where she studied the history of costumes. She completed her studies in fine arts, applied arts and designs in England in 1957. Ekong was a Nigerian artist, Chief Afi Ekong, who was a highly privileged woman who achieved high standing in the arts but also became the first gallerist and broadcaster of (Efik-)Nigerian descent just around Independence in 1960.

⁷⁸ I could not find information on the 1962 fashion show but found information on the other two: The "Autumn-Winter collection of dresses for children" was opened on Thursday, 23 May, 1963, at the Great Titchfield House (14-18 Great Titchfield Street, London W.1). The "Autumn-Winter collection of dresses for children" took place on Thursday 21 of May 1964, at Weymouth Mev, Weymouth Street, London. This was the last fashion collection produced under her label before taking up full-time employment at Marks and Spenser as a fashion designer in 1965. Although she was most known for children's clothes, Valerie also designed women's clothes.

⁷⁹ Also see - 1963. *Queen Magazine*. March; 1963. *Daily Express*. May; 1963. *Daily Express*. June; 1963. *Daily Telegraph*. Jun; [1963. *Woman & Beauty*; 1963. *Vanity Fair*; 1963. *Harpers Bazaar*; 1963. *Harpers Bazaar*. December; 1964. *Daily Express*.

In 1964, Valerie began psychoanalysis therapy. The motivation to opt for psychotherapy was from the pressure she felt that while her fashion career had taken off, she had not ever reconciled with her past. She felt she needed some kind of therapy to help guide her, as was common in those days, due to the trauma of the War.⁸⁰ She says, “It took me a long time. In fact, I mean to skip, like many years, in 1963, I was so screwed up. I mean, I found myself so screwed [...] Because none of my childhood had been resolved. I hadn’t come to terms with it [...]” (Desmore 1998). In another interview, she named her reasons as follows: “I stayed with people too long. I stayed in relationships too long. I didn’t have enough self-respect. And self-respect is one of the most important things. And you know I had to get my self-respect back” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

This costly endeavour forced her to find a more stable job. She lamented thus:

I had no money and he [the therapist] said “you’ve got to pay. You’ve got to pay for psychoanalysis, five quid a session. And you’ve got to come [...] every day, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday [...] Thursday [...] Friday, for one year and then every two years, for a loooong time”. He said, “Valerie you’re very sick!” And... I said... “What the fuck? God! What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do? I am a painter” [...] Fortunately, there were times, during my time in England, when I had to stop painting and do something to earn a living. And [...] during one of those periods, I’d been posing as a fashion model at St Martins School of Art, which is like [...] has the greatest fashion department in the whole world today [...] So, I went there for one year and began getting various jobs. And that’s when the painting had to go on hold. I thought that fashion would not interfere too much with my attitude to my work when I eventually could paint again. (Desmore 1998)

In 1964, to pay for psychoanalysis,⁸¹ Valerie landed a job at the retail chain Marks & Spencer (M&S), where she worked for eighteen years until 1982.⁸² Describing this change in career in another interview:

I went into psychoanalysis. I paid for it. Five quid a session. And you know how I got my money? I joined Marks and Spencer as a fashion designer in order to pay my psychoanalyst. That’s how. And I suppose I’m the first person who ever went into an industry to pay for psychoanalysis, hey? (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

From this statement, we are able to perceive her thoughts of her fashion career as a means to an end, a thing she needed to survive and to recover from her past. She focused on using fashion as

⁸⁰ Mention the influence of the WAR – on psychoanalysis around this time.

⁸¹ As evident in her personal testament above, psychoanalysis was an important part of Valerie’s life transitions, so much so that it informed much of her later artistic work when she finally returned to making art full-time after retirement. She underwent psychoanalysis for more than ten years until her therapist died in the early ‘70s.

⁸²It might be worthwhile mentioning that while at M&S she moved up the ranks from children’s clothes to being a swimwear designer. Toward the end of her employment with M&S she was working as the international trade liaison, often visiting other M&S international stores in countries like Australia.

a tool to get the healing needed in order to get her life together. In some ways, Valerie underestimated how successful her fashion career would be. Even though she wilfully tried out different things in fashion with the intention of succeeding in it, this creative detour was never part of Valerie's master plan when she moved to the United Kingdom. Describing her time at Marks & Spencer, Fleck says, "[Valerie was] a flamboyant, talented, unconventional designer who did not fit in, but who did a good job on the creative side. Never a company woman, but she did well and became head of a section" (personal comms. 2019). Indeed, there are business records in her archive that show her rank climbs within M&S from designing children's clothes to swimwear to eventually becoming an international buyer for some of the M&S stores in Australia. The Getty Image in the introduction of this chapter shows Valerie at a social business event, showing the kind of social circles in which Valerie appeared in London.

An astute businesswoman, while at Marks & Spencer between 1977–1979, Valerie briefly opened her own clothing shop called *Liza Doolittle* at Covent Garden.⁸³ The shop was named after the eponymous character in the 1912 play titled *Pygmalion* by playwright George Bernard Shaw. Shaw was inspired by the "social reform movements of the 1890's and 1900's" (Covent Garden Memories)⁸⁴ in order "to shine a spotlight on changing British attitudes to class, personal freedom, language and the position of women in society" (Covent Garden Memories).⁸⁵ By 1938, the play had been made into a film. In this film, Eliza — a so-called 'uncouth' flower seller on the street of London's Covent Garden — is lured by English language Professor Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering to participate in their experiment, where she is taken into Higgin's home to be taught English and other social habits. They do this in order to change what they describe as "her reprobate cockney ways" and in order to "make her become a proper lady" (Covent Garden Memories).⁸⁶

⁸³ Designer shop was at 2 Bow Street, WC2, Covent Garden London.

⁸⁴ Covent garden memories http://www.coventgardenmemories.org.uk/category/eliza_doolittle

⁸⁵ Covent garden memories http://www.coventgardenmemories.org.uk/category/eliza_doolittle

⁸⁶ See: http://coventgardenmemories.org.uk/page_id_55_path_0p29p.aspx The historical website on the Covent Garden describes the play as follows:

In part, the theatre served as [Shaw's] tool to promote social change [...] Throughout, it is not known what Higgins actual intentions are for the young girl. Shaw uses Eliza's father as a pivotal device. Significantly, when Higgins pays Mr Doolittle for Eliza, he says that: "*She is at an age of interest*". *Pygmalion* repeatedly exposes the dual nature of relationships between social reformers and young, unmarried women. This statement reveals the mindset of the Victorian and Edwardian time period and the clashing British social classes. Shaw hoped that unveiling such (impure) thoughts in a comedic and theatrical setting might revolutionise popular perceptions of society as it was then constructed [...] Throughout the play there are various links to the *Maiden Tribute*, and Shaw also included a twist at the end of his play. He was very specific that he did not want Eliza to go back to Higgins. Shaw wanted to show her character as a strong independent figure [...] Shaw's play ends with Eliza leaving and not returning to Higgins' home. She has proved that she too has

Valerie's choice of naming her shop after Shaw's character or a politically charged narrative is intriguing, but not unexpected considering her love for cinema. What was she trying to say through this shop? To what extent would locating the shop in the same precinct as the setting of this play have been a coincidence? Could we argue that the name alluded to her personal experience as a South African in an English context, having to assimilate into a culture that would consider hers as reprobate? Or in what ways was she using the fashion context to remark on the social change happening around her and the changing position of women in society, particularly since her clothes were primarily for girls? It is undeniable that naming the shop after this character was a political act of biomythography. What that political gesture was directed at is largely unknown, but as newspapers attest, Valerie, through her clothing, did alter perceptions around children's wear. It also signals Valerie's earlier awakenings of feminism, a position she claims more boldly in later years.



Figure 18: Undated photograph. Valerie Desmore's Fashion show, picture 1
Figure 19: Undated photograph. Valerie Desmore's Fashion show, picture 2

limited options and can only indulge in those options as an independent individual. Shaw clearly allowed his play to be taken in many different directions and used various scenes to make political and social points.



Figure 20: Cover of the invite to the Winter Collection show, September.
 Figure 21: Invitation to the Winter Collection show, September.

Three years after the shop closed, in 1982, aged fifty-seven, Valerie took early retirement from her job at Marks & Spencer, returning to painting full-time.⁸⁷ From 1982 onwards, she produced paintings more consistently until the early 2000s when her kidney illness took more strain until she succumbed to it in 2008. In all the twenty-one years at Marks & Spencer —Valerie produced very few paintings —with almost none appearing in the 1970s.

The transitions throughout Valerie’s entire creative career are important indicators of the tumultuous nature of self-writing, self-determination, and self-enunciation for Black South African artists of the twentieth century. As her fashion career grew in London, Valerie ceased to exist as an artist back in South Africa, due to her exile. In fact, for a very long period Gladys Mgudlandlu—who held her first public exhibition in 1961 in South Africa, and whose history I pursued in 2012—had been mistakenly referred to as “the first ‘non-European’ woman to hold an exhibition in 1961 in South Africa” (Miles 1997: 89). Such mistakes were exemplary of the design of the intra-racial fractures between previously disadvantaged groups of the time. These divides meant that contributions from artists of colour were drawn according to and maintained by ethnic rifts. Secondly, they are “exemplary of South Africa’s racialised cultural institutions’ disregard for some Black artists and disproportionate acknowledgement for others. It is testimony that such acclaims

⁸⁷ There are many works in circulation from the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘80s onwards, but very few to none from the 1970s.

[Mgudlandlu acclaimed as the first] had a lot to do with the construction of the political system at the time” (Ntombela 2013: 7). Thirdly, they are exemplary of the global workings of a discriminatory system. For, even in exile, Valerie’s career as an artist quickly diminished.

While the choice to study fashion, a change in Valerie’s career path, was for pragmatic reasons, it nevertheless indicates the beginnings of forms of refusal that she may have employed to address the limitations she faced in the field of visual arts. Similarly, her choice to operate outside of the visual arts mainstream was not because of failure but was indicative of her critique of the workings of the London art scene. Recognising “the economic hazards of living by her art alone” (Murinik, 1998), she also understood that the London art scene was not in favour of the expressionistic kind of art that she made. In a letter to Elza Miles (6 May 1997), for example, Valerie claims, “I have never tried for a ‘one-man’ show in England because they hate expressionism here” (Desmore 1997). When I visited the Cape Town family archive, I discovered exhibition entry stickers on the back of some of her artwork, indicating that she had tried to submit several of her works to the Royal Academy exhibitions (1985) (Fig 22–23) but was never shortlisted. One of her notebooks includes a scribbled CV that lists the *Royal Society of Women Artists* in London (Fig 22–23), yet I have not been able to trace further details about this exhibition.

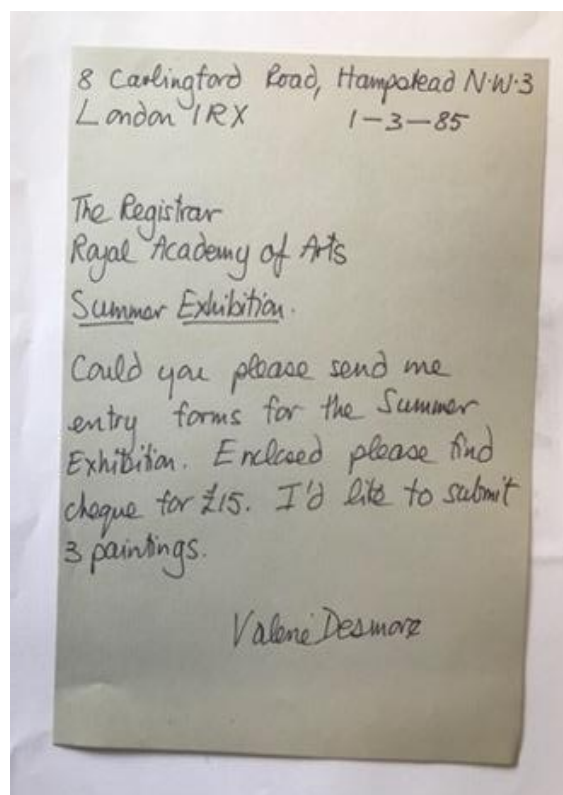


Figure 22: Letter dated 1 March 1985, addressed to the Registrar of the *Royal Academy Summer Exhibition* from Valerie Desmore.



Figure 23: Sticker of the *Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 1985* pasted on the back of the painting now titled *Mermaid Feast*, 1985, Oil on canvas, 102 x 76cm.

One might understand moments like these to illustrate the limitations she faced in London. These restrictions, although different specifically from the South African context, still demonstrate the workings and implications of a limiting art system. By never endeavouring for a solo show, she established the complex strategies she employed to overcome these limitations. The refusal to engage with the London art scene shows Valerie's attempt to explore her artistic expression on her own terms. It also indicates her deliberateness in engaging with the visual art world without hindrance. It is a response to the rejections and limitations of a system that worked to frustrate her and keep her out, evident of the kind of structural violence that resulted in her almost being written out of art history altogether. The risk, of course, is that it then took her fifty years for her history to eventually be remembered in South Africa, even though that remembering remains inconsistent.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter, I have sketched a brief overview of Valerie's art career, highlighting the historical moments that capture the pivotal development of her artistic career. The fact that Valerie, a young 'Coloured' woman artist, gets celebrated at such a young age makes her story particularly unusual and remarkable, especially since it happens at a time when racial segregation was increasingly sanctioned.⁸⁸ However, what this chapter does not do is to delve into the intricate details of her highly successful career as a fashion designer. This is because the conventions of that discipline are beyond the scope of this dissertation. It does not mean that they are entirely separate,

⁸⁸ There are very few examples of Black artists who by the early 1900s were established and known, i.e. Gerard Sekoto. They were also often older, mature and male (Van Robbroeck, Makhubu 2022).

but rather, much of what influenced her later career remains largely unexplored in the existing writings about her as an artist. Similarly, even though there is not much written about her fashion career either, for the purpose of this research, however, the focus is on elevating her artistic work within an art historical inquiry. It is hoped that this research will encourage future exploration of her fashion career.

The other parts of her life that also remain unaccounted for, in this chapter, include her social, cultural and political life in London in relation to broader, more politically visible Black South African constituents of the exile communities. Quite obvious is how Valerie navigated the art world in unconventional ways, which is unusual for a Black artist of her time. This has meant that social connections within the Jewish community may have limited her interactions with other South African Black communities in London. The earlier support of Valerie's career through van Gerderen in establishing her artistic career, and then remaining within the Jewish community circles with the three friends she arrived with also coming from the Jewish community, makes it possible that her social orientation would never see her associating with other South African Black communities in London, apart from her family who subsequently joined her. Additionally, the gender-based dismissal in certain publications neglect to fully acknowledge her professional contributions and focuses instead on her love life. John Calder, writing about his career in publishing, mentions Valerie as the girlfriend of one of his authors, Arthur Boyars, who was also Jewish. Barney Rosset also mentions Valerie's love affair, adding further details about travels to the United States. In this light there remain possibilities of further engaging and complicating how she remained in art circles in London and was how this overlapped with her fashion design work. She does not give many details about this life in the interviews between herself and Fiona, though there are a few moments where she speaks about social life with other communities during her university years, but this is also in passing with very little detail. Further exploration into Valerie's social life and community engagement would provide a more comprehensive understanding of her experiences and impact in England.

This means that stories of how her existence related to the lives of other South Africans who were in London around the same time are also largely missing. This is an area worthy of further investigation as it is well known at the beginning of the twentieth century, England was a place frequented by many South Africans and Africans at large, particularly creatives from different artistic disciplines. For example, Noni Jabavu, a pioneering South African writer and journalist, one of the first Black African women to achieve success in these fields, was already in London by

the time Valerie arrived. Comparing her experiences with Noni Jabavu's would be interesting. Sandra McGregory, another 'Coloured' South African woman artist, as well as Albert Adams, 'Coloured too, and who arrived in London shortly after Desmore, would be another interesting examination as to why there was very little to no interaction between them. Photographer George Hallett, who, though eighteen years younger than Valerie, also moved to London and documented the lives of South African exiles in London, Amsterdam, and France. This would provide another contrasting point that enriches a broader picture of what was happening around and during Valerie's life in London. However, within the scope of this research, it remains that Valerie existed outside of the political and creative circles of South Africans who are known today for their exile experience, placing her outside of these broader narratives.

Furthermore, while it may seem as though the information presented here is in chronological order, much of this information is sourced from non-linear sources. In that light, inconsistencies may appear. As a biomythography, the intention of the thesis is precisely to lay bare the messiness, confusion, contradictions and inconsistencies of some of the information gathered and how it is stored. Almost as raw data, the intention of this chapter was to acknowledge Trouillot's (2015) warning about the impossibility of neutral and straightforward histories. By "stitching" together these pieces of information, we can appreciate Valerie's multiple biomythographical contexts. As a result, there is an idiosyncratic approach to the flow of this chapter.

The chapter that follows (Chapters 2) discusses refusal and biomythography in detail, as a key concepts that underpin this dissertation's engagement with Valerie's artistic approach. Subsequently, Chapters 4 to 5 examine specific artworks, illustrating Valerie's struggle with forms of refusal in the artwork itself. I return to biomythography and archiving practice in chapter 6.

Chapter 2

Race and Refusal

Introduction

This chapter explores two aspects of the Valerie narrative: First, it delves into some literature debates that revolve around the notion of refusal and argues how this relates to Valerie's practice and life circumstances. Second, it discusses the politics of race. Together, these aspects illustrate how Valerie navigated her worlds. By beginning with the concept of refusal, the chapter sets up how we can understand her career choices, illustrated in the previous chapter. By indicting the issues of race particularly, the chapter also broaches the nuances and contradictions inherent in what it meant to be a modern 'Coloured' woman artist pursuing a career in art in South Africa in the early 1900s and in exile. In this sense, biography and race become catalysts for understanding the intersections of refusal and biomythography within Valerie's work.

It is important to state that while the debates on race are helpful in thinking about the complexities of race naming, it is not the objective of this dissertation to write on the complicated racial categorisation. Most critical is that it is not within the scope of this research to engage disciplinary studies of the microcosms of critical race theory specific to the deep and complex social, cultural and political debates of these racial categories as they manifest for specific communities across South Africa and the world differently.

Furthermore, I am cognisant of the fact that as a Black woman, it would be impossible to explain Valerie's race, given the particularities of such race discourses resulting from South Africa's history of segregation between previously disadvantaged groups. To attempt to read such a race category falls outside of what Maithufi Sopelekae defines as "a site of experience" (2010: 1) or what Njabulo Ndebele also defines as "embodied interiority" (2006: 78). In these notions, Sopelekae and Ndebele both cite the importance of insider experience when one considers such contested histories. As the chapter will illustrate, the writers I engage solidify that the position of this identity remains undeniably complex and unattainable, especially to someone living outside of this identity formulation.

However, within this study, it has been impossible to escape imprints of the race discussion around Valerie, given how her work has been received in the public domain. In several texts, she is often referred to as ‘Coloured’ as a prefixing term to the analysis of her work or a discussion around her. In several interviews, she refers to herself as ‘mixed race’ (Miles 1989; Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006; Greslé 2006; Siebrits 2006; Joost and Stevenson 2008; Siebrits 2019). The specific political history of these words and categorisations means race discussions cannot be entirely avoided, but engaging in them requires some awareness of their histories. Using race naming in this instance is, therefore, about invoking the circumstances that Valerie lived through and its paradoxes. I have therefore relied on writers such as Gavin Lewis (1987), Mohamed Adhikari (1987, 1993, 1999, 2005), Zoe Wicomb (1992), Yvette Abrahams (1999), Desiree Lewis (1999, 2001, 2004), Daniel Bowler (2014), Nicola Cloete (2015), Zimitri Erasmus (2001, 2017) and many others, on their diverse takes on the notion of ‘Coloured’, mixed race, etc.

While race is not the main purpose of this study, I remain hopeful that the study still offers an important contribution towards the broader history of South African Black women artists, as these things are not mutually exclusive. Valerie’s gendered position as a Black woman artist remains the most prominent and urgent motivation for this study. This is to acknowledge her historical contribution to the South African art canon. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, the work remains the subject and object of this study. Biographical and race debates, therefore, only get implicated within the analysis of the work. This early mention of race offers a disclaimer on the polarising nature of the words in question.

Refusal(s)

Refusal is an ever-present concept that often becomes more urgent during moments of dispute. As an act of declining to do something or an expression of the unwillingness to accept or grant an offer or request in the arts, such a concept often surfaces as a tool and or philosophical debate to critique public disputes about, but not limited to, systems of oppression. Its manifestations, however, are often mobilised variably through wide-ranging visual representations. Philosopher Julian Murphet posits that refusal works from two different frames of reference, the “political and aesthetic” (2007: vii). To these, ethical questions are posed between the performed unwillingness (strikes, riots, public demonstrations, etc.) and the interpretations or appearance of this performed or interpretations of unwillingness as art. The notion ‘political’ here, too, does not infer race politics alone but also speaks to junctures of politics that include issues of class and gender. In this

light I anchor my definition of the concept of refusal on Lilian Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan's writings on the subject:

Indeed, the charge of refusal as a concept is to pay attention to those forms of relation that challenge the discursive infrastructure that makes political action legible, that renders minoritarian bodies as such, and that reiterates dominant norms about the place and time for political recognition. Crucially, practices of refusal are never a program of action, and such practices have occurred continuously in the history of political struggle without always being recognised as such. Performing refusal requires obstinance, bodily comportments that disassociate and emanate the desire to not be included. (2019: 7)

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in refusal as an artistic discourse in the United States by African-American scholars and writers like Tina Campt (2017, 2019), Saidiya Haartman (1997, 2007, 2016, 2018), Christina Sharpe (2016), Fred Moten (2018) and many others. Calling this phenomenal practice a visualisation of refusal or practices of refusal, this kind of artistic strategy is understood to be another form of activism recognising the work of Black American contemporary visual artists, who use refusal to raise awareness and consciousness about the oppressive experiences Black communities endure in the United States. To describe this idea of refusal, Campt posits:

refusal: a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation, i.e. a refusal to recognise a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise. (2017: 83)

A key aspect of Campt's position is the importance of refusal as a confrontational tool that she argues artists have used to challenge the status quo, thus, making refusal a way to make life 'livable'. Campt's discussion on refusal as a term that is located within the politics of aesthetics offers an important link to Valerie's strategies of refusal, which straddles two notable forms. The first is the refusal that is enacted through the images that she produces in her work. These are unpacked in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. In these chapters, I explore how her artworks tell stories of refusal and succinctly inform her way of making art. In them, we see Valerie develop her own expressionist iconography, which she turns into a complex yet noticeable Desmorean visual language.

The second refusal manifests in her performing a kind of retaliation, for example, walking away from the art scene or moving 'sideways', as a way of overcoming the art world's rejection and restrictions. Valerie's iconic move from art to fashion is one way in which her walking away helped her explore an alternative creative medium that allowed her the expressive space of a different kind of institutional pressure. Also, within the refusal of walking away, the rejection of the visual art world meant finding artistic growth in unconventional ways. This audacious gesture brought her into the circles of expressionism: the type of art she really yearned to study. This walking away

from the dictates of convention becomes a form of ‘absent-presence’ or a stay-away, demonstrating a pushback against that very art system. As an artist, Valerie mobilised refusal to bring to light the oppressive systems and contexts she lived in. In this section, I explore some of the literature on refusal that has been fundamental in understanding how Valerie enacted refusal in her art and personal context, deliberately charting a viable biomythographical narrative.

Saying No: The Right to Refuse

Carole McGranahan writes about ‘ethnographic refusal’, arguing that such a phenomenon is useful in understanding how decolonisation and self-determination, “for rights and recognition, for rejecting specific structures and systems” (2016: 321), can be achieved. She argues that the notion of ‘refusal’ is a recognition of one’s rights that she bases on personal beliefs, explaining it as follows:

To refuse is to say no. But, no, it is not just that. To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move towards one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another. Refusals illuminate limits and possibilities, especially but not only of the state and other institutions. And yet, refusal cannot be cast merely as a response to authority, or an updated version of resistance, or a concept to subsume under already existing scholarly categories. Instead, [refusal can] be about the social as much as the political, to be a concept in dialogue with exchange and equality. (2016: 319)

McGranahan groups this recognition of one’s right into four forms of refusal. Refusal as generative; refusal as social and affiliative; refusal as not another word for resistance; and refusal as hopeful and as wilful. All four principles articulate how refusal makes it possible to rethink ways of existing in the world other than doing what is expected or imposed by a hegemonic system. McGranahan explains that this concept is both “social and political” (2016: 320) as they speak to “formal and everyday relations, including between claimed equals, in ways that redirect levels of engagement” (2016: 320). She argues that it is about showing the limits of certain things, such as “affiliations, identities, and relationships in ways that are not about domination or class struggle [...] but instead about staking claims to the sociality that underlies all relationships, including political ones” (2016: 320). In this instance, Valerie’s refusal(s) become(s) a tool towards self-determination. For example, her leaving South Africa, and her quitting the Slade arts programme that later led to her finding support in Kokoschka and further gave her the confidence to continue creating work and exploring the inner journey that became generative for her as an expressionist.

My interest in McGranahan is not so much in the ethnographic refusal but what the recognition of one’s right, thus refusal, potentiates. Such recognition of rights can be related to Hannah

Arendt's (1973) questions about 'the right to have rights' where rights are tied to citizenship.⁸⁹ To emphasise Arendt's ideas on citizenship, I relate it back to McGranahan's argument for recognising one's right as an "insistence on a certain sort of grounding in the world" (2016: 321). The concept of rights and citizenship becomes more complex when it comes to Valerie, an artist who decided to leave her country of birth and became a stateless exile for many years. This raises questions about her rights as an artist, which adds to the complexity of the situation. Valerie's strategy of walking away, therefore, created a different kind of 'grounding' for her in the art world, which resulted in her being able to pursue and develop a different career altogether, such as her fashion career and the attendant accolades she earned, at the same time asserting her rights as an artist and citizen of the world. The strategy of walking away created an 'absent-presence', there-but-not-there, known but not known, resulting from her leaving her home country and pushing against a prescriptive art practice. By exercising her right to refuse, Valerie, in turn, revealed other potentialities of working as an artist. Such forms of refusal have thus resulted in what Audra Simpson describes as a 'happy reveal', which she explains as follows: "[t]here [is] something that seemed to reveal itself at the point of refusal — a stance, a principle, a historical narrative and an enjoyment in the reveal" (in McGranahan 2016: 321). With this in mind, one can consider Valerie's move from visual arts to fashion as refusal as a 'happy reveal' or what I will call from here on 'happy refusal'.

Julian Murphet (2007) complicates this notion of 'happy refusal' by basing this on the understanding that there is a difference between political and aesthetic refusal. For Murphet, while both are generally understood to be a "subjective indication of unwillingness" (2007: vii), he argues that they, however, work differently. He explains that political refusal "emanate[s] from an ethical injunction" steeped in the "performative indication of unwillingness" (2007: vii), whereas aesthetic refusal is a more philosophical or conceptual form of refusing. Focusing on the latter, he notes that this kind of refusal often plays itself out in art. Within art, it produces "ambivalences and paradoxes" (2007: vii) that are often read through Herbert Marcuse's concept of negation and privilege, which makes art "merely a symbolic act of negation" (2007: viii). This is so because of how it is compromised by capitalism, in the sense of arts commercialisation, what Igor Zabel would have defined as "political propaganda disguised as art" (2012: 112). In other words, Murphet disputes the idea that art can fully embody an absolute refusal, as it would mean artists would need to consider the commercialising aspect of the field in the way that this may pit itself against the

⁸⁹ Though in the case of Valerie the idea of rights and citizenship, proposes more complex issues of how these rights might work for an artist who chose to leave their country of birth, which for many years made her a stateless exile.

political refusal that they are trying to represent in their art. To fully realise this, he stresses the personal choice of “refusing to refuse” (2007: viii) and to do so not according to what others say but according to what they choose.

Murphet’s argument relates to what philosopher Slavoj Žižek proposes in his powerful theorisation of Herman Melville’s short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853) — in its positing of the notion of “I would prefer not to” as a form of refusal, enjoyment, and an inherent transgression. In Melville’s story, the protagonist Bartleby is, at first, a devoted and active worker who goes out of his way to do what is expected of him. As the story progresses, Bartleby soon starts to reply to all his employer’s instructions with “I would prefer not to” and acts this out by doing less and less work than is expected of him. Instead, he would stare out the window at a brick wall all day long. The employer’s attempts to reason with Bartleby became futile. One day, the employer arrives at the office to discover that Bartleby has moved himself in. It is from there on that things begin to deteriorate. From here, the normalcy and weakness of hierarchy and structured dominance become revealed to the proponent of refusal.

Analysing this story in his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Žižek suggests that there is something effective about the art of doing nothing. He says, “Bartleby *does nothing*, but this sort of doing nothing is far more effective than ‘doing something’” (2008: 217). In this sense, Žižek casts an indictment on the so-called natural human impulse to always feel the need to react in situations of disagreement and dispute. He proposes that perhaps it is in doing nothing that different kinds of ‘action’ may be offered. Though the protagonist of Melville’s story does not literally walk away from his situation as Valerie does, his contrary act of staying and encroaching on his employer’s space as a form of transgression mirrors Valerie’s strategy of staying in the arts through fashion, which ended up producing a different trajectory for her from what was expected of her at the beginning of her career. Instead, what Valerie ends up doing is producing a type of refusal, boycott and rebellion that was a mix of circumstantial needs (opting to do formal corporate work in order to survive) and her insistence on the expressionist pursuit even though it was not vogue in London. In this instance, Valerie’s ‘staring at the brick wall’ and utterances of ‘I prefer not to’ are achieved through pursuing another art career towards a ‘happy refusal’.

Žižek, however, does not only end with this ‘happy refusal’. He further complicates this argument of ‘not doing anything’ by offering that it can also be seen as an act of doing something when considered as an ideological disidentification. This becomes another way of looking past what is

seen as a stumbling block. In a website article reviewing Žižek's interpretation of Melville's story, the writer The Dangerous Maybe (pseudonym) asks, "Is there a doing something that actually serves to reinforce that which it opposes?". To answer this, The Dangerous Maybe refers to Žižek, quoting him as follows:

Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly (acts like providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities, and so on). The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active", to "participate", to mask the Nothingness of what goes on" (2006: 334).

"Pseudo-activity," in this sense, can also be "signs of political resistance without any real, corresponding referents" (2019), which, in the end, as The Dangerous Maybe argues, become avowals. He says, "Acts of resistance are ultimately affirmations of the very power they 'resist' since they take their cues from it. Worse, people end up becoming libidinally invested in the repetitions of this struggle — they *enjoy* resisting" (2019). This creates a form of circular resistance that is both negative and positive. To Žižek, this is 'inherent transgression'. He explains it as "a form of enjoyment (jouissance) that seems to transgress the rules of law/ideology, but actually only serves to make us more subservient to it, more invested in it" (The Dangerous Maybe 2019) or pointless. All this points to the importance of personal choice. Reading Valerie's trajectory of refusals against Žižek's provocation can thus be related to Walter Mignolo's (2010) 'epistemic disobedience', which I understand to call for a refusal of disciplinary violence that I associate with how Valerie defied the arts industry.

Refusing the Art World

How does refusal work in the art world? As I have mentioned above, refusal manifests in many ways. The most common, in the context of a project in art, is through the artwork. The artwork is seen as an instrument of critique of social, political, racial, economic, cultural, gender and class injustices. The other is through retaliation by artists who refuse to participate in the art space in expected ways. To discuss the latter, I return to Martin Herbert's book *Tell Them I Said No* (2017), where he discusses personal choice as being at the core of the artist's retaliation, refusal or rejection. For him, personal choice is the freedom to do as you please. However, he complicates this by interrogating the impossibility of personal choice. According to him, it is a little challenging in the arts, given how the choice to refuse often comes with dire consequences for artists. Hettie Judah, who reviews Herbert's book, poses a series of questions about this personal choice, trying to explain how Herbert's book interrogates the predicament artists face in navigating their careers. For Judah, Herbert raises important questions about the lengths to which artists are expected to

go in order to promote and sell their work; something she argues has become a prerequisite for contemporary artists today, over and above the making of their own particularly idiosyncratic art.

As Herbert (2017) argues in the book, for some artists, such prerequisites are against their moral beliefs as to why they became artists in the first place. This stance has resulted in those artists becoming either antagonistic, ostracised, resentful, or, as Judah puts it, “turn[ing] their backs” on the art field. Valerie disappeared for these exact reasons, resulting in her becoming excommunicated from the art scene. And, of course, when she arrived in London, other dynamics of how that art world operates forced her to reject the art field.

Herbert further highlights that the complexities of this walking away can be daunting. He argues that while there is perhaps a level at which artists earn the right to walk away, these gestures tend to be romanticised because not all artists who walk away are privileged enough to be remembered in history due to various structural confines within the system. Some simply disappear and are totally forgotten. Certainly, as Herbert (2017) further proposes, for women, mainly due to sexism, such walking away could even be permanent, complicating the idea of exercising the so-called personal choice.

The points raised by Herbert are important to consider. To what extent did Valerie earn (or not earn) the right to walk away from the system? How have issues of sexism and race played a part in her inconsistently recorded history? Moreover, how does this knowing upset art history, given that the careers of Black African artists have so often been, and still are, selectively ‘let in’ or ‘left out’ and are unfairly gendered? As Herbert illustrates, this kind of attitude was part of the 1960s and 1970s milieu, and one is inclined to wonder whether this was something that Valerie consciously used to privilege her exile status. Valerie’s choice to refuse the art world as a form of protest and her choice to work outside of the art world until such time as she was ready to return demonstrates the risks she took. This produced what became her unique artistic style, exemplifying forms of self-belief that, today, illustrate her visionary thinking about the value of her artistic contribution, which was not without consequence.

Absent-presence and Absenting as Refusal

Kari Cwynar (2017) writes about how the right to say no can be “psychologically and politically demanding and, at the same time, a necessary means of self-preservation”. Proposing this as a form of *absent-presence*, *absenting* or what Erica Weiss (2016) has described as “silent refusal is a form

of abstention” articulates what Herbert terms as inner journeying. Within this section, I contemplate Valerie’s refusal not only as political retaliation but as a space for this self-preservation and inner journeying. Weiss argues:

[...] those [...] whose refusal remains below the surface, do not have the same public impact. They stay unadored, uncelebrated. Their refusal is, rather, a quiet groundswell of abstention. These refusers’ motivation resembles that of other groups considered in this Openings collection: the decision to invest their hopes and energies elsewhere. (2016)

Weiss makes a distinction between ‘declaring refusal’ as “an act of defiance” and ‘silent refusal’ as “a form of abstention”, arguing that both the public performance of defiance as refusal and the choice to stay away are still forms of refusal. This echoes what Žižek and Murphet have described severally ‘as doing nothing’ or ‘staring at a brick wall’ as effective forms of refusal. However, rather than not doing anything at all, in Valerie’s case, there is a deliberate hiding, walking away, and staying unnoticed. Instead, she preoccupies herself with something else, intending to make her absence seen or felt. As much as hers is a form of refusal, it is simultaneously a self-care tendency. It overturns the idea of absent-presence, not fundamentally as a negative thing, but rather a positive choice. Choosing not to continue beating herself against a system that refused to see her — Camp’s “illegibility” and “unintelligibility” (2017: 83) — is the kind of refusal that allowed Valerie to regain her creative freedom.

Thinking about absenting in this way offers an opportunity to carefully examine how she used this ‘time away’ to carve out her preferred mode of work and how the work would be seen. As known, this absenting affected her artistic career, which compels us to ask: What was she really refusing? How was she refusing it? How is her absent-presence to be interpreted when we read her entire oeuvre? The second question obliges us to look deeply into what sorts of material and information about her are readily available in the public archive. This means asking questions about the form and shape of her public and private archives. Why are there so few of her works in public collections, given the kind of interest she garnered in the arts in South Africa before leaving, as well as after her return through the 1997–1998 exhibition? When were these items collected, and what do they tell us about the times and contexts she lived in? Given the amount of Valerie’s work that sits in private and public collections and the kinds of exhibitions her work has been included in, what does it tell us about how she is (dis)remembered and (un)acknowledged? By whom is she acknowledged or remembered? What does this disparate history tell us about the structural and systemic confines her work continues to be placed within? How do we interpret the proximity and distance between her and mainstream art, both as an insider and outsider? By considering Valerie’s refusals from both, the art systems of her time and her response to them complicates the

biomythography of her life story. This locates her in a myriad of hidden narratives about modern art, race and gender in South Africa and abroad.

Arguably, the inconsistent recognition Valerie has received — not quite remembered, known yet not quite known and the little interest in her work even post-1998 — has meant she is somewhat remembered but not fully known. This mirrors the experiences of the artists Herbert discusses, who became mythical figures by “refusing to play the art game” (as noted by Hettie Judah 2017). In this way, Valerie’s refusal becomes a powerful tool for self-writing and recognition. It is a privilege, *jouissance* or form of enjoyment that acknowledges the power of saying “no”.

Politics of Representation: Race and Exile

My initial resolve was to approach Valerie’s work without over-emphasising the concept of race, however, it became apparent that despite the wide range of themes explored in her art, race was a persistent theme in discussions and analyses of her work. Her art was often categorised as ‘Coloured’, which resulted in a prevalent focus on her South African racialised experience when interpreting and evaluating it. Consequently, a significant portion of the literature on her work focused on this aspect, often using it as the primary lens through which to understand her artistic vision, meaning and artwork value.

Valerie lived in South Africa for only twenty years, from 1925 to 1945, before going into exile. Though the race bar was already in place by then, her move happened before apartheid was formalised. The racialised experiences read in relation to Valerie’s work, however, have tended to be inaccurately linked to apartheid race politics. A distinction must be made that Valerie never lived through apartheid. This detail implies a particularly different kind of South African racialised experience that writers do not often acknowledge. More writing that positions Valerie’s racial experiences within the twenty years of her early South African life and life in England might, therefore, be important to make this distinction clear.

Race too often gets used to rationalise why she continues to be ‘overlooked’ as an artist even in post-apartheid South Africa. In *Land and Lives* and other group exhibitions where her work appears, the context has often been subsumed into broader political narratives around redress and ‘rediscovery’. This often spoke to race and gender and less about the kind of intellectual contributions she brought into art historical discourse. While these political narratives have been

influential in debating how apartheid affected Black cultural practices of this country, focusing on redress has, in turn, glossed over racial, cultural, social and class dynamics within the intra-racial divides.

Valerie's self-proclaimed 'unwantedness', due to her race, indicates the divides that have continued well into the democratic dispensation, resulting in friction and mistrust. It gives us a glimpse into some artists' perceptions of this historical friction. This suggests to us the possibility of many artists who remain overlooked. These discussions specify the dissonance between the self-elected or self-identifying and societally-imposed race naming and 'Coloured' refusal.



Figure 24 (a): Valerie Desmore, *Crab*, 1961, Oil on board, 72 x 112cm.

To illustrate how race has been one of the main strands of enquiry in soliciting meaning from her work, I would like to refer to art sales agent Warren Siebrit's (2019) recent analysis of Valerie's 1961 painting *Crab* (Fig. 22). In his monthly newsletter, dated 31 July 2019, #23/2019, Siebrits speculates that the work was a warning about historical political changes. He bases this on the fact that the work was produced the same year that South Africa became a republic in May 1961. In his analysis, he points out that this came with the issuing of the 'mixed-race population' policy by the Public Relations Office of South Africa in London.⁹⁰ Discussing the work further, Siebrits says, "Desmore's painting [...] depicts an aggressive and ominous crab dominating a white ground. In my mind, this is simply a visual metaphor for the interests of white South Africans blanketing the political and social terrain of the country" (Siebrits 2019). Siebrits rationalises this analysis of Valerie's *Crab* as a political critique based on how her teacher, Oskar Kokoschka's) also painted

⁹⁰ Siebrits references the document titled 'Dr. Malan's Policy for South Africa's Mixed Population' issued by the Public Relations Office of South Africa House, London (1948).

an image of a crab — *Crab* (1939) (Fig 24)⁹¹ — to symbolically comment on the Second World War.

In an interview with me (2019), Siebrits made yet another reading on the position of the crab in the painting. He pointed out that the crab faces away from its viewer. This to him suggests a shunning of South Africa. He believes this may be a metaphor that Valerie makes about herself as the crab that has turned its back on South Africa. Besides the plausibility of this close reading of her work, one begins to see how her race and her past with South Africa gets consistently used to derive meaning. Here we see Siebrits using the politics of the 1960s, fifteen years after Valerie had left South Africa, to cite the continued erosion of South Africa's racial politics on Black communities, specifically for the 'Coloured' community. Could the work have simply not been about race politics but rather a mere copy of her mentor Kokoschka's work? After all, Valerie came to London to escape racial persecution. Why, then, would she have been obsessed with South Africa's race politics instead of focusing on her new life in London?

Another possible reading of this work is to think of *Crab* (Fig 24) as an illustration of her favourite foods. Valerie was known to her friends for her cuisine. In a notebook, she writes about her favourite recipes, which include fish, and describes how these dishes reminded her of home. She states, "As a born South African living in long time exile in London. I'd like to share a family recipe for a fish marinade. When I experience a deep nostalgia and longing spicy Cape Malay DISH known as CAPE Pickled Fish. This is what I do [...]" (Fig 27). Could *The Crab* be considered as another example of her paintings of animal life, much like the fish and other foods she enjoyed cooking?

⁹¹ This work is part of the Tate Gallery, London collection.

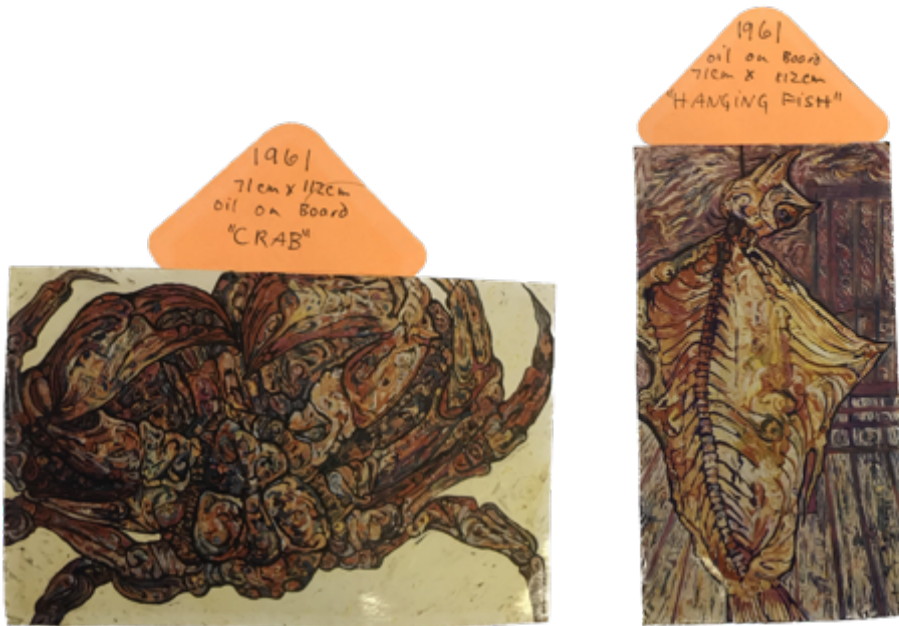


Figure 24 (b): Valerie Desmore, *Crab*, 1961, Oil on board, 71 x 112cm. Photograph from the Simon Pickstone-Taylor Archive.

Figure 25: Valerie Desmore, *Hanging Fish*, 1961, Oil on board, 71 x 112cm. Photograph from the Simon Pickstone-Taylor Archive.



Figure 26: Valerie Desmore dishing up the crab at one of her many dinner parties.

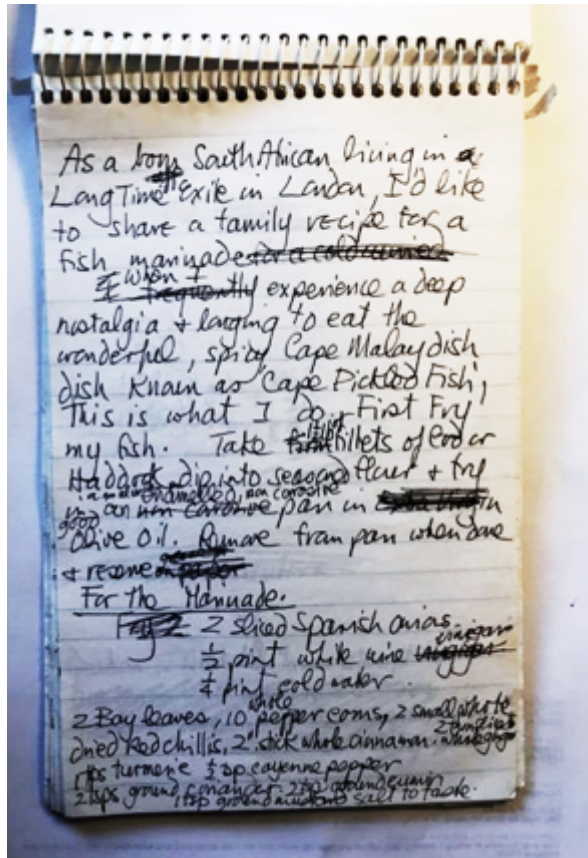


Figure 27: Handwritten note about fish recipe taken from one of Valerie’s notebooks.

This thinking about the tension around the use of race in reading artists’ works is not unique to Valerie. Drawing attention to the contentions around the use of the word ‘Coloured’ to designate an artist’s race, authors Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin in the book *Listening to Distant Thunder: The Art of Peter Clarke*, quote Clarke’s take on the word ‘Coloured’, saying, “The word goes on being annoying” (2014: 12).⁹² The authors use this expression to explain how they arrived at their use of the word with quotation marks instead of the capital C, justifying this by saying that the capital C has been ineffectively debated, and as such:

The use of a capital ‘C’ may be seen to lend dignity to people to whom the term applies but may equally be understood to dignify an apartheid construct, which is why we ultimately chose to avoid capitalisation and to mark the work with quotation marks to signal its use as an artificial form of classification in that abhorrent hegemonic system. (2014: 11)

While these writers contextualise Peter Clarke’s individualised experience, what this helpfully foregrounds are the contentions that may resonate with many other artists, like Valerie, who in a

⁹²Gavin Lewis’ book *Between the Wire and The Wall: A History of South African ‘Coloured’ Politics* (1987), which is based on the study of the rise of ‘Coloured’ elites and politics of the 1900s, used one of Peter Clarke’s images on its cover, which might also explain the annoyance, though I am sure this is not the only reason.

number of interviews spoke ambivalently⁹³ about the identification with being ‘Coloured’⁹⁴ or mixed race.⁹⁵ Though Valerie often used these terms to describe herself, she was never settled with them. Reflecting on her childhood, she says in an interview: “I was coloured, and I was supposed to be dirty and horrible and unacceptable” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006).⁹⁶ Instead, she was troubled by a society that needed to fix her into some kind of racial category using these kinds of words.

Though Valerie Desmore and Peter Clarke experienced what being ‘Coloured’ meant differently, their works are often studied and valued under the race rubric.⁹⁷ In 2005, Warren Siebrits capitalising on the ‘reintroduction’ of Valerie’s work to the South African art scene through the *Land and Lives* exhibition, included her in a four-man show titled *Adams, Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand*.⁹⁸ The exhibition presented works of four ‘Coloured’ artists, namely, Albert Adams, Peter Clarke, Valerie Desmore and Dollar Brand.⁹⁹ This exhibition was the first commercial show to present Valerie’s work post-1994. Even though Siebrits was not showing works directly sourced from the artist, as he was reselling works of a private collector, it was, however, the first exhibition to show her work beyond the mega museum show. Though the *Land and Lives* exhibition showed works of many then living artists, by their very nature retrospective exhibitions are understood to show the historical work of often deceased artists or artists who no longer produce work. To be introduced through this commercial show made Valerie’s work more accessible and current. Yet, to be introduced under the rubric ‘Coloured’ through this grouping was, even though drawing on

⁹³ Ndebele writes about “dialectics of ambiguity” (2006:78). He also calls it tactics of absence, reservation, humility and accommodation, as strategies that the people living in those times used to exercise both agency and resistance. To Ndebele, then, it is the task of the writer to expose the multi-facetedness of this history in order to show the nuances of living and working in a space of and surviving oppression.

⁹⁴ Most of her friends in London referred to her Cape as ‘Coloured’ - See Calder, Rosset. In Chapter 5, I speak about her visit to South Africa and how she recalls boasting to many of her cousin’s Afrikaans friends that she was ‘Coloured’.

⁹⁵ Excerpts taken from an interview she had with Fiona where she self-identified as ‘Coloured; “My father was a prominent Coloured person” (“Living in the Cape as a Young Child”; interview); “I was rejected by the school that I had been going to because I was coloured” (Painting Secrets); “So, he took me in to see the principal. I was nervous sitting there and she said, “No we can’t have Valerie back because she is coloured”. Yeah. It frightened me. I was horrified” (Painting Secrets: interview); “I mean. I would not have gone out with a coloured person. I would not. You know why? Not? Because I was coloured and I was supposed to be dirty and horrible and unacceptable? Why would I go out with someone who was dirty, horrible and unacceptable?” (Painting Secrets: interview).

⁹⁶ Zöe Wicomb describes such shame as follows: “Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of ‘race’, concupiscence, and degeneracy, continue to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid’s strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame. We do not speak about miscegenation; it is, after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse” (1992: 92).

⁹⁷ In fact, both Valerie Desmore and Peter Clarke were included in two exhibitions that precisely looked at the work of ‘Coloured’ artists.

⁹⁸ *Adams, Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand*, curated by Warren Siebrits. Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art, Parkwood. (21 June–14 July 2005).

⁹⁹ South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim was previously known as Dollar Brand.

the redress project, a reinforcement of identity politics that the artists did not necessarily desire. Hermann Giliomee reminds us about how such race identities were a form of social engineering that is meant to reflect “cultural activity, creolized formations shaped by South Africa’s history of colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid” (2003: 14). There are many other writers like Paul Rich, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Mohammed Adhikari, Gavin Lewis, Yvette Abrahams, Zoë Wicomb, Pumla Gqola and Nicola Cloete, among others, who have engaged how ‘Coloured’ identity emerged, informed mainly by the histories of slavery; the rise of ‘Coloured’ specific politics; elite culture through education and economics.

Though Hobbs and Rankin (2014) argue for critical and reflexive use of the word ‘Coloured’, the limit to their proposition is that they write through the artist’s voice and not from their own subjective and lived experiences. Writing from a more subjective position, Mohammed Adhikari and Nicola Cloete offer critical considerations of what it means to invoke this kind of race naming. In contrast to Clarke, whose disdain for the term is argued for by Hobbs and Rankin, historian Mohammed Adhikari offers a more accepting and agentic stance on the term, emphasising that “Coloured identity is a product of its bearers” (2006: xiii). He suggests that perhaps the term ought to be used in relation “to those people who refer to themselves as coloured” (2006: xv). This is echoed in earlier writing by Gavin Lewis, who states:

The solution to this dilemma, I suggest, is to accept that Coloured identity is a white-imposed categorisation. But it is one that for a variety of reasons came to be adopted by sections of those people so described. More specifically, an emerging Coloured elite gradually began, by the early 1900s, to use the imposed Coloured identity to mobilise others so describe to as to advance their interest as a group. How this constantly evolving process developed can be seen in the rise of Coloured political organisations at the Cape. (1987: 4)

In saying this, Adhikari and Lewis are not suggesting that the term was self-originated by its bearers, but rather, that the term has been inversely embraced historically by the same community to whom the term was designed as a negative designation. This would have caused the likes of Peter Clarke to reject it. Instead, what Adhikari and Lewis propose is to turn the term upside down as a socio-historical and political gesture. Adhikari finds value in the use of the capital ‘C’ and references how his choice was inspired by Paul Stober, who expressed this choice through the argument that “As a distinct ethnic group with over three million members, we deserve a capital letter” (in Adhikari 2006: xv). Academic Nicola Cloete, who agrees with Adhikari in the use of the capital ‘C’, however, wrestles with the term, particularly in its association with the history of slavery.

In her PhD (2016),¹⁰⁰ Cloete uses both the capital ‘C’ and the word with inverted commas. By this, she argues that “The choice to identify all racial categories in inverted commas is an attempt to signify this process of thought and to indicate an ongoing consideration of what role racial categories play in the post-apartheid South African context” (2016: 35) and the importance of “calling attention to those experiences” (2016: 22).

She states that this choice is situated within the space of wanting to challenge, caution and avoid how the use of the word ‘Coloured’, without any distinction, plays into the language use that continues to produce harm. She insists, “identity politics of colouredness... therefore requires that particular attention be paid to how terms are used and what ongoing work they do in perpetuating these legacies of harm” (2016: 35). For Cloete, it is impossible to use this term without probing its dual invocation of historical harm and self-reclamation, which is why she proposes the use of the inverted commas in addition to the capitalised ‘C’. This, for her, would signal the self-reflexive stance of acknowledging historical harm and, in a way, also seek to surmount it. For her, this awareness is unavoidable and should, therefore, be foregrounded.

Blackness

There is no such thing as the Black ‘race’. Blackness, whiteness and colouredness exist, but they are cultural, historical and political identities.

— Erasmus (2001: 12)

This thesis considers the term Black as a collective, reclaiming, inclusive and unifying political concept that places all previously disadvantaged groups together as opposed to the taxonomisation of ‘black’ as a biological identity and a racially dividing term instituted by the apartheid government. It echoes what Erasmus exclaims above. Certainly, the separate existence and political mobilisation of the early twentieth century complicated how we reconcile this inclusive understanding of Blackness. To begin complicating this, within this section, I refer to the notions of Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), a movement of the 1970s led by Steven Bantu Biko, Mamphela Ramphele, and Barney Pityana premised on asserting and foregrounding the experiences of Black people as an important and worthy ideology to live by. As it is known, this movement emerged as a result of the political vacuum that was created by the apartheid state of repression following the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) — political parties that were opposed to the repressive apartheid regime

¹⁰⁰ titled *Memory, Slavery, Nation: An Analysis of Representation of Slavery in Post-Apartheid Cultural and Memory Production*

in 1960. The BCM aimed to build Black and African consciousness that had been suppressed by apartheid and colonialism. Part of the insight of the BCM was in understanding that Black liberation would not only come from imagining and fighting for structural political changes but also from the psychological transformation in the minds of Black people themselves. That in order to take back their power, Black people had to believe in the value of their Blackness. If Black people believed in democracy but did not believe in their own values, they would not truly be committed to gaining power.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that Valerie subscribed to BCM ideals; this would be putting words in her mouth, but I am, however, mobilising a concept that allows inclusive ways of writing and engaging about the past.¹⁰¹ As indicated by Erasmus' quote above — where Valerie talks from a place of racial separation about being not wanted by the 'black government' — what BCM offers, is a move away from separatism but an inclusive Black identification that reconsiders a diverse range of racial political positioning

Divides about who belongs within this concept of 'Blackness' discourse exist, noticing how the inclusion of Valerie as a Black artist in shows such as *When Rain Clouds Gather* was received with vehement disagreement and disputes (Joja 2022; Rousseaux and McBride 2022). These debates were often focused on the twentieth century's homogenising histories of racial segregation between previously disadvantaged groups, such as in the case of Indians, 'Coloureds', Africans, Asians, and so forth. It is important to state that BCM did not only refer to people as Black because they themselves identified this way but rather how the whole notion of BCM was a reclaim and an inclusive approach that was not only about that moment onwards but aimed to reach back into the past and forward into the future, for everyone who falls under such racist categorisation practice. It aimed to address a long duration of racial oppression, to understand a system that not only operated in the 1970s but for centuries, subjugating anyone who is not white. The collective reclaim and inclusive approach were against the divide-and-rule colonialist tactics, transforming the term 'Black' from a biologically determinist concept or a set of differentiated terms in specific periods into a political identity addressing systemic racism built upon a structure of oppressor-

¹⁰¹ "My family aren't black" (what do you mean honest interview); The Africans came down from their black countries to work in the mines. And Johannesburg is a long way away. And I remember that there were so few black people in the Cape at the time that we were living in the Marsden Road in the Walmer Estate before we went to America. And I must have been, at least, eight years old and there was a knock at the door. And, you know, my father worked late at night. My father went to answer the door and he told us that there was a black African from the Transkei, and he needed food and a place to sleep. And my father gave him a place to sleep and food in our house. So, there were very few. (what do you mean honest interview).

oppressed. Race re-classifications in South Africa were only formally instituted during apartheid, from 1950 to 1966, when South Africans could be re-classified on the basis of their ‘race.’ Before this time, a so-called race bar governed racial separations and race re-classification was never formally constituted prior to apartheid.

To demonstrate how Valerie’s identity was not static or rather how it oscillates between ‘Coloured’ and ‘Black’, in 1997, she accepted the invitation to take part in the exhibition *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Modern Black Artists*. The inclusion of her work in this exhibition was a huge political moment. To choose to be represented within an exhibition that looked at ‘Black artists’ meant she was choosing to be acknowledged under this race discourse which received new attention at the dawn of democracy, where new definitions of race were being negotiated and newly defined (Erasmus 2001, 2017). This insertion cannot be overlooked. Instead, its significance further underscores her desire to be acknowledged under this broader term, Black, within the new democratic dispensation. It signals the political identification she might have felt in being reinserted into the South African art canon. Therefore, her inclusion in this exhibition is absolutely critical in how we can begin to consider her under the label Black because the exhibition cements her existence within the art history of Black artists. As Chabani Manganyi illustrates:

Black consciousness should be understood to mean that there is mutuality of knowledge with respect to the ‘totality’ of impressions, thoughts and feelings of all black people...Some observations made by some people may create the spurious impression that Black Consciousness primarily refers to awareness of skin colour. This is not a judicious interpretation. My own interpretation is that skin colour in itself and of itself is insignificant. [...]I have often said that the existential fact of the black body has also meant certain specific ways of relating to the world and to others. This relating may be understood as involving both positive and negative features. In its negative form we recognise the fact of a specific form of suffering — that of having been a colonised people. It stands to reason that part of our consciousness of being black people amounts to a mutual knowledge of this suffering at the hands of white domination. We must hasten to say that this consciousness of mutual suffering must not be mistaken for self-pity, for that would be a tragedy. That black people share the experience of having been abused and exploited. This is part of our consciousness. (1973/2019: 22-23)

Colouredness

Names ‘Coloured,’ ‘Colouredness,’ ‘mixed-race,’ bi-racial, Metis, dougla, or half-caste, etc. as Daniel Bowler argues, are “a South African racial phenomenon that challenges racial logic, in the way it transgresses aesthetic uniformity, biological essentialist notions of ‘purity’, eschews easy description, and presents a hybrid body that defies clarity” (2014: 9). This has been debated by modern history writers like Gavin Lewis, explaining that “To study coloured history, one needs to

know what a coloured is: yet to accept existing definitions of coloureds is to accept implicitly, and thereby reinforce, the obviously unjust and arbitrarily imposed definitions of a state in the interests of white supremacy” (1987: 4). Lewis’ position has, however, been updated in more contemporary writing. Mohamed Adhikari wanting to nuance a more complicated position around discourses of colourness writes that Lewis’ “coloured identity...[is] a simplistic formulation” (1993: 92), arguing that “The nature of coloured identity has become a highly controversial issue in South Africa” (1996: 169). Adhikari is interested in revealing the complex political role beyond the “white imposed categorisation” (1993: 92) but to understand how the ‘petty bourgeois’ ‘Coloureds’ themselves informed ‘Coloured’ identity in particular ways. This role of the elite group interests this dissertation since Valerie’s father was one of those important figures who played a key role in the early 1900s configurations of ‘Coloured’ identity and how this history informed Valerie’s own complex understandings of herself.

While some of the writers mentioned above have given guidance on the most recent politically-correct ways to use racial categorisations like ‘Coloured,’ or at least have offered some critical thoughts on how to consider its use, much like Cloete (2015), Adhikari (1987, 1993, 1999, 2005), and Hobbs and Rankin (2014), it may still be important to consider how Valerie referred to herself. In many interviews, Valerie often referred to herself as mixed race or ‘Coloured’, sometimes as an exile as discussed above. In his book *Identity*, Stuart Hall’s use of the idea of *identification*, rather than the state of *having an identity*, might offer a useful consideration. In this line of thought, Hall considers the person’s ability to “recognise oneself in the range of possibilities” (in Lewis and Baderoon 2021: 3) and identities. Valerie, though born in South Africa, spent sixty-two years of her life in England. This has had implications on how she identified, which might vary from how these terms evolved in South Africa. For example, the post-apartheid dispensation provokes quite heated and sometimes polarising responses to race categorisations such as ‘Coloured’ and mixed race. For writers like Erasmus, it invokes abhorrence. She condemns this in her statement, saying:

To talk about ‘race mixture’, ‘miscegenation’, ‘inter-racial’ ‘sex’ and ‘mixed descendant’ is to use terms and habits of thought inherited from the very race science that used to justify oppression, brutality and the marginalisation of ‘bastard people’. (2001: 12)

While Erasmus makes an important point about the negative impact of these terms, Adhikari on a socio-historical contextualisation reads the term from its origins:

Since [‘Coloureds’] were also partly descended from European settlers, coloureds are popularly regarded as being of ‘mixed race’ and have held an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the numerically preponderant African population. (2005: 2)

Adhikari, has written quite extensively about the complex explications of concepts such as ‘Coloured’ and mixed race. He has particularly pointed out how these terms get used, recalled, constituted and formulated historically and in the contemporary—whether this is within the social, cultural or political contexts. Perhaps it is within these understandings of the notion of ‘mixed race’ that Valerie self-identified. In this case, her use of the terms ‘Coloured’ and mixed race sits within a space of fluidity and interchangeability to enable her to self-identify outside of how those terms are understood in South Africa. This is quite different from how someone like Peter Clarke might have evoked the same term. For Valerie, the term might evoke a past or moment in South Africa, echoing the distance of home as an exile artist.

In the interviews she had with Fiona and in her Curriculum Vitae, she often underscored how leaving South Africa was an escape from racial persecution, so much so that in one of her handwritten notes she confesses that, while in London, though many of her friends knew she was ‘Coloured’ (referring to her as ‘Cape Coloured’), she avoided the topic of race (refer Chapter 5). I understood from these confessions that she was selective about where she revealed her ‘Coloured’ identity, perhaps choosing Hall’s notion of identification as a strategy of biomythography. This I understood as the paranoia of her South African experience, which she could not shake off even after many years of living in London. To then refer to herself quite boastfully as ‘Coloured’ much later in her life was a kind of reclamation and self-acceptance, embracing Hall’s proposition of identification or Adhikari’s adaptation of the word as a form of political reclamation. Valerie’s use of the word situates her subjective lived experience as something that she constantly negotiated throughout her life.

Cloete, making another point about race naming, argues that as much as it is important to “acknowledge the place of cultural, historical and political identities”, it is equally important to resist “the impulse to read their markers as essential or static or to forget that these race-based naming practices have been inherited from systems of imperial, colonial and apartheid oppressions” (2016: 35). In other words, what Valerie is choosing to self-identify as ‘mixed-race’ or ‘Coloured’ should not be read as static, permanent, or self-marginalising but as her continuously negotiated lived experience.

To move us forward, Erasmus proposes multiple forms of mobilising these categories, such as thinking through this race naming concept as political and or cultural positions. Such positions are reverberated by writers like Zoe Wicomb (1992), Yvette Abrahams (1999), and many others, who,

in their writing around the term ‘Coloured’, have highlighted this shift between the historical and postcolonial understandings of what the racial word ‘Coloured’ may mean. The significance of these positions has allowed the fluidity of oscillation in the sense of “gaining power and justice without essentialising, homogenising or hardening ways of seeing [and being]” (Lewis and Baderoon 2021: 4).

Erasmus’ explication of the use of the word ‘Coloured’ and its potential as a political position can be related to how the term Black in upper case has been used to describe the inclusive term that allows all people of colour to self-identify, for example, Africans, Indians, ‘Coloureds’ and Chinese, as described in the South African constitution. As Lewis and Baderoon argue, “The meaning of blackness in South Africa is itself contested and fractured. Apartheid’s compartmentalising of ethnic, religious and mixed-race groups has a powerful impact on how groups continue to identify themselves [...] to choose to be black rather than non-white was an act of political resistance to the divisions of apartheid” (2021: 4-5). Similarly, they argue that “identifying as coloured in the post-apartheid period is integral to assertive self-naming” (2021: 5).

Exile

Although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made between exiles, refugees, expatriates, émigrés. Exile originated in the old age practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word “refugee” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality.

Expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons [...] Expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid prescriptions. Émigrés enjoy an ambiguous status. Technically, an émigré is anyone who emigrates to a new country. Choice in the matter is certainly a possibility.

— Said (in Eyene 2011: 97)

The history of exile for the African artist is a tricky topic, encumbered with complexes that must be nuanced and critically interrogated. Writing about artists who left South Africa through “the experience of exile from 1945 to 1976” (2011: 97), Christine Eyene characterises the idea of exile through Edward Said’s writing above. For Eyene, Said’s distinctions of forms of categorisations for people living outside their birth homes offer a clear-cut understanding that she then frames around the South African artists “who left between the end of the Second War and the Soweto Uprising,” which in her mind, qualified them as exile artists. To buttress this claim, she states:

Some artists emigrated to study art abroad, but were subsequently either discouraged from returning home, or banned outright because of their political views. Sometimes, they became refugees, or stateless, in the process. Whatever the circumstances, in most cases departure from the home country was driven by South Africa's repressive political regime. (2011: 97—99)

Within the pool of artists that she writes about, Eyene includes Valerie Desmore, alongside Ernest Mancoba, Gerald Sekoto, Zwelidumile Feni, Albert Adams, and George Hallett. While all the male artists mentioned here are often categorised through 'exile' as the framing element, it is uncommon for Valerie to be considered in this light. Warren Siebrits, Christine Eyene, Michael Stevenson and Joost Bosland are the only writers in my research so far who have named Valerie as an exile artist of the early twentieth century.¹⁰² Why is this? The facts of her race (being 'Coloured') and gender (being a woman) seem to have had a lot to do with it. Having been largely supported by the white South African constituency, to the point that some writing claimed that her studies at Slade had been sponsored by the New Group, and others claiming it was Oskar Kokoschkar's scholarship, it is in such instances that her departure to England was often misconstrued as an opportunity of her privilege and not a "repressive political" migration, which would then merit an 'exile' status. As such, this purported support from the white art world sort of dismisses the possibility that she, like her contemporaries, might have left South Africa under harsh circumstances. Instead, her departure is considered within the context of white artists pursuing studies overseas to advance their careers and adopt Western styles (Tietze 2017). This, of course, was far from the truth, as Valerie herself, echoed by Siebrits (2006) and Bosland and Stevenson (2008), proposed that her artistic training, much like those of her contemporaries, could not continue in South Africa because of the race bar which abruptly halted her schooling life and forced her to seek international study. These were similar circumstances for Sekoto, Mohl, Mancoba, and Adams. As Valerie confessed, "[...] I had to come to England, in order to get an artistic education because I couldn't get it under a white government" (Desmore and Fleck 2002—2006). Stevenson and Bosland also reflect:

[...] for the young black artists, the decision to remain at home in Africa and pursue a career as artists was no easier. The conflict between remaining in Africa and advancing the concept of art in the face of resistance, or going abroad to advance one's own art education in relative freedom, was a real dilemma [...]. (2008: 15)

As indicated above, the eroding life of African artists, even the so-called 'Coloured' elite, around the early 1900s pushed a lot of artists to seek better opportunities elsewhere. I suspect that as a

¹⁰² Did she even identify as an exile? In another notebook, in which Valerie wrote about her nostalgia for South African food, we see her refer to herself in this light "As a born South African living in a long-time exile in London, I'd like to share a family recipe for a fish marinade when I experience a deep nostalgia and longing to eat the wonderful, spicy Cape Malay dish known as Cape Pickled Fish" (Reporter's notebook).

further consequence of being supported by the white arts community, Valerie's move to London meant she did not exist within the purview of other Black artists but rather remained within the white art world and, in turn, fell off the radar of those artists who were exiled due to the racially repressive political regime. The other point of how her experience would be seen differently from her contemporaries is, of course, the fact that, unlike the many accounts of her counterparts, she never experienced the hardships of homelessness, alcoholism and poverty which would have mirrored what was typically known as a life in exile (Bosland and Stevenson 2008).

While I have argued to qualify why Valerie ought to be seen in relation to certain frameworks that speak to widening the exile experience of Black artists, I am also careful of institutional clumping of the experience of living abroad for modern Black artists' experience into one category which often disavows "blackness and artistic agency" as James Macdonald argues (2019:78). Macdonald cautions against the study of Black artists as a collective as this is often at the expense of the "intersecting trajectories, histories, and socio-political influences and impulses" that inform the personal journey of individual artists (2019: 88). This widening would shift the assumption that conditions of exile are the same for all, as people expelled under punitive measures, and that those who underwent self-imposed exile arising from unlivable circumstances were simply privileged. This is certainly not the purpose of discussing Valerie's works within this framework of exile. It is rather to highlight some of the historical narratives she is often excluded from and, in turn, not seen to have participated in. To see her experiences as part of this art history means we are beginning to represent the vastness of modern Black South Africans' participation in the world and in the way we reflect on South Africa's modernisms. The point is also not to defend her racial navigations but to indicate how racial divides impacted her 'visibility' and historical accounting. Her ability to 'pass' certainly served her better than other Black artists, both in South Africa and abroad.

By discussing Valerie's work through the positionalities of exile and African modernisms means acknowledging not only her positionality within art history but also her gendered positionality. Valerie and another artist Sandra McGregor (b.1928) are the only two 'Coloured' woman artists known to have left South Africa around the 1940s among the few Black male artists mentioned above, yet writing that explores their experiences of living abroad is scant. For Valerie, only two texts (Stevenson and Bosland 2008; Eyene 2012) write on her work in relation to her exile experience. What this often overlooks is the fact that as a 'Coloured' woman artist, her experiences offer a unique kind of modernist contribution to the study of African modernisms. Furthermore,

Valerie's gendered position throws up questions about the exclusion of women artists more broadly (Eyene 2012; Makhubu 2020).

Echoing Stevenson and Bosland (2008), Christine Eyene (2011) writes about how exile artists often rendered a "displacement" crisis to belong to a particular past, geography, community, and identity, in their work. For Eyene, Valerie, as an artist, suffered even more exceptional forms of estrangement not only from the hardships of just being a foreign artist but also exclusions because of her gender. She posits, "Doubly othered as a woman and as a 'coloured' (as people of mixed race were termed) in South Africa, Desmore's art, with its themes of existential estrangement and trauma, typifies the alienation so frequently encountered in exile artists' work and lives" (2011: 105). Michael Stevenson and Joost Bosland resonated the same, saying, "Aside from the South African painter Valerie Desmore, who moves to London in 1946 to study at the Slade, there is a conspicuous absence of any women artists in these exchanges, a reminder that the modern Black artists in Africa was essentially male" (2008: 11).

Thinking about Valerie's racialised and gendered position overturns the absurd claim of how this visualisation of exile artists and their yearning for home is typically male. As such, it, in turn, offers a new kind of understanding of the gendered transnationalism of a Black African modernist artist of the early twentieth century.¹⁰³ Generally, the engagement with the politics of gender on a macro-scale of international theories is very minimal. It is even more absent when zooming into the South African sphere of modern art, specifically the kind that unpacks these politics. This is because the writing, historicising and theorising of art history is often very patriarchal, with the exception of a few white women. In her 2020 article, Nomusa Makhubu writes:

[...] the transitioning of classic African art into the Western notion of modern followed the pattern of European masculine tradition [and thus] ... colonial entanglement in Africa meant that gender became an articulation of racialised power. A seventy-year-old black male was still a "boy" in white society. When African male artists were eventually acknowledged, African women artists were fated to practices unclaimed under the long shadow of masculine discourse. (2020: 23)

This disproportionate outlook on male artists shapes gender attitudes and privileges a characteristic of South African modern art that, in turn, marginalises women. This privileging of male narratives

¹⁰³ The concept 'transnational' is often used to define people whose purview of the world straddles two or more worlds, i.e., in the context of African artists, those who work from both African and Western contexts. See Christine Eyene's article *Yearning for Art: exile, aesthetic and Legacy* (2011) and Jessica Morgan's article "Question 1: What is a Curator?" (2013). In an interview, Valerie Desmore declares, "I mean England is my home. I feel at home in England. England is my home".

or male perspectives has then skewed modern art's theories leaving out experiences that may be outside of the dominant and homogenised tropes of modernism, the racialised experiences for Black South African artists and the resultant gender exclusions. In Valerie's work, we see the effects of gendered and racial oppression on her. We further see how this particularly gendered experience speaks to the dynamic of mixed-race artists even before the implementation of the apartheid system and how this signifies ways in which artists of colour found themselves navigating nationhood, migration and home in the modern era. The fact that only Albert Adams' work, as another 'Coloured' artist who left South Africa in the late 1940s, is extensively written about further emphasises this lacuna. In this train of thought, Valerie places not only the visibility of Black women artists in art history as beginning in the 1940s but also their participation in the international art scene and their exile experiences. Gendered modernism is a new area of study that has emerged as a result of the persistent overlooking of women artists. As a woman artist, her contribution to South African modernisms is, therefore, paramount given the glaring omissions of this paradigm shift within art historical discourses.

Conclusion

Given the political nature of race in South Africa, this chapter has demonstrated that debates on race categorisation cannot be ignored. However, they must be approached with an understanding of their historical context. Writing about Valerie becomes challenging due to the impact of race on her value as an artist. To overcome this challenge, this chapter attempted to engage race in relation to the artist by using it as a lens to understand the circumstances she lived through while highlighting its connection to her art. To achieve this, this chapter drew heavily on debates offered by academics who have engaged in these race debates and BCM. As such, the BCM reference is expressive of a new kind of engagement with art and solidarity. The terms Black (as a political stance) and 'Coloured' are capitalised and within quotation marks to draw attention to their distinction and historical contentions. These terms speak to the broad encapsulation that includes all people of colour.

Linking the understanding of race debates in relation to Valerie, this chapter also demonstrates how contentions around race and the artist's career choices reveal practices of refusal. Manifested as a social, aesthetic, and political stance, the chapter articulates how practices of refusal can ultimately potentiate a stance of absenting as a form of refusal. Valerie's practice is emblematic of a systemic wrestling that many modern South African artists have had to endure. This wrestling

with the concept of refusal has led to critical thinking about its implications for artists like Valerie. It raises questions about privilege, such as whether refusal is effective in producing significant change or whether it is often co-opted and commercialised by capitalism. It also prompts us to consider whether refusal is a luxury that only a privileged few can afford and whether it addresses the material conditions of those who are marginalised and oppressed. When considering Valerie's strategies of refusal, we must ask in what ways her refusal to participate in the art world and the rejections she faced have shaped her practice. In the following chapters, an attempt to limit the racial scope of this study is made by focusing mainly on the art that Valerie produced. This approach allows us to contain the study and focus on theories and concepts related to the artwork.

Chapter 3

The Family: Longing to (Un)Belong and to Exist as a 'Maybe'



Figure 28: Valerie Desmore *The Family*, 1959, oil on canvas, 71 x 112cm¹⁰⁴

Introduction

Desmore's The Family suggests, in composition, the formal, linear organization of the conventional Victorian family photograph, but the considered rawness of her highly textured, expressionist surfaces and dark, suffocating palette draws the viewer into a complex psychological drama.

— Greslé (2006)

I come back to that subject many, many times in my life. Of painting the family.

— Desmore (1998)

¹⁰⁴ Image published in Van Robbroeck, Lize. 2011. *Visual Century: South African Art in Context*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, p.106; Siebrits, Warren. Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand, Warren Siebrits Contemporary, 2005.

Engaging Valerie's use of the family portrait as a biomythography, in this chapter, I am interested in how she uses paintings of the family as a form of self-representation and an illustration of a biomythography. To do this, I examine her family portraits, looking at the following things. First, to understand her artistic style and how her use of the expressionist painting mode allowed her the space to speak about her family's deep histories. Second, I explore how, even though she approached portraiture as a traditional artistic medium, she simultaneously broke its mould and conventions. Valerie achieves her unique style by adapting the expressive impasto technique and incorporating intricate, sometimes contradictory symbolism. Her depictions of objects, such as the theatrical face masks, reveal her inspiration from the artist James Ensor, who was "known primarily as a painter of masks" (Brown 1997: 10). At the same time, she intentionally alludes to African masks in a broader sense. Lastly, I explore how Valerie negotiated her own positionality within this understanding of family through portraiture and the family theme.

Valerie's thick impasto painting, *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27) — a family portrait, from head to shoulder, of a father, a mother (whose face is covered with a mask) and a child — reflects a compelling articulation of biomythography through portraiture. This family portrait of three, reflected through the prism of modernist expressionism, demonstrates the many ways Valerie used her art to tell her life story.

Against "the rawness of her highly textured, expressionist surfaces and dark, suffocating palette" (Greslé 2006), their (three figures) jarringly white painterly faces and shoulders stand out. The dominant red¹⁰⁵ mask on the woman's face, which is the same colour as the man's cheeks, and the child's hair, cheeks and red mouth also stand out, proposing some kind of resemblance and kinship between these three figures.

While it is possible that the painting could be an illustration of any family, we are aware that the painting is of the artist's family (Siebrits 2006; Stevenson and Boosland 2008).¹⁰⁶ On the left-hand side of the painting, a man wearing a suit — a black blazer, blue shirt, and black tie — postures some kind of high social standing and respectability. This is further reinforced by his stern poker-faced look from his darkened eyes and pressed lips. The man is said to represent Abe Desmore, the artist's father.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ This colour palette is the artist's known trademark.

¹⁰⁶ In the exhibition catalogue titled *Adams, Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand* (2006), Warren Siebrits writes, "The Painting titled *The Family*, shows Valerie with her parents and was painted in 1958".

¹⁰⁷ As introduced in Chapter 1, Abe Desmore was a well-known teacher, and a respected political figure of the early twentieth century.

In the centre of the painting is a bare-shouldered woman with a mask on her face. Her sharply dotted piercing eyes peep through the mask, staring straight at the viewer. We cannot see the woman's bust beyond the shoulders to make certain she is indeed a woman. Yet, her small and less broad shoulders against that of the man standing next to her, indicate a feminine body structure. The mask on the woman's face is not a literal depiction or one that is a solid covering over her face. Instead, it appears as a demarcation of a red mask-like shape that is painted over her face, from eyebrows to chin, which still allows us to see her facial features. From this we can see the details of the nose and the femininely shaped lips, further suggesting she is a woman. On the side of the woman's face, a thin string appears as if tied at the back of her head, reinforcing the red shape on the woman's face as a mask. Her face, somewhat covered by this mask, creates a kind of suspense and mystery around her identity, making her presence deliberately ambiguous even though we are aware of who she is — the artist's mother, Violet (née) Arends Desmore.

Behind the woman, on her right, is the child, who appears only half bare-shouldered as if squeezed into the edge of the painting in a “very claustrophobic position” (Siebrits 2019) with a facial expression of shock. Seemingly screaming, as indicated by the Munch-like-scream¹⁰⁸ both the mother and father are unaware of the child's trauma they stare forward at the viewer. The child is said to be the artist herself, Valerie Desmore.

Although Valerie has largely remained unknown as an artist, it can be said that *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27) is arguably one of Valerie's most compelling works of art. Valerie's *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27) is also one of the very few publicly known works.¹⁰⁹ In this work Valerie depicting an modern

¹⁰⁸ In her library of books, I found *Edvard Munch: Sings of Modern Art* (2007), which is how I link this reference to *The Scream* (1893).

¹⁰⁹ The most historically valuable provenance. In terms of its provenance, since its first appearance in the exhibition Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand (2006), *The Family* (Fig. 27) has also been included in several other publications and several prominent exhibitions like *Take Your Road and Travel Along* (2008) which was a booth exhibition at the first Joburg Art Fair, the South African art fair which has since become an important annual art calendar event in South Africa. This work has also exchanged several owners, and been in two private collections: the Bowmint Collection, owned by Nicholas Maritz, bought it directly from Valerie via Elza Miles who was working as a consultant for Maritz and Cecil Feront, a businesswoman and analyst who in turn bought it from Siebrits via the 2008 Joburg Art Fair. This has not only resulted in the accumulated monetary value of the work, but also its broader cultural (of being seen in these important events) value has been enhanced. This significantly relates to the expanded scholarly understanding of the artistic practice of South African modern Black art pioneers. It is by engaging the biography/biomythography of Valerie's *The Family* (Fig. 27) that the trajectory of its provenance, thus value, becomes important. The exercise of examining the biography of the artwork — its aesthetic, historical and political value — also reveals why the work of Valerie remains sturdy through surface representation in terms of the ostensible use of race and gender as the reinforcement of her unknown status. It has also been included in several publications, including the exhibition catalogue Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand and *Visual Century: South African Art in Context: 1945–1976* (2011) edited by Liza van Robbroeck.

elite 'Coloured' family has gained significant recognition as a modernist icon. Employing formal conventions of portraiture, Valerie draws from the tradition of the Victorian family portrait with deep knowledge while imaginatively using what Amy Mooney, who writes about the portraiture of Archibald Motley, describes as "portraiture[s] conventions to both expand the canon and trouble its somatic signs" (2014: 19). Through this representation, Valerie's painting serves as a signifier of early conceptions surrounding 'Coloured' modern familial dynamics. It is also noteworthy as the sole example of an early articulation of traditional modernist depictions of family portraiture by a South African 'Coloured' Black woman artist. By that, I do not intend to frame this painting as iconic in the way that Nicole Fleetwood explains iconicity, as "the ways in which singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes" (2011: 2). Rather, I consider how, through this painting, Valerie employs a number of skillful illustrations and visual strategies that show her ingenuity — representative of her oeuvre. *The Family* (Fig. 27) shows a deep connection between the artist and the subject, an expressionist trait, at the same time demonstrating her ability to engage what Chika Okeke-Agulu describes as "the stylistic sophistication we have come to associate with twentieth-century modernist practices" (2015: 4). By showing the aspirations of her family the painting signals the emergence of South African 'Coloured' elite life of the early twentieth century, which in turn challenges the backdrop of the often-stereotyped persistent image of the African village.

That being said, Valerie does not simply replicate convention. Within this painting, we see three elements out of the ordinary of a Victorian family painting. The first is the mask on the woman's face, the second is the mother and child's bare shoulders, indicating nudity, and the third is the child's facial expression, which echoes the "drama" that Greslé points out (2006). While Greslé unpacks this family portrait according to the conventions of a "Victorian family photograph", arguing that this portrait is validated by its "composition, the formal, linear organisation" (2006), she bases this reading on how photographic images of modern families were often studied. However, as an image based on a photograph, the inclusion of elements such as the mask on the mother's face and nudity, as suggested by the bare shoulders of both the mother and child, make this family setting slightly unrealistic, unusual and strange. It indicates manipulation that is easily achievable in painting or other artistic mediums, unlike photography.¹¹⁰ This, coupled with the fact that the painting is of the artist's younger family, even at the time of its making (early years of

¹¹⁰ This is more evident in her later work such as the silkscreen of a family where she experimented with a different medium. In Figure 130, we can see this where the artist is standing next to an easel in her home in London. On the easel is a painting and a photo pinned above it that looks the same. and to include other elements that aided the story of the painting.

being in London), also makes it possible to assume that while she might have based the painting on an existing photograph or existing photographs of these three members, it is highly likely that its imaging is a manipulated interpretation of her family with added elements from her own interpretation.

This form of unrealism of painting surfaces is what Greslé points out as the painting's ability to "draw the viewer into a complex psychological drama" (2006), which could be understood to gesture towards the artist's interpretation of her inner feelings about her family at that time. The painting, as a showcase of emotions, thus illustrates what Esmé Berman, who writes about South African expressionist art, describes as a style that "is applied to a variety of modern styles in which the visual object is distorted or transformed by the subjective feelings of the artist" (1993: 64). This is also what Marion Arnold articulates as "the emotional overtone" (1996: 90) in art. Attesting to this, Valerie herself states:

I am an expressionist painter, and we paint... often paint the violence in people, the violence in ourselves, the unhappiness sometimes in ourselves, the longing in ourselves, our relation to our friends and family. And. [...] . all these things make my world of painting. (Desmore 1998)

In doing so the chapter also explore how biomythography is articulated as 'the longing in ourselves' that Valerie describes above, which I then weave through the theories of longing, belonging, unbelonging and disbelonging. This notion of 'longing in ourselves' through portraiture can be related to how concepts of belonging, longing, and looking longingly have been studied in portraiture. However, I would like to push this further by proposing that while the painting can be read from a more oppositional and ambivalent interpretation of its meaning, what I am mobilising is an 'unbelonging' and 'maybe' (2012 and 2013). Explaining this concept Chuz Martinez says, "The 'maybe' is a non-concept, instead, it is a modifier. This modifier denotes the attempt to introduce a difference into the relations that define the knowledge, the limits of language and the event of thinking through art" (2012: 46). Though Martinez's 'maybe' was a proposition of curating, thinking of exhibitions as a maybe that curator Tšhegofatšo Mabaso explains as follows:

Martinez introduces us to the 'maybe' and proposes prioritising knowledge production as a speculative and propositional stance in the sense that the 'maybe' affords agency to knowledge production that has not happened yet, that is not finite, but is possible. (2017: 20)

I relate this concept not only as a possibility of curating but one of art making and its meanings. Martinez, in another text, explores such a possibility when she writes that “art never claimed any ontology to state that it could be more real than the real was, for that matter, otherwise all marble statues could be claimed to dream of being flesh” (2013: 51). Instead, she argues that art offers “an interesting twist of realism” (2013: 51), which also speaks to the constructed nature of knowledge. This thinking, realism, therefore, becomes an abstraction of the real, or rather, becomes unrealism, which according to curators, Larry Gagosian and Jeffrey Deitch, it is the “challenge of portraying contemporary reality where the real is often confused with the unreal” that presents “new approaches to figurative imagery” (2015).

As a ‘maybe’, it makes it possible to think of her work as a form of myth-making and another way of suspending meanings, offering the possibility to subvert how concepts of ‘belonging’ can also be a provocation of ‘unbelonging’, or as Bimbola Akinbola proposes, ‘disbelonging’. Writing about the work of Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Akinbola explains that disbelonging can be understood as “a strategy and viewpoint that centres anti-respectability as a critical tool in the cultivation of alternative belongings for marginalised diasporic subjects” (2020: 153). For her, this disbelonging is “a theoretical model to trace the relationship between loss, alienation, home, and belonging” (2020: 153) in moments when diaspora communities try to return to Africa. Akinbola utilises disbelonging as a phenomenon that is concerned with how this diaspora artist ‘returns’, only to find herself in a complex situation of simultaneously feeling welcomed yet remaining a perpetual outsider. In dealing with this, Akinbola writes about how artists like Ogunji turn this feeling upside down by thinking of returning home to Africa not as always seeking acceptance but rather one of directly dealing with the disconnection that comes with the ‘return’, that she theorises as ‘unruly’ because it has to do with bringing to bear this experience of ‘disbelonging’.

While this notion of disbelonging does touch on how elements of Valerie’s art might speak to a ‘return’ — for example, the work I discuss in Chapter 4 on her mother’s childhood — within this chapter the notion of disbelonging is less of a focus. Rather, my exploration focuses more on the term unbelonging as one that can reflection on the in-betweenness of the past and present, geographies, identities, and so forth. Within *The Family* (1958) (Fig 28), we see this idea of unbelonging encapsulated within the image of her younger family (probably from the time they lived in South Africa), far away from the place and time that the painting was produced, by then, her older self, was living in London. Thus, the painting becomes a looking back and, in a sense, a collision of time and space.

This looking back, the collapsing of time, as a maybe and a reference to her experiences in South Africa, proposes another consideration of the painting as an object of defamiliarisation, which I base on how she treated her surfaces (objects and subjects). Defamiliarisation, as an artistic technique, is about using ordinary objects or known stories anew. Coined by the Russian writer and theorist Viktor Shklovsky (1917) as *ostranenie* or defamiliarisation, this formalist term speaks to literary and artistic techniques to make us see the ordinary in a new light. Over time defamiliarisation has been used in diverse ways, bell hooks, in *Art on My Mind* (1995) refers to this technique when she states:

Coming to art in search only of exact renderings of reality, many black folks have left art dissatisfied. However, as a process, defamiliarization takes us away from the real only to bring us back to it in a new way. It enables the viewer to experience what the critic Michael Benedikt calls in his manifesto *For an Architecture of Reality* “direct aesthetic experiences of the real”. For more black folks to identify with art, we must shift conventional ways of thinking about the function of art. There must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look. (1995: 4)¹¹¹

As a concept studied under biomythography, it becomes a useful framework to consider within the family portrait — particularly in relation to ‘maybe.’ It speaks to how surface and object treatment as a defamiliarisation makes us see the family portrait not just as traditional illustrations of families of a particular social standing but as a decoding of the very familiar convention of a family structure using symbolism and the characterisation of objects and subjects. For example, when Valerie uses objects like the mask, we can see the artist’s hand in actualising the defamiliarisation through imagination and multiple artistic references. This use of the mask thus changes ordinary objects anew, where we begin to see the mask differently. I unpack the use of the mask in detail later in this chapter.

Another example of defamiliarisation as a ‘maybe’ is through the whitening treatment of the skin of her figures. While the whitening of their bodies might be understood to raise questions about race, in the sense of them being seen to seek to belong to whiteness, referring to a certain kind of identification some ‘Coloured’ families in South Africa often adopted, it can also be seen as a critique of this imposed form of subjugation (Thompson, 2017). This ‘maybe’ can also be about unbelonging or a refusal to belong to whiteness or whitenesses’ refusal for them to belong. In other words, a deliberate artistic strategy to express deviant racial ‘passing’ that I discuss later in this chapter through Sharlene Khan’s (2012) proposition of ‘becoming’. Khan articulates

¹¹¹ Original emphasis.

‘becoming’ as a kind of fronting that people who lived through apartheid, which in the context of this research is Valerie’s family, may have had to put up in public (the photograph being this family’s becoming performativity). As a ‘maybe’, the painting, therefore, becomes a way to express ambiguities of how the artist perceived, felt about, experienced and embodied this family image — a kind of visualisation of feelings that expresses many possibilities, not just as either-or (desiring to be white or fronting as white) but a ‘maybe’.

Furthermore, *The Family* (1958), as a proposition of a ‘maybe’, of belonging and unbelonging, visualised through forms of defamiliarization, also draws attention to the close and distant relationship between the parent and child, patriarchy and matrifocality. The characterisation of the father, mother and child in this way calls up many concepts of respectability and perhaps even shame (i.e., covering up with the mask) as further denotations of biomythography and refusal. Here, we see a father in his suit, as if connoting his social status as a respected figure in society and the head of the family. On the other hand, the mother, who is placed in the centre of the image, insinuates some kind of dominance, on the spot (position in the picture frame) often reserved for the father. She is disguised and bare-shouldered, suggesting something beyond convention and respectability, perhaps even alluding to something more sinister and fragile. The child’s face further exaggerates this fragility, alluding to something more dramatic, spectacular, and conspicuous.

This focus on her relationship with her family begins to show us how Valerie represented herself in relation to family and how this relationship often reveals the psychological drama that Greslé alludes to above, as well as, and the multiple visualising meanings of what Christine Eyene describes as an “intricate phenomenon translated into visual idioms” (2011: 97) of South African Black modernist work. All these examples highlight the complexity of the concept of biomythography and refusal. Refusal in the sense that her paintings unintentionally and intentionally encapsulate the unmaking and undoing of the familiar convention of the Victorian family portrait, thus refusing to be a neat illustration. The refusal, in this instance, brings to bear a refusal of prescriptive artistic conventions and one-dimensional tellings of history. It makes for a compelling argument about art’s proximity to history and the social commentary that it produces. It is such kinds of refusals that I see as a *maybe*.

Valerie's Other Families



Figure 29: Violet Desmore, Valerie Desmore, Vital Desmore, Abe Desmore – date unknown. Image courtesy of the Fleck Archive

While the overall work of Valerie Desmore often deals with broad themes of violence, sacrifice, tragedy, artifice, deception, sexuality, objectification, love, desire, malaise, mistrust, myth, and nurturing, the theme of family is, the most prevalent. We see this in a number of her paintings, such as *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27), *The Family* (1960) (Fig. 29), *Children Fighting* (1958) (Fig. 117), *The Mother /The Family* (1959), *Girls Fighting* (1989), *Shadows/Now you know where I am coming from* (1996), *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998), the *Untitled silkscreens* (undated and unfinished) and many others, in which the story of her family is illustrated in many different ways.

Within these paintings, she always imaged herself and her siblings as children. Always imaging the mother obscurely as either a child or an older woman who is sometimes wearing a mask or is naked, she is never fully clothed. As a child, the artist's mother is always distant, alone, seemingly abandoned, standing away, or rather, standing at a distance from everything else surrounding her — as seen in *Shadows/Now you know where I am coming from* (1996) and *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998) that I discuss in Chapter 5. Valerie always imaged her father wearing a suit (always fully clothed), with his strict stern look — as seen in *The Family* (1959) and *The Family* (1960). Apart from her mother, who changes between being the masked naked woman or the child, depending on the

focus of the story of the painting, the characterisation of her father and brother are usually the same.



Figure 30: (left) Valerie Desmore, *The Family*, 1960, Oil on board, 123 x 73cm, (right) Valerie Desmore, *The Family*, 1959, Oil on canvas, 71 x 112cm.

There are two paintings with the same title, *The Family* (Fig. 29), painted during two consecutive years, 1959 and 1960. In both paintings, there is a child with parents, a mother and a father. However, their orientations are different; one is a landscape, and the other a portrait. They are also vastly different in tone and mood. For example, *The Family* (1959) — the portrait — is painted with a minimalist impasto palette, emphasising the artist's signature colours of red, black and white; the faces of the three figures are painted largely in white. This painting is believed to be of Valerie as a child and her parents. However, in *The Family* (1960), Valerie shows her other signature palette of a dotted multicoloured impasto method with a slightly dim overtone. This painting is believed to be of her brother Vital, who, at the time, was a child and his parents. It may be plausible that such tonal differences were a deliberate delineation of their racial makeup, with both her and her brother growing up racially oriented differently. In this image, the mother and child cuddle, showing a close relationship between her brother and mother. Their faces seem happy. Both are naked, and their nudity is shown in full figure, signalling innocence and freedom. Unlike the other family painting, in which both mother and child are also naked (suggested by the bare shoulders), they are not in full figure, with palpable tension on their faces.

Valerie stands behind the mother with her mouth open, as if she is screaming, — signalling tension between her and the parents. Such stylistic differences between these family paintings allude to the contrasting ways that, as children, she and her brother experienced their parents and childhood. For example, throughout her schooling life, Valerie was sent to white schools since, although often for a brief moment, she could pass for white and could be accepted to schools reserved only for whites, but would also always be discovered and expelled from these schools for not being white. However, her brother did not have the same educational experience. This is not to say that her brother was unaware of the sister's rejections; rather how from not going to white schools he did not face expulsion or rejection from schools, unlike Valerie who attended white schools. Instead, he attended 'Coloured' schools and did not experience the trauma of being rejected. Therefore, we can read these two family paintings to be registering how different their childhoods were. This is just one reading; one can speculate on these paintings.

Interestingly, Valerie never created a family painting of her sister with her parents. She also never painted one with all of them together as one big family, even in those of the late—1990s, when she started experimenting with screen-printing using family photography; it is still only her, her brother and her parents. However, it is still as a young family. The prints were incomplete.



Figure 31: Valerie Desmore *Untitled (family)*, c.1998, Silkscreen, (size unrecorded)

Thinking about *The Family* painting of 1959, we can see how Valerie's family paintings not only engage family portraiture¹¹² genres from an art-historical point of view, but how her use of family portraiture illustrates different moments in her life. They explained how she understood, illustrated and complicated her interest in family, in the way she imaged herself, her parents and siblings and how this understanding of family evolved over time. Regarding the theme of family in her art, Valerie states:

I like painting families, as well. Because I had quite a [...] well [...] you know how neurotic and peculiar families can be? And I am very interested in that [...] and [...] I have painted [...] I come back to that subject many, many, times in my life. Of painting the family. (Desmore 1998)

For Valerie, family meant different things. For example, she also spoke about her cat family. Within this dissertation,¹¹³ I only look at the representation of her biological family.¹¹⁴ I do, however, mention the cat family here to hint at the expansive ways in which Valerie thought about the idea of family and family portraiture. Both of her paintings titled *The Family* (Fig 28 and 29) put these concepts into focus. Such forms of introspective visuality are a common characteristic of the expressionist paintings that Esmé Berman articulates:

In their intense identification with their subject matter, whether natural scenery or human situation, they [expressionist artists] conceive their paintings not as records of events and scenes, but rather as vehicles for communicating an emotional experience from one psyche to another; it was not the mere appearance of the subject, but the sensations it aroused within the artists that were given form and colour in Expressionist compositions. (1993: 66)

In this study, we examine Valerie using the expressionist style to interpret family portraits. *The Family* (Fig 28 and 29) portraits are therefore important, for in them, Valerie practices more skilful precepts of expressionism. Although Greslé premises her analysis of “the suffocating textured palette” on one painting, *The Family* (1959) (Fig 28), it could also be applied to other Desmorean family portraits, particularly since this reading looks at the use of her colour palette and impasto paint brush strokes through tone and texture, and how this way of painting gradually constructed Valerie's unique painting style over time, which I think is an astonishing command of draughtsmanship.

¹¹² According to art historian Emma Barker family portraits “Depict the whole family, not least the father, accords with the restriction of the term to portraits that include the male head of the family as well as mother and children” (2016: 528).

¹¹³ The study of animals and still life are areas of study that offer new possibilities to read Valerie's work anew.

¹¹⁴ In a video interview, she mentions her cats as her family. She mentions this in response to a question about why she never had children. To her, the cats were as much of a family as her biological family. There are many paintings of cats in her collection.

Through her use of expressionism, we see Valerie communicate her emotional experiences and the psyche of her family history — the psychological drama of belonging and unbelonging, through what she also terms as the ‘peculiarity’ and ‘neurosis’ of family. In other words, Valerie’s use of family portraiture, which she visualises through expressionism, is an illustration of her ‘belonging’ or ‘unbelonging’ to her family. What I argue illustrates biomythography through the strategy of expressionism, locating herself within this family setting, and further evidencing how she performs the refusal through her work. In turn, it also demonstrates how expressionist painting as a genre in-and of itself, was already a strategy of biomythography and refusal, given the way that it “communicat[es] an emotional experience” (Berman 1993: 66) and how “the visual object is distorted or transformed by the subjective feelings of the artist” (Berman 1993: 64). In this instance, Valerie’s modernist expressionism closely aligns with her experiences and realities.

It should be emphasised that Valerie’s artistic style has roots in expressionism. This style drew from German expressionism and primitivism, which were introduced to South Africa by artists like Irma Stern. Valerie was introduced to this painting style through Rosa Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky while she was still a young scholar at Central Girls’ School. Valerie, however, transcended the primitivist inclinations of South African expressionism and moved towards a distinct avant-garde practice of expressionism, possibly through the influence of Kokoschka and his Viennese expressionism. This may also explain why Valerie often depicts herself, her siblings, and her mother as children — a nod to the avant-garde practice of returning to a child-like state and the unconscious child in psychoanalytic theory (as explored in Chapter 4 and 5). Although no such link can easily be made to the expressive styles of Black postcolonial modern artists in South Africa and beyond, it is worth considering the kind of work Valerie offers in this discourse. As a form that visualises modern Black subjectivity, Valerie’s work shifts the expectations of class, race, and gender that constitute modern life as well as its understanding of modern Black subjectivity.

Whitening as Process and Meaning Making

In reading Valerie’s family portraits through the concepts of longing, seeking to belong and unbelonging as tenets of biomythography, and as a modernist expressionism gesture, I contrast this theoretical examination with the archive in as many discursive and diverse forms (oral and ephemeral) as possible. As explained in Chapter 1, the reading of Valerie’s work is by no means an attempt to provide an accurate account of Valerie’s history but rather a recognition that her work offers a more insightful reading by knowing her personal story. As such, it pushes the reading

of her work beyond the speculative into the generative, multiple-sourced reading of her ideas through concrete evidence (her works and her discussions of them) that can be matched and interpreted visually and through context — the “re-membering” that I discuss in Chapter 3 in relation to Boswell (2020), Khan (2014), Armah (2015), and hooks (1997). In so doing, this chapter pays attention to the symbolisms, pursuit of artistic conventions or their rejections, negotiation of positionality and deliberately tongue-in-cheek manner in the narratives that Valerie employs to articulate her subjects generally and the family portrait in particular. The element of multiple sourcing in terms of reading Valerie’s family history, is therefore important, in so far as it becomes a tool that enables us to understand her work more intently.

Engaging multiple sources offers an essential tool for reflection: by suspending the idea of a single truth about her ‘textured’ life story, we are giving glimpses into various aspects of her life. Wendy Pickstone-Taylor (2019),¹¹⁵ Valerie’s cousin, in an interview during Valerie’s visit to South Africa in 1998, when the family was reunited, echoes this need to read Valerie’s art not as the ultimate ‘truth’ of her family history:

[...] we are really concerned that Valerie’s paintings should get recognition. And the family story is immensely powerful and none of us want the actual privacy of that to be intruded on too much. That would be number one, but the other thing is we don’t want the fact of Valerie’s paintings to be obscured by, you know [...] Because her life is so textured, so rich, but the personal story is extremely powerful and [...] you see there will be Fiona’s version, there’ll be Simon’s version, there’ll be Valerie’s version and there will be Wendy’s version.

In other words, even though Valerie’s art is shaped by her family history, what Wendy is cautioning here is that this art ought to be read with the understanding that these are merely Valerie’s interpretations of their family history that may be different from how other family members interpret it. It should, therefore, be understood that this reading of history that I call biomythography, as with many other histories, is notably selective. Thinking about Pickstone-Taylor’s comment points to the obfuscation within biomythography as a showing of the kind of suspended ‘truth’ that I propose above through Martinez, around the correlation of history and art, as a ‘maybe.’

Echoing this idea of ‘maybe’, Sarat Maharaj suggests moving away from approaches to visual art that rely solely on treating it as an “image-lingo” based on a linguistic model of grammar, syntax and related regularities, which in turn limits the visual to verbal-discursive legibility. This approach

¹¹⁵ Wendy Pickstone Taylor is related to Valerie via the Pickstone family side.

could lead to talking over and above the artwork, something that has been cautioned against by Goniwe, Chigumadzi, and others, as discussed in Chapter 3. Instead, Maharaj proposes “thinking through the visual”, emphasising the understanding of the process as a central part of visual arts and artistic inquiry. While it may not be possible to speak directly to Valerie’s process, linking an understanding of the process to how the multi-sourcing of reference materials can aid in the reading of Valerie’s conceptual underpinnings as a valid approach.

Irit Rogoff (2003, 2006) highlighted the performative nature of visual culture in her argument that meaning is not imminent and cannot be excavated or made obvious. To her, meaning is inherently unstable, and we cannot decipher it on behalf of the artist because there is no final word in determining its meaning. Instead of attempting to uncover and make legible its hidden meanings, we must ask: What does the artwork do? What does it produce? What effects does it have on the world, for whom and in which moment? (Rogoff 2003: 103). That is, and as I will argue in relation to Valerie’s work, “meaning takes place in the present” (2003: 103) and is produced in ways which are contingent on the immediate audience and their subjectivities, as well as the temporal moment, which can be related back to the notion of the flattening of time. To relay Rogoff’s proposition of meanings found in art as a continuum can also be related back to Martinez’s proposition of the future of art and its relatedness “to the question of duration” that she argues speaks “to the conditions under which art is continuously made, to its history” (2013: 43). Artist and writer Raél Jero Salley also proposes “a theory of temporal awareness”, which he argues is the:

focus on the ‘now’ of things [that] requires working out several issues at once: what is at once both past and remaining; how a lingering ‘before’ appears in a contemporary moment; and how ‘this’ moment — and our understanding of it — will soon change to accommodate future demands. (2013: 355)

To unpack the meaning of art in this way concurrently unsettles how we think about the ‘truths’ of history as fixed veracities. Instead, how do these ‘truths’ reveal so much about the fluidity of time, positionality, and geopolitics? In this light, we need to consider the possibilities of ongoing interpretations — the ‘maybe’ that Martinez proposes. This understanding of the ongoing interpretation of art makes it salient that the relationship between artistic practice and history-making is about the broader enduring debates of theories of knowledge, which in this case, I examine through Valerie’s use of expressionism, biomythography and refusal.

Contemplating Maharaj’s notion of “thinking through the visual”, multiple sourcing and the temporality of meaning offered by Rogoff and Salley — in the sense of engaging process as

meaning-making — I engage this note below to explore how Valerie's process is deeply entangled with the concepts of her paintings.¹¹⁶

When I was 13 years old — I was told by my schoolmates about all the "Colour Points" which distinguished the people of mixed blood in my country from the Afrikaners or Englishmen.

And this is how it went;

If a person looks white and you think they are coloured — look at their neck — if the skin is darker than that of their face — they are of mixed blood, they are coloured. Look at their hands, if the skin around the nails is discoloured and dark — they are of mixed Blood.

If they look white, that is they have European features and their hair is kinky (very curly) — they are "Cherry Blossom." English euphemism for touch of the Tar Brush. Cherry Blossom I didn't understand.

So, when my dusky-skinned — East Asian looking sister was born — my friends at my Jewish school pestered me to see her. Trembling I took 2 or 3 to my house. I was ashamed of the small dark creature in a cot. My friends said, "She is very dark" I said, "no she is white" and I showed them the palms of her hands. They were pink. I felt relieved. They worried she was black/ different.

I knew even then that Natives (Africans) had pink palms. I knew I hated my sister from then. She had spoiled my lovely white image. I knew white was right. I was then just 13 yrs old. I still feel the same way. Actually, I discovered quite early on — that being a person of mixed blood wasn't at all desirable.

And although I was a Fashion Designer for Marks and Spencer for 18 yrs I didn't tell anyone about my colour. I knew — the machinists would call me "chocolate" — so I hid myself from everyone I thought would hurt me.

I never sunbathed. I didn't want to be black. Besides, the Beaches were only for the whites. Not only were the Afrikaners culprits — so were the Jews.

The best beach in the Cape was Muizenberg.

I always thought what a pity I couldn't have been born in Spain — Luis Buñuel Portolés says — in his autobiography that in his family all sorts of racial features and skin tones came up — and so it is with my family. We produce people from really African Black aborigine.

Desmore (notepad found in the archives, date unknown)

From this note, we can begin to see how Valerie possibly used her art to acutely articulate the refusal of 'Colouredness' and refusal of race in different contexts — thus proposing a kind of introspective refusal. This examination is particularly probed by the notion of 'colour points' that she mentions in the notebook extract above. While Valerie's use of colour points is a reference to

¹¹⁶ Even though Valerie lived until she was eighty-two years old and had an active career as an artist for almost twenty years from whence, she retired in 1977 and returned to painting full-time, no writer ever engages her process of making. The few writers that engaged her work textually mainly deal with the broad concept mentioned above. None have engaged her process of making in any great depth — even though some have even had the chance to visit her home studio and or speak to her in person about her work.

race, this visual phenomenon is also evident through the colour layering process in her paintings. The purpose of drawing from these personal accounts is not about casting judgment or to “parse sensational details” (Mooney 2014: 22) about the artist’s life but “to see the artist as a complicated, multivalent persona who cannot be reduced to a positive or negative determination” (2014: 22).

Although I had been researching Valerie’s work since 2019, it wasn’t until July 2021 that I had the opportunity to visit her personal archive in France. This visit allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of her artistic process and its relation to the conceptual foundations of her work.¹¹⁷ During my visit to France, I found photographic documentation of Valerie’s creative process, including handwritten notes, study photographs, and preparatory sketches for her paintings. The above note cites some of the ways in which Valerie’s life and paintings intersect, particularly in how she grappled with her race using “colour points”. This suggests that she may have visualised these “colour points” through tone and paint colour in her work. Looking at “The Family” painting, we can see this deliberate use of dotted and intense white painterly strokes, which intersect to represent the “colour points” of the subjects’ skin.

I relate this treatment of her painting surface to Greslé’s assessment of “the suffocating textured palette” and the psychological drama it underplays. While Greslé does not unpack these ideas as part of Valerie’s making process, she, alludes to their connotations in relation to the subject matter and symbols. Here, I wish to explore the ‘colour points’ concept as having a relationship between the painting of skin in Valerie’s paintings and ideas of race articulated in the note above.

¹¹⁷ Prior to my visit, I had only seen a few of her works in public collections, such as JAG and SANG. Most of her work was only accessible to me through electronic archives shared by her family members, as well as a few publications featuring *The Family* painting. When I started my research, I had only seen four of Valerie’s works that I displayed in my master’s exhibition “*A Fragile Archive*” at JAG in 2012. These works were *Girls Fighting*, *The Hunger*, *Street Accident*, and *The Malay Girl* (1945). However, as I continued to delve deeper into her work, I discovered more pieces. The first piece I found was *Crab*, (Fig. 22) which Warren Siebrits had recently acquired in 2019 through an auction in London. Late last year, as soon as lockdown restrictions were lifted and national travel was permitted, I went to Cape Town to see the work that Valerie had left for her cousin.



Figure 32: (left) Valerie Desmore, *Dialysis*, 2002, oil on board, 122 x 91.5cm; (right) Valerie Desmore, *Dialysis*, 2002, unfinished.

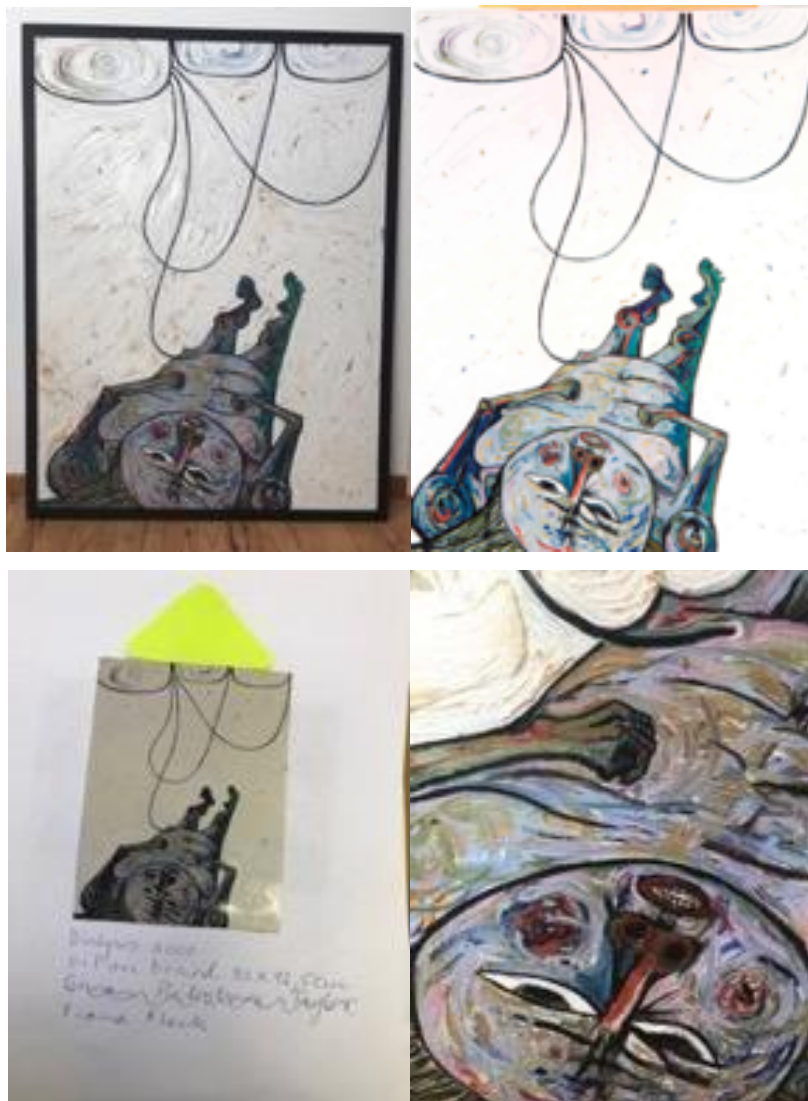


Figure 33: (left) Valerie Desmore, *Dialysis*, 2002, oil on board, 122 x 91.5cm

(right) Close-up *Dialysis*, 2002.
Figure 34: Archive document, *Dialysis*, 2002.
Figure 35: Close-up, *Dialysis*, 2002.

To unpack the process of the ‘colour points’, there are two photographs found in her personal archive that show the process of the work titled *Dialysis*. The two photographs show the painting in its unfinished and finished states. The painting is of a naked person lying down on their back, facing up with their eyes looking as though in agony or some kind of trance. This seems to be caused by the tubes connected to the person with the three rectangular bags hanging above like clouds. There is no bed; instead, the body floats against an empty background. In the left photograph, we see *Dialysis* as a finished painting with a thick white impasto background, whereas in the right photograph, we see the same painting in its earlier stages with the background still in its multi-coloured state.

When I saw these two photographs, I finally understood how Valerie arrives at the white thick textured background which is seen in many of her paintings. From this, I realised that she began most of her paintings with these colourful layers that she worked over with thick layers of mostly white paint.¹¹⁸ Applying thick paint repeatedly, and depending on how much she whitens the area, sometimes the surface areas are left multicoloured without the dominating white, or semi-blended with some strokes of colour seeping through. Sometimes the white paint becomes so dominant that the colourful under-paint disappears altogether, often leaving the white surfaces as though they were negative spaces. In other instances, the colours underneath the painting appear as stains on the white surface, as seen in works like *The Hunger* (1985).



¹¹⁸ Seen in a number of her paintings, this whitening process begins with an underlayer of bright colours that she layers with white paint. There are other unfinished paintings there that are in a similar state of this first colourful layer, such as the portrait (undated), *Hanging Fish* (1960) and many others



Figure 36: (above) Valerie Desmore, *The Hunger*, 1985, Oil on canvas, 76,2 x 101,7 cm.
 (below) Photograph found in her archive of the painting *The Hunger* in its earlier stages.

Based on this, I realised that this form of layering might potentially be speaking to the ‘colour points’ that she describes in the note above. These rough notes reveal some of her most profound thoughts about her childhood in relation to race. I particularly found the thought about the colour points insightful in thinking about the layering process of her paintings. It made me wonder if the white bodies in *The Family* (Fig 28) painting were one of the ways she visualised the tension of race that she writes about in the above note. In making this link the aim is to signal the salient complexities of her paintings, not just about what is seen but also what is not seen, or rather, what gets buried underneath the thick colourful layers of paint and that which appears on the surface.

Within *The Family* (1959)(Fig 28) the whitened figures are what gets seen – with very little trace of the colourful areas — which invokes so much meaning around race. I am reminded of what Zimitri Erasmus describes as ‘the look’ and what Sharlene Khan articulates as ‘passing’ through art, as an illusion of complex race discourses — i.e., what is seen and what the seeing constructs and /or challenges — that I wish to discuss below. These two ideas explicate ‘whitening’ as a play on the politicisation of the body, identity, identity performativity, identity marking and /or identity refusal as the actualisation of a ‘maybe’.

Khan’s proposition of ‘becoming’ and ‘passing’ offers a useful theoretical tool in negotiating identity deviancy. Writing about the notion of ‘performing’ ‘fitting’ or ‘misfitting identities,’ in her essay *Becoming: The Art of Everyday Performance* Khan questions “the potential of active identity performance as a strategy for the necessary subversion of identity categories in post-apartheid South Africa, especially as they have manifested in the visual arts” (2012: 16). She posits that “the emergence of apartheid narratives today evidences the many ways people *had* to manipulate discriminatory apartheid constructions through a range of everyday performances of identity and

the notion of a *fitting into* race and ethnicity” (2012: 16).¹¹⁹ To Khan, these strategies have been fundamental to how many people survived or ‘passed’ apartheid identity limitations. Khan’s argument is compelling as it complicates how people ‘looked’, challenging the rigid ways race has often been used to cast which sides of history they belonged. This is what Erasmus, in her book *Race Otherwise*, describes as the problematics of ‘the look,’ stating:

Skin colour and other physical markers are meaningless for constituting racialised subjects... Racial markers depend on the connotations that they invoke when assigning people places in a social structure. These connotations in turn depend on the way race articulates with gender, class, nation, language, sexuality, geopolitics, and the human. ‘The look’ depends on the racialised mind’s eye. Because the relation between the signifier or marker (black, white, Coloured, Indian, ‘mixed race,’ ‘foreigner,’ ‘Muslim’) and the signified (the effect of meaning attached to the marker) is arbitrary... Put differently, ‘the look’ reverses processes of racialisation. It assumes that the body is marked prior to the social-political process by which the particular mark was chosen, and prior to the power relations that gave the mark its meaning. It places the mark on the body before racial classification, even though the criteria for and the act of classification are products of relations of power. (2017: 52).

Echoing Erasmus, Khan thus discusses the different ways people used this idea of ‘looking a particular way’ as a way that made it possible to ‘pass’ or manipulate the system, albeit limited as it was, to either avoid certain prejudices or gain certain advantages while undermining the system of racial categorisation. Indeed, Valerie’s statement attests to this when she describes her work environment, particularly how she never spoke about her race to her colleagues. While this moment could be understood as the kind of passing that Nella Larsen¹²⁰ describes as a “breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly” (2019: 16). In the note above, Valerie was neither denouncing nor denying her ‘mixed race’ status. She was just not making her race known.

Interestingly, Larsen was also referred to as ‘mixed race’. She stopped writing novels and moved to nursing, removing herself from the literary circles of the Harlem Renaissance. The narrative of passing possibly surfaces different forms of passing, aspirational passing and tactical passing. Valerie’s passing could be considered tactical in the sense that she was passing only to gain the benefits of white society, thereby undermining the system. It could also be aspirational in the sense

¹¹⁹ Original emphasis.

¹²⁰ In her fascinating book titled *Passing* (2019), Nella Larsen’s writes about two women who, after separating at childhood, reconnect as adults to find themselves navigating two racially different worlds. Irene, who is similarly light skinned, discovers that her childhood friend Clare has been passing for a white woman after severing ties to her past, even hiding the truth from her racist husband.

that she aspired, encouraged by her father, to immerse herself in white communities. Based on her father's writing, it is clear that she was also proud to be 'Coloured' and wanted to be seen as equal. The African-American scholar Allyson Hobbs (2014) calls it "a chosen exile". This links to my earlier point, in Chapter 2, about Valerie as an exilic personality in the sense that her exile was not just about place but also about leaping into other cultural and social worlds in the context where segregationist societies make it difficult to move fluidly between.

The deliberate and obvious non-mentioning or the unspoken is what I understand to be the performative passing that Khan speaks about, which I speculate is what her painting *The Family* (Fig 28) is trying to demonstrate. For example, even though all three figures are painted white, the intensity of the application of white is not the same. The blotted-painterly application of the white with some places unblended or not completely covered up, such as the mother's neck, shoulder area and their cheeks, alludes to Valerie's 'colour points', making obvious the points at which whitening or passing is unachievable, unable to completely cover these areas white. In Jackie May's unpublished article on Valerie, we learn that her mother was darker than her and her father, which might explain the different tones of her two paintings and the fact that the mother wears a mask in *The Family* (1960) (Fig 29). In some sense, the idea of the 'colour point' also indicates the impossibility of passing, given that it is about proving how even those who may have looked white could not completely go undetected but were rather let slide. In some sense, they speak to Valerie's attempt to do the covering up by showing her white friend "the palms of her [sister's] hand". It also invokes the idea of the look as a challenge against set notions of how we see and how this seeing is constructed through appearance and social conventions. Could this be why she never produced a family painting with her younger sister, in that her sister's darker skin was beyond visualisation within this family context? Her sister is only illustrated in two artworks *Children Fighting* (1958) and *Girls Fighting* (1985). The appearance of Valerie's sister in a conflict situation and not in a Family portrait speaks volumes, where the revelation of her sister's dark skin to her friends exposed her passing and "spoilt my lovely white image". In this sense, these two works echo the silences and absences in *The Family* (Fig 28) portrait. In this light, *The Family* (Fig 28) portrait thus becomes not just about what is seen, visible or present but also about what is not seen, which might imply that the Victorian family portraits sought to project a particular ideal and status. The erasure of Valerie's sister means she saw herself as not belonging with them or saw them as not belonging with her and their parents.



Figure 37: (above) *Children Fighting*, 1958, oil on board, 66 x 97cm.
(below) *Girls Fighting*, 1985, charcoal on paper (Gesso on hardboard), 67.6 x 101.7cm

The moment described in this notepad is indicative of the suspiciousness that surrounded her because she was constantly placed in schools where she had to perform whiteness. Through the note above, we are shown how this performing of identity for Valerie began as a child and how it continued to play out in her adult life. As a child, she thought people did not know, and yet even in England, where many of her friends knew of her race (Rosset 2016; Calder 2001/2016), she still felt she could not mention it in her workplace. For Valerie, the performance does not end only until her reunion with her family in the late 1990s. In an interview with Fleck, she recalls how when she returned to South Africa, she would insist, especially in the presence of whites, on making it known that she was ‘mixed race’. She states:

Do you know that when I went back to South Africa, the first time? I was very bolshy and my cousin Wendy who lives in the wine district, with all the Dutch neighbours and things, you know, these Boer neighbours. And she was chatting them out and she would say “this is my cousin” and I would say “of course you know that I’m mixed race.” [laughs*] I said this to everyone that she introduced me to because I wanted them to know, who I was. And because I wasn’t ashamed of it. (1998)

As a child, she had to internalise these traumas and had no one to talk to about them, but as an adult and through psychoanalysis, she found a way to confront this history. There are other aspects of the performativity of the look, such as the fact that all the family portraits are somewhat performing what hooks calls an oppositional gaze or what has more broadly been termed returning the gaze’ within feminist discourses. Through this understanding of performed identity in her painting, Valerie offers a stance of returning the gaze, where the viewer is implicated in looking back; looking at the viewers as they look at them as a family.

Resemblance as (Un)belonging

As I have already indicated in the introduction of this chapter, Valerie’s *The Family* (1959) (Fig 28) — of three figures with their white painterly faces and shoulders and the dominant red mask on the woman’s face, which is the same colour as the man’s cheeks and the child’s hair, cheeks, and red mouth — signify a kind of resemblance, likeness, and kinship between them.¹²¹ Painted in 1959, when Valerie was thirty-three years old,— she paints her younger family of herself, her mother and her father, indicating a journey back in time and possibly to a time before her siblings were born. It has been argued that portraits also serve as a means to position oneself within a trajectory of

¹²¹ I make a distinction between resemblance and likeness in this section, where resemblance is about the physical likeness between the figures and likeness is about an art-making process that attempts to illustrate a person as close to how they look as possible. That being said, I am exploiting the ambiguities of these words to insinuate other kinds of meaning.

ancestral lineages, or as Tamar Garb (2018) an act of “looking longingly”. While for Joni Brenner, the engagement with portraiture has to do with “The fascination with what our ancestors looked like” (2014: 46), our capacity to relate to and respond to resonating images is connected to our self-image, recognizing both changes and continuity enables us to understand our long trajectory of belonging.

For Garb, the act of “looking longingly” foregrounds the “proximate relationship” (2018:116) between the people imaged and the person doing the imaging. She borrows this framing from the curatorial framework of Sabelo Mlangeni’s photographic exhibition *Umlindelo wamaMakholwa* (2017),¹²² that she uses to discuss Mlangeni’s precarious position of being an insider looking in from the outside and longing to belong. *Umlindelo wamaMakholwa* show included portrait images of the Zionist community that Mlangeni for many years belonged to but was later distanced from when he moved to Johannesburg as he no longer lived in the same community.¹²³ This, going back, implicates the distant looking and intimate relationship the photographer had with the people he imaged. His return to Mpumalanga, over many years, to photograph this community therefore resulted in a series of photographs that visualise what Garb then calls an intimacy and proximity of ‘looking longingly’.

This sense of precarious yearning also seems to pervade Valerie’s portrayals of her family, in the way that she characterises her young family; as both the insider and outsider looking in. In this instance, Valerie is at once the insider (in the form of the child) and at the same time the outsider (as the adult painter who images herself as the younger child). At the same time, she acts out the racial insider /outsider dynamic where she is somewhere between belonging and not belonging to a ‘Coloured’ family as someone who feels ‘white is right’ and that being mixed-race is not desirable. As such it collapses time, what Rogoff alludes to as the continuum of meaning begging the question around ‘ancestral lineage’ and ‘longing’ that Valerie was trying to visualise. We have to ask, what was she trying to communicate at the time? In particular, what does it mean to only image a family of three and exclude her siblings? What is it about this time, when there was only the three of them, that is the artist is pointing out?

¹²² *Umlindelo wamaKholwa* was the second iteration of an exhibition that was formerly exhibited as *Kholwa: The Longing of Belonging* in Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, UK (June–September 2017). The second iteration took place at Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg from 26 June–28 October 2018.

¹²³ Since he moved to Johannesburg.

Garb further argues that the proximity of looking longingly ends up showing “empathy and belonging so that little separation endures between [...] subject and object” (Garb 2018: 116). We see this proximity through Valerie’s inclusion of herself in the family portrait in the ways it accentuates her positionality of looking longingly both as an insider— in other words, as subject — and outsider, the artist who is painting herself in the family setting. Such proximity reinforces Marion Arnold’s articulation of “the emotional overtones embedded in the subject matter” (1996: 90) that I link back to the idea of the psychological drama in Valerie’s family portrait as living elements in the construction of a biomythographical narrative. This proximity is also between the artists and parents. How do we understand this “longing in ourselves”, belonging and looking longingly to be a biomythographical tool?

While the idea of positionality, longing, seeking to belong and “looking longingly” might suggest a penchant for the nostalgia (an atavistic harkening) of happy childhood memories (of the harmonious family) by imaging her younger family, the characters portrayed in Valerie’s family portraits also connote the broader “emotional overtones” (Arnold 1996: 90) of a negative social and political past that they would have experienced as a ‘Coloured’ family. Such experience speaks of the socio-political dynamics of their time in apartheid South Africa, emphasising what it meant to be ‘Coloured’ in South Africa at that particular time. It compels us to ask, what does it mean to remember or in a particular sense, re-constitute, this very moment in South African history through Valerie’s deliberate disruption of family portraiture?

The remainder of social and political circumstances on them as a family prompts what Valerie herself ambiguously alludes to, in her above statement, as the ‘peculiarity’ and ‘neurosis’ of family, which, to me, starts to unearth what Greslé alludes to as a “psychological drama”. This illustration of Valerie’s younger family asserts the painting’s capacity to flatten time, place and history in the sense that it brings up childhood memories of her family’s time in South Africa while extending it to her later life in exile in London where the paintings are produced there. In her handwritten Curriculum Vitae, Valerie indicates that this is a time, place, and history she “never looked back” to because of the “racial persecution” she experienced while living in South Africa. This never look[ing] back’ might sound contradictory, in the sense that by painting her younger family she is, in fact, doing the very thing she claims she never did. What she meant by this, however, is that because of racism, she, for the longest time, never returned to South Africa or tried to keep any links with South Africa since her departure in 1946. It was only in 1998 that she returned briefly to reunite with her maternal grandfather’s family and to view the exhibition that included her work

after fifty years of not exhibiting in the country. This is also the only moment she physically returns to South Africa. Since then, she remained in London until her death in 2008. So, what does it mean to illustrate this moment through the family portrait? How does it connect to her time and experience of living in London? This travel across time through the family portrait echoes the embodies the power of portraits to shape perceptions of the past and the future.

Valerie's use of portraiture is fascinating in how it portrays lineages. *The Family* (1959) (Fig 28) painting demonstrates two sets of qualities - resemblance, likeness, and kinship - as well as unlikeness, distance, estrangement, and defamiliarisation. Through this painting, Valerie offers a space to see not only the similarities between family members but also their differences. This is achieved not only through facial features but also through other details, such as the father wearing a suit while the mother and child are nude. Valerie's painting shows that she is unlike her parents, and the exclusion of her sister from the family portrait also highlights her differences. Similarly, her brother Vital is portrayed differently, with a distinct style and tone in *The Family* from 1960 (Fig 29). In this sense, the family portrait serves a dialectical function of making connections through resemblance and belonging while also doing the work of differencing, un-belonging and disbelonging.

The Mother's Transgression Through the Mask

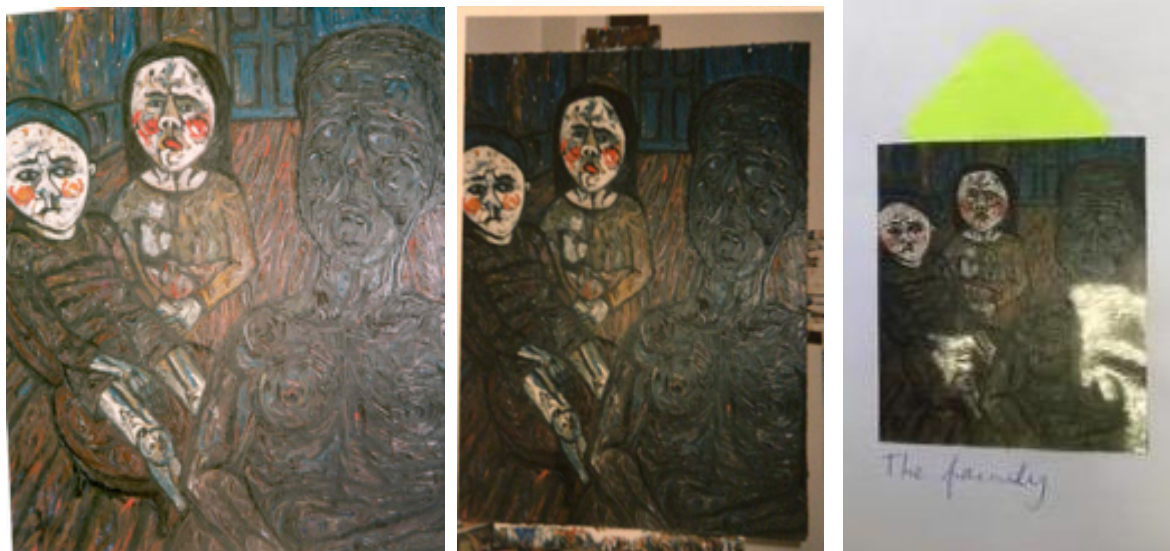
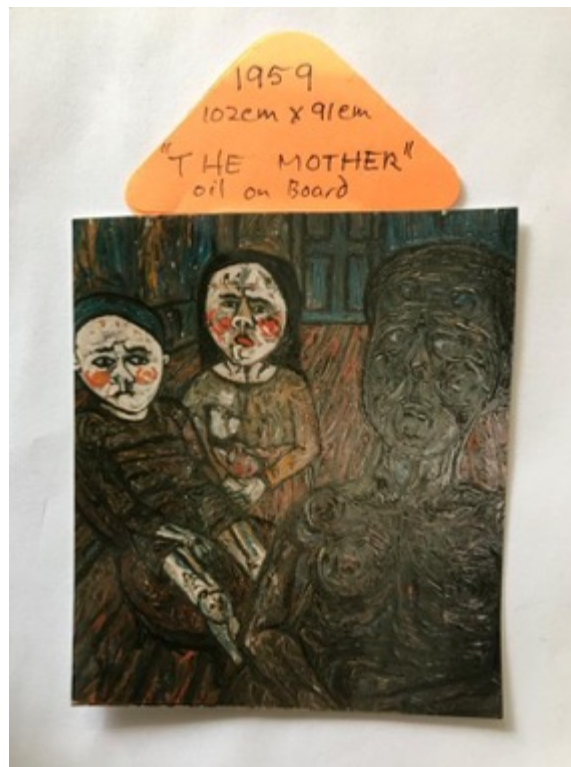


Figure 38: Valerie Desmore, *The Mother* (also titled *The Family*), 1959, oil on board, 102 x 9cm.

In three family paintings — *The Family* (1959) (Fig 28), *The Mother* (1959) (Fig 38) and *The Family* (1960) (Fig 29)—Valerie draws our attention to the mother figure. In these paintings, the mother is often placed in a dominating position — invoking notions of matrifocality. She wears a mask and is bare-shouldered or, as in the case of *The Mother* (1959) (Fig 38) and *The Family* (1960) (Fig 29), is nude. The central placement and characterisation of this woman figure (masked and nude) constantly draws our attention to the story of her mother; a story that becomes more and more

prominent in Valerie's later work, where she focuses on her mother's childhood.¹²⁴ I engage the mother's history in more depth in Chapter 5. In this section, I focus on the representation of the mother within the painting *The Family* (1959) (Fig 27) to explore the different visual devices Valerie uses to focus on the mother figure.



Figure 39: Some examples of Valerie Desmore's African masks sketches.



Figure 40(a): a picture of Valerie Desmore's flat showing some of the masks she owned and her portrait painting when she was young.

To begin, I look at the use of the mask and its multi-pronged meanings. Speaking about why Valerie used the mask in her art, she states, "And I use the mask as a device. Because everyone uses [...] different masks in different situations. And people've got lots of selves." (Desmore, 1998). Thinking about this statement, I am curious about how she invokes the idea of "different

¹²⁴ She was a qualified teacher and a painter (1997:89) though not at a professional level like Valerie.

masks in different situations” within this painting. While a mask in art symbolises many things, within Valerie’s work, we can discern a range of meanings that add to the illuminating concepts of belonging and unbelonging (‘disbelonging’, Akinbola 2019). Of immediate illumination is the idea that the mask speaks to “different masks in different situations”, alluding to the way the mask oscillates between the past and the present, Valerie’s young family painting produced by the older Valerie. This is what Brian Finney articulates as a form of “defamiliarization” and “narrative strategy”(1990: 21) because of the way the story “drift[s] between past and present in a way which both baffles and intrigues”(1990: 21). Reviewing Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988), Finney makes us aware that to understand this narrative strategy of defamiliarisation, the viewer “has to attend to the connections and associations that jumps [between past and present] create” (1999: 21). To engage the use of time travel, I ask, what does the representation of the mask mean in a painting that represents the artist’s younger family? Within Valerie’s work, we see the possibility of defamiliarisation, in being transported simultaneously back to her past (her young family) and her present (her older self), by the fact that she made it at the age of thirty three, yet the painting is of her younger family, possibly before her siblings were even born. By doing so, this time travel through the mask – the idea of “masks in different situations” – deconstructs and illustrates the manipulations of the real.

What does it mean that the mask is only on the mother’s face? The fact that the mask is placed on the mother figure might allude to the social, gendered, and racial restrictions put on women at the time. Tracy Murinik writes that some of Valerie’s paintings illustrated “women trapped within the restraints of patriarchal living” (1998). Thinking about this, one wonders whether the mask in this instance might signify such patriarchal constraint, possibly because while “Both her parents were teachers and her mother also painted” (Miles: 89), Valerie’s mother had less opportunity to pursue her teaching career in South Africa. But when she came to England, her mother could teach for the first time. Speaking about her mother’s teaching career, Valerie says:

After I went to England, she [mother] came with my brother and sister and then later my father came. My mother blossomed in England. She taught again for the first time because, as a married woman, she didn’t work, and she taught again because, we ...you know... they needed the money. And she loved it, she absolutely loved it. And she was a great influence on her grandchildren. (Desmore 1998)

In other words, the mask could be understood as a visual transgression of these past constraints on the mother, not being allowed to pursue career opportunities in the same way as the father when they lived in South Africa. The painting is thus trying to represent this moment of social constraint. This use of a mask to visualise social constraint or speechlessness is similar to how the

Cape Town artist Lionel Davis uses the mask in his works. Writing about Davis, Bridget Thompson states:

Here masking reveals more than it hides, highlighting pain, anger, and death-in-life... These masks as portraits speak to the experience of life under apartheid in a community, which has a continuum of pain that far precedes apartheid's short five decades of human social engineering. (2017: 203)

Although apartheid was not yet constituted during the years Valerie spent living in South Africa racial laws in the form of the race bar were already in full force. As a 'Coloured' woman, her mother could not easily find teaching opportunities in those days, under the race bar, which meant that she had fewer teaching opportunities. Writing about the Black South African modernists exiled in Europe, Christine Eyene observes that "Desmore's art, with its themes of existential estrangement and trauma, typifies the alienation so frequently encountered in exiled artists' work and lives" (2011: 105). This observation begins to articulate the connection between Eyene's "existential estrangement and trauma" and Valerie's own articulation of "racial persecution" in South Africa, which refers us back to the proposition of belonging or, in this case, her mother's unbelonging. While Eyene wrote about Valerie's experiences and not the mother's, the same can be said about her mother's life. Eyene's comment is multi-pronged in that it is both about the artist's experiences of being in London and in South Africa — given Valerie's struggle to attain visibility as an artist in London — and about her mother's life.

Such "existential estrangement and trauma" could also then be understood as the limitations put upon Valerie's mother in being unable to take up teaching based on her gender through the social status of being a 'wife, and her racialisation through the race bar. The existential estrangement and trauma" also emphasise Garb's point about "empathy and belonging, so that little separation endures between [...] subject and object" (2018: 116). In other words, we are able to see Valerie's empathy towards her mother, which is complicatedly captured through the mask. This multiple play with the mask could be what Eyene described as a "visual idiom" of "displacement" through her exile status. To read Valerie's work within this understanding of displacement, we see the possibility of understanding the fractures and disconnections between the mother and Valerie within their contexts.

Another idea that the mask illuminates concerning belonging and unbelonging is the concept of likeness as a convention of portraiture. As Arnold attests, "The very nature of portraiture is that

the likeness of a person is *represented*” (1995: 95).¹²⁵ If we are to unpack the question of likeness through the racial connotation underscored by this painting in relation to Erasmus’ proposition around ‘the look’, in the sense of it being of “physiognomic likeness” (Woodall 1997), then how does this relate to the woman wearing a mask? When thought of as ‘the look’, Valerie’s use of the mask signals a transgression against it being a racial marker but rather proposes ‘ambiguity’¹²⁶ and a form of defamiliarisation, ‘maybe’, and difference. As already discussed above regarding the implication of the whitened bodies, here I explore the question of the look in relation to likeness and what this means in relation to the mask on the mother figure.

This notion of likeness is echoed in Brenner’s discussion about portraiture, where she writes that “The fascination with what our ancestors looked like is probably connected to our capacity to relate and respond to that which resonates with the images we have of ourselves; recognising both changes and continuity enables us to look into a long trajectory of belonging” (2014: 46). How do we see the mother’s likeness when she wears a mask? Also, how does the mask invoke ‘this capacity to relate’ between herself and the mother figure?

Indeed, as an expressionist painter, her painting style and method are already understood to illustrate the emotions of how she feels about the subject that may not result in total likeness. To this end, the mask, instead, invokes ideas of unbelonging, unlikeness and standing out or being the odd one out. In its mystery and ambiguity, and a kind of retainer of her identity, as a secret. This is because the mask becomes a metaphor and physical barrier to belonging, alluding perhaps to the disconnect between Valerie (the child) and her mother.

Thinking about unrelatability, there is a ‘disconnection’ between mother and child in the painting, where the mother appears unaware of the child’s expression behind her. The mask becomes a

¹²⁵ original emphasis

¹²⁶ Mohammed Adhikari (1993) explains that ‘Coloured’ history is riddled with ambiguities and contradictions. He states:

Historical writing on the coloured community of South Africa has tended to accept coloured identity as a given and to portray it as a fixed entity. The failure to take cognisance of the fluidity of coloured self-definition and the ambiguities inherent to the process has resulted in South African historiography presenting an oversimplified image of the phenomenon. The problem stems partly from almost an exclusive focus on coloured protest politics which has had the effect of exaggerating the resistance of coloureds to white racism and the advance of rigatonism. Furthermore, little consideration has been given to the nature of coloured identity or to the manner in which it shaped political consciousness within the coloured community. This is particularly true of analyses of the following the inauguration of the Union of South Africa in 1910, a time the legitimacy of coloured identity was not in any way questioned within the coloured community and when coloured protest politics was dominated by the body, the African Political Organization. (1993: 92).

What did this understanding of ‘Colouredness’ mean to Valerie?

more tangible physical barrier or mediation between the child and the mother. Growing up, Valerie had a very strained relationship with her mother, partly because of the conservative ways that she and her siblings were brought up. Attesting to this, she states, “The parents were quite stern really” (Desmore 2004–2006). To some extent, Valerie felt her mother was pushing her to live her art dream, a dream that she, the mother, could not realise because of social limitations. Describing this, she states, “[...] Yeah, I mean she [mother] was pushy. Do you know why? Because she was the person who didn’t go on painting after 14. That’s why. I don’t know why she stopped. But she was never a creative painter, she copied” (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006). Perhaps this is how Valerie’s mother figure within this family setting looked when she reflects on these histories. This would mean the mask becomes a metaphor for “the socio-political implications” (Arnold 1996: 90) and of the multiplicity of character.

The other constraint was the ‘big family secret’ of her mother’s father, Harry Pickstone. Though I go into much detail about this history in Chapter 5, it is worth mentioning here that Valerie discovered this secret as a child through overhearing conversations between adults. Might it be because of this secret link to Harry Pickstone that Valerie decided to conceal or demarcate the identity of her mother? Moreover, as the mask that is distinguished by colour disrupts the notion of secrecy around the mother’s identity, especially since the “was not actually a secret but merely a story that was not openly discussed. The issue of race was a challenging topic for Valerie’s family to address. In one of her interviews with her niece, Fiona Fleck, Valerie mentioned that the secrecy surrounding her mother’s identity made it difficult for them to discuss the discrimination and collective challenges they faced as a mixed-race family. She states:

I could never ask my parents why we were mixed race or anything like that. She never discussed it. The only thing she ever....and I had to ask it...When I was 14, I said who was your father? And we never brought out the mixed race thing at all! They just didn’t want to...well, she didn’t talk about it. (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

As such, she often felt alone and disconnected from her parents. She often had no one to talk to about her experiences of being rejected at school because she was ‘Coloured, which in turn fractured her relationship with her mother most profoundly. Through the mother, the sense of unbelonging is emphasised by the physical and conceptual barrier created by the mask. It becomes an effective illustration of the fractures in the relationship of all three figures, more especially between the mother and her daughter.

By thinking about the mask as a physical barrier, the idea of defamiliarisation is brought closer. Valerie’s use of defamiliarisation also breaks the mould of the style and conventions of portraiture

in modern art, forcing us to see how it begins to speak to her exile and experience of life in the diaspora. The inclusion of the mask — which could be linked to the ‘African mask’ and thus a kind of “African idiom” (Stevenson and Bosland, 2008: 7) — plays with what is familiar anew. Yet, as Valerie was also influenced by artists like James Ensor, who is known for using the mask to reference carnivals, Royal Balls and the theatre, her use of the mask is pushed beyond that of the African mask to something more global. As a result, this disrupts and defamiliarizes the simple link to the African masks as a familiar object, alluding to something beyond, indicative of her diasporic position.



Figure 40(b): One of many postcards found in Valerie Desmore’s archive with work of James Ensor on it.

Christine Eyene’s explication of the “visual idiom” of “displacement” through her exile status and its resultant defamiliarisation can be linked to how Thompson writes about Davis’ use of the mask in relation to its placement within the history of the Cape carnivals. For Thompson, the mask is a parody and an alter-ego that gets used to invoke the history of slavery and freedom or its unmasking. To illustrate what this freedom meant, she quotes Denis-Constant Martin when he states, “revellers choose their mask — they can be what they are not allowed to be during the rest of the year, what they would not dare to be — In a word, the mask confers freedom, freedom to be, freedom to act, freedom to choose” (in Thompson 2017: 204). In other words, the mask

allowed those living under oppression the temporary opportunity to unmask what is put on them by oppression and put on whatever they want to be. Relating this to the history of slavery and emancipation, Thompson mentions the Klopse Carnival stating that “Wearing a mask and a costume in an annual ritual allows the Klopse freedom from self in a way which deploys the first principle of human behaviour, the ability to communicate metaphorically and not only literally” (2017: 204), thus leaning towards the mask as mediation. However, she does not end it there, arguing that Davis’ use of the mask touched on the divisions between the ‘Coloured’ and the Black African communities in relation to the African mask. Explaining this, Thompson states:

In the coloured community the striving to cope in a white-dominated society saw African heritages belittled and ‘masked’. Accents reminiscent of an African background were frowned on and names were changed. Darker skinned relatives were hidden or their presence in a domestic space explained as them being servants (2017: 206).

So, for Davis to use the mask was to unmask this historical disassociation, division, and shame as something he had experienced personally. Thompson explains that when he was in Robben Island, Davis finally got to embrace being African and its associated heritages, which is what the work somehow connotes. As Thompson explains, “the masks in Davis’ art are as much an unmasking to reveal an inner truth, as they are a masking to create a new liberated persona” (2017: 206). While it is impossible to equate Valerie’s use of mask imagery to this history in the way Davis did, and even though the two artists may share a similar historical context by virtue of being ‘Cape ‘Coloured,’ they most expressly are from different generations. Such complexities of reading the mask within these highly racialised histories offer an important speculative moment. They provide the possibility to imagine numerous other implications of the mother’s mask in Valerie’s work. Valerie’s encounter with African masks was in London, a location outside of South Africa. Her experience offers a kind of reflection on living in the diaspora. This is a common trait among many such artists. Many modern artists in Europe and Africa were interested in African masks. Senghor’s negritude manifests this way, too and spreads beyond Senegal. Mancoba’s shift to the African mask and Kota reliquary figure develops once he’s in Europe. The likes of Irma Stern also collected African masks and sculptural figures (which inspired their expressionist work).

In recalling some of these moments, Valerie proffers, “There was a time when I was very interested in ‘African sculpture’ and African art and those artefacts. And I think they are absolutely wonderful. And I spent a lot of time at the British [Art] Museum looking at them” (Desmore, 1998). The fact that she says this is interesting. Undoubtedly, the many study drawings of the mask in Valerie’s notebooks (Fig 117) illustrate this new discovery of an otherwise atavistic historical reference. As earlier mentioned, such encounters in art were commonplace with a lot of Diaspora

artists. They are often said to eventually ‘self-discover’ these stock symbols of ‘African history’ through the mediation of the Western Museum. So, it is on the one hand self-discovery but was also an aesthetic of the period, albeit a very politically complicated one. These episodes of self-discovery invariably speak to histories of slavery, colonialism and oppression more generally. As, in the case of apartheid South Africa the oppressive regime-endorsed programme of segregation that kept communities away from each other culturally. Governed by the white minority, apartheid mechanised sub-racialised divisions by in South Africa. What is interesting is that although Valerie does sketches of African masks, they do not really impact on her work as much as they did for other African artists. She instead goes for the carnivalesque mask in her paintings.

Valerie’s use of the mask, therefore, would have to be read with a great deal of nuance. Since simply saying that her incorporation of so-called ‘African mask’ imagery into her work was due to her having been born South African - would be a grave mistake. Instead, I would propose that this connection speaks to the historical fractures, disconnections, and ‘displacement(s)’ that she experienced – which summarily take us back to the notions of ‘belonging’ and ‘unbelonging’, the main themes of this chapter. Like many of her cosmopolitan contemporaries, renowned modernists, Valerie would have considered African masks as a source of inspiration (as per her statement that she found them wonderful).

It can, therefore, be concluded that the representation of the mother within this painting somewhat subverts dominant cultural narratives of gender, family, class, and race. It also unmask the everyday, normalised, and institutionalised representational practice of gender, family and women. What would have conventionally been “bourgeoisification” (Bell, 2002: 12) of the mother within the so-called Victorian family turns into multi-contestation of the public and intimate representation of the mother figure in family portraiture – aberrance.

The Father’s Respectability and the Child’s Pain

Although there are three figures in the painting, my attention was drawn to the mother, as I had noticed that her story emerged in many of Valerie’s paintings. The section on masks in this painting is related to what I explore in Chapter 5. However, it should not be overlooked that the other figures in the painting also contribute significantly to the interpretation of the central mother figure.

Valerie's father played an important role in her life, and she held him in high regard. In many of the interviews I conducted, it was clear that he represented a valued and acceptable authority figure, particularly in guiding her academic career. In a home video interview from 1998, Valerie was asked if she was ever jealous of her mother's relationship with her brother. Her response, "I had Daddy, didn't I?" was a clear reflection of the internal parent-child dynamics and divide, where her brother and mother were closer than Valerie and her father.

The image of a man in a suit is ubiquitous in many of Valerie's paintings. Although in many of them, we only see his back, in two earlier portraits *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27) and *The Family* (1960) (Fig. 29), the man faces the viewer.¹²⁷ It is unknown whether the man who has his back to the viewer is the same as the man who faces the viewers and whose likeness is acclaimed to be the artist's father, Abe Desmore. In these two paintings, the father wears the same dark suit and tie with the same strict pose. Even though in both paintings his facial skin colour is different, and the shape of his face is not quite the same, with his face in the one painting, *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27), painted in white with hues of blue and red in the cheeks, in the other painting he is dark grey with slight hints of colourful tones of yellow and orange. However, we are aware that he is the same person. His dress code and pose with those strict stares looking straight back to the viewer gives off the same kind of social standing, fatherly guardedness, protection and respectability.

Mooney argues that the genre of portraiture established the use of "pose, prop, and personas that inform and influence our interpretations of the image" (2014: 24). As mentioned in chapter 1, , Abe Desmore's¹²⁸ public positions are consistent with the image of the man in the suit in both paintings – respected and authoritative. Attesting to this Warren Siebrits states:

The father is clearly, as most families would work at that time, he's the patriarch—a disciplinarian and a major educationist...He's almost brewing over with indignation. You can see the tightness of, especially his mouth and so on. (2019)

It also meant adopting dress codes that would articulate this modernist approach. The father is the only person dressed and wearing a suit – almost to visibly assert this acquisition of modern standards. While in both paintings he is not placed in the centre, his placement on the right-hand side in *The Family* (1959) (Fig. 27) and left-hand side in *The Family* (1960) (Fig. 29), like a ghost is an indication that he is not the centre of this story, yet, holds some sort of vital presence.

¹²⁷ *The Family* (1959) showing Valerie Desmore as a young child with her parents and *The Family* (1960) showing brother Conference Desmore as a young child with his parents.

¹²⁸ A well-known teacher school principal of Trafalgar High School, writer, and a respected political Figure a member of the political party African Political Organisation (APO) (1909 – 1923).

Curiously, within this paint Valerie paints herself the half bare-shouldered child positioned in a “very claustrophobic position” (Siebrits, 2019) as if squeezed into the edge of the painting with a facial expression of either shock or a scream as indicated by the open mouth. Such visual clues indicate what could be an underlying story behind this family painting, a sort of ‘tension’ – Valerie’s rejection that goes unnoticed by her parent and the keeping up of the so called ‘Victorian’ family image. Warren Siebrits speaking about this painting, states,

And then, just by how she’s compressed herself into the corner—it’s quite literal. I mean, there’s almost no space for Valerie. You know, she’s in a very claustrophobic position, where she’s not necessarily seen or heard. (Siebrits, 2019)

The man’s strict-looking “poker face” (Siebrits, 2019) indicates a dismissal, disconnection, or unawareness of what is happening with the two figures next to him. The mother, too, seems to be unaware of what the child standing next to her is going through. These elements speak to the ‘peculiarity’ that the artist herself alludes to when she talks about her family paintings, telling us that this is no ordinary family painting. Much could be speculated about this moment, especially it being a moment when the family was only made up of the three of them. The experiences of Valerie’s schooling life and the rejections she faced could be one of the readings of this moment. The fact that her mother is somewhat restrained or muted by the suggested mask renders her somewhat powerless in Valerie’s situation. Yet, the father, looking straight ahead, seems adamant and unphased. However, as I have illustrated above in the section about her transgression, the fact that the mask is not a solid covering over her face might suggest an attempt to speak out. It is difficult to firmly apply meaning without knowing the artist’s intention behind the painting. We are only left with these strong visual impressions of how the three figures seem to be or not be interacting with each other. We are left with a ‘maybe’.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined four key concepts: belonging, longing, looking longingly, and unbelonging, and unpacked them in relation to Valerie’s painting, *The Family* (Fig 28) Through these concepts, I have proposed that Valerie’s painting reflects her childhood, and how race issues have affected her small family to the point of (un)(be)longing. I have also explored the ideas of defamiliarisation as an extension of the forms of (un)(be)longing. Since *The Family* (Fig. 27) is one of her most well-known works, studying it through defamiliarisation heightens its accumulation of cultural value. By examining the painting through the lens of (un)(be)longing as a form of defamiliarisation, we can appreciate the contextual complexities of race conversations that the

painting reveals, including forms of self-reinvention through multiple identities, cooption, masking, self-whitening, concealing, passing and so on. These revelations require nuance, and they highlight the importance of artwork analysis as an integral part of understanding what the artwork may not necessarily represent. Institutions that have engaged with Valerie's work have not gone deep enough to engage with the artist's practice but instead have recycled limited knowledge on this artist. To derive the work's meaning, it can no longer be read as a standalone entity or only through its subject matter, but rather how the work's multiple appearances over time have accumulated diverse meanings that need to be discursively considered. In this light, *The Family* (Fig. 27) portrait is examined as a biomythography, oscillating between Valerie's sense of (un)(be)longing and defamiliarization, as a 'maybe'. As a 'maybe', this close analysis accentuates multiple perspectives, which do not limit the interpretation of the work to a single understanding but rather open up other possibilities for engaging it.

Chapter 4

Mother's (un)Homing



Figure 41: (left) Valerie Desmore, *Shadows/Now you know where I am coming from*, 1996, Oil paint, 120 x 81cm, Collection of Cecil Feront

Figure 42: (right) Valerie Desmore, *Violet and The Peacocks*, 1998, Oil paint, 102 x 76cm Simon Pickstone-Taylor Collection

*What is home? The place I was born?
Where I grew up? Where my parents live?
Where I live and work as an adult?
Is home a geographical space, a historical
space, and emotional, sensory space?*

—Chandra Mohanty (2003: 126)

Introduction

In 1996, Valerie Desmore made the painting *Shadows/Now You Know Where I am coming from* (1996).¹²⁹ It is said that she based this painting on her mother's family history.¹³⁰ In this brightly coloured painting, we see a young woman with a look of surprise on her face and arms folded across her stomach. She is sitting on a cushioned peacock-high-back-wicker-throne-armchair¹³¹ which is placed on a Persian carpet in the middle of the room (the foreground of the painting). The young woman is said to represent Valerie's mother, Violet Desmore. Behind her an older woman facing Violet's direction, wearing a long black winter jacket and hat while holding a red flower. Mysterious and haunting, like a ghostly presence, the woman stands under a spotlight that creates a silhouette over her structure while still showing her greyish face and greenish hands holding a flower. The older standing woman is said to represent Violet's mother (Valerie's grandmother), Elizabeth Arends. Also placed under the same spotlight, next to the woman, is a gold-framed portrait of what looks like a man with a moustache. He is wearing a suit. The portrait that hangs on the wall, according to Simon Pickstone-Taylor, is the portrait of Harry E.V. Pickstone, Violet's father (Valerie's grandfather).¹³²

In 1998, Valerie made another painting titled *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998). In this work, Violet is the child standing in a pastoral field — her father's farm, Lekkerwijn — with the farmhouse in the background surrounded by hills.¹³³ Violet stands in the foreground, with a sad face looking down, unmoved by the playful peacocks circling around her. Valerie discusses this painting in a video interview conducted during her visit to South Africa. Valerie notes that this painting is based on her mother Violet's traumatic childhood memories. Speaking about this painting, Valerie (1998) says:

¹²⁹ In the exhibition *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black Women Artists 1940 — 2002* (2022 — 2023) at the Norval Foundation the work was titled *Self Portrait*. This is how the current owner received it when it was sold to her in 2008.

¹³⁰ This is the same year Fiona Fleck visited South Africa in search of their family history, where she met Wendy.

¹³¹ Interestingly this chair appears in several other works i.e. Ken (c1970) and Quentin (c 1970). Given that these two paintings are live studies of family friends one can assume that the chair belonged to the artist, which implies a strategy of assemblage in which she collages actual objects with photographic references — a kind of hyper sampling. See <https://www.viad.co.za/hypersampling-identities>.

¹³² As mentioned in the introduction, and since Valerie and her mother are the main protagonists in this chapter, I deliberately refer to all people by their first names as much as possible, except in the case of authors, to avoid confusion around names as most people mentioned here share the same surname (Desmore). Resorting to the use of first names, therefore, introduces a sense of the familial and is a particularly pragmatic means of navigating this familial space.

¹³³ Three years after *Shadows/Now You Know Where I am Coming From* (1996), Valerie produced another painting about her mother titled *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998). She made this painting shortly after her first visit to South Africa.

This painting is about my mother's memories of her childhood...and my mother remembers... being walked through the rooms at Lekkerwijn. My grandfather is holding her hand and took her out into the lawn. And she saw the peacocks and it was a very strong... made a very strong image in my mind. You see, my mother like my father, my mother had one white parent. Her father was her white parent. My father had one white parent as well, and his mother was his white parent...That is her memory... of her white father... and his house.

Using her impressive colourful, impasto painting style, Valerie lures us into thinking these paintings are of a happy childhood memory, only for us to be jolted by the image of a sad and lonely child. The seemingly happy image of the brightly coloured surroundings, ironically, now proposes something more ominous than what initially arrests the eye. Suddenly Violet, the child who is portrayed in the painting, looks out of place, lost or even abandoned. The situation now probes deeper questions about what the strained relationship between the locations might be imaged in the painting, the peacocks, the home and the child.

Instead of unpacking the formal elements of the paintings *Now You Know Where I am Coming From* (1996) and *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998), as exemplary of expressionism, within this chapter I engage how Valerie continues with the exploration of “longing”, “belonging”, “unbelonging” and “disbelonging” as composite forms of biomythography through the illustrations of her mother. Both paintings depict Violet's childhood traumas and fractured family through portentous depictions of home as Valerie grapples with the idea of home. In one painting, Valerie portrays her mother as a child sitting alone on a chair inside a lounge, while in the other, the child stands alone outside with an illustration of a farmhouse in the background.

It is curious that in the works analysed in the previous chapter, the mother is depicted as an adult. She is masked and centred within the familiar context of a family portrait. Here, however, the mother is imaged as a child, noticeably estranged and legibly sad and alone. Valerie's tarrying focus on the mother prompts a number of questions, given that the painting in the previous chapters came from the period of her earlier work, the 1950s and – 1960s, before the twenty-year hiatus of her art career to become a fashion designer. In this situation, we may want to ask, what does it mean for Valerie to return to painting her mother imaged as a child? What does this alteration or age reversal of her mother's image mean? In one sense, so much gets revealed about Valerie's relationship with her mother through the ways in which she chooses to single her out and make paintings about her. Valerie chooses to tell her family story by painting her mother. In another sense, we see Valerie constructing a context through an interplay between shame and pride, innocence and culpability in the representation of the mother, leaving us once again with a

proposition of an ontological biomythographical ‘maybe’. This is further impressed upon by her refusal to explain the work as illustrated further on in the chapter.

An Encumbered Family History

Valerie’s mother, Violet, never lived with her father because of the race bar that prohibited her parents, Elizabeth Arends and Harry Pickstone, from marrying. Even though Harry ended up marrying someone else, he clandestinely looked after Elizabeth (Valerie’s grandmother) and her children (Valerie’s mother, Violet, and Valerie’s aunts, Vera and Sissie) until his death in 1939. While Harry was secretly known to Elizabeth’s family, the descendants of Harry ‘sand Elizabeth’s family had never been in direct contact. Their disconnection was further prohibited by the fact that when Elizabeth died in 1947, Violet (who by then was the only living child of Harry and Elizabeth) immigrated that same year to London with her husband Abe Desmore and their children (Vital and Varena).¹³⁴ By this time, Valerie had been living in London for nearly two years.

Many years later, in 1995, Fiona Fleck¹³⁵ (Valerie’s niece) visited South Africa in search of their family history. This is where she discovered the descendants of her great-grandfather Harry Pickstone and their family home, the farmhouse Lekkerwijn in Groot Drakenstein. It was the home built by Pickstone. As if in response to Fiona’s trip, Valerie made the painting, *Shadows/Now You Know Where I am Coming from* (1996). In 1998, three years after Fiona’s visit to South Africa, Valerie herself also visited this home.¹³⁶ She was seventy-three years old at the time, and by then, fifty-three years had passed since she had left South Africa. Her visit occurred around the time of the exhibition *Land and Lives*, which reintroduced her work to South African audiences since her showcase in 1947. Shortly after her own visit, Valerie made another painting *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998).

Together the two paintings demonstrate what can be considered a visualisation of a three-generational conversation about home through Valerie’s mother’s memory, Fiona’s and Valerie’s visit. In these paintings, we witness Valerie beginning to represent home as a site of troubled hope and trauma. In *Now You Know Where I am Coming From* (1996), Valerie represents home in less specific ways, leaving us unsure if the scene of the painting is the inside of the farmhouse

¹³⁴ Since Vera died 1937, two years before Harry, Violet was then the only living child of Harry and Elizabeth, yet she was never formally introduced to Harry’s family.

¹³⁵ Fiona Fleck is the daughter of Valerie’s sister.

¹³⁶ This was also the time when the exhibition *Land and Lives* was on show at the National Gallery where her work also featured and was included in a South African exhibition after fifty years since her last show in 1947.

Lekkerwijn or elsewhere. It alludes to a home that is a generative concept of a space in which people (a family) live. In the second painting, however, *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998), Valerie specifically references the farm Lekkerwijn and its location. In this work, she paints the farmhouse (Fig 43) with its surrounding mountains in the background, behind the child who stands far away from the house, making it decipherable that the scene of this painting is Lekkerwijn Farm.





Figure 43: Photographs of the Lekkerwijn farm found in Valerie Desmore's archive in France. They were taken during her visit to South Africa in 1998.

This play between the inside and outside of the home invokes the many complex layers of “longing”, “belonging”, “unbelonging” and “disbelonging” as inter-generational trauma, displacement, homelessness, and rejection that I examine in this chapter through the concepts of ‘homing’ and ‘unhoming’. I was inspired by artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum’s concept of “homing”, as depicted in her multi-channel video art installation “Homing Device” (2018). In this work, she beautifully illustrates how pigeons possess an innate ability to navigate their way home, even in the face of various obstacles and alterations to the landscape and geography. Thulile Gamedze, in response to Sunstrum’s work, equates this ability to human instincts, calling it the “homing impulse”, suggesting that it is the “desires around home” (2019: 35), to belong, feel safe, and be loved, even in a world of “alienation and exclusion” (2019: 35). While this rich exploratory concept of homing is derived and inspired by Sunstrum’s work, this chapter does not directly engage Sunstrum’s work beyond this point as the material content is so vastly dissimilar. The distinction here is that Sunstrum’s notion of homing foregrounds intuition as a means of home-finding and homemaking, which proposes homing as a pursuit of, or longing for, home. Whereas home in Valerie’s art speaks to a broader social process and social arrangements, which at times, are about how families are pushed apart in order to sustain oppressive ideas of nuclear family structures. To engage these complex ideas of home within this chapter, homing is engaged as a theoretical framework through two main motivations. First, it explores ‘homing’ and ‘unhoming,’ through Valerie’s artistic and conceptual engagement with her family history,. Secondly, it looks at how this body of work critically touches on homing and unhoming as part of art historical writing.

Homing

As a theoretical framework, I relate homing to Sara Ahmed’s (1999), Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Irune Del Rio Gabiola’s (2009) collective notion of home as embodied. Here, “beong at home”(Ahmed 1999:91) is understood as a feeling and sensation, in that it is something we feel, where the body engages with place through sights, smells, sounds, touch, feeling and memory. At the same time, homing is thought of as intertwined with homelessness, displacement, migration and nationalism, all of which poignantly relate to Valerie’s story. I maintain that Valerie’s painting of her mother, when discussed in relation to homing, moves beyond an obtainable space of the fixed object of a home, its location, geographical site and nationhood. Rather, it invokes what Del Rio Gabiola pronounces as follows, “Instead of inhabiting home, the experiences of feeling at home inhabit the body” (2009: 82). In this regard, Del Rio Gabiola bases her ideas on Ahmed’s 1999 essay *Home and Away*. In this essay, Ahmed dispels the idea that home is only the place where

you come from. She insists that returning to a place you knew as home, which holds memories of your past, can no longer be home in the full sense of what it was (Ahmed, 2000: 91). Instead, she proposes that home can be understood as an in-between space of a perpetual arrival and leaving. This is what she termed as a ‘transitional space’ of association, affiliation, reconnection and self-discovery. I extend this ‘transitional space’ to manifest as a form of circulatory homing and a ‘creative sojourn’, referring to how Valerie’s return to and leaving from home particularly resulted in those two paintings.

The use of the verb ‘homing’, he says, “highlights the processual and biographically evolving constitution of home” (Ahmed 2000: 91). The notion of circulatory homing (implying homing as a continuous journeying and never settling) is an important consideration given the fact that Valerie and Fiona are, in essence, arriving from another ancestral home. England was, after all, their great-grandfather Harry’s birth home: the place that he originally left to settle in South Africa. By this, a circulatory leaving, returning and arriving, just to leave again, is gestured —rom South Africa (Valerie) to England and England (Fiona) to South Africa and back to England. To think of circulatory homing via Valerie’s two paintings produces what Del Rio Gabiola further describes as a way “to resignify, ‘home’ through attachments rather than through origin or destination” (in Ahmed 2009: 82). This can be sensed in the journeys that both Valerie and Fiona make in order to reconnect with their ancestries through the back-and-forth oscillations between homes of their forefather in England and South Africa.

Chandra Mohanty terms *home* as a feminist pursuit, which she describes as “remapping boundaries and renegotiating connections” (2003: 87). This makes it possible to think of homing as forms of “re-membling” (hooks, 1995)¹³⁷ and “re-memorying” (Morrison, 1987; Gqola, 2010),¹³⁸ — two feminist and biomythographical concepts discussed in Chapter 2. This is highlighted more by the fact that all these journeys are done by women —Valerie’s mother, Valerie and Fiona, which within this context implies a particular gendered experience of homing. Through these concepts, we are able to read Valerie’s and Fiona’s journeys in relation to Valerie’s eventual paintings.

¹³⁷ Referring to hooks’ notion of piecing together stories that I discuss in chapter 1.

¹³⁸ Referring to Pumla Gqola’s (what is slavery to me) strategies of re-membling the traumatic story of Sarah Baartman’s. The term “rememory” was used by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* (1987). Caroline Rody in her analysis of Morrison’s work, explains how “‘Rememory’ as trope postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present, and thus neatly conjoins the novel’s supernatural vision with its aspiration to communal epic, realizing the ‘collective memory’ of which Morrison speaks” (1995: 101).

It is possible to suggest that the encounters between Valerie, Fiona and the other descendants of Harry Pickstone, which initially happened as though between strangers, speak to a sort of collective homing — a re-membering and re-memorying of their family histories together. This was attested to by Wendy Pickstone-Taylor, Valerie's cousin, during their reunion when Valerie visited South Africa in 1998. Wendy admitted that their collective perception of their family had completely changed. This sort of transformation puts into question the notion of the erstwhile seemingly contained family structure, which through the disruption of the settler colonial narrative, offers a welcome contestation via a more dynamic and complex familial orchestration between so-called servant and master. I propose that the long episodes of their collective estrangement as a family with a rather encumbered genealogy, scattered over geographies and generations, becomes the very essence that finally evokes their eventual remapping and renegotiation of their family histories in ways that shifted how they thought about their connected pasts. These are pasts that Ahmed claims “bind[s] the self to a given place” (1999: 331).

The titles of the two paintings *Shadows/Now you Know Where I am Coming From* (1996) and *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998) allow us to deduce that the paintings become an allusion to Violet's, (and by extension, Valerie's and Fiona's) bind to these places that were largely unfamiliar to them, gesturing towards Ahmed's proposition of “patterns of estrangement”. These paintings articulate a sense of their ‘return’ to a particular moment in South African history, as though reclaiming a home that they were once never allowed to have or even return to., a home they were never allowed to know to begin with. For many exiles, the dawn of democracy from the mid-90s, were the years of bitter-sweet ‘return’ to a South Africa from which they were estranged. For Fiona, who was born in England, South Africa was a home that she had never seen until that very ‘return’ (arrival) to a place she never left. For Valerie, it was a return to a place that did not ‘want her’. This return became possible with the dawn of democracy, allowing Valerie and Fiona to return in ways they could have never done during apartheid.

It is this kind of return that, posthumously, offers hope, healing, and a giving-of-voice to Valerie's mother through the paintings that are proposed here as a telling of her story. As such, it touches on questions of belonging within which Valerie pushes us to think of ‘homing’ as a verb and an emotion that she enacts in two ways, between the giving-of-voice and visualisation. By painting her mother in these two scenarios, Valerie manifests and visualises (drawing, imaging, imagining, writing and inserting) her mother inside this home that she, by birthright and therefore ancestrally) belonged to. Yet, due to the complexities of racial politics this is the very home that she

systemically and, equally un-belonged. Secondly, Valerie paints Violet as a visible person, albeit rather sad. Through this bestowment of visibility upon her mother, Valerie metaphorically makes her seen and heard. Violet now inhabits her 'belonging to' and is temporarily accepted within a home that she never really lived in.¹³⁹

The idea of simultaneously being of every place and no place, as exemplified in the situation of Valerie and Fiona having had no 'home' in South Africa, offers us a nuanced approach to homing and belonging. This has to be multi-scalar for those all impacted by imperialism. In characterising her notion of homing, Ahmed capitalises the word *Home*, arguing that the home of origin (the real home) is most often unfamiliar. She states, "Interestingly, it is the real home, the very space from which one images oneself to have originated, and in, which one projects the self as both homely and original, that is the most unfamiliar: it is here that one is a guest, relying on the hospitality of others" (1999: 330). Even though Ahmed was, in this instance, writing about migrant communities whose initial coming together is often based on their being strangers in a foreign country, she concludes that this condition of being strangers eventually becomes the reason for their collective homing. This is how she illustrates her idea of 'patterns of estrangement'. To do this, Ahmed draws on literature that links the "sense of having a home to the formation of new communities" (1999: 84-85), where 'strangers' who share a lack of home, together create a new home and a new, sometimes an even more united, community. We can extend this thought of collective homing to how Valerie's painting functions in the evocation of an ultimate collective homing for the Desmore family. This, for Ahmed, implies that remembering home cannot be an individual task. Instead, it is "through forming communities that create multiple identifications through collective acts of remembering in the absence of a shared knowledge or a familiar terrain" (Ahmed 1999: 229) that the lost or forgotten familial histories may be pieced together again. To this end, home can, therefore, be thought of as both an assembling and disassembling of communities.

Through Valerie's physical return, she enacts a gesture of taking her mother, Violet, home spiritually and metaphorically. This is what she literally illustrates in the paintings. All these gestures, beginning with her and Fiona travelling back to South Africa, resulted in the two paintings. These works are, therefore, deeply enriched by the mother's childhood, which inextricably shows us the exponential conceptual evolution of Valerie's work in later years. This is said in comparison to how Valerie had represented her mother in earlier paintings like *The Family*

¹³⁹ In another notebook she writes "These Pickstones know nothing of me" (Valerie's notebook).

(1959) (Fig. 27). In other words, we can say that it is through Valerie's painting and re-painting of the mother's story that we are able to gain a richer understanding of Valerie's family history. Particularly how the mother's position evolves in Valerie's mind – the expressionist tool that Ie discussed in Chapter 3. As a result, Valerie Desmore's art inheres to a notably deliberate tendency to focus on the maternal side of her family history (Fig 44).

VALERIE DESMORE FULL FAMILY TREE

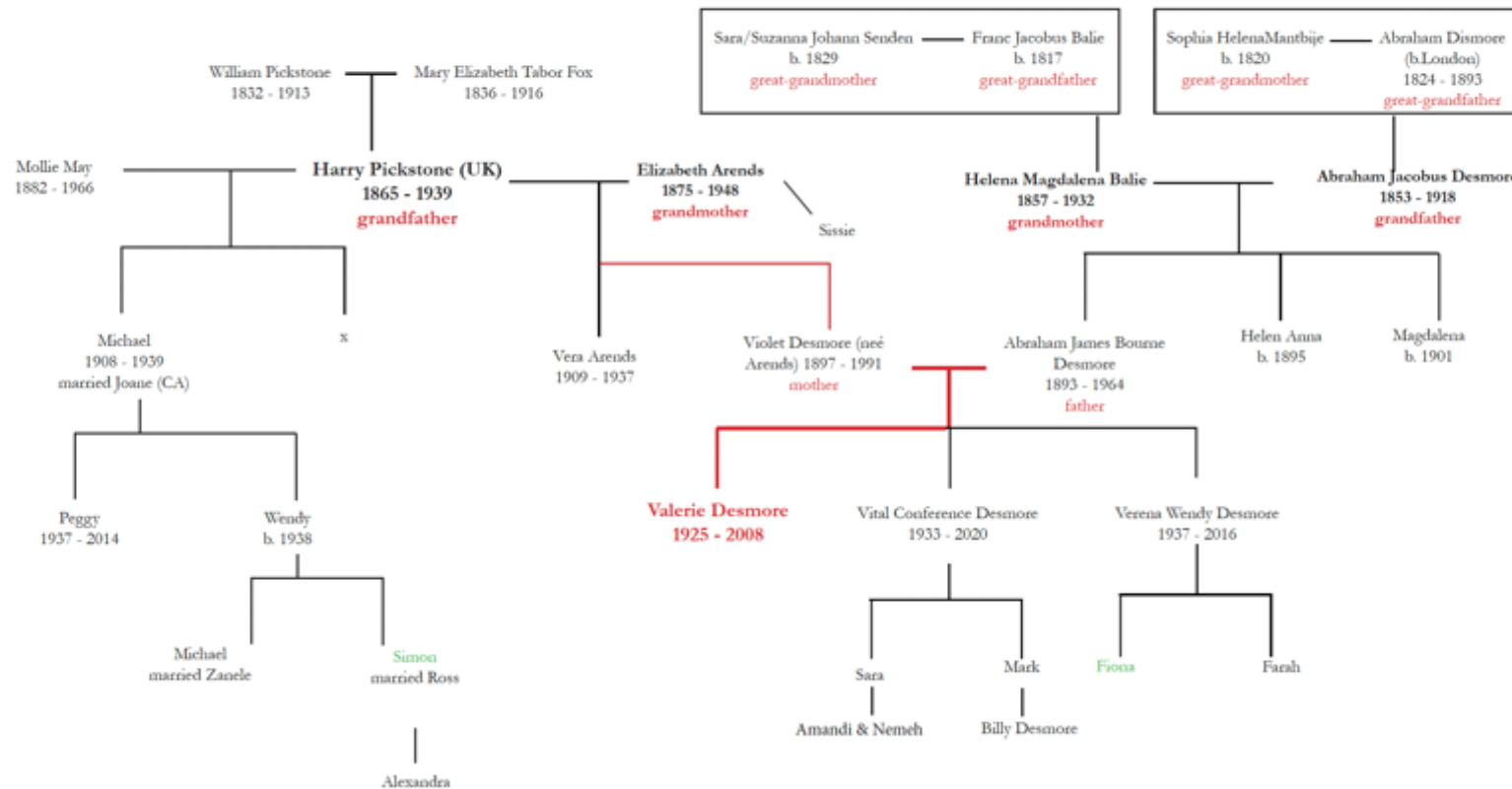


Figure 44: Valerie Desmore's Family Tree

As already stated in previous chapters, while the purpose of this research remains focused on Valerie Desmore's art, her family history is also inextricably tied to how we are able to read her work. In order to understand this family history, the above family tree has been drawn up as an attempt to create a visual map of the Desmore family. Two family members were consulted in order to generate this family tree. Simon Pickstone-Taylor, Desmore's second cousin, provided information on the maternal Pickstone side of the family. Fiona Fleck, Valerie's niece, provided information on the paternal Desmore side of the family. The family tree has been drawn up with the assistance of artist Reshma Cbbiba. I combined, contrasted and compared the information provided by the two relatives to produce the above map. Though this map represents the fascinating story of the two sides of Valerie Desmore's family, in this section, I focus on her maternal family history.

Now You Know Where I am Coming From

Violet (Valerie's mother), born in 1897, was the second child of Elizabeth. Violet was a child that Elizabeth had with Harry Pickstone.¹⁴⁰ Harry was a white British settler who became famous for establishing South Africa's fruit industry in partnership with the imperialist mining magnate Cecil Rhodes. Harry is said to have met Elizabeth on one of Rhodes' farms where she (Elizabeth) worked. As already mentioned, together, they had two children, Vera¹⁴¹ and Violet. Said to have been in love and committed to each other, the two were, unfortunately, prohibited from marrying due to the race bar.¹⁴² This meant that Harry and Elizabeth could not openly continue their relationship, even though they had two kids. In the end, Harry married Mollie nee May, resulting in Harry having to negotiate living two parallel lives. He secretly looked after Elizabeth while openly living as the husband of Mollie.¹⁴³ Harry clandestinely supported Elizabeth by buying her a house on Yarra Street,¹⁴⁴ just off Glengariff Road, in Three Anchor Bay, Cape Town. This is the home where Elizabeth, as a single parent, brought up her three children: the firstborn being Cissy, whom Elizabeth had before meeting Harry, and, the last two, Violet (Valerie's mother) and Vera, who were Harry's biological children.¹⁴⁵ Even though Harry saw to all of their needs until his death, he apparently 'never' visited them, as this would have been illegal by the laws of the race bar. Besides, he lived with another family who had very little to no knowledge of Elizabeth and the children.

¹⁴⁰ The founder of the South African fruit industry, Pickstone Fruits. "Harry Pickstone, an Englishman with experience in growing fruit in California, convinced Rhodes that a commercial nursery was needed to propagate new varieties of fruit trees for the industry. Rhodes financed his first venture, the Pioneer Fruit Growing Company. In 1896 Rhodes decided to invest further in fruit farming. Pickstone advised him to buy old wine farms in the Groot Drakenstein, Wellington and Stellenbosch areas. In March 1897, Rhodes secured the first of more than twenty farms, including Boschendal and Rhone. Twelve young managers were appointed, many of whom had been trained in California. Under Pickstone's tutelage, they transformed the farms, introducing modern pruning, grafting and irrigation methods and training farmworkers in the new skills. They planted 200,000 deciduous fruit trees - pears, apricots, plums and peaches. In its new incarnation as Boschendal — The Estate, the former "Rhodes Fruit Farms continues to be a major source of employment for local communities". See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boschendal#Rhodes_&_Pickstone

¹⁴¹ Vera died in 1937 after giving birth to twins.

¹⁴² The race bar, also known as the colour bar, developed by J.B.M. Hertzog, is among a host of other bills written in 1911, one of which forbade interracial marriages or any social engagement between people of different races. Other race bar laws included the Mines and Workers Act of 1911 and the Wage Act of 1925, to restrict the rights of Black people within the labour market, giving preference and protection to white settlers. See Eric Silver, 1966, "Colour Bar Ends at All London Stations", *Guardian*, 16 July, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/jul/16/archive-colour-bar-e...> (accessed 22 September 2018).

¹⁴³ He subsequently married Mollie May when he could not marry Elizabeth Arends. Together with Mollie May, his American wife, they had two sons, Michael Pickstone and Joan California Pickstone.

¹⁴⁴ The house still exists (see Figure 45). I recently visited the same street and found that the house is still there.

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth lived in this house until it was sold. Once sold, she moved to stay with Cissy in the Cape Flats the same year she died in 1947. This was the same year Valerie's family moved to London.



Figure 45: Violet Arend's home on Yarra Street, Three Anchor Bay, Cape Town, South Africa. (March 1995), – Fiona Fleck's Archive

As a result, Harry remained a big family secret in the Desmore home. Only the older family members were in the know of Harry Pickstone's love affair with Elizabeth. The younger members, like Valerie knew very little about the Pickstones, resulting in them losing total links when they all moved to England. In an interview with Fiona, Valerie recalls the family secrecy around Pickstone saying:

[As a child] I didn't know anything, except I knew there were people called the Pickstone's who were on their [Elizabeth, Violet and Cissy's] lips every day. You know. Either my mother or my grandmother, talking to Cissy or my mother talking to her mother. Or sometimes servants came down from Groot Drakenstein to give us a hand and they'll be a little talk about the Pickstone's then. So, the Pickstone's were an entity around. Cecil Rhodes was also an entity around. I mean, it was like Cecil Rhodes was my grandfather or something. You know, because he was talked about a lot. And there was this photograph of this man hanging up. I never asked who it was, but when I saw the photographs of Harry Pickstone when I was older, I knew that this is a photograph of him. (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

Fiona Fleck, working as a journalist, managed to track down Harry Pickstone's family through her work links in Russia, which resulted in her traveling to South Africa in 1995 and eventually meeting Wendy Pickstone-Taylor. In the home video interview, Lionel Bowman, Wendy Pickstone and Valerie Desmore, recount Fiona's trip as follows:

Lionel She came to Cape Town to search out... research for her roots. Highly intelligent girl. And she works for Reuters at the moment in Germany. And she came to seek out her roots and that's how she met Wendy.

Wendy And, why she was...she was in Groot Drakenstein because as a young journalist she'd gone off freelancing into Moscow and she speaks Russian, and she had turned up the Khrushchev, umm... what is... the Verwoerd-Khrushchev accord, and that is the South African Russian agreement to keep the diamond market stable.

Lionel That's right.

Wendy So the result of that, the De Beers in London wouldn't let this dame out of their sights. Every time she moved they were tracking her. So, she went back to London, and she was speaking to one of the senior DeBeers' men there and saying she was coming out to South Africa to which he replied, "well you must go see our fruit farms".

And then Delia [journalist conducting the interview] this really is the case. She... umm... she went to Boschendal and umm... she's a very... She is a very delicate, softly spoken, experienced little journalist, but she's also very very well mannered.

I can just imagine that she was given the PR girl for the day, who was told to pin this dame down and give her a good day. And she got into the dining room, and she saw the maps of the Rhodes fruit farm holdings and the...which includes that statement of my grandfather's land holdings.

So, said Fiona to umm... Alison.
Such a sweet girls Alison [PR person].

Wendy So, Alison came on the phone.
And I heard Alison saying to me "Wendy there is a person here she is a journalist from Reuters, and she says Harry Pickstone was her great grandfather" ...And I was on my way to Cape Town, so I asked her to stay in Boschendal around until three-thirty. When I could then return. And then there is whole long story after that, Dhelia, I mean it really is fascinating. Because I didn't believe a word of what the girl was telling me. Except that she was telling the truth, I knew that. And the first thing Fiona said to me was, "she said, she didn't know whether this was true, her aunt had told her certain things...they would..." ...this is Valerie. And I mean, I've always known. And indeed, had seen pictures of the family and Simon had actually asked whether we should look up the family. And my reply was no, you know, we are very visible and if they wanted to find us, they could. And so...I met Fiona...but this all happened four years ago.

Valerie In '95.

Wendy And it's been a very slow process. And it's a very important process because it's...it's...There has been a complete change in all of our perception of the family.

When Simon, (Valerie's second cousin from the Pickstone side of the family), moved to London for his university studies, he picked up on this connection and became very close to Valerie. As already stated, this family connection only becomes concretised in 1995, when Fiona visits South Africa and connects with Wendy Pickstone-Taylor, Harry's great-granddaughter.¹⁴⁶ Wendy had also heard that Valerie's family left for London. Describing this Simon(Wendy's son) says:

All we knew was that they'd all gone to England. Our neighbour once showed our mother a picture of them because the cook at the local hotel kept correspondence with that family. The cook was a Cape Coloured woman. Basically, there was no contact for seventy years. Because essentially, Harry died [...] She [Mollie the grandmother] wasn't going to talk about some child he had had with some housekeeper [...] It was a very sad relationship because my great grandfather was quite famous, in terms of farming and a whole lot of stuff like that, but we never understood why his personal life wasn't spoken about. (personal comms 2019)

In the minds of the Pickstone family, this relationship had been a case of promiscuity, as was common in those days and not a real 'love' relationship in the sense of being known and accepted even by the Pickstone family back in England. Simon (2019) however further recalls:

But actually, what happened was Harry had come out here and met Elizabeth Arends, Valerie's grandmother. She was a Cape-Coloured woman and was Rhodes's housekeeper at his cottage here in Groot Drakenstein. Basically, his family in England accepted her. This was their first grandchild, and there were eight children—seven sons and a daughter—so Violet, Valerie's mother, was the first grandchild in this family. They even sent a silver art-deco belt for Elizabeth to wear, and they were non-conformist. They completely accepted that this child was their first grandchild, but then what happened was that in the Cape there was the colour bar. Harry said, "Listen, this is not a healthy place for us to live" (I never knew any of this until we met Valerie, but this was her story). He wanted to move to New Mexico. He said, "Listen, we can't live in this society. There's far too much prejudice here". In New Mexico, in America, at that stage, it was a lot more liberal. There were a lot more mixed-race families. It was ok. But Elizabeth refused. She said, "No, my family is here, I'm not going anywhere. Thank you very much". (personal comms 2019)

Valerie captures this history in the painting *Now You Know Where I Come From* (1996). By placing an illustration of Elizabeth as the silhouetted figure, and Harry, the portrayed distant father, at the back of the room, Valerie somehow implies the secret relationship between the two. She reminds us that the main story of this painting is about how this relationship affected their child, Violet, in the way that it marred her identity throughout her entire life. It could therefore be said that the painting somewhat becomes a grand reveal of this secret past that Valerie perceptively visualises.

¹⁴⁶ "I made the connection with Simon's mother on my first trip to SA in 1995" (personal comms. Fiona 2019).

In reading Valerie's image of her mother Violet as the child who sits alone in the foreground of the painting, one might speculate that Violet is contemplating what might have become of her parents' forbidden romantic love affair. With this, Valerie draws us into the tragedy of her family history, giving us visual clues, such as the placement of the woman (Violet's mother, Elizabeth) behind Violet, at the extreme back of the room, but under a spotlight. This creates some suspense about what the connection between this ghostly figure and the seated child might be. Under the same spotlight, next to Elizabeth, is the gold-framed portrait painting of Violet's father, Harry, whom she never got to know and live with due to racial prohibitions in the South Africa of their time. As a child, Valerie recalls once asking her grandmother and mother about her grandfathers, noticing that she had no grandfather on either side of her family:

[...] the fact is, I didn't think it was too unusual because I didn't have a grandfather on either side. So, I said, "Why don't I have any...". I did ask. I said, "Why don't I have any grandfathers? I've only got grandmothers and other children have grandfathers. Why haven't I got grandfathers?" And they just said, "All your grandfathers are dead". (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

The distant image of the unknown grandfather and the unknown image of a man that hung in the passages of her grandmother's house in Three Anchor Bay could be speculated to be the man in the picture that hangs next to this silhouetted figure in the painting. Assuming this is the painting of Harry Pickstone, it might explain why it appears unrecognisable — as his facial features are illegible and hung so far back — symbolic of the fact that he is a kind of distant memory to both her (Valerie), and Violet, his daughter. Yet, this illustration of Harry through a golden Victorian framed portrait is suggestive of his immortalised status that is ensconced in history, since he was an important person in South Africa's farming history.¹⁴⁷



¹⁴⁷ A portrait of Harry Pickstone in a golden frame currently hangs in the Lekkerwijn Farmhouse in Groot Drakenstein that Valerie would have seen during her visit to South Africa in 1998.

Figure 46: (left), Portraits of Harry Pickstone at Lekkerwijn farm in Klein Drakenstein near Simondium.

Figure 47: (right), Painting of Harry Pickstone's father William Pickstone who lived in England. Willima never visited the Cape, but sent a silver belt as a present to Valerie's grandmother Elizabeth Arendt on the birth of Valerie's mother Violent. She was his first grandchild.

When I visited Lekkerwijn at the beginning of this research in 2019, I noticed many portraits of a similar kind, hung in the lounge of this farmhouse. I wondered whether Valerie had referenced these portraits in this painting, or if it was instead, a recollection of the paintings she saw in the passages of her grandmother's house. If, in this painting, Valerie is possibly collapsing three homes into one, we can think of a kind of 'homing' that Edward Said once noted to be the exile's perception of the world. He proposes that in this sense, "the new and old environment[s] are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally" (1990: 136). It could also have been that some parts of this painting illustrate her grandmother's home in Three Anchor Bay, or that they were the portraits from Lekkerwijn Farm. The other component being the third house, which could be a reference to her own London home. I make this connection to Valerie's London home because, the Persian carpet (Fig 48) and the peacock-high-back-wicker-throne-armchair where Violet sits in the painting are both from Valerie's own home – a reference that I found in many of her archive photos of the chair, which she used in many of her paintings such as those of her cats and her friend *Quentin* (1970) (Fig 49).



Figure 48: Valerie's Collection of Persian carpets. Simon Pickstone-Taylor's photo archive, Cape Town.



Figure 49: (left) Valerie Desmore, *Zazje on Red Chair*, 91 x 61cm (Simon Pickstone-Taylor Collection) (Right) Valerie Desmore, *Quentin*, c. 1970, oil on board, 106 x 71cm (Fiona Fleck Collection)
Both paintings show the peacock-high-back-wicker-throne-armchair similar to the one in the painting 'Now You Know Where I am Coming From' (1990)

Sara Ahmed also writes about “Home through the failure of memory” (1999: 330) and “the failure to fully inhabit the present or present space” (1999: 330). In this line of thought, Ahmed describes how yearning for home is oftentimes shaken by disconnections we may have with places we currently occupy and how that disconnection might be associated with a longing, remembering and disremembering of family histories. In that, the act of remembering family histories is also about remembering home, people and places, even if it is of places we never lived in. The home is a generational remembering of geographies and nations that indicates a tracing of family genealogies.

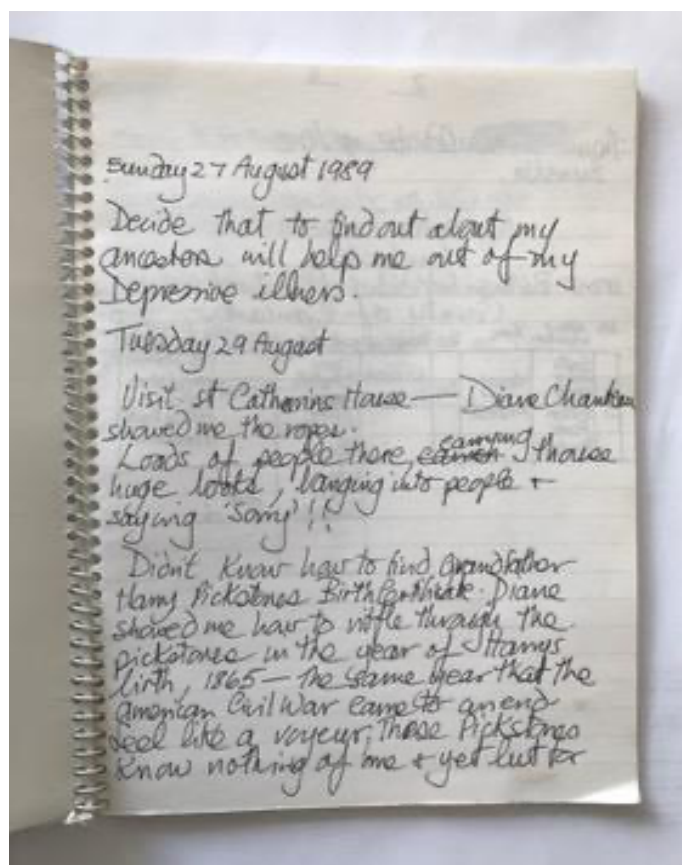


Figure 50: A diary entry in Valerie's notebook: "decide[d] that to find out about my ancestors will help me out of my depressive illness" (Sunday, 27 August 1989).

For a long time, Valerie yearned to discover her family history. This is something that she actively began investigating in her senior years. In one of her notebooks, she writes, "[I] decide[d] that to find out about my ancestors will help me out of my depressive illness" (Fig 50). In this small piece of self-documentation, we see how Valerie's return to South Africa, ten years after having written this note, might be linked to the views of home as a space of psychological healing; of this failing memory of home; whilst also in the process of self-discovery both physically and spiritually. As Gamedze also maintains, "From the onset, we are aware that, for us, 'going home' is bound to be a complicated conceptual, physical and spiritual practice" (2019: 34). It might then be possible to think of Valerie's visit to her grandfather's home as a kind of psychologically bound experience beyond the physical — echoing home not as a space of permanent return but rather as a 'transitional' and circulatory return, arrival and possibly departure again.

The historical memorialisation that Valerie evoked through the effect of the golden framed portrait is, however, not the same for Elizabeth, who only hovers like a ghost, with her story remaining largely unknown to the world. Standing in hopeless waiting, this image is based on the only photograph Valerie had of her grandmother (Fig 51), where Elizabeth stands in front of the house

that Pickstone bought for her on Yarra Street, in Anchor Bay (Sea Point), Cape Town. Valerie uses this image in a number of paintings, i.e. in the drawing *Shadows*, (also titled *The Transgressor Grandmother*) (1995), and a screen print *My Grandmother* (1995). In the archives there are several photos where her niece Fiona dresses in a similar way – remodelling this look. The repeated use of this image ends up being what Sally O’Reilly opines as a motif; a site and symbol of familiarity and political signification, where the image “then, has become recognised as the principal arena of the politics of identity, as well as a facilitator and marker of belonging” (2003: 10). In other words, this image of Elizabeth has become a familiar site, synonymous with her mother’s silenced story that gets invoked every time this image is used.



Figure 51: (left to right): Her grandmother in front of her house in Yarra Street, Cape Town; The silkscreen she made based on the previous photograph of her grandmother, titled *My Grandmother*, 1995. Screen print, 114 x 42cm; A silkscreen print based on the original photograph of Elizabeth on Yarra Street in Anchor Bay, See Point, Cape Town. The work is titled *Shadows* (and in other documents, *The Transgressor Grandmother*), 1995. Silkscreen; Valerie Desmore dressed in a similar fashion as her grandmother, photographed by Fiona in 1977; Fiona dressed in a similar fashion as her great-grandmother with the original photograph showing at the back; sketch of fashion item inspired by Grandmothers coat.

By titling the painting *Shadows/Now You Know Where I am Coming From*, Valerie further gives us clues that the back story of this painting is about something that lurks in the shadows and that the discovery of this history is through her painting.

I was able to verify what she implied with this title through archive documentation. In the JAG archive file, on a page where the picture of this painting is pasted, it is written, "Shadows 1995 painted after artist met her grandfather Harry Pickstone's descendants, Wendy and Simon Pickstone Taylor of Lekkerwijn in Klein Drakenstein near Simondium" (Fig 51). On the reverse of the painting, the artist wrote: "Now you know where I am coming from." This note is a reminder that the story of Violet's mother is intertwined with that of Valerie — the extension of a biography to others in her family. As such, it illustrates the coded ways in which Valerie used her paintings to tell her story and her family's history, through the telling of her mother's story.¹⁴⁸

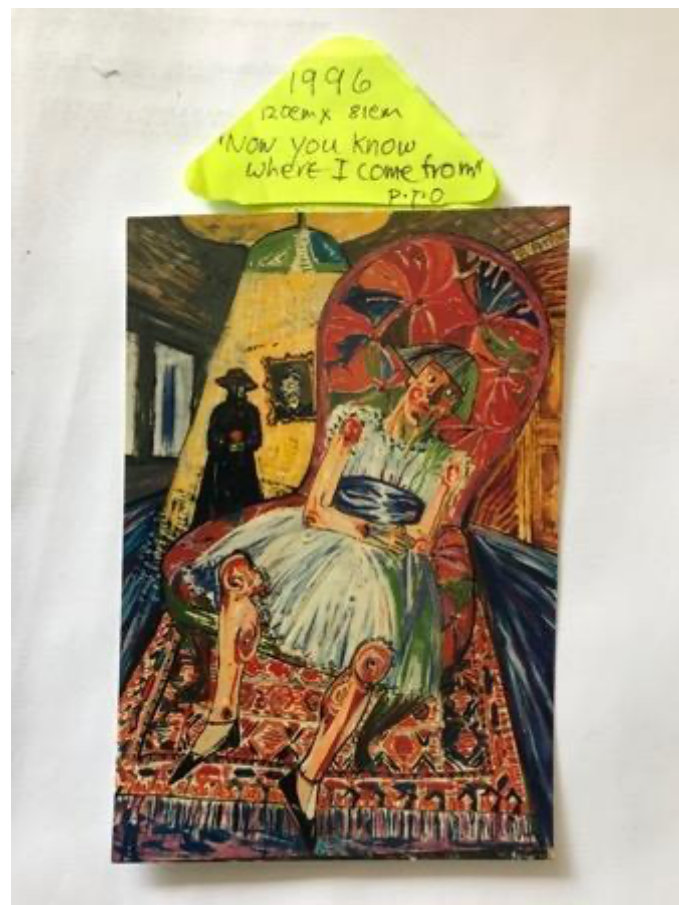


Figure 52: Archive image of the painting *Shadows/Now You Know Where I am Coming From* with label tag attached to it that shows the date of its making as 1996, whereas the JAG archives say 1995(see below).

¹⁴⁸ It is important to point out that the title of this painting has changed over time. When the curating team received this work for the exhibition *When Rain Clouds Gather* that I co-curated in 2022r, we noticed how its title had been renamed to 'Self-portrait'. The owner informed us that this is the title that was given to her when she bought it in 2008. It is such instances. the meaning of the work may get lost. As far as the owner was concerned, she assumed the work was about Valerie.

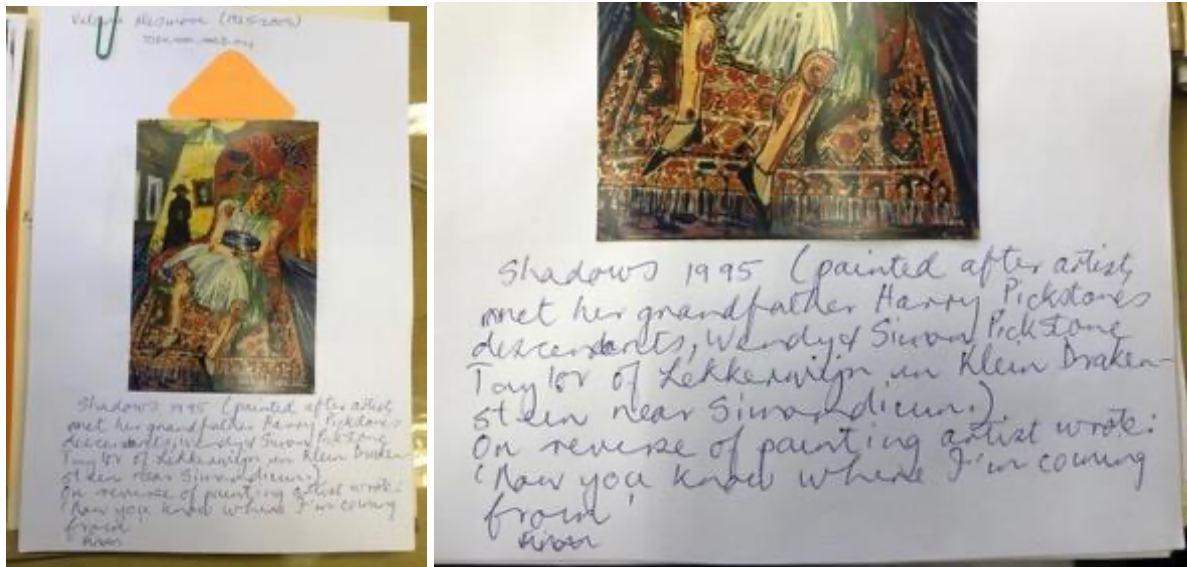


Figure 53: Archive documentation on the painting *Shadows/Now You Know Where I am Coming From*, found at JAG.



Figure 54: Various sketches of the grandmother found in her archive; Valerie Desmore, *The transgressor grandmother/ Shadows*, 1995, charcoal, pastel on paper, 120 x 81cm; Figure 123: Valerie Desmore, standing next to the final drawing

While in the final painting there is no clear indication of the location of the home, as we see it from the inside – there are several preparatory sketches of her grandmother (who in the final

painting, appears as a silhouette) that index the connection between the farm and the silhouetted figure. This may suggest that what we are seeing in this painting is the inside of Lekkerwijn farmhouse. On the top of the page of one of these preparatory drawings, Valerie writes the word 'Angel'. These sketches show us the evidence of her thinking and making process towards the creation of this painting. It evidences how she may have played with the idea of placing the grandmother on the farm – making it possible to imagine that the inside of the illustrated home might be of the farmhouse Lekkerwijn farmhouse. While we could never really know what the word 'Angel' is meant to mean, given that the grandmother is the only human form imaged in these sketches, we can speculate on how it may be symbolic of the grandmother as a spirit, (thus 'Angel'), to signify a ghostly presence as I earlier alluded to; a guardian, another visual form of homely belonging. Interestingly while the sketch indicates an important role of the grandmother, in the final painting, what is foregrounded is Violet and not the grandmother Elizabeth. However, taking from the word 'Angel', we could propose that the grandmother may be seen as a protector of the child, seated behind the scene. She and the man in the picture and the farmhouse are what guard or haunt the seated child. This reference to the superhuman presence of the grandmother, adds another layer to the reading of these returns. There is perhaps, a fourth person who also returns. That fourth person would be the grandmother, in addition to Fiona, Valerie and Violet.

Violet and The Peacocks

I have spent the last few days making time in order to watch the Peacocks. They are displaying now — that is, the male peacocks. I noticed outside my bedroom window — on the lawn, where the lily pond is, they are making strange little dancing movements — Then suddenly there was a fan of feathers aureole arranged round him & his feet moved in an intricate dance, this side and then to that side, swiftly cruising and panting, then turning this way and that way. Feathers rattling until shoeing his hen the tail side of his feathers, his spectacular dance ended. Wendy says that Annabel used to wait until the Peacock displayed — then she rushed over to the doomed beast & grabbed at the down feathers on his bottom and pulled them out! I remarked that this seemed very cruel, but Wendy said, "All the pillows at Lekkerwijn are filled with Peacocks' down". I think that this is a wonderful piece of domestic history for Fiona to enter into her book.

Notebook entry, Desmore 31 October 1998

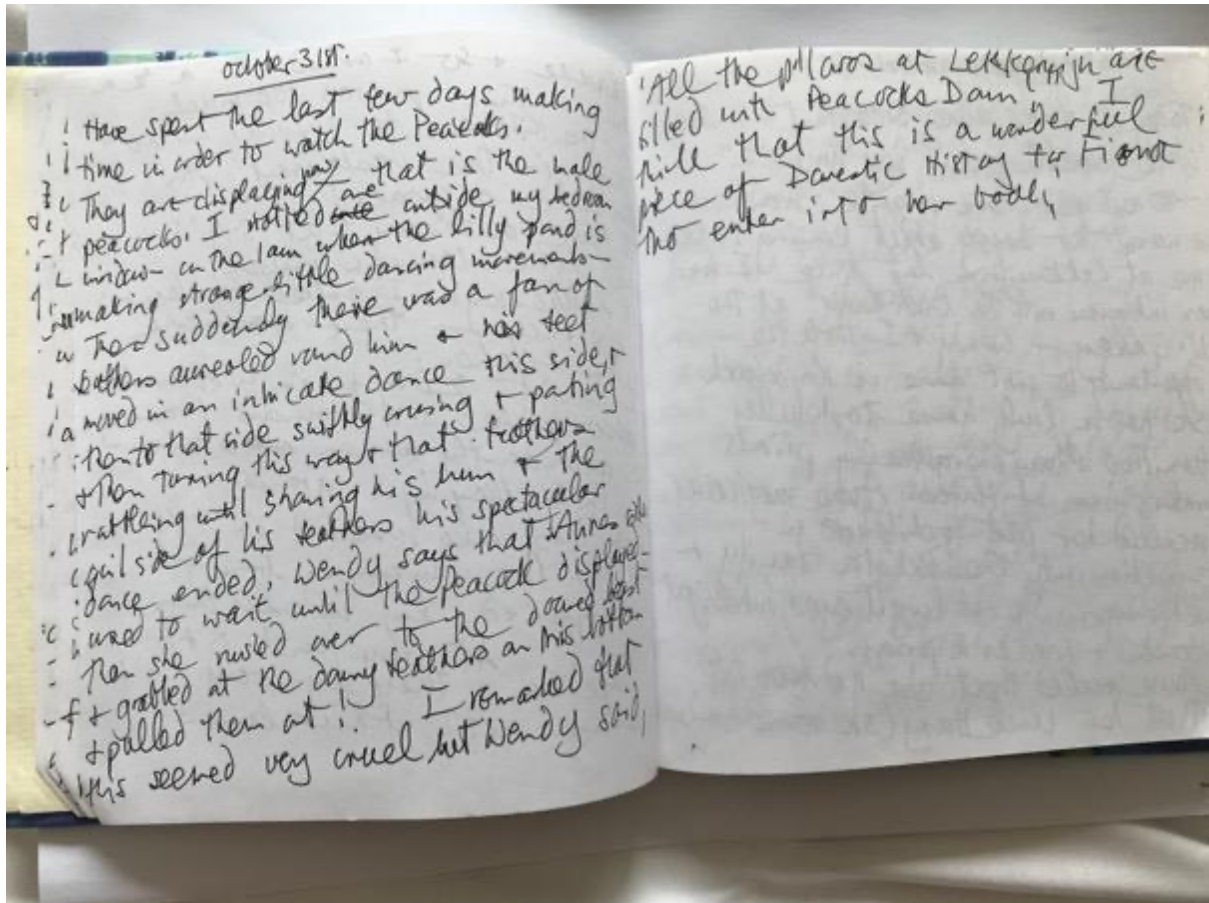


Figure 55 (a): A page from Valerie's Cape Diary, dated 31 October 1998.

This thought of the harvest of peacock feathers to fill pillows, as “A piece of domestic history”, is an interesting indication of the complexity and irony of homing. It is complex because, firstly, peacocks are an alien species in the Western Cape and are known to symbolise colonial history. Believed to have been brought in from India, peacocks were used to decorate the lawns of the early Western Cape’s wealthy colonial settler family homes. Like many other animals and plants that settlers imported, such as the Chapungu bird from Zimbabwe, peacocks were brought over from other countries to display wealth, power and domination. They symbolise the occupation, presence and takeover by colonial settlers and their remodelling of the African landscape to fit their colonial ideals. Since the birds are foreign to this environment, it seems odd to imagine them as iconic of domestic history. So, what did Valerie mean by this sentiment? In her taking them home, what is the implication of having this colonial reminder of their past and land?

Furthermore, in the painting, she decorates Violet’s dress with peacock feathers. What is the symbolism indicated by her embellishment of the young mother’s dress in this way? In the painting, the young Violet is standing far away from the farmhouse with the peacocks. This placement of her mother further away from the farmhouse, suggests something more menacing than a mere

celebration of a domestic history. It almost reads as an indication of the disconnection between the child and the landscape. With her face cast downward and her arms tensely pressed down by her sides, as though upset, the painting poignantly captures the image and feeling of being abandoned. This is suggestive of the ending of her story (refer to chapter introduction), where her father walks her out and leaves her outside, abandoned and rejected. The expression of perceptible grief, even though she is facing down and we do not see her face entirely, reinforces the pathos of this moment. With this ability to capture the “psychological drama” of her mother’s only memory of her father, Valerie imagines how the situation might have made her mother feel, as a child, not growing up with her father.

This chapter also considers the schizophrenic opposite of homing, ‘unhoming’, as the other side of the same coin. It allows us to ponder on Valerie’s gesture of taking her mother back to the farmhouse, as a kind of unhoming. Valerie uses these uncanny images to disrupt the idea of home as a site of fondness and idealisation, what Gamedze articulates as the ideals of home as a space of safety, love and belonging. The concept of ‘unhoming’ proposes a new turn to the idea of ‘returning home’ (her and her mother) and how this returning might be a refusal of association and belonging. In another way, it amplifies the notion of ‘unbelonging’ and ‘disbelonging’ through the child’s memory of this place as one of disassociation, alienation, rejection, distance and even shame. Within this understanding, the idea of home as a deeply politicised space emerges, where unhoming is also then seen to be about confronting the disconnection between Violet and her father, Harry — even as they are temporarily and imaginatively ‘reunited’ through this painting. With Violet’s back turned away from her father’s home, we can speculate that the illustration of Violet, in *Violet and The Peacocks*, could be about unhoming; one, of either being rejected or abandoned by her father or, two, of the child rejecting her father and his home. We can also relate this to Ahmed’s proposition of “patterns of estrangement” where the home is unfamiliar, so much so that they all become strangers to this home — feeling unbelonged and thus unhomed. The fact that Violet never even lived there potentiates this as a double estrangement, firstly because she was already a stranger to the place, to begin with, and secondly, that the painting illustrates her almost as a waif, given the few childhood memories of having visited the home.

Instead of unpacking the formal elements of this painting, in the next sections, I wish to engage how this painting might be read as a form of refusal; a conceptual demonstration of an unhoming.



Figure 55 (b): Valerie next to her the painting, *Violet and the Peacock* in her London flat. Date unknown

Disincline and Biomythography

Valerie discusses the painting in a video interview that was conducted during her second visit to South Africa, as follows:¹⁴⁹

Delia I never quite get it, though; you didn't say much about your mother...Can you tell us just a little bit about your mother?

Valerie Well...I don't want to go into deep detail. Because umm...Well, just because...but... umm...If I can show you... this painting... I did this painting, about a month ago, after my first visit to South Africa. The house in the background is the farm Lekkerwijn. There are peacocks at Lekkerwijn. You might have noticed...This painting is about my mother's memories of her childhood.

Valerie's disincline to answer questions about her mother directly is intriguing. Rather than giving immediately telling answers about her mother, she chooses to answer the question by talking evasively about this painting in her mother's story. Being fully aware of the listener and viewer,¹⁵⁰ and refusing to divulge, Valerie resorts to biomythography as an indirect strategy to tackle the history of racism and biological rejection. This narration around her mother through a discussion of the painting is indicative of the deep sense of melancholia that Valerie is able to capture through

¹⁴⁹ This visit coincided with the exhibition *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Modern Black Artists*, which featured some of Valerie's work that the Johannesburg Art Gallery acquired the previous year towards this show. The inclusion in this exhibition was a significant career moment for Valerie as it meant she was being reintroduced to the South African art scene since 1947, her last show, which was a year after she left for London. Being part of this important show encouraged her to see the show, which also allowed her to visit the Pickstone family. I discuss the detail of the exhibition in Chapter 5.

¹⁵⁰ See Carli Coetzee's *Accented Future* on the concepts of the "addressed and addressee".

the act of painting itself. By sensitively yet acutely capturing the feeling of longing and looking longingly, and by implying the rejection and denial within the picture plane, Valerie is able to evoke the emotions without having to speak about it confrontationally to her interviewer.

We must note, too, how the interviewer's white position heightens tensions inherent within this history. In her *Cape Diary* (Tuesday, 10 November) she reflects on this interview experience stating:

Today Lionel came to Lekkerwijn to bid me goodbye, since he was there and I was being interviewed for radio by Dhelia something or other, he sat in on it. The interviewer started off badly because Dhelia's first question was 'Valerie tell me where you were born' – I realised then that I had to take over the interview or else we would get nowhere, so from then on I guided her into asking the right questions. Wendy also had a camera man there in order to tape the thing for Simon. Everyone said I was a natural born lecturer and a wonderful interviewee. I enjoyed myself and since the video extended beyond the broadcast interview — I included Lionel and Wendy in it as well.

This acute awareness by Valerie of the interviewer is illustrative of a number of things. First, it can be understood as a refusal. In his book *The Cultural Game* (2004), artist and writer Olu Oguibe also writes about a similar instance, in articulating the ignorance of Eurocentric listening. Describing eloquently the experiences of artist Ouattara Watts, in an interview with Thomas McEvilley, Oguibe reveals the interviewer's limited social skill, ignorance and oblivion in being able to ascertain the discomfort his questions created for the artist he was interviewing, which in that moment heightened the miscommunication and misunderstandings encapsulated by their different positions. Here we see Dhelia, a white South African interviewer, failing to see the ignorance in her question about Valerie's mother's past. It's an example of the tendency to equivocate the complexity of expectations for Black artists to always foreground their origins, even though the question of origins becomes prejudicial.

Valerie's tactics to navigate the interviewer — whose questioning displayed interested in how this history might implicate the white family, attempting to focus on the surface sensation of Valerie's mother's childhood — is impressive. For instance, the interviewer did not understand that by asking a question about Valerie's mother's history, she not only poked at her mother's secret past but also revealed the role of the white family (who appointed her to do the interview), racism and the brutality of the race bar that denied Valerie's mother a relationship with her father and career as a teacher. If she had understood this, perhaps this probing of the mother's story would have been phrased differently. Valerie's later reflections, the realisations that she needed to intercept

and divert towards a different interview outcome, indeed make apparent her awareness of the interviewer's oblivion to race.

This ignorance of Eurocentric listening is further aggravated by the presence and interjections of her cousin Wendy, who later on in the interview, comments about how it must be made clear which family history Valerie is telling, emphasising that there may be different versions of their family history.¹⁵¹ While it may be true that this family history ought to be read with the understanding that there may be different versions of it, the subtext of Wendy's comment is not so much about the accuracy or inaccuracy of this unearthed family history, if we consider the particularly "textured" story of Valerie Desmore. What is at stake for Wendy really, is what Valerie represents in the context of this family story.

One senses that it is about the imminent controversy of their grandfather's so-called, forbidden love life that Wendy tries so hard to suppress, given that Valerie is part of this unflattering and painful history of shame. Shame not because of the love story of Valerie's grandfather, although it was wrong in so far as South Africa's historical racial separatist laws were concerned, but because this history reveals a man who, in the public domain, is documented as South Africa's farming "hero". Paradoxically, he is also the same person who had to keep the *real* story about his personal life a secret in order to protect his 'other' family; the more legitimate one in the skewed eyes of South African law at the time. He did this also to protect his own reputation, by not getting himself in trouble with the laws of a country that he so well served. As Wendy attests, "there has been a complete change in all of our perception of the family" (1998). This question of perception could also underscore the parameters of legitimacy. Homes are also ways to stake claims to legitimacy (or not), but legitimacy goes down deep in terms of race and prejudice. For example, Oguibe questions McEvelley because this well-trodden question is one often hinged on skewed understandings of legitimacy: an African artist is not legitimately an African artist unless everything constructed as African is worn on the sleeve. Likewise, Valerie's frustration with the interviewer may spring from this. The question of legitimacy, though problematic in itself is also about the unsaid disappointments of being a descendant from a hidden part of the family, that would be considered "illegitimate" or racially unbelonging by being 'Coloured'. Valerie's paintings evoke such muted intimacies within ineluctable family bonds.

¹⁵¹ Wendy Pickstone, her cousin from the Pickstone family side, in an interview at the second reunion with Valerie in South Africa in 1998 articulates.

To Wendy, recounting the full story of Harry only from Valerie's position would disrupt the well-knit story of her white family's history and implicate them in a deliberate narrative that they have constructed their entire lives, being unaffected by the consequences. It is about protecting the telling of this story from what might put them as the white family on the 'wrong side' of history when they, up until their reunion with Valerie and her family, had only experienced appraisal, glory and respect for the role their grandfather played in the historical building of this country's economy. As Ahmed (2007) argues, whiteness is "an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (2007: 150). In other words, whether or not Wendy is aware, her interjection and caution on Valerie's story reinforces this white centralisation of the family narrative that Ahmed warns against. In this particular moment, it need not have mattered whether or not Valerie's family narrative is one-sided given the fact that it is the side of the story that had not yet been told to a wider public, and which therefore, warrant existence without mediation or correction. More especially, not one from the white side of the family given that they, as the white family, have always been the sole authors of how this family's history manifested into the public imagination. By this comment, Wendy therefore negates Valerie and her mother's experience as invalid or less important.

It is worth noting that Wendy's appearance in the video comes at the end of the interview. She had been standing near the cameraman the whole time, listening to the interview. Valerie invited her to join the picture as the video was being made for Simon, Wendy's son, who couldn't be there on Valerie's trip but played a crucial role in reuniting the family. By entering the scene, Wendy suddenly becomes the main focus of the video. Her comments further heighten her presence, making what she says reverberate even more, to the point of undermining Valerie. More poignantly, this negating gesture could have been removed during editing, if it was handled self-reflexively. In this sense, Valerie's two paintings disrupt this well-knit story of the Pickstone family and its legacy, unearthing its hidden mess for the public to view. Through this disruptive unearthing, we are able to understand how Valerie's family history, thus her painting's homing, is significantly marred by the complexities of race in South African.

Another aspect of Valerie's painting that might relate to this idea of the politics of representation as biomythography and refusal is the issue of shame. Thinking about these racial dynamics put, Fiona's dismay when she visited South Africa into perspective. With this visit, she becomes aware of the fact that her great-grandmother Elizabeth's life in South Africa was clouded by shame and bitterness since their relationship was not accepted in the public eye and by law (personal comms

2019). What Fiona might have been referring to is what writer Zöe Wicomb describes as the shame that had to do with:

Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of 'race', concupiscence, and degeneracy, continue to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid's strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame. We do not speak about miscegenation; it is, after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse. (1992: 92)

It is this understanding of shame that Fiona realises when she meets her great grandfather's family, Wendy and Simon, during her visit to South Africa. While this story of shame was and continues to be a prevailing one in the historical accounts of 'Coloured' communities, especially in Cape Town (Wicomb, 1992; Gqola, 2010; Abrahams, 1996), and even though she knew very little about the story of her great grandfather and great grandmother, she believed that their relationship was based on love, only to be shocked to learn that her version of their history was not a common story in the South Africa of their time.

Of course, notions of shame have come to mean different things in terms of its postcolonial use (Wicomb 1992). According to Wicomb, shame within postcolonial discourse has come to mean "transcoding ethnicity, of contesting its meaning within a new politics of representation" (Wicomb 1992: 93) which she explains in these words:

The making of the subject and the script of shame imbricated in such ethnographic self-fashioning as well as in the discursive construction by others need to be examined in the light of the narrative of liberation and its dissemination in the world media that constructed oppression in particular ways. (1992: 94)

Such adaptations of the evolution of the word 'shame' speak to the challenge of thinking about its meaning as a fixed term. This is echoed by writer Zimitri Erasmus,¹⁵² who explains that: "To talk about 'race mixture', 'miscegenation', 'inter-racial' sex and mixed descent, is to use terms and habits of thought inherited from the very race science that was used to justify oppression, brutality and the marginalisation of 'bastard people'" (2001: 12).

By painting her mother as a child in this place, Valerie gestures towards a restoration of this shame and reclamation (and innocence) of a life that her mother never got to experience. It is a reclaim of her mother's right to be identified with this place, which was a place that essentially rejected her existence. It articulates the proximity of Valerie to this story in that, through the painting of her

¹⁵² See Zimitri Erasmus *'coloured' by History Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on 'coloured' Identities in Cape Town*

mother's story and through her visit to the farm and her experience of it, she is able to bring her mother back to her birthplace. The story of the child and parent is thus enacted through this painting, the child being her mother who is her parent, at the same time the child being Valerie who is the illustrator and narrator of the painting. Yet in all this, it is her mother, the child, who is narrated in the painting, who initially narrates the painting.¹⁵³ The illustration of her mother does not directly include Valerie in the sense of being illustrated in it. However, she is included through their relationship as a daughter telling her mother's story, which further heightens their proximity, making it an illustration of Valerie's life as well. The porousness of the narrator shows the potential efficacy of Valerie's painting to produce a biomythographical account of her past. In one way the painting becomes an illustration of home as a showing of feeling shame and alienation; the child's face demonstrates this.

It is also what Napikoski terms "overlapping identities" (2009: 299) in biomythography, illustrating how Valerie's physical return to her grandfather's Lekkerwijn farm indirectly enacted her mother's return to the same place and how this return is visualised via the painting. It is in this proximity of her relationship with her mother (the painter and subject in a direct way) and the proximity between Violet (her mother), her mother Elizabeth (Valerie's grandmother) and her father Harry (Valerie's grandfather) which we see enacted through *Violet The Peacocks* (1998) and *Shadows* (1995) that makes these two paintings biomythographies.

This proximity not only articulates Greslé's internalised psychological drama that is made possible through the evocation of the expressionist style. It also articulates what de Sousa describes as the "psychological and political counter-narrative" (2017: 529); that which underscores the image's subversion of this particular family's publicly known history through an artistic navigation of her history. This is symbolic of the covert nature of telling a biomythography as a form of remembering, similar to Lorde's use of biomythography. In both paintings Valerie illustrates, with great awareness, her family's complicated history, particularly that of her mother's history and her relationship with her mother.

Conclusion

¹⁵³ This story which we see enacted through *Violet and The Peacocks* (1998) and *Shadows* (1995), illustrates the proximity of her relationship with her mother (the painter and subject in a direct way) and the proximity between Violet (her mother), her mother Elizabeth (Valerie's grandmother) and her father Harry (Valerie's grandfather).

In this chapter I have explored how the concept of homing and unhoming — as another way of understanding Valerie’s biomythography — often oscillates between the individual story and collective family history and how this family history is part of a broader political understanding of family. I have also explored how Valerie in her two paintings showed home as an intersection of re-membling histories and memories that are sometimes tangible, and sometimes shared by association with people connected to that home and not necessarily of lived experiences. It also explored home as a site of extreme pain that is brought about by the historical racialised system.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates the continuous wrestling and double-play between homing and unhoming with the ideas of home as a deeply politicised and biomythographised site that Valerie illustrates through the painted psycho-analytical story of her mother’s childhood and, in turn, a story about her family history. It makes consideration of her work as both homing and unhoming as a double bind of being inside and outside, exception and rejection, and of returning and leaving. In the few recorded interviews with Fiona, Valerie speaks about unboundedness or wanting to leave the racist oppression of South Africa to be unbounded. The fact that she returns at the dawn of democracy might imply her return home as an unbinding — in being able to return to a place that bounded her to unbind its bindings. Still, it is an idea of home as a thing or a place that Makhubu argues is “redeeming yet disquieting” (Makhubu, 2023: npn). Thinking about home as a double play means we are able to consider it as a site that constantly upholds both love and rejection, simultaneously suggesting that it may remain an unreconcilable idea for Valerie, her mother and niece. In this sense, in a similar line, as Gamedze argues about Sunstrum’s work, we see the same in Valerie’s work, that “the work inadvertently rejects the possibility of singular interpretations of home and homing, in favour of conversation where home acts as a convergence of things” (2019: 34).

In conclusion, even though this chapter largely focused on unpacking Valerie Desmore’s paintings in demonstrating notions of homing or unhoming, through the displacement of Violet from her birthplace, it also pointed to the displacement of Valerie’s own artistic career. When she left South Africa in 1945 to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, her departure not only displaced her personally, but disrupted her budding art career. Her subsequent decision to quit the Slade after moving to London and to be mentored by Oskar Kokoschka further stalled her art career. More so when she moved into fashion. This public discontinuation and invisibilisation of her work, owing to the move from South Africa to England and then her despondence to make her work public in London, left a vacuum not only in the South African art scene but also, more

broadly, in art history. It created a gap in the documentation and public engagement with the transformation and development of her artistic practice resulting in there being a lack of writing about the evolution of her style of work. As a result, the tracing of her unique adaptation of modern art styles that she produced both in South Africa and later in London remains understudied.

I therefore propose that this dislocation of her work can be related to unhoming in the ways that not only speak of her family's history but the kind of ecosystem in which her work was (or was not) supported and patronised therefore unhomed. Engaging with the unhoming of Valerie's career proposes a possibility of it being homed anew. Through this study, we can understand a "re-surfacing" — to borrow a term from Desiree Lewis' and Gabeba Baderoon' book *Surfacing* (2021) of the multiple arts economies and art historical geographies, cultures, politics, gender, races and classes that she traversed — offering an incredible collapse of the modernist paradigm. As Eyene puts it, "estrangement and yearning for home" (2012: 97) signals a recurring trope and theme amongst the work of exiled Black artists of modern art. Valerie's two paintings discussed within this section squarely centre this thematic enquiry.

To relate homing to Valerie's work art historically, Michael Stevenson and Joost Bosland write about how Black African modernists who lived abroad from 1929 often illustrated a yearning for home in their work. In their book *'Take Your Road and Travel Along': The advent of the modern black painter in Africa* (2008), Stevenson and Bosland write about how Black modern artists who left South Africa in pursuit of art education often illustrated images that indicated a yearning for home, as a form of "nostalgic recollections" (2008: 11) of Black narrative archetypes, which were understood as expected tropes of estrangement as the recall to a place they could no longer return to. From the insistent imaging of rural landscape to Gerard Sekoto's illustration of African women, they argue that all this was in response to both Western expectations for them to produce "African idioms" in their assimilations of Western artistic traditions and a real response to the hardships, alienation and homesickness they felt living so far away from home.¹⁵⁴ This yearning was critically

¹⁵⁴ What we get instead is a very limited number of themes explored through a limited range of media. Township scenes, rickety, yet picturesque, as often as not including horses or donkeys and carts, hardly ever such tokens of technology as motor cars. Images of musicians and of dancing, seemingly designed to illustrate the "they got rhythm" thesis. Images of black people in tribal situations. Big-eyed children, mothers with babies usually designated as Madonnas with Child. Biblical themes. Images of pathos and sadness; though often given titles the "Hunger", it is a rule of thumb that the cause of the suffering it never shown, and thus, while such pieces certainly engage the sentiment of the viewer, they would hardly confront him or her with the actionable realities which produce the pathetic situation. (Powell 1995:3—4). Almost all of this work is rendered in a style that is identifiably crude and usually tends, through

felt when returning home was no longer an option. This echoes Ahmed's position on the migrants' desire to return to the place of their first departure which they then spend the rest of their lives yearning to return to. When examining this work from the conventions of art history, the idea of how home is illustrated in art and how art historical accounting of artists who lived abroad can be seen as an interconnected form of homing in the multi-locationality of Valerie's work.

exaggeration of negroid featuring, the distortion of hands and feet, and so on, to primitive and even caricature the subject. But while the look has certainly become "African", it seldom invokes any actual African models. Almost all of the two dimensional work is legibly rooted either in earlier twentieth century and mainly German expression or in the self-conscious and pietistic medievalism promoted by the mission art school at Rorkes Drift. Though sculpture (itself an uncommon medium in this context) tends to show somewhat more variety, a great deal of its rests, nevertheless upon an aqually limited range of essentially primitivising influences (Brancusi, the more expressionist Picasso, Henry Moore, among other) and, for the most part, seek to cast in three dimensions the same imagery that dominates the two dimensional work. (1995: 4)

Chapter 5

Self-Portraits

*Because I... I paint my life.
Because it's what I really know about.
And I am interested in...in inner feelings and inner things.
And...I like just to... not to share the outside of what things look like
But, maybe an inner world.
And a sort of an ...another reality... that is completely different.*

— Desmore (1998)

Introduction

Attending to how Valerie Desmore turned the torch on herself using portraiture as a form of 'Self-writing', this chapter maps out how she tells the narrative of her life through art. This narrative is illustrated in the early physiognomic self-portraits of her young self, to the mythical, metaphorical and fictional references to herself as a mermaid, and at the end of her life through the dialysis series where she serially recorded her dying body. In these portraits, Valerie wrestles with varying kinds of trauma, such as race and identity politics from her childhood, depression, loss and grief, as well as ill health in the form of kidney failure, leading to dialysis.

Valerie underwent psychoanalysis therapy with the Jungian psychoanalyst Dr May for ten years. Reflecting on the moments that led to her taking up psychoanalysis, Valerie says:

I remember a very intelligent man. He wasn't a lover or anything. Saying to me, "You know Valerie, you are like seaweed?" And in fact, I thought about it, and I thought, you know I got nothing fixed; I got nothing I really believe in. You see! And I had to learn all that. At my age, [then twenty years old] right from nothing! I had to find things to believe in again. I couldn't have done... Well, you know my analyst Doctor May. And I said "thank you Doctor May" almost every day of my life. I said, "Thank you Doctor May". Because he saved me. (in Fleck and Desmore 2002–2006)

After ten years of working with Valerie, Dr. May suddenly died. Though Valerie tried very hard to find another therapist, in the end, she decided to no longer pursue psychoanalysis, believing that she had learnt all that she needed to know from Dr. May and was able to cope with life without

ongoing therapy. Indeed, when her life partner, John Bickedike (1924-1981), died, she was able to decide to retire early (1982)¹⁵⁵ with relative ease, though she admitted to having taken his death “really badly”¹⁵⁶ (Desmore 1998). She recognised that she needed to give herself time to mourn her late partner and, at the same time, return to what she had always wanted to do, which was to make art. From that point on, she returned to art full-time, employing the tools she had learnt from psychoanalysis in her art. Speaking about this experience, she says, “And I think my analysis probably sustained my ability to keep my art intact, and when John, my partner, died, I was able to start painting seriously again. So, in that respect, analysis helped me throughout my whole life afterwards. And it still helps” (Desmore 1998).

This return to art in the early 1980s shows an intensified quest for self-healing, which links back to the overarching idea of inner journeying and biomythography. Within this period, we see Valerie sophisticate the vibrant mixed-colour palette and the pared-down colour schemes of red, white, and black that she had begun in the late—1950s as her distinct visual language. Both styles demonstrate a particular form of layering of the thick impasto paint technique that, when closely analysed, centres the process of revealing and concealing the inner story. In some of these works, we also suddenly encounter a more robust feminist side to Valerie that is not so easily detectable in her earlier work. To some extent, this feminist side is signalled in paintings such as the ones featuring her mother. Moving away from the broader concept of family life, the paintings explored in this chapter instead, reveal how Valerie used self-portraits as an inward-looking tool in telling her life story.

This introspection becomes what Kathy Yusuf Zarur, writing about Hassan Musa and Walid Raad, defines as a way of “contribut[ing] to the history of self-portraiture by performing a rejection of the art world’s simplistic references to identity” (2014: 6). I argue that Valerie also performed this identity rejection specifically as a response to South Africa’s racial categorisation that marred her childhood. In wanting to address the prevalence of identity politics in Valerie’s life story, I further associate this rejection, via psychoanalysis, with the Jungian strategies of the shapeshifter. I propose that Valerie might have mobilised this strategy in order to play with the ideas of itinerant identities in the sense of having no fixed identity when referring to race. This reading of her

¹⁵⁵ Now, what happened then, I was at Marks and Spencer for 18 years. My partner who was an architect... he’s an Englishman. He was an architect with his own practice, and died. He had a heart attack... and... Well, you know... I took it terribly badly. And Marks and Spencer offered me early retirement at 55-56. Age of 55-56 on full pay with a pension when I reached 60. So, I grabbed it and said, “No more lovers!” *[laughs] “Just Painting!”

¹⁵⁶ Retiring from her fashion design job at Marks and Spenser at the age of 60.

employment of Jungian strategy is linked to the fact that Valerie worked with a Jungian therapist, Dr. May, for almost ten years. To this, she states:

[...] in those days, I mean, [psychoanalysis] was really big. They [the therapists] weren't just counsellors. They were, well, you know [...] They were 'lie on the couch psychoanalysis'. And I found a wonderful man. He was a Jungian but eclectic, with an eclectic bias [...] you see [...] he'd go out from whatever school that would suit that particular person. And he was wonderful with me. He...the work was wonderful [...] that I did with him. (Desmore 1989)

Another important focus of this chapter is the use of self-portraiture as a form of physical healing. Here I connect Valerie's engagement with the Jungian strategies to Terry Dennett's (2011) terms of "auto-didactic therapy" and "auto-therapeutic approach" as well as Susan Bell's (2002) "illness narrative". Describing auto-didactic and auto-therapeutic approaches, Dennett writes about how, when photographer Jo Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1982, she turned to photography for healing. This resulted in Spence developing self-healing approaches that offered "a number of counselling survival strategies using photography, mirrors, texts and self-dialogue" (2011: 224).

Susan Bell extends this self-helping therapeutic approach to write about Spence's cancer photography as a form of narrativisation. Bell believed that "When a person's life is interrupted by an illness, narrative offers 'an opportunity to knit together the split ends of time, to construct a new context' and to fit the disruption caused by illness 'into a temporal framework'" (2002: 7). I relate this idea of narrative to how Valerie's notebooks, sketches and notes build on her narrative that eventually culminated in painting. I suggest that Valerie made her portraits in a bid to perform therapy. Within this understanding, I posit that in each of these painting moments she may have used psychoanalytical strategies, auto-didactic and auto-therapeutic approaches, and illness narratives to illustrate what she was going through.

Thinking about Spence's use of photography, I consider expressionism as another form of healing, too, taking what Valerie says about it as being a way of "dealing with the violence in ourselves" (Desmore 1989). Spence's photographic psychotherapy and Valerie's expressionism are both based on the artistic expressions of healing. With this in mind, it is, therefore, worth proposing that auto-didactic and therapeutic approaches form a meeting point between psychotherapy and expressionist modes of art-making that are imperatively characteristic of Valerie's practice. It can therefore be assumed that Valerie used psychotherapy to create her self-portraits as a means towards healing, making the internal struggle of going through the healing process evident in the

resultant artworks. This attitude echoes what artist Haifeng Xuan says that “the artist’s inner life might be known via the reading of signs he/she uses and makes in a painting” (2012: npn), defining it as the “complex practice that engages with psychic and somatic matters of the artist” (2012: npn). In Valerie’s paintings, for instance, we see these signs manifest as the deliberate use of strategies such as the physiognomic likeness to herself as a young blonde to produce trickery; the use of impasto painting style to conceal and reveal humorous critiques of gendered experiences and other social issues; and the varied ways in which she illustrates the suffering of the body and its ending as part of the telling of the ‘inner-life’ story.

Generally, Valerie’s self-portrait renditions — which span a period of approximately sixty years (from her early Twenties to her Eighties) offer an interesting study of illustrations of her inner life and the numerous changes that transpired over time. However, there is no evidence indicating that she may have had any grand plans to literally document her life as a unified body of work, in a similar fashion to how we understand an artist like Frida Kahlo to have done.¹⁵⁷ For example, it has been argued that Kahlo’s entire artistic oeuvre was an obsession with self-documentation. Kahlo, who (like in the latter life of Valerie) battled illness all her life, obsessively documented herself, some say, in her fear of death and not wanting to be forgotten. Salomono Grimberg points to this in his book on Kahlo:

Frida Kahlo painted herself for the same reason she painted many of her self-portraits — so that she would not be forgotten. No one who met Frida Kahlo ever forgot her, but she never believed it. Even her earlier documented self-portrait, drawn for a schoolmate in 1922, has a plea above her head that says, “I’m sending you my picture so you won’t forget me”. (2006: 15)

While both Kahlo and Valerie’s self-portraits assert a sense of urgency to document and deal with their traumas, albeit from slightly different angles, Valerie’s self-portraits are seemingly sporadic, eclectic, and idiosyncratic. This is because they are produced with no apparent plan, trajectory or deliberate structure. Instead, they reflect an almost pragmatic response to the turbulent moments in Valerie’s life. To unpack how Valerie illustrated these turbulent moments using portraiture and psychoanalytical strategies, I have divided this chapter into three sections.

The first section looks at her early self-portraits with the hope of capturing the urgency with which she chose to record and assert herself as an artist while disrupting expected understandings of early

¹⁵⁷ Kahlo suffered from a number of chronic health conditions, including polio, a bus accident that left her with lifelong injuries, and endometriosis. Her paintings often depict her pain and suffering in graphic detail. However, they also show her strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

twentieth-century South African identities. Here, I argue that she deliberately does this to signal the politics of representation. The second section looks at her use of visual metaphors in the *Mermaid Series*, fictionalising herself. I intimate that such visual metaphors are a strategy of covering up yet revealing the personal story through the employment of a complicated visual language. The third section looks at the *Dialysis* series that I propose characterises her use of “autodidactic therapy” and “illness narratives” as a profound form of self-documentation and self-healing from the literal and conceptual sense of death. I believe she fought the illness not because she did not believe she was going to die but because she trusted in the immortalising power of recording oneself through art. The obsessive capturing of the physical changes of her dying body, in text (diaries) and image, all reveal her healing journey.

Head and Shoulders: Young Valerie Desmore’s Self Portrait



Figure 56: Valerie Desmore, *Self-Portrait*, c.1949, oil on board, 65 x 55cm

Throughout histories of art, portraiture has been one of the central tenets that operated in two major ways as subject (signs communicated through things that are imaged) and genre (the discipline developed through styles or groupings of practice). Within these two ways, various artistic traditions have a deep history (Borgatti 1990; Brilliant 1991/2013; Woodall 1997). As such, portraiture has helped us think through time in ways that have informed and framed artistic and historical forms of memorialisation and representation.

According to Stevenson and Bosland, there is something particular that Black African artists do when they choose to produce self-portraits. Writing about the modern African generation of artists, Stevenson and Bosland proffer that African artists often produced self-portraiture as a demonstration of their mastery of the Western tradition and an illustration of “the universalising image of artists” (2008: 7) or what Lize Van Robbroeck proposes as illustrations of Black middle classness which she explains is not just about the assimilation to Western culture but an adaptation of it into a kind of non-traditional form of modernisation (2011: 115). Explaining this, Stevenson and Bosland¹⁵⁸ maintain that:

The artist’s visual reference in constructing images of themselves was informed by those of the European masters of the past, standing in urbane and self-conscious pose in the studio, recalling a tradition that dates back to Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architect*, published in 1568, with its 144 illustrations of these artists. (2008: 7)

To illustrate this, Stevenson and Bosland make specific reference to George Pemba’s *Self Portrait* (1987/1947) describing this work as “offer[ing] a representation of himself as a dapper artist-gentleman standing beside his easel with paints and brushes at hand as well as in photographs of the formally attired Pemba” (2008: 9). Words like ‘gentlemen’, ‘formally dressed’, ‘easel’, ‘paint’ and ‘brushes’ are used here to deliberately register a particular kind of image of African modernisation. Though Stevenson, Bosland and Van Robbroeck’s discussion on portraiture by African artists seeks to recognise them as part of the broader historical canon, such words work to underscore these African artists’ assimilation into Western ideals and aspirations. These are common problematic art historical articulations of separate development of arts in Western and African worlds (Powell 1995; Araeen 2014). Describing these kinds of art historical rationales “as misguided notions of Africa’s entry into modern history” (2014: 7), Rasheed Araeen states that “what is, in fact, generally recognised and celebrated, even by most Africa’s own historians, is what began as mimicry under the tutelage of colonial paternalism and patronage” (2014: 7). Sharing the same sentiments Ivor Powell writes, “South African art lies in its connections with a much fetishised international art scene” (1995: 14). I bring this up not to register Valerie’s portrait as an anomaly but to highlight the backdrop and the critique that her portrait produces about art historical stereotyping of African artists. When considering Valerie’s particular case, these racialised modes of understanding self-portraiture in African art collapse. In her practice, nothing is as it seems. In this way, portraiture ceases to be a simple form of representation or memorialisation but could perhaps be considered a riddle to be solved.

¹⁵⁸ This argument is said in relation to early African modern artists who were exiled to Europe in the 1920s to 1950s in pursuit of art education and better opportunities for their art in Europe.

An alternative account of this history of portraiture is the emergence of portrait photography resulting from the independence of many African countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Bisi Silva posits that this kind of photography suddenly offered “new subjectivities and syncretic identities, creating a counter discourse to a colonial visual repertoire premised on foregrounding the African subject as ‘exotic and ‘primitive’” (2014: 195). Through Valerie, I want to argue that such an immersion into the multiplicity of subjectivity and syncretic identities reflected the contested formulations of modernity under the conditions of the twentieth century, especially for African artists who, through leaving their country of origins, found other considerations of modern art that are not often accounted for in broader art historical geopolitical focuses. Some artists became vulnerable in countries that barely accommodated them and instead gained a kind of ‘precarious cosmopolitanisms’, hence their syncretic identities, such as in the case of Valerie.

In her 1949 head-and-shoulder, *Self-Portrait*, Valerie depicts herself as a young artist. With her face turned back over her shoulder, it is, however, her hand holding the paintbrush against the corner of the canvas that tells us that she is specifically depicting herself as an artist. This section examines how Valerie’s self-portrait manifests biomythography, psychoanalysis and identity politics in three ways. The first way is how her portrait articulates a kind of self-reckoning, a self-affirmation, a becoming, a self-recording and self-writing into an art historical existence as a young artist in a particular epoch. The second is the self-portrait as an articulation of an identity crisis, shape-shifting, trickery and healing in trying to reconcile her childhood traumas of South Africa’s racism. The third is the Black feminist return of the gaze in addressing what it means to be a Black woman in art and the world.

Portraiture and Historical Indexing

Haifeng Xuan, who writes about Marlene Dumas in his Masters thesis, defines the use of self-portraiture by artists as a “process of identification with the self and a process of constituting the self” (2012: npn). To explain this idea of constituting oneself, Xuan courts psychoanalysis and refers to Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage” (2012: npn) and Charles Peirce’s semiotic conception of the “dialogical self” (2012: npn). He argues that these are concepts that artists use to visualise their subjectivity and the internal conversation between themselves and the image of themselves in “examining [their] the artist’s inner life” (Xuan 2012: npn) whilst positioning portrait

painting as “a kind of sign with an indexical property offering evidence of the painter’s existence” (2012: npn).

At the time of producing this portrait, Valerie was twenty-four years old and living in England. By then she was working with Kokoschka (1971/1974), who, in his teachings of expressionism, guided her towards producing art that was about illustrating her inner feelings. Thinking through Xuan’s understanding of the artist’s use of self-portraiture as mirroring and dialoguing with the self, we see Valerie attempting to express more than a surface representation of herself, but an art historical index of her existence while bringing to light a critique of certain identity tropes and stereotypes. Together the mirror stage, dialogic self and indexing imply that the artist’s self is continually being negotiated and transformed.

Portraiture and an Identity Crisis

Apart from the face and hand, the other parts of the painting give no other detail except for the very translucent and largely smudged colour brush strokes over the shoulders and background. This lack of detail in other parts of the painting further heightens, although is not limited to, the detailed parts of the painting as the focal point for deducing the meaning of this portrait.¹⁵⁹ The following analysis, therefore, only attends to the detailed parts of the painting.

As a young ‘Coloured’ South African woman artist and to be documenting herself in this way in 1949, Valerie disrupts many things. First, by imaging herself as a young artist, Valerie inserts herself into the global art historical registry of portrait painting, thus disrupting art histories in particular ways. For example, to date, there is no other published record of a self-portrait by a South African Black woman artist from the 1940s.¹⁶⁰ Such an artwork, therefore, becomes an important historical record. For a Black woman artist, this is unimaginably assertive and daring. It stands out as an oddity against the backdrop of the popularised image of Black women in servitude that has long been the study of Western-centred African art. We see this in several works by Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, among others, where the images of the ‘native’ women were perpetually one of servants or the uncivilised other (Arnold 1996; Van Robbroeck 2011), or the few widely circulated portraits of the well-dressed Black male artists counterpart who have become the archetype of

¹⁵⁹ I am told by her niece Fleck (2020) that she left out the detail of her dress because she couldn’t decide what to put on herself.

¹⁶⁰ It is possible that portraits of artist Sandra McGregory, another ‘Coloured’ South African woman artist from the same period, may exist.

Western assimilation. Such archetypes infer histories of dominance relating to how the so-called practice of portraiture has been a project tied to imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, racism, class, and gender inequalities.

The other thing it disrupts is the issue of race. Blue-eyed, bright red lipstick, and voluminously curly blonde hair — without knowing the background of the imaged person, it would be easy to racially categorise the artist as a young white woman. “So, I looked European then. I mean, I looked even more European then because I was a little blonde, [but] my hair grew darker”, Valerie describes herself in the interview with Fleck and Herbermann (2002—2006). Here Valerie uses the look as an illusion to raise questions about her race, drawing our attention to the complexities of her mixed-race heritage. Such a play with racial ambiguities relates to Mooney’s proposition of “seeing” as “constructed through aesthetic and social conventions” (2004: 20) and Erasmus’ troubled “look”, which that I discuss in Chapter 3. Mooney writes about how this disruption of “seeing” (2004: 20) is also about revealing Black subjectivities. Writing about African-American portraits of artist Archibald Motley, Mooney is interested in “the politics of black representation” (2004: 20). She argues that portraits of artists with mixed-race heritages begin to complicate, “expand and trouble the canon and its somatic signs” (2004: 19). Mooney’s unpacking of “how the artist [Motley] viewed them as a means of achieving racial equality” (2004: 20) is of interest to this research. Similar to Motley, Valerie’s portrait challenges this racial equality by playing with the visual ambiguities of the “look” and “being seen”.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, Valerie struggled with her race. This is evident in the moments where she tries to hide her younger sister and her grandmother from her white school friends, her testimony about never discussing race with her Marks & Spencer colleagues, as well as other moments that she speaks and writes about as avoiding the topic of race. These moments signpost a struggle with race and attempt to disrupt ways of being “seen”. They also signpost a seeking for equality and privileges that can only be accessed by appearing a certain way. In other words, they are a strategy of shapeshifting in how the image is meant to trick the eye. This is the Jungian characterisation of the trickster, in which a shapeshifter is one of the archetypes. In Jungian psychology, a shapeshifter is someone who is able to take on different personas or identities. This can be seen as a way of integrating different aspects of the self, or as a way of coping with difficult or traumatic experiences. Valerie’s shapeshifting can also be seen as a way of unconsciously coping with her racialised traumatic childhood.

Put another way, by playing with the look Valerie offers a double play. The first part of this double play is the image of herself 'looking' white. To look white could be read as an aspiration or desire to look 'European' or white or the so-called universal image. She wants to be believed to be white and uses the self-portrait to aid this desire. Valerie's self-description of looking white could be read in this light. It indicates that she was keenly aware of the role this portrait would play in the future, as proof of the moment she looked most convincingly white. When Valerie speaks about this painting in the interview, forty-nine years after its making, she is looking back at herself and understanding the value of this work as a piece of historical evidence, while knowing it is an instrument of trickery and secrecy in her family.

Furthermore, portraiture serves as a means of commemoration, allowing individuals to be remembered for personal, political, ritual, or social reasons. Our fascination with the appearance of our ancestors is likely rooted in our capacity to relate to images that resonate with our own sense of identity. Valerie's 'European look' was another way of making visible the complexities of her mixed heritage particularly the alignment to the white side of her family, and the memorialisation of only this part of her history. As such, the portrait becomes a complex form of constructed and deceptive self-representation in the sense that it is about revealing and concealing her identity. It is the use of the painting as a form of deception, where truth and knowledge are volatile. This could be related to Roberta Hurtado's (2019) points about genealogies of the body, the body as inscribed and the body as an inscription enfleshment, especially following the significance of race in how Valerie is seen and how she sees herself and now the focus on her body as shifting "beyond the scope of the body". Valerie's play on illusion (what is shown and not shown) therefore exercises this constructed knowledge.

The second part of this double play is the ability of Valerie's portrait to provoke the 'fitting in'. Even though she may look 'white' she does not fit neatly within this racial categorisation either. In this regard, I return to Khan's essay *Becoming*. Khan begins with a story of how, as a child, she was fascinated by her aunt 'Nettie', who although born Indian, sounded 'Coloured'. As a child, Khan found her aunt to be a misfit, but later in life she realised that her aunt's misfitness was a form of racial deviancy that was powerfully used during apartheid by Black people to undermine the dominant and oppressive ways of being seen. Khan starts her essay with this story as a theorising prompt to how misfitness made it possible for people to live deviant lives. For Khan, this deviancy allowed a 'passing' that, for her aunt, challenged apartheid's homogenising race categorisation because of how it refuted other deviating understandings of race outside of what it described.

Khan argues that, in wanting to control Black life, apartheid in turn failed to consider cultural and social deviance. Valerie, who looked white, could not have painted herself otherwise. Yet the fact that she did not live life as a white person but instead lived a very public ‘Coloured’ life, given her father’s political work, illustrates the deviancy that Khan writes about.

Franz Fanon, influenced by Lacan and Sartre, write about how racism constructed Black people as deviant and whiteness as the norm into which Black people were meant to try and assimilate. In reality, these hard lines were more complex than could be described. By painting herself ‘looking’ white, Valerie performs the complexity of the norm. She further performs it by juggling a ‘white’ passing life as a child in order to access certain amenities reserved for whites. As such, the word deviance here infers multiple existences arguing that deviance does not simply imply a deviation from the norm of perceived whiteness to being the deviant black (criminals, the mentally ill, etc.). Rather, it is about disrupting these set delineative understandings of the norm or its nonconformity to social norms and what is assumed as acceptable behaviour. Valerie’s *Self-Portrait* asserts an identity performance disruption to the so-called universalising image, showing up the absurdity of racial categories, when the look no longer fits snugly to express expectations and stereotypes. In so doing, it foregrounds the fact that there were so many people who, though ‘classified’¹⁶¹ as ‘Coloured’, could have been seen as white today and vice versa, likewise between Africans and ‘Coloureds’. As such, through this painting, Valerie reveals apartheid’s scopic and myopic regimes and how she subverted and undermined them. Furthermore, the fact that Valerie made this painting in London, having lived there for almost three years, shows the long-lasting effect of South African racism on her psyche.

I want to return to Pierce’s concept of semiosis, especially in what he describes as the “dialogical self” or “semiotic communication”. For Pierce, the dialogical self or semiotic communication could be argued as the portrait’s ability to stand as both an agent and product of meaning. In Pierce’s so-called “semiotic communication”, the agent refers to the “utterer” of a sign while the product would be the “interpreter” of the meaning of that sign. Both the utterer and interpreter are the same person, much like Lacan’s mirror image, where the child sees themselves in the mirror. The mirror image is the sign but the interpretation of the self – what the child sees – is the dialogic process. Valerie’s portrait is a dialogic self. This dialogic self, that is about self-identification, is also a radical self-gaze in the way that it plays with ambiguities. In this light, we view the portrait as something deeper and as a signifier of what Freud termed as *sublimation*, signalling a

¹⁶¹ Although she was not yet living in the period of formal classifications, racial difference was still the norm.

representation of the unconscious. By this, Freud suggests that artists and psychoanalysts both seek truth and a reckoning with the self. Valerie knew quite well how her image would read and, like Motley, Valerie “was careful to leave much ambiguity, recognising that the power of the portrait lies in its ability to foster connections with viewers beyond the constraints of time or place” (Mooney 2004: 19).

Having only engaged with the detailed area of the painting, it is important to state that this does not mean that the brown background and white smudge areas do not offer any kind of possible analysis. Valerie was deliberate about these parts of the painting too. One way of looking at these areas of the painting is to view them as question marks or a hint at the possibility of other kinds of of psychoanalytic exploration. For example, Sigmund Freud’s conscious, unconscious and subconscious dreaming and sublimation are possible areas of exploration. This is, however, not the focus of my analysis, as I want to engage less with the interpretations of the abstract parts of the painting but rather to focus more on the tangible or the seemingly literal parts.

Mermaid Series: Metaphor as Portraiture



Figure 57: Valerie Desmore, *Mermaid Feast*, 1984, Oil on canvas, 136 x 85cm.



Figure 58: Valerie Desmore, *Mermaid Feast*, 1985, Oil on canvas, 102 x 76cm.

“I was still looking for my own painting voice. And I feel it’s very important to get my own painting voice because there is no good imitating another painter”.

— Desmore (1998)

Conveying her inner struggles and fears in 1984 and 1985, Valerie made two paintings titled *Mermaid Feast*. In them, we see yet another deeply personal expression of her life experiences and emotions. These paintings reflect a recurring theme of not quite fitting in and feeling inadequate, which she portrays with great sensitivity and candour. Using her signature trademark of minimalistic reds, whites, and blacks, in both paintings we see a “woman ‘dished’ up as a mermaid on a banquet table in a macabre setting with death” (Miles 1998: 90). The two paintings are however different, in setting and in tone, with the one work characteristically and colourfully looking more theatrical than the other. For example, in *Mermaid Feast* (1984), four people sit around a red table, as though they are getting ready to eat the mermaid. Of the four people, three appear parahuman (humanised animals). They are unclothed with one sitting crouched on the chair like a monkey. The fourth person, who sits sinisterly with his back to the viewer, is a man wearing a black suit. He seems more human looking than the other three. In the other painting, *Mermaid Feast* (1985), the mermaid is surrounded by people wearing different masks who look like they are in a dispute over the mermaid. While the majority of people in this painting wear red ball or carnival masks, the others wear masks of animals such as birds and wolves. The animal masks are worn over the head and shoulders, almost as if the wearer is therianthropic. Lurking at the back is the human skeleton wearing a black hooded cloak.

Both paintings show a focus on the mermaid.¹⁶² The creature is always in a seeming danger. For instance, in many of Valerie's preparatory drawings (Fig 59), the mermaid is always in a vulnerable position, lying on a bed as if sick or on a plate about to be consumed. It is always surrounded by therianthropes and sometimes a man or men in suits, who look like they are about to dissect or attack her.

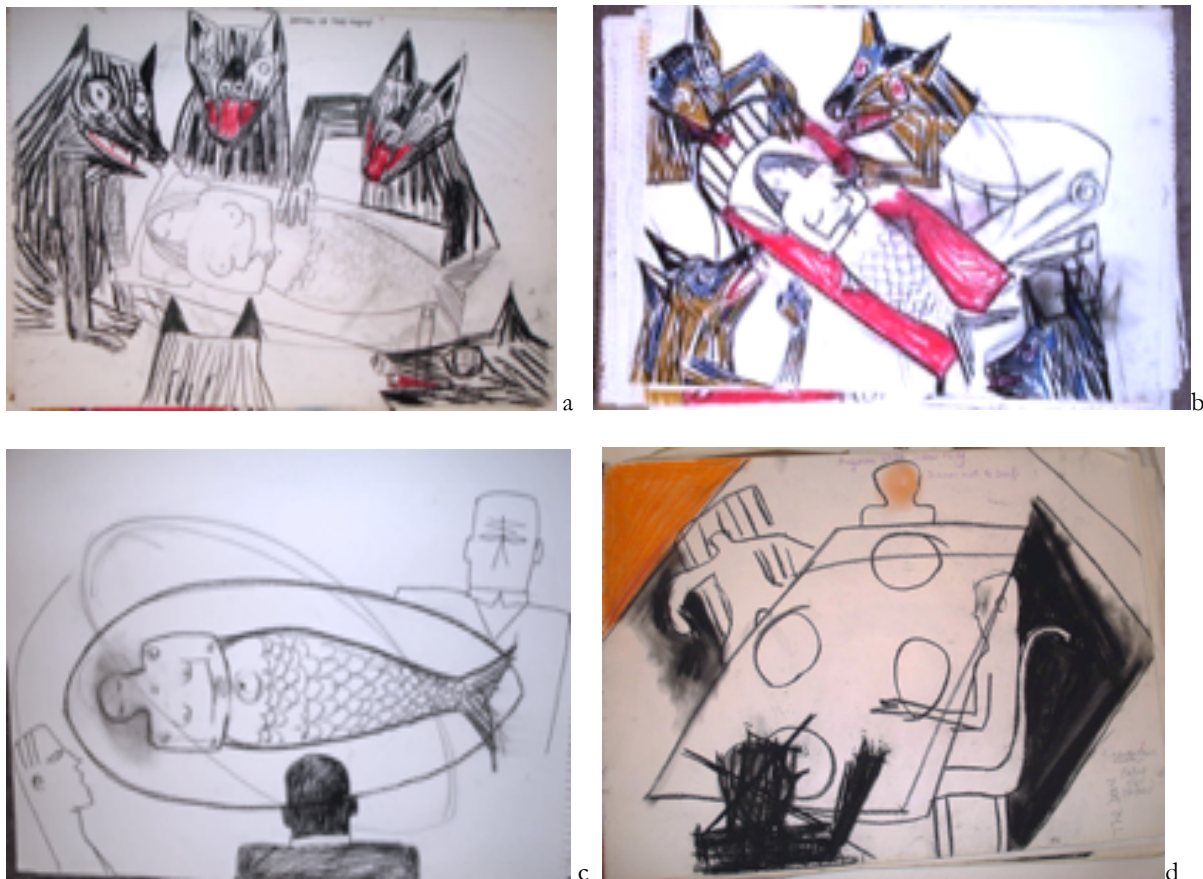


Figure 59: a-c Valerie Desmore, *Untitled*, sketches (mermaid with wolves), colour pastel, various sizes and d - *The devil eating the mermaid*, date unknown, charcoal drawing, size unrecorded (right).

Valerie, in a few interviews, reveals that the mermaid is a representation of herself and all women. In this series, she draws inspiration from Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969). The novel is based on gender equality, loss of identity and what Atwood calls "symbolic cannibalism".¹⁶³ The story follows Marian MacAlpin, a twenty-something survey writer and product sampler living in an unnamed Canadian city who is struggling with the transition into womanhood. Marian is unsure of her career path and accepts a marriage proposal from Peter, a young, successful

¹⁶² According to Wikipedia, "In folklore, a mermaid is an aquatic creature with the head and upper body of a female human and the tail of a fish. Mermaids appear in the folklore of many cultures worldwide, including Europe, Asia, and Africa. Mermaids are sometimes associated with perilous events such as floods, storms, shipwrecks, and drownings"

lawyer, as an alternative. However, Marian is not happy in her relationship with Peter, who is dismissive and controlling. Following a dinner party where Peter candidly talked about hunting for a rabbit to other guests, Marian began having trouble consuming food. She began to empathise with meat, and is eventually unable to eat any kind of meat, vegetables, eggs, and, ultimately, cake and other foods.

Marian unconsciously seeks an escape from her life with Peter. One day, while doing door-to-door campaigning for a beer survey, she meets Duncan, a literature university student, and they become lovers. However, their relationship ends when Marian sneaks out to spend the night with him at a hotel after an office party that Peter had thrown. The next morning, Marian wakes up and realises that she has been consumed by Peter all along. In an attempt to confront Peter, she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and insists that he eats it as if he was eating her. Furious, Peter leaves. At this moment, Marian realises that her desire for food has returned and eats some of the cake. She then gives the remaining bits of it to Duncan, realising that she is not really interested in him either, but is more interested in her own story.

There are notable similarities between Atwood's novel and Valerie's artwork. One such connection is the portrayal of Valerie as a mermaid, which mirrors the depiction of a cake in the shape of a woman in Atwood's story. Both the mermaid and the cake are intended to be consumed, thereby underscoring the objectification and unequal treatment of women in society. Furthermore, the individuals surrounding the table where the mermaid is served up to signify the "symbolic cannibalism" of women. In an interview from 1989, Valerie elucidates about these paintings, saying "These two [pointing to the pictures of the painting] ... I call 'Mermaid Feast'. Which is really about the way some women allow themselves to be gobbled up by men" (Desmore, 1998). This illustration of women as edible objects could be read in many ways. One way could be as a feminist critique.¹⁶³ For example, while the danger seems to lurk more for the mermaid there is a double-edged play with danger here. The fact that the mermaid signifies something more dangerous (if not powerful) in a lot of folktales or mythologies, , herein, suggests defiance. In other words, while it may seem that the mermaid might be in a more vulnerable position, its unknown supernatural powers suggest that danger might sit on both ends. Much like Marian who, in Atwood's story, is seemingly a hopeless victim of her circumstance, the ending of the story revolves around her regaining her voice, therefore demonstrating how she defies social scripts of her as a woman.

¹⁶³ Though this novel has largely been written about through feminist arguments, Atwood has declared that the book is "protofeminist rather than feminist: there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965" (1969/2009: x).

When looking at this story from this end, one can see the feminist angle to this work. This is the case in Valerie's other later work titled *Tight Rope* (1987) in which she illustrates a woman standing on a tightrope or on display for the perverted viewing of three men in suits. Speaking about this work, she states:

VALERIE There are times I've also almost been gobbled. But I've got away...
This is a woman. Men are trying to drag this woman down, but she is rising
above it. And. She's okay. She is doing... working in a man's world. And...

Delia She is surviving.

VALERIE But, I call this *Tight Rope*.

Lionel But, it is a tightrope.

VALERIE That's right.

Lionel ...and psychologically too.

VALERIE That's right.
So, I suppose... maybe analysis has also helped me get into the psyche a
bit. Because...umm... I think they do.



Figure 60: *Tight Rope*, 1987, oil on canvas, 102 x 76 cm

Such work illustrates Valerie's use of self-gaze in the bell hookian sense. The notion of the self-gaze that I refer to here is specifically derived from bell hooks' notion of what she calls "an oppositional gaze". As outlined in her groundbreaking text *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectator* (1992), this gaze is one which promotes a self-determining power to self-represent or what other feminist concepts have termed 'returning the gaze' or 'black feminist autobiography', empowering black women to document and construct their own discourses with their own image. hooks attributes this gaze to Black people collectively, stating that, "Even in, the worse circumstance of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (1992: 16). Even though hooks limits the scope to subjectivity by deliberately addressing Black women, it is this capacity of hooks' oppositional gaze that is feminist at its core. It intentionally considers the intersectionality of race and gender as a correlation between the power of looking back defiantly and the reclaiming of the telling of one's story. This stance of returning the gaze (here in particular returning the male gaze) and self-representing could be considered another form of biomythography that I posit Valerie employs in her work overall.

By the same token, thinking of Valerie's work as feminist, it might be worth further contextualising her feminism. It is interesting that she phrases the role of women as "allow[ing] themselves to be gobbled up by men". While her reference to the novel seems to be about showing the agency of the women characters with them making difficult decisions in an unfair world between career and marriage, raising children without men, seducing men, tricking men, etc. For example, in the *Edible Woman* novel there are two other women characters who also straddle different gender-based challenges. Marian's flatmate Ainsley, for example, is interested in raising a child on her own and decides to seduce Marian's womaniser friend Len solely for the purpose of getting pregnant. The other woman is a university friend, who falls pregnant in her second year of university and is about to have a third baby. In the story she lands as an agency-less victim of circumstance. The story attempts to illustrate the diversity of issues women have to deal with.

As pointed out above, in a gender-oppressive society, this consumption is a result of a structural condition (not a choice to be passively eaten). The novel itself seems to speak of trickster strategies by women, where being on the plate is both being in a place of vulnerability and a trick, especially in moments where Marian demanded Peter to eat the cake, making him face his own position. Yet, Valerie's use of the word "allow" somehow makes it seem as if the women are passive, willingly playing into things or that they are things for consumption by men. It is in this encounter that

Valerie's feminism is momentarily unconvincing. It is also the moment where the knowledge of what Valerie says encumbers the work itself. Without the knowledge of what she said, *Mermaid Feast* is profoundly feminist work, yet when one hears her speak about the work it becomes something else, almost undermining its powerful association with Atwood's monumental feminist work. But Atwood herself has denied the association of her work as feminist, arguing that it is about power relations. Perhaps it might have been a poor choice of words or a slip of the tongue (Freudian slip) on Valerie's part to say "allow", or it could be a kind of liberal feminist tendency of women who deliberately and cunningly play up the normative behaviour of being constrained in the male-dominated world towards one's own ends. It certainly speaks to what might be tension between image and the discourse on self-writing. It would have been easy to just focus on the image and argue for a radical feminist position. However, once we become aware of Valerie's own thoughts, it shifts this position a bit.

Humour and Allegory of Human-Animal Characters.

The illustration of herself as a mermaid can also be related to James Ensor's work titled *The Dangerous Cooks* (1896) in which he is served on a plate with the body of a fish.



Figure 61: James Ensor, *The Dangerous Cooks*, 1896, Oil on panel, 18 x 46 cm

As I have mentioned in other chapters, Valerie was highly influenced by the work of Ensor. His influence is often observed in her painting technique and style of the pastel-like impasto layering with a lot of similar object symbolism such as the mask and the animal-human subjects. I found the above illustration of Ensor's work in Valerie's book library (Cape Town Archive). The book is titled *James Ensor 1860–1949 Theatre of Mask*. Of this work, Carol Brown writes:

An equally caustic wit prevails in Ensor's *The dangerous Cooks* (ill.p.126), a sarcastic parody of artistic dinners. Here he exposes the trials and tribulations of some members of Les XX, and refers to the disagreements they were having with Octave Maus on the one hand and Edmond Picard on the other. Maus was Secretary of Les XX and was extremely influential in the organisation of their annual exhibition. Picard was a well-known lawyer and the editor of *L'art modern*, the journal of Les XX and *La Libre Esthétique*. Both were prominent figures in the Belgian avant-garde, which is why Ensor represents them quite accurately as 'dangerous cooks' preparing a meal for the critic who are sitting around the table: from left to right are Edouard Fétis, Eugène Demolder, Camille Lemonnier, Max Sulzberger and Emile Verhaeren. The figure climbing the stairs is Ensor's friend Théo Hannon. The meal served by the two cooks defies digestion. Verhaeren and Sulzberger are vomiting, Hannon has diarrhoea and is making a dash for the lavatory. In the foreground, the two cooks are preparing the heads of various Belgian artists and members of Les XX. On a shelf to the left are the heads of the painters Georges Lemmen (with spectacles) and Théo Van Rysselberghe (with fishtail). The painter Anna Boch is represented as a chicken hanging from the ceiling. Crawling about at the ground level are the sculptor Charles Van der Stappen represented as a piglet and the painter Henry de Groux as a crab. Edmond

Picard has the head of the painter Guillaume Vogels (with pig's ears) in his cooking pot. Beside him, Octave Maus is offering Ensor's head served on a pickled herring on a porcelain dish garnished with lemon and parsley. A small sign stuck in the painter's head bears the 'ART ENSOR', a play on the similarity in sound between 'Art Ensor' and 'hareng saur' (pickled herring). The painting is yet another example of an allegory in which human characters are transformed into animals. (1997: 109)

As illustrated by this very lively description, Ensor's work often carried with it a sense of satire yet serious witty criticism of social and political issues. Similarly, Valerie, even though she is criticising patriarchy, uses satire and wit in a theatrical manner. Even though she makes no reference to this when she speaks about the work in the recorded interviews, it is not far-fetched to consider that Valerie herself in this work might have also been critiquing the art world all the same, with herself served up in a plate surrounded by gawkers as patrons and critics who are about to consume her. Such an outlook would perhaps be her underlying rationale for absencing herself from the art world. Whatever the ultimate meaning of the work may be, Valerie's use of humour — though much more serious in undertone — is yet again seen here as a form of resistance, challenging the norm. By doing so she uses humour to disarm her audience and to make them more receptive to her message. She also uses humour to find joy in the midst of danger and pain. As a scene capturing a frozen moment of something that is about to happen, the painting is suggestive of something unreal, fictional or theatre like. The fact that Desmore's painting is like a theatre set suggests something satiric echoing the humour that the artist Ensor reproduced in their work. It evidences the profound influence of Ensor's work on Valerie.

It is worth noting that Valerie's reference to the theatre was not a later development, considering that she named her clothing store after a character from Shaw's 1912 play, *The Pygmalion*. It is possible that the link between her art and the theatrical world began during her university years when she skipped classes at the Slade School of Fine Art to watch plays and movies at the Odeon cinema. Her childhood training in ballet and frequent visits to the theatre are evident in her work. All this affirms her biomythographical approaches.



Figure 62: Valerie Desmore, *untitled*, 1942, water colour on paper, size unknown.

Shapeshifter

Another element in Valerie's work that is important to consider is the integration of psychoanalysis. When it comes to employing psychoanalytical approaches in her art, we see a diverse range of strategies, such as the use of the Jungian archetype of the shapeshifter that, for example, is evident in the different characters she brings into the *Mermaid Feast* series. In psychoanalysis, mermaids symbolise the unconscious mind. The human part of the mermaid signifies the conscious mind, while the fish tail represents the unconscious mind. The mermaid's ability to move between the two worlds of water and land is a metaphor for the ability of the unconscious mind to influence our thoughts and behaviours. Mermaids also symbolise sexuality. The mermaid's tail is often seen as a phallic symbol, while the human form represents femininity. This combination of male and female attributes is interpreted as a representation of hermaphroditism. In some cases, mermaids represent danger or death. The mermaid's tail can signify danger and drowning, while her sharp teeth or claws are symbols of death. This association with death represents the fear of the unconscious mind. Valerie illustrates herself as a mermaid to show her own agency to alter the course of her destiny. By illustrating the absurd and non-human,

she is able to self-determine and overcome any traumatic experience she may have faced. The mermaid is a powerful symbol that can be used to explore a wide range of human experiences and emotions. The fact that Valerie illustrates herself as a mermaid, in a similar manner as Ensor's fish, and Atwood's cake woman, speaks to the power of being able to self-gaze, and at the same time shapeshift. By illustrating the absurd and the non-human, Valerie shows her own agency to alter the fate or course of her destiny. She is able to alter the reality, albeit temporarily, for herself as a way of directing the narrative that allows her to self-determine and overcome whatever traumatic experience she may be going through.

Furthermore, the element of shapeshifting is the inclusion of characters such as birds and wolves. Apparently, Valerie had a phobia of birds since childhood. This explains two things about this work. One, the significance of birds to Valerie and two, painting from the bird's eye view.



Figure 63: Valerie Desmore, *Man and Birds I*, 1958, oil on board, 61 x 51cm.

Figure 64: Valerie Desmore, *Man and Birds II*, 1958, oil on board, 74 x 56cm

In terms of the phobia of birds, though there is only one person wearing a mask of a bird, Valerie has however produced a few works where we see this fear illustrated in a more direct way, such as the works titled *Man and Birds I* (1958) and *Man and Birds II* (1958). In these works, we see her show the threat of the bird more vividly. The understanding one gets from this reference to the bird is that it illustrates Valerie's fear with onlookers circling and gawking at the dished-up mermaid.

Equally, the wolves reinforce a mood of something threatening and awe-inspiring. Even though the wolf is not referencing something traumatic like the birds. The wolf masks that the characters in her paintings wear, as we learn (Fleck 2020; Pickstone-Taylor 2020), are an illustration of her cats Azu and Ibu. Such a reference makes yet another node of possible analysis of wit and humour. Ultimately, we see Valerie signal the multifaceted meanings of her work. Even though the wolves are not referencing personal trauma, they are cleverly used here to incite some kind of danger.

What can artworks in themselves tell us about memory and lived experiences of trauma? When talking about art as a kind of visual language of trauma or as visual testimonies, can we talk about 'Trauma Art'? Do we not then end up in the form of essentialism that made slogans like 'Black Art' obtrusive or even marginalising the discussion as illustrations of psychiatric discourses? And, from the point of view of the viewer, how do we conceptualise trauma and identify its presence in an artwork? (Nicodemus 2009: 73)

In her PhD Evelyn Nicodemus writes about the connection between historical trauma and psychoanalysis found in the work of early African modernists. Examining the artwork of John Muafangejo, Erhabor Emokpae, Ezrom Legae and Paul Stopforth, Nicodemus illustrates how African artists have responded to the collective (public histories) and individual experiences of the trauma of colonial history through their art. For her, "collective trauma caused by the drastic social change of the impact of colonisation and colonial rule on African societies and individuals" (2011: 90), in turn, permeated into cultural trauma that has transformed African individual identities (2011: 93). For Nicodemus, in order to understand this impact of colonial history, attention needs to be paid to the relationship between the unconscious and conscious processes in art. Referring to the work of psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Frantz Fanon, she states, "it is nevertheless easy to find observations that throw a sharp light on conditions relevant for my inquiry into the impact of colonialism on the production and the development of modern art in Africa" (2011: 94). Justifying her pairing of Freud and Fanon she states:

I was aware that through the 20th century, studies on memory had been influenced to a big extent by Freudian psychoanalysis. However, whilst acknowledging the indisputable importance of the work of Freud and his followers, I found that it possessed a Eurocentric limitation characteristic of its time and place and was clearly distinct from the approach of Frantz Fanon, who, I suggested, 'brings Freud's thinking on trauma into the daylight of a wider cultural and political field in order to build an understanding of postslavery and postcolonial black existence'. Some few years later, Edward Said made a similar analysis in a lecture held at the Freud Museum in London, published as *Freud and the non-European*. (2009: 70)

Within this understanding of African modernism, when unpacking historical trauma, we can therefore see the link to Valerie's Mermaid series, first, in how the fictionalised character is about

externalising absurdity (i.e. the feeling of being an edible creature); Second, situating Valerie as an exile artist speaks to broader issues around Africa’s colonial history and the fractured nature of South African modern art.

Dialysis and the Psychosomatic: Illness Portraits and Healing



Figure 65: Valerie Desmore, *Injecting*, 2000, Oil on canvas, 102 x 77cm

[I] decided that finding out about my ancestors will help me out of my depressive illness.

— Desmore (Sunday, 27 August 1989)

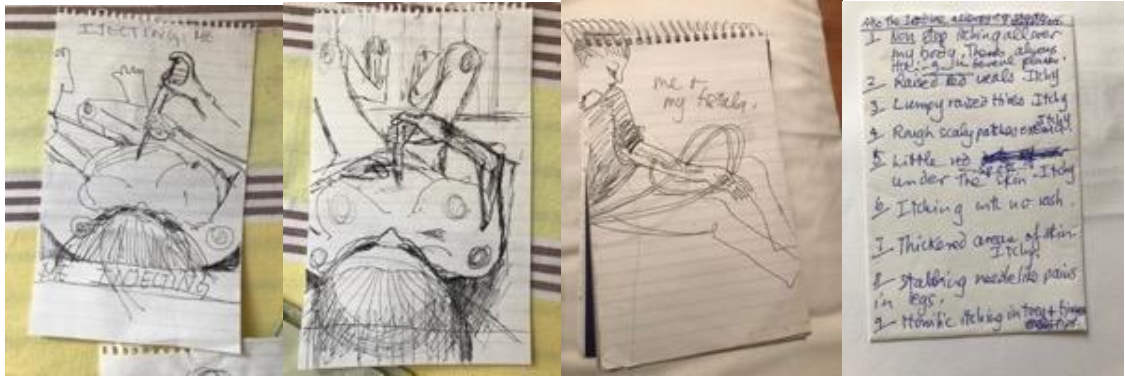
Valerie painted herself for the same reasons she painted her family and mother’s story – to understand her past and to document how this past affected her psychologically. The above statement is one of many notepad confessions that Valerie penned as a form of therapy. In them, she often related her illness to the misalignments of her family history, connecting her illnesses with the past. In Chapter 4, I discuss how this led to disconnection with her parents as well as how, in Chapter 5, it prompted the journey back ‘home’ to South Africa. Looking at the trajectory of Valerie’s self-imagining we begin to see how throughout her life, she wrestled against the forces

of death from the things that were meant to kill her spirits, such as the South African racist regime that forced her to leave home, the disappointing arts programme she discovered at the Slade School of Fine Art and the eventual physical illness of kidney disease. Some of these things even led her to consider attempting suicide due to depression. The obsessive documenting of her body is therefore one of the ways she shows us her will to live and zest for life.

In this section, I focus on the painting *Injecting* (2000) which is an illustration of her going through kidney dialysis. This focus on her physically ill body due to kidney disease is yet another way she attempted to heal from her past. In *Injecting*, rendered from a bird's-eye-view (above her head), Valerie paints her naked body sitting down and pushing an injection into her stomach. Her skinny arms, thin legs and breasts show a body ravaged by disease. There is no detail to the background, nor is there detail of what she is sitting on. Instead, the background is her signature impasto white with only a thin black line cutting across the canvas and underneath her thighs to suggest the edge of the bed she is 'supposedly' sitting on.

There are many ways one could deduce meaning from this work. Unlike the *Mermaid* series where she presents her body as a metaphor, in this painting, Valerie reckons with her own dying flesh, confronting body as body. She is reckoning with the body as a corporeal physical entity that is vulnerable to pain, illness and death. Here it is possible to consider the body as a complex and multifaceted entity where it is also a site of subterranean pain or maybe a site where the pain is uncovered and confronted, uncloaked from its trick of attempting to hide pain and is maybe coming into full circle to the "bio" [life] of biomythography as an in- and out-of-body experience.

I call this genre 'illness portrait' or what has also been called 'autopathography'. It is a kind of shrivelling inwards to reflect on mortality. From the year 2000, Valerie produced a lot of these illness portraits, with the last, *Dialysis*, being painted in 2002. These works all focus on her ill health. They illustrate her body in agony. We also see this in the sketches and drawing she produces around this time.





On my days off from dialysis
 I try + sleep off the
 draining effects of Dialysis.

My Bedroom is right next to place
 where all the building work
 will be carried out + I will be
 severely affected by that.

Nob is a nice House + I
 don't understand why a few
 mat inches on the depth of
 the house will improve it at all.

My second objection is Security.

I know very well that during
 the building work all us 6
 the workmen might very well
~~put~~ ^{take} down the dividing fence in order
 to facilitate work.

This will mean that ~~I will be~~
~~will be~~ ^{will be} ~~in~~ my grand floor flat
 will be open to anyone trying to
 enter by my pad's door in hours.

Figure 66(a): Valerie Desmore, various sketches, mixed media, 2002-2006 and a note about dialysis recovery, from notepad

The well-known photographer Jo Spence used this strategy in her cancer narrative photographs. Spence (1934 – 1992), who “was originally a professional portrait photographer, became well-known during the 1970s for her poignant explorations of the family and self-image” (Dennett 2011: 223). However, after being diagnosed with cancer, she turned to photography to find a way to deal with the journey of the illness. As she went through her cancer treatment, she discovered so many limitations with the kind of support services the health system was offering to cancer patients in being able to deal with the psychological and physical impact of this illness. Trying to find a way to cope with her self-support and healing, she “developed a number of counselling survival strategies using photography, mirror, texts and self dialogue” (2011:224). Dennett names Spencer’s creative practice as a “self-reliant approach” of auto-therapy and auto-didactic therapy. Calling this “documentation and surveillance”, Dennett explains how Spence used the same strategy. Explaining this, he quotes Spence saying:

When I first learned I had cancer... I used my camera as a third eye, almost as a separate part of me, which was never watchful, analytical and critical yet remaining attached to the emotional and frightening experiences I was undergoing – my camera must shoot on auto pilot at these times I question the photographs later... I think of photography as an act of writing – one picture worth many words – words that I and other cancer people find hard to articulate during illness (in Dennett 2011: 225)

Through this psychotherapeutic work, which Dennett explains was inspired by the psychoanalytical work of Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Roberto Assgioli, Spence developed four methods; talking therapy, photo meditation, scripting and graphical methods; (mind mapping). Valerie’s art-making methods can be associated with one of these four methods, specifically the graphic method. This method involves noting down thoughts and sketching, which produced what Dennett refers to as “illness diaries” or “creative journals”. In developing these tools, she also wanted to create awareness about the brutal health system cancer patients are subjected to and to offer them self-help tools. Spence’s work gave rise to the idea of photography as a therapeutic medium (2011: 223) in what she says is the connection between the mind and body (2011: 235). This work has been posthumously discovered by the medical field. Today, health practitioners recommend Spence’s healing tool to cancer patients to help them deal with the internal turmoil of going through cancer treatment and to give them a voice and space to express their experiences.

Valerie was diagnosed with kidney disease in the early 1990s, but it was only in the early 2000s that her health took for the worse, forcing her to start dialysis. It is at this time that you see her obsessively documenting her dying body until the end of her life. Scores upon scores of

sketchbooks, or what Dennett terms “illness diaries” (2011: 227), are full of sketches of Valerie’s body, with only a few finished paintings: *Injecting* (2000) and *Dialysis* (2000). From tissue paper to sketch pad drawings, between 2000 and 2006, we see Valerie producing many drawings of her ill body. These sketches show her body going through a range of treatments, from injecting types to ones where her body is connected to tubes or catheters etc. All illustrate the painful experience of going through kidney disease. They show a physical wrestling with a dying body. This kind of self-documentation could be argued to be a way of writing, what Dennett terms “illness diaries” or “journal making” (2011: 227), or as part of what I am calling ‘self-writing’. It is unclear that Valerie would have known about the work of Spence, yet so much of what she does in these works echoes how she was using a creative form to deal with her illness. Both Spence and Desmore grappled with the psychological effects of illness on their bodies and psyches through creative means.

Another exploration of meaning is the distancing of herself from her body —a visual structural perspective —where the painting is illustrated from a bird’s eye view. This happens in the *Mermaid* series as well, where the view of the paintings often shows a distant view of herself. Almost as if referring to herself in the third person, most of them are drawn from a birds-eye-view as if she was looking at herself from a distance, a mirror or photograph, which in turn illustrates what looks like an out-of-body experience.

This idea of a distant self could be linked back to Atwood’s given the novel design of shifting narrative that moves from Marian’s first-person perspective to third-person and back to first-person again. These shifts happen at specific moments – the first moment occurs when Marian gets engaged to Peter, and then when she confronts him. This narrative device shows how Marian has lost control over her life in the middle section of the novel, depicting the workings of patriarchy over women’s lives. Similarly, Valerie’s painting illustrates herself as the third-person perspective in the story of the mermaid and dialysis, emulating Marian’s position in Atwood’s story. In both works, we are left only with the illustration of this period, building up a myth around it.



Figure 66(b): (left) *Dialysis*, date unknown charcoal and pastel, size unknown (right) a photograph of Valerie standing in front of her artwork titled *Dialysis*, with her raised band-aided arm. Image found in the Fleck Archive, 2021

Conclusion

In this chapter, Valerie's life and work come into a full circle through her portraiture. Not only as the conventional head and shoulder type, within this chapter the idea of what constitute a portrait is expanded by looking at works that illustrate the self via other kind representation as portraits demonstrating the biomythography in Valerie's story. Once again biography here is different to how it has been discussed in other chapters in the way that centre a story of Valerie's personalise story unlike how in previous chapters she told a story about herself via other people's stories such as the story about her mother. Through this story Valerie show other ways that biomythography (through personal story) can be seen to challenge dominant narratives.

In them, we see her use a variety of mediums, painting styles and characterisation of herself, combining this with wit, satire and metaphoric symbolism to address deep emotional issues. We also see Valerie, through her own life story, use her work to tackle broader issues around racial politics, gender issues, and therapy.

Furthermore, additional analysis of Valerie's portraits via feminist strategies shows how she arrives at producing a feminist biomythography. Through her work, we see the intersection where biomythography and feminism meet, and where the personal and the broader political, social, and cultural meets.

The borrowing and cross-referencing of different artistic works illustrate Valerie's multidisciplinary approaches to her work and a different kind of biomythographisation blending autobiography, fiction, and myth. The reference to literature, psychoanalysis, and other visual works also shows the multidimensionality of her work. Instead of producing a single universalising image, she

combines different universal images that in the end produce a more complex understanding of herself and broader issues that women face. Portraiture, therefore, becomes not only about the person's images but a cross-referencing of multiple indexes that speak about the complicated nature of a person, never as a passive consumer of Western culture but rather an agent of her own transformation whose fascination with portraiture echoes her emotional and psychological changes.

By evoking biomythography through her use of obsessive, “autodidactic therapy” and self-imaging/writing strategies, Valerie illustrates her belief in the restorative and reparative potential of her art as healing. While Self-imaging (via visual modes) is proffered as Self-writing, we also see a literal reference to Self-writing, based on Valerie's notebook and diary entries. These written sources have been very instrumental in the unpacking of Valerie's paintings.

Self-writing also offers a space for Valerie to reclaim her own story and to assert her own agency. Biomythography is a genre of art that allows Valerie to blend her personal experiences with fictional elements. This allows her to create work that is both personal and universal. In all this, we see a sense of optimism and a zest for life – given how she continued to try to overcome all her life's devastations.

Chapter 6

Bio(mytho)graphy as a Re-membering of the Archive

Introduction

I am supposed to write my own biography. Does writing a biography mean juggling with dates? Idealising? [...] That would mean writing a story that is not true. Some spoiled readers might, in all innocence, expect a life story to be an essay on contemporary taste and philosophy. But, clearly, I can write only about what concerns me. Like one of the ancient Greeks, I have found one principle alone to be valid, that man is the measure of all things. And since I am a man who experiences the world through his eyes, not his ears, I will speak of what I have seen. [...] How did it begin? How did I become a human being? For one does not become human just by being born. One must become human being again at every instant. I think it was Herder who said that.

—Oskar Kokoschka (1971/1974: npn)

This quote is taken from the biography¹⁶⁴ of the world-renowned Viennese expressionist painter, Oskar Kokoschka, titled *Oskar Kokoschka: My Life* (1971/1974). He once taught and mentored Valerie Desmore. Valerie met and became Kokoschka's pupil in 1947,¹⁶⁵ two years after having moved to London; a year after leaving the Slade's arts programme.¹⁶⁶ I found this biography in the collection of books that previously belonged to Valerie and are now bequeathed to her second cousin Pickstone-Taylor. This collection of books is part of a more extensive archive of things that Valerie left to her relatives.¹⁶⁷ These things tell us about how diligently she pursued her interests. They tell us about the kind of investment she put into knowing about the people and things that interested her, in this case, her teacher and mentor, Kokoschka. They also tell us about

¹⁶⁴ The distinction between biography and autobiography is as follows: a biography is an account of a person's life told by another person, and an autobiography is an account of a person's life told by that same person (Coullie et al. 2006: 9). Yet, Kokoschka writes about writing a biography when, in fact, he is referring to his autobiography. I found at least three Kokoschka biographies in Valerie's library. *Oskar Kokoschka My life* (1971/1974), Oskar Kokoschka Letters: 1905 – 1976 by Heinz Spielmann and Oskar Kokoschka (1992), *The Eye of God, A Life of Oskar* (1999) by Sussane Keegan.

¹⁶⁵ It is said that she wrote him a fan letter asking to be a student (Pickstone-Taylor personal comms 2019, Jackie May unpublished article)

¹⁶⁶ In many archival correspondences, and in her old short biography it is often claimed that Oskar Kokoschka sponsored her studies at the Slade. This is false. In an interview (2004-2006) with her niece Fiona Fleck, Valerie speaks about how it has been falsely stated that her studies were funded by other people when, in fact, she paid for them. She was able to pay for her university fees studies through her father, who paid for them "Through the paintings he had sold for me" (in Fleck and Desmore 2002-2006). She explains that "My parents had sent the Slade principal my work. And he promised to take me on as a student if I came to London... a lot of people think I was given money to go over and given scholarships... when I paid for myself" (Desmore 2004). Indeed, copies of her application for studies that I found at the UCL library show her father's name, Abe Desmore, as the financial guarantor for her tuition.

¹⁶⁷ The archive included things such as her paintings (the largest body of mostly never shown works produced between 1982 and 2006), preparatory drawings, scrapbooks, magazine and newspaper clippings, invitations to her fashion pop-up shows, fashion sketches, articles and photographic recordings of her earlier South African exhibitions, personal documents such as postcards, note pads and letters from friends, family and people in the art world, etcetera.

the kind of investment she put into documenting her own life experiences. Based on these things, we can understand, through her eyes (through book choices), not only Kokoschka's thinking process and his experience of the world as an artist but the kind of influence his thinking may have had on Valerie and her work. As articulated in the opening epigraph of this chapter, through Kokoschka's biography, we can understand how he experienced the world based on what he saw. Similarly, we can almost say the same thing about Valerie— that it is through her own archive of books that we also begin to understand what she, too, saw— even when it may be impossible to equate Kokoschka to Valerie given their different backgrounds.

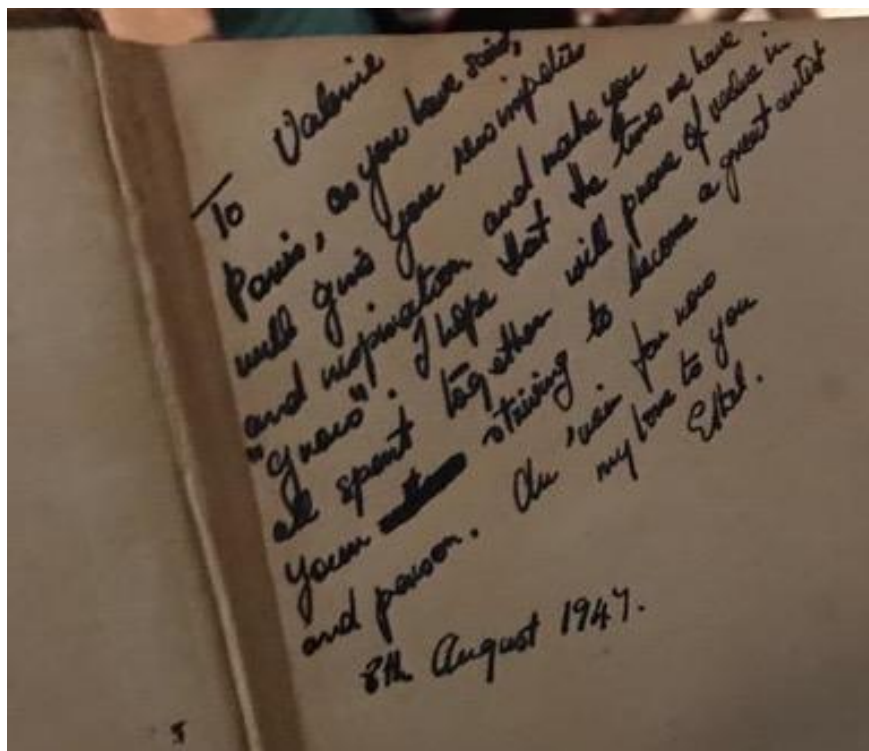


Figure 67(b): A note from Esther found in one of Valerie's books

The largely ocular experience underscored by Kokoschka's testament is only symbolic of the more expanded sets of visceral experiences and their connectedness to Valerie's ephemeral objects, such as her books. They generally imply the aural, tactile and phenomenological experiences of auto-biography. Most importantly, such phenomenological and hermeneutic experiences evoke the impracticality of accuracy and chronology in auto-biography, given the emotive ways many people remember and re-construct events that have happened in their lives. This potentially encumbered act of re-counting one's life in a sequence of chronological and straightforward events has been contested by many writers. As briefly explained in the introduction, bell hooks (1997, 2015) proposes biomythography as an alternative to auto-biography, stating:

It may be that the conventional narrative form of the autobiography lends itself to this obscuring of the inner reality and consciousness of an author precisely because it is usually so focused on the unfolding of a chronologically based genealogy. (1997: xix)

Advocating for autobiography as experimental memoirs, hooks bases this on Audre Lorde's book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, A Biomythography* (1982). In this book, Lorde explores the notion of biomythography in writing about her life and her relationship with the women in her life, highlighting how they worked together to surpass oppression in the 1950s and 1960s. She enunciates the idea of interpreting elements of truth mixed with dreaming, fantasy and self-invention in writing an auto/biography as a fiction that she called a biomythography. In an interview with Karla Jay on why she, Lorde, wrote this book at that time, Lorde replied:

Because there was a gap, *Zami* was written, and so *Zami* is not only an autobiography but mythology, psychology, the ways in which I think we can see our environment. And this is what I think good fiction does. And it is fiction. (1984: 109)

Even though *Zami* is written as a fiction, it does, however, transcend this definition and becomes a site for generating critical theory. This idea of transcendental critical theorisation through fiction is argued eloquently by Barbara Boswell when she writes:

Since black women have been historically — and, to a differing degree, are currently — denied access to sites of formal theory — making, their fiction can be viewed as a site of prodigious theoretical production, as a discursive 'place' where they critique an existing unjust political order, and imagine an alternative, more socially just world. (2020: 4)

While Boswell is referring to the literary work of South African Black women novelists¹⁶⁸ and how their fiction, in their engagement with apartheid nationalism, revealed feminist praxis and theory, this is similar to how Lorde's work has been studied concerning race and gender politics in United States and the world over. By exploring Black women's fiction in this way, Boswell shows the possibility of how a critical interrogation of fiction can become a subversive site of knowledge. Her exploration of these fictions' feminist praxis gives evidence of the impact of racism and gendered oppression on Black women and how this was engendered through their writing. Through this single study of over twenty novels of Black women's writings, Boswell's theorisation of the history of racism and gender oppression in fiction, and fiction as historical revision, offers a rare encounter with South African Black history in conversation with one another. As such, Boswell shows us the different ways we can reread Black women writers' novels. In this study, I explore Boswell's assertion of returning to historical fictionalisation using Lorde's biomythography as a tool to be able to analyse Valerie's art. I argue that through her art, Valerie tells us not only

¹⁶⁸ The writers that Boswell writes about are Miriam Tladi, Lauretta Ngcobo, Farida Karodia, Agnes Sam, Zoë Wicomb, Sindiwe Magona, Yvette Christiansë, Ryada Jacob, Kagiso Lesego Molohe and Zukiswa Wanner.

about her personal story but reveals the historical conditions of her time – thus making her art a critical and prodigious site of knowledge; the intersection of art history and her own personal life. While this may be true of all artists, much like how Lorde used her book *Zami* there is specificity in the way that Desmore deliberately used art as a storytelling tool in not so overt ways and how this was informed by the long engagement with psychoanalysis.

Linda Napikoski, who writes about Lorde’s biomythography, also extends this notion of fiction as revisionist, saying that it is a form of “overlapping identities and the overlapping truths that go along with them” (2018); what Monica Pearl calls “a coming out” (2009: 299) because of how the book is also believed to have been a kind of a coming out for Lorde about her sexuality. This coming out was not straightforward but was rather coded through storytelling in a way that bypassed the limitations of writing about sexuality in her time, undetected. This strategy of overlapping identities thus makes biomythography a useful framework to think about the writing of biographies that are not fixed veracities, but rather interpretations of truths. Tanvi Gupta, who writes a review of this book from a womanist perspective, concurs with this position stating that:

The invention of a biomythography, here, served as a platform to cleverly yet deceptively convey her take on the unfair treatment of some groups at the hands of a powerful few [...] Lorde’s treatment of her biomythography was seen as an important step towards establishing a shift in the way Black women, or Black lesbians were received in the eighties, i.e. the time when *Zami* was originally published. (2016: 37-38)

Gupta’s widely shared sentiment about the importance of this book for its feminist and womanist activism asserts the criticality of biomythography. Interestingly, the structure of biomythography has been taken further into the practice of visual arts. Academic and artist-Sharlene Khan, in her PhD (2014),¹⁶⁹ briefly writes about biomythography as a form of remembering and re-membering, which she argues is a practice of subjective storytelling and an invocation of historical legacies. Though Khan’s PhD was not about biomythography, she touches on biomythography as part of her research on postcolonial masquerading. For Khan, biomythography within the understanding of postcolonial masquerading is part of “black feminist ideas of creative theorisation” (2014: 7) that she claims the four contemporary South African Black women artists¹⁷⁰ she selected for her PhD, explore in their art. By doing this, she links biomythography as a strategy of re-membering,

¹⁶⁹ Khan’s PhD is titled *Postcolonial Masquerading: A critical analysis of masquerading strategies in the artworks of contemporary South African visual artists Anton Kannemeyer, Tracey Rose, Mary Sibande, Senzeni Marasela and Nandipha Mntambo* (2014).

¹⁷⁰ These artists are Tracey Rose, Mary Sibande, Senzeni Marasela and Nandipha Mntambo. Khan looks at how these artists in their visual artworks use costumes, makeup and props in staging their bodies before the camera to reveal contemporary debates about postcolonial masquerading notions as a tool to question identity, autobiography and memory.

which is invoked through bell hooks. Quoting hooks, Khan explains her use of the word re-member, and its slight shift from the word remember, thus:

The word remember (re-member), evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. [...] Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonising eye. (hooks in Khan 2014: 92)

In an award-winning body of work and book titled *When the Moon Waxes* (2019), Khan further practicalises her use of biomythography through video art, drawing, and embroidery. Remembering and reciting her grandmother's story as part of a group of people who came from India to South Africa through indentured labour. Khan applies this understanding of biomythography to invoke processes of piecing and literally stitching together the story. For Khan, producing this body of work was an act of re-membering. She argues that it is a reminder that "as people that have endured disrupted traumatic histories, part of our identity process is to re-member" (2014: 92). This kind of biomythography making, according to Khan, is seen to be "a part of subjective storytelling in compelling the reader/viewer to acknowledge its bias, its invention, its fiction" (2014: 92). In this instance, Khan's re-membering affirms biomythography as a subjective visual object that revises history through visual art. Such an understanding of biomythography speaks to art as a complex yet valid site of theorisation. Further extending the understanding of art as fiction (text) and a tool to produce biomythography, I relate this employment of biomythography to Valerie's work, particularly how she narrates her family history of being 'mixed race' as well as another social commentary about her experiences of living in exile. By engaging Valerie through this lens, we see how she also applied biomythography in the making of her work, making this exercise a visual theorisation. Writer Panashe Chigumadzi, echoing Khan and Boswell through her own writing about her Grandmother, states, "I have been particularly inspired by the ways black women writers have used fiction and the imagination to overcome great historical silences in the face of great historical trauma" (2021: 235).

hooks, Khan, Boswell, and Chigumadzi's proposal of remembering and re-membering is critical to this research, given that Valerie self-identified as an expressionist to produce art that deliberately tells her life story. Explaining the expressionist mode of working, Valerie states, "I am an expressionist painter, and we often paint the violence in people, the violence in ourselves, the unhappiness sometimes in ourselves, the longing in ourselves, our relation to our friends and family. And all these things make my world of painting" (Desmore, 1998). Analysing Valerie's work as a re-membering, in its making, and thus its reading, is multi-layered since much of what it references are coded motifs and images that may not be so easy to decipher. They are challenging

to read because they are obfuscated. Furthermore, this excavation is activated through Boswell's proposition of rediscovering new knowledge sites of theory through fiction. I deliberately adopt these radical ideas since they recognise the generative power of fiction.

In other words, biomythography is a viable method through which to unveil the fictions of historiographic representation of Black women artists. Doing this highlights the intersections between Valerie's artistic, personal and broader history rather than attempting a straightforward biography or monograph. Importantly, 'reading' Valerie's oeuvre as a biomythography propels a non-linear navigation of the interwovenness of the personal, social, political story and circumstantial contexts of their making. Indeed, Khan aptly concludes, "...for after all, too often the facts have been lies" (2019: 7-12).

The remainder of this chapter discusses how Valerie's work could be read through the historical context of the public and private archive and biographical writing, its theories and politics in remembering and re-membering Valerie's autobiography, biography and biomythography. It engages an archive of re-membering through a multiplicity of sources, offering complex ways of reading the various elements of personal symbols and narratives; the broader archives and ephemeral material; stories and narratives of others.

Personal Archive and Public Archive

Unlike many Black modern artists, Valerie is one of the few who left a legacy of her own archive, as listed in the introduction. Keeping records of her life's work and achievements has meant that the reading and extending of her art and life story is not only based on the scanty sources in the public record,¹⁷¹ but also the information she kept on herself. This makes her personal archive a very important resource as it suggests that it is possible to verify the accuracy of this public record for any historical misrepresentations. Such misrepresentations are common for early Black South African modern artists within their context, particularly the way writing about their work is often expressed through lenses that collectivises Black experiences (Goniwe, 2003; Khan, 2015) because in the modern period (i.e. twentieth century through apartheid) there was no political interest in documenting the lives of Black artists. As Bhekizizwe Peterson attests, "As we know, colonial and apartheid authorities consistently denied the existence of any legacy among Africans worth preserving, an attitude borne out of their insistence that Africans had no history" (2002: 29).

Additionally, Valerie's archive gives us a geographical mapping of her experiences. This is what Lize Van Robbroeck frames as "temporal and geographical context(s)" (2011: 115). We are able to appreciate the times in which she lived as well as their "spatial narratives" (Harney and Phillips, 2018: 2). We can pay attention to the way that she understood her contexts, and we receive convincing evidence to facilitate the possible mapping of her geographical experiences, mobility and independence. This is important given the extreme evolution of her art career in two worlds — her early visual arts career in South Africa and her career shifts to fashion and back to art in later life in London.

For Valerie to have so deliberately documented her archive evidences autonomous practice (Oguibe, 2001: 40) and privilege that was not always affordable to many Black artists.¹⁷² This is said in consideration of how many Black artists of the 1920s and 1930s were unable, due to their contexts of inequality and displacement, to collate documents of their own achievements (Spiro 1988; Ntombela 2013).

The freedom to compile one's achievements is one of privilege and liberation; a path towards self-enunciation which was not common practice amongst early African modernist artists. This

¹⁷¹ This includes the short online biography, published articles, and the small archive of documents in institutions where her work is collected such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the South African National Gallery (JAG and SANG).

¹⁷² Many had to live exilic lives, making such a collation difficult to keep.

autonomous practice is what Bea de Sousa names “subversive subjectivity” (2017: 532), which is based on her reading of Ben Enwonwu’s biography and archive. She notes that Enwonwu negotiated his agency as an artist of the early twentieth century, through autonomous acts of self-archiving that allow those who encounter his work today to see his subversive subjectivities, agency and voice. It is in a similar light that Valerie’s archive is engaged in this dissertation. Valerie’s complex archive reveals how she may have wanted to ‘self-represent.’ Judith Lütge Coullie *et al.* write about the archives and their connectedness to biography as premised on “time, meaning and action” (2006: 1) in being able to demonstrate “How [she] became who [she was]?” (2006: 1) and “Who [she] want[ed] to become?” (2006: 2). Such an inspection into her archive and personal biography also offers an opportunity to carefully examine how she may have wanted her life’s work to be encountered later. It compels us to look deeply into the kinds of material and information that she makes available to us posthumously.

This ‘self-representation’, through the artist’s personal archive, is posited by de Sousa as a political site. de Sousa says this because it provides the understanding of “the contextual reality of the artist, Enwonwu’s artistic process and reception. Importantly, we are able to take note of his own cognitive and emotional agency” (2018: 500). This is because de Sousa understands Enwonwu’s archive to have “responded to his colonial subjugation with his own subversive subjectivity” (2017: 532) as well as his “psychological and political counter-narrative” (2017: 529). de Sousa’s observation of Enwonwu aptly describes what could also be said about Valerie particularly because, to a certain extent, both artists shared similar historical contexts. The period in which their art careers began was the early 1900s. Also, both their countries were once colonies of England, meaning both experienced similar kinds of “colonial subjugation” and “colonial miseducation” (Armah 2015). They both pursued further studies at the Slade School of Fine Art. Valerie, contrary to the script, only lasted a year due to her eventual rejection of the Slade’s “restrictive curriculum” (Desmore 1989).¹⁷³ They also both come from considerably ‘affluent’¹⁷⁴ families, which subverts the common narrative of their political reasons for leaving their home countries of Nigeria and South Africa (respectively) to attend art school in London.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Interview where she describes what they did. Refer also to the documents sent the Bea about the art subjects she took.

¹⁷⁴ I am using affluent quite loosely here. Though Valerie’s family her father’s position as a school principal and his political work, and the fact that Valerie’s family lived in an affluent side of Cape Town Sea point, they were not rich enough to afford international study.

¹⁷⁵ Contrary to many writings that claim that Valerie was funded by the New Group or Oskar Kokoschka, in an interview with her niece Fiona Fleck, she stresses that it was her father who raised the money through the selling of her art in order to pay for her tuition. Indeed, records from the UCL archive of her original application of study at the Slade show her father’s name as the financial guarantor for her tuition.

The opposite of these similarities is the glaring difference between Enwonwu's celebrity status within the art world and Valerie's obscurity. These differences articulate how their positionalities exude different forms of privilege. Even though both might have come from affluent families, and both come from Africa, they both lived different lives. Unlike South Africa, Nigeria has never had to navigate the race bar,¹⁷⁶ which was a particular contextual condition of South Africa that would later become apartheid. As colonialism ended in 1960 for Nigeria, South Africa only gained its real independence in 1994, thirty-four years later.¹⁷⁷ We can argue that these conditions have largely affected how both artists are historically remembered. Here, their privileged positions function very differently. In other words, the equalising comparisons between Enwonwu and Valerie might be incommensurable. From this, we can understand that the two artists could not have navigated the same struggle for self-representation or the politics of subversive subjectivity, even though their 'career journeys' were emergent around the same time.

The question of gender stands out significantly in this context when we compare the lives of Valerie Desmore and Ben Enwonwu. While both are Africans; come from affluent families; and theoretically, went to the same art school, the art world has always historically embraced and documented male modernists with far greater conviction (Makhubu 2020). This navigation of a male-centred world gave more value to male artists than to women. For instance, other's like Afi Ekong,¹⁷⁸ a Nigerian woman artist, who also studied art in London in the 1950s, never received the same attention as Enwonwu did. While Enwonwu's personal archive may be an important example to show how an artist's archive can act as a political subversion and agent of art history, for Valerie, it was more complicated since she had the extra hurdle as a woman negotiating epistemic racism and gender inequality in all her contexts. By this, we also can understand that even though archives can act as political sites, their conditions also speak to the multi-facetedness of the politics of their time. We can also understand that the archive, as a form of 'self-

¹⁷⁶ It may be argued that Nigeria may have also experienced residential segregation, but this was not the same scale of a settler population.

¹⁷⁷ It is important to note that South Africa's colonial independence from Britain was in 1910, but was qualitatively different from the independence of Nigeria which was gained through African nationalist liberation struggles.

¹⁷⁸ According to Wikipedia, Ekong began her art studies in London in 1951 at the Oxford College of Arts and Technology, she later went on to Saint Martin's School of Art in 1955, then returned to Lagos in 1957. In 1958 at the Exhibition Centre Marina, Ekong was the first woman artist to hold a solo exhibition in Lagos. In 1961 she had a solo exhibition at Galeria Galatea in Buenos Aires. She owned and operated the Bronze Gallery in various locations, in Lagos and on the Fiekong Estate in Calabar. She was manager of the Lagos Arts Council, a founding member of the Society of Nigerian Artists, also the supervisor of Gallery Labac from 1961, and chair of the Federal Arts Council Nigeria from 1961 to 1967. She appeared regularly on a Nigerian television program called *Cultural Heritage*, to promote the arts. In 1963 she was featured in a *New York Times* photo essay as an example of the "new African woman" after independence. She also chaired a UNESCO commission in the 1970s, and in 1990 the National Council of Women's Societies Committee on Arts and Crafts.

representation', is centred around personal and collective identity. It is able to share all these different views through what it holds.

Since she kept her own archive, which we can access to gain a wider reading of her biography, such as learning about her fashion career. This career change and trajectory remain unknown, especially within the context of South Africa. Understanding her fashion career shows her ongoing visibility within the creative sphere despite her significant extended absence from the art world, contradicting Martin Herbert's (2017) argument about how women artists who reject the art world end up permanently erased from it. However, this knowing about her life in fashion also proves Herbert right about his prognosis that artists who leave the art world out of frustration do not ever leave completely; there is always something in the field of creativity that keeps them linked to the art world. Through Valerie's fashion career, we see how she maintained ties with the creative field — particularly her association with Central Saint Martins, another art school in London, even though she had willingly left the Slade.

Another important point about Valerie's personal archive is its accessibility to the public. I have been fortunate to have had direct access to Valerie's relatives, which has made access to some of her personal documents arguably easier in comparison to what may have transpired in the context of public archives. As already stated, this is not always possible for artists in the modern period, as many did not always have the opportunity to document their own lives (Spiro 1998; Ntombela 2013). Most of them were literally 'spoken for' by anthropologists, ethnographers or 'white connoisseurs' (Goniwe 2008; Sincuba 2020). Writing about the challenges of accessing the artist's personal archives, de Sousa explains that engaging the private archives is a varied, layered and complex process that often requires careful methodologies of engagement since most are family-run, and thus, "open to research on a case-by-case interpersonal level" (2017: 504). The advantage of them, de Sousa argues, is that "they act as a firewall against changing government policies" (de Sousa 2017: 504), should these archives have been operated by the state. These family-run institutions, therefore, allow for the possibility of unscripted or extra-governmental engagements.

The notion of government firewalls has been discussed to length within the discourse of archiving by writers like Hamilton *et al.* (2002), Peterson (2002), Mbembe (2002), Anne Stoler (2010), Okwui Enwezor (2013), Gule (2013) and many more who write about how government archives are constituted by a miscellany of political ideologies that function as a form of gatekeeping of knowledge that contrarily, is meant to be available for public access. This then results in public

archives being prescriptive because of the way they are biasedly selective, classified, catalogued, often bilingual¹⁷⁹ and absurdly bureaucratised. Within the context of art museums in South Africa, Khwezi Gule argues, “the act[s] of collecting and archiving are deeply political and are intricately bound with the politics of the time and its rhetoric” (2017: 126). In other words, “Archives cannot, therefore, escape the thick imprint of their institutional and political nature” (Peterson, 2002: 29). This political boundedness of national collections and their archives is often untraceable as many institutions for a long time collected and built up their archives with no ‘written’ policies; instead, they were collected based on a shared consensus of exclusions that were enabled by apartheid laws. Lesley Spiro explains:

As an overall observation, then, formal written policies have until recently been largely absent and most of the policies are so general that they do not drive towards very specific recognisable profiles [...] This lack of formal policies suggests that the shape and form of South African art museum collections have been driven largely by the people, the procedures and the structures that have constituted the acquisitions process at each museum and at each point in time. Besides, it implies that collection development has been an area in which museums have not been accountable to their constituencies. Indeed, the absence of publicly available policy effectively stifles debate and criticism by outsiders because there is nothing concrete to react to. (1995: 22)

Spiro’s characterisation of institutional firewalls speaks to the larger ideological issues that stem from historical exclusions of art museum archives and collections. Quite clear is the fact that the challenges and limits present in public institutions are not the same for personal archives, as artists tend to have autonomy over what they collect about their own lives. And while this autonomy offers great possibilities in the project of redress, as already mentioned, not everyone had the opportunity to exercise it. Finding these archives presents a more significant challenge. Many early artists have died, and knowing where to find them is not always easy.

Writing on this question of access and the urgency to document such archives, academic and writer Peterson (2002), calls for particular consideration of what he calls the ‘itinerant’ archive. For him, this was the most urgent archive project at the dawn of the post-apartheid era. At a symposium titled *Refiguring the Archive*, which later became a book, he describes the itinerant archive as “the stubborn memories of people, in suitcases and plastic bags under beds, in wardrobes and in ceilings” (2002: 31) that he felt was more under threat than any of the ‘so called’ public archives. Saying this in 2002, Peterson thought it was more pertinent “to find, assemble, catalogue and elucidate as much as possible of this material and to bring it into play in the public or institutional

¹⁷⁹ In the case of South Africa, this often means English or Afrikaans and never any other language. And in the case of any of the other post-colonial African States, English and French would be the operational languages, thus excluding the majority of local publics who would be constituted of speakers of so called ‘native’ tongues.

orbit” (2002: 31). Peterson was addressing what he felt to be a misplaced focus of the post-apartheid archive project in its concentration on public institutions as opposed to private archives of Black practitioners and the Black institutions that were constantly threatened with closure due to the lack of financial support. He found this focus to be a “rhetoric of change”(2002: 31), which only continued to valorise what he calls the monolingual archive in the way that it “embodied and voiced only the experiences and discourses of the successive white oligarchies that have governed throughout the twentieth century” (2002: 31).

As a counter to this focus, Peterson states “we have to establish what other forms of knowledge and records have been deemed inconsequential and inappropriate and consequently excluded from archival holdings. We have to be critical of the methods that have gone into the acquisition, cataloguing and interpretation of material” (2002: 30). This thinking about the itinerant archive, resonates with Valerie’s personal archive. It also reverberates Boswell’s notion of prodigious theorisation and Nkosi’s radical sharing. Given that Valerie left South Africa in 1946, much of her public archive in South Africa exists as snippets of press releases from her early exhibitions at JAG and SANG. Fortunately, she kept some documentation of this period of her life, which included her early shows in the 1940s. More miraculous is the fact that her family has also kept this archive, including her large art collection – a demonstration of the value of the ‘itinerant archive’. Finding Valerie’s archive in 2019 proves just how important Peterson’s warnings were, and how slow our attention to the itinerant archive has been given that it has taken so long for an in-depth study on her to happen. In that time Valerie’s archive has gone through massive change, with some documents getting lost or possibly disappearing altogether.¹⁸⁰ Even those existing documents sometimes are difficult to access, such as her videos that were still in VHS until very recently (October 2020).

It makes Peterson’s call critical in stressing the need to excavate, bring to light and make visible the other narratives of South African modern artists through their personal archives. It also reiterates Boswell’s proposition to return to these moments in history with the intention to pull out the intellectual contributions of what is found. The fact that Peterson wrote about this in 2002 already signalled the crisis around the “fragility, scarcity and safety of the material,” which makes

¹⁸⁰ As an example, there are works that were listed in the original bequest that have disappeared without a trace of who they were sold or given to. Such an example is the disappearance of the work *Shadows/Now You Know Where I am Coming From*. Attempts to trace this work have been futile, and the owners of her estate have no recollection of where it is.

this kind of research even more paramount. Finding it in 2019 also highlights the possibilities, though slim, that lie ahead of finding more archives of other Black modernist artists.

While being able to gain such access to Valerie's personal archives comes with a certain sense of triumph in beating the "battle against forgetting" (Peterson 2002: 35), it also comes with a great sense of responsibility and challenge. Doing this kind of research as a Black scholar comes with its own set of problems. Race, gender, class, and cultural dynamics play a significant part in how researchers are either granted or denied access to different family archives. There are still certain perceptions about the kind of person considered knowledgeable and trustworthy because of how certain forms of knowledge are societally and discipline constituted. While other disciplines have certainly made good progress in disrupting these perceptions, my own experiences in the field of art, particularly in the context of South Africa, have led me to believe that my body and name as a Black scholar carries a certain weight, perceptions and reputation which can either gain or deny me access to certain kinds of people. So, while it may be easy to gain trust from non-South Africans, who often engage without historical prejudice, the South African scene is still led by much historical mistrust.¹⁸¹ Therefore, this can be limiting in terms of getting material content on early Black modern artists as many records on these artists lie in the hands of the families of the same 'white connoisseurs' that continue to place their trust in certain types of scholars. I have been lucky in the sense that it has been relatively easy to connect to Valerie's family. However, I recognise that it ironically took her niece in France to make it possible for other doors to open for me in South Africa.¹⁸²

Representation in the Archive

While, within the context of this research, direct access to the artist's archive is possible, it is also important to stress that the opportunity to cross-reference between the artist's personal archive about her life with what is widely circulated in public, is rare. Too often, art writers and curators struggle to find accurate information on Black artists from the modernist period due to the colonial erasure that systematically denied Black artists the right to be acknowledged as important contributors to the South African art canon (Van Robbroeck 2006; 2011). As mentioned above, artists have also struggled to keep documentation of their own achievements.

¹⁸¹ See Khan's *Doing it for Daddy* article.

¹⁸² Fleck was the first person to approach me.

Spiro illustrates this in her essay found in the exhibition catalogue for *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art* (1930—1988) —of the ground-breaking exhibition which was given that same title - —where she reflects on the challenges she faced putting together biographies of Black artists for the exhibition. She notes:

The fact that the artists in this exhibition represent a largely ‘neglected tradition’ was nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the effort to compile a reasonably accurate and complete set of biographies. In the first instance, no detailed biographical survey of this important group has been done before. Information had to be gathered from a wide range of sources – newspaper clippings, journal articles, exhibition invitations and catalogues, books, artists’ own curriculum vitae, and interviews with the artists themselves and people with whom they have come into contact. Many of these sources yielded only sketchy and inaccurate data. Even the artists, often working in extremely difficult circumstances, have seldom had the opportunity to develop detailed records of their lives and achievements. In addition, such phenomena as multiple names for the same place and non-standardised spelling added a layer of confusion to the task of verifying facts [...] A great deal of more research will be necessary before we can claim to have done justice to the subject. (1988: 97)

The challenges she writes about begin to articulate the politics of representation through biography and archive. It also articulates how archives of modern Black artists became institutionalised. The fact that the *Neglected Tradition* exhibition catalogue is now one of the few frequently referenced resources on Black artists,¹⁸³ following Esmé Berman’s *Art and Artists of South Africa: An Illustrated Biographical Dictionary and Historical Survey of Painters and Graphic Artists since 1875* (1970/1983) and Ricky Burnett’s *Tributaries: a view of contemporary South African art* (1985) is indicative. These 1980s publications were later expanded through Edward J. de Jaager’s *Images of Man: Contemporary South African Black Art and Artists, a pictorial and historical guide* (1992) and eventually Elza Miles through her *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Modern Black Artists* (1997—1998) books and exhibition catalogues. Together, these publications illustrate the impact such documents (books and exhibitions) have had on the way modern Black artists entered the South African art canon as they ultimately determined their visibility and invisibility, which supported what was also captured in exhibition reviews that can be found in newspaper archives of the period under focus.

Through these documents, we can see the context of time, politics, and geography that governed the way modern Black artists operated. We are also able to see traces of white collector connoisseurship, who, even though they saw themselves “furthering a deserving cause” (Marshall, 2001: 54) under the socio-political climate of the time, instead gained buying power which turned

¹⁸³ Complementing the *Tributaries* exhibition catalogue which was ground-breaking for its inclusion of many Black artists in one exhibition, even though it did not include artists’ biographies with far lesser artists than those included in *The Neglected tradition*.

them into taste and value makers that controlled the representation of Black artists — much of which has not changed till this day. Consequently, white connoisseurship became the first form of documentation of modern Black artists' practices, particularly since public art museums only began buying the works of modern Black artists more conscientiously, with some institutions sporadically starting in the 1960s¹⁸⁴ and 1980s, and more deliberately in the 1990s (post-apartheid). By then, most institutions had to back-buy overlooked artists' works through resales in the secondary markets from the very same white connoisseurs (Rankin 1990).¹⁸⁵ This has meant that for the most part of the early twentieth century, the work of many Black artists has remained largely in the white private collectors' hands, with some works introduced gradually over time through publications or public art museum exhibitions and collections. As a result, these power dynamics of collecting and archiving have inevitably established problematic frameworks of 'sympathy' (Rankin 1990), 'curiosity' and 'othering' (Marschall 2001) with 'sketchy detail' (Spiro 1989) since documentation of these Black artists lives was not the primary concern of these collectors. It is, therefore, paramount to engage public archives with a "critical approach" (de Sousa 2018; Mahashe 2019) because, as Gule argues:

the value of a collection [...] is not subject to limitations of one project, not the myopia of one curator nor museum official. It lies in the generations of art lovers, artists, researchers, and scholars who will continue to look upon this collection for inspiration, for information and for a picture of what the art world was like a century ago. (2017: 126)

Writing about this interest in returning to such collections, Heidi Sincuba¹⁸⁶ in her review of the exhibition *All in a Day's Eye: The Politics of Innocence in the Javett Collection* (2020) critiques the use of institutionalised private collections by Black curators. Defining them as "collections of white men" and as violent spaces, Sincuba warns Black curators to exercise caution when engaging with such collections. In this review, Sincuba challenges the seeming radical critique of this controversial exhibition's curatorial framework in its problematisation of the seeming innocence of private collections. She warns that any attempt to engage the racism embedded in historically white collections is a form of 'entanglement' that can implicate Black writers and curators "in the sinister situation in which whiteness and patriarchy emerged not only as the perpetrators of violence but the generous patrons of its commodification" (Sincuba 2020). Sincuba notes the paradoxical relationship between white connoisseurs and works of Black curators, which highlights the fact

¹⁸⁴ While JAG is recorded to have purchased the first artwork from a Black artist, Gerard Sekoto, in 1946 it wasn't until the 1960s that they bought another Black artist's work.

¹⁸⁵ "White patrons of black art have probably been particularly influential in the area of painting not only because this art form was new to black culture but because the concept of art as a commodity, another idea introduced from the west, has been adopted wholeheartedly by many black artists who have a thoroughly practical view of art as a way of earning a living and therefore pay close attention to the requirements of the market" (Rankin 1990: 28).

¹⁸⁶ The title of her essay is *The Politics of Guilt and the Violence of the Archive*.

that learning about early Black artists, who were initially collected by whites, involves navigating through prisms of racist art histories. This creates a challenging situation that could make it difficult to revise these art-historical positions through the same collections, as the archives' history of trauma cannot be undone. For her, if such revision work does not reflect on its collaboration with this violence, it may inadvertently show a "loyalty to the problematic archive" (Sincuba 2020). Thinking through Sincuba's proposition makes it paramount to acknowledge the archive's complicated process of engagement, as it may also mean acknowledging the way these private archives maintain silence and collective complicity in what becomes of them today.

The reality is that, without archives of Black artists by the artists themselves, the study of modern Black artists involves relying solely on these very problematic archives and collections, both for the public and private sectors. And while Valerie's own archive provides the much-needed accuracy and detail, being able to access the broader context of where she worked means consulting these very problematic archives too. This implies that in order to understand Valerie's history, one still has to work with the same violent spaces that Sincuba writes about.

Framing the Biographies of South African Black Artists

While Sincuba's criticism looks at the contextual and representational elements that inform biographies, it also addresses the numerous contestations that many art writers have expressed about the way biographies of Black artists are configured and used in art history (Goniwe 2008; Leeb-du Toit 2009; Van Robbroeck 2006 and 2011; Mdanda 2011; Gule 2013; Ntombela 2013; Mdluli 2015). These contestations are levelled at how biographies of Black artists – in the way that their personal information of social, cultural, gender, and class – tend to be used; often to spectacularise the so-called 'fact' of their 'ethnicity' or 'lack of formal education' (workshop trained, etc), and in so doing, belittle their artistic skills – what Khan and Asfour (2018) termed "white-speak". Fouad and Khan describe "white-speak" as an attitude toward writing about black artists where black artists' contributions are always a paradoxical index of infantilising subtext of what is written. This is furthered by the unequal attention paid to Black artists' intellectual contributions than that of white South African artists, which in turn normalised racial dividedness with very little done to address the unequal access to opportunities for Black artists. They also normalised writing about Black artistic talent only as attributes of white patronisation (Marschall 2001; Rankin 1990).

Art historians like Thembinkosi Goniwe have long lamented this in public platforms as well as in text, arguing that artist biographies are often used in particularly racialised ways, so much so that their biographies become all-encompassing in the way they are used as a tool for art audiences to ‘get to know’ Black artists via their ‘ethnic’ origins. To him, this has problematical implications for how Black artists are always ‘known’, or rather, always ‘explained’ to the public, to the point where the ‘knowing’ comes to stand in for ‘the work’ as opposed to focusing on knowing about the formal, material and conceptual merit of their work. He contends that art historians and critics seem to be unable to divorce the ‘life histories’ of Black artists from their ‘work’, which limits and endangers nuanced readings of the work. This renders Black artists as passive victims of apartheid who are dependent on white interlocutors. How are we to think about the relationship between biography and artistic production? Referring to verbal comments that Goniwe has made at different times, Khwezi Gule (2013) writes:

critics tend to use the [Black] artist’s biography as a primary point of departure, often to the detriment of the work itself... Having said that, however, one has to acknowledge that when artists speak about their work, they make references to their life experience, their background, beliefs, whether political or religious, and self-identity. There exists the very real danger that the artists, no matter how they identify themselves, can thus be easily boxed. (2013: 560)

While it may not always be possible to divorce the biographical and the artistic, for expressionist painters like Valerie especially, this presents a more complex lesson towards the enmeshment of these two things, therefore making it difficult to totally reject biography.

The other major issue that Goniwe criticised about other sorts of ‘othering’ when reading Black artists’ work is the ‘collective’ study of Black artists, in the sense that Black artists’ work, especially revision work, is through group exhibitions, which tend to collectivise and typecast Black artists biographies. In these moments, the individual contribution of each artist is flattened into an overarching narrative that diminishes the individual practice of each artist. Such problematic forms of biographical use might speak to what Nancy Jacobs and Andrew Bank write about post-apartheid auto-and-biographical writing as “inherently an awkward project” (2019: 166). This, they argue, is based on their observation of the strains of producing a ‘faithful’ biography in a world where “observing without judgement is impossible” (2019: 166). This judgement has to do with negotiating “the intimate and fraught politics between author and subject, author and sources about the subject’s internal life, and author and audiences who may be very invested in certain depictions of a well-known subject” (2019: 166). These are elements of biographical writing that are often unseen, yet, implicate the way writers navigate biographical work. For Jacobs and Bank,

these unseen things are part of navigating “awkward encounters and unsettling negotiations” (2019: 171), therefore calling for the need to make these negotiations known and in the case of this research, how they may begin to speak to biomythography.

While it is not possible to do away entirely with biographies, as they play an important part in understanding the artist’s choices, intellectual project, and career trajectory, it is important to engage the biographies with these warnings in mind. Biographies, thus, need to be produced with consideration of such historical contestations.

Self-Reflexivity

Art historian Juliette Leeb-du Toit has attempted to make the problematic ways biographies of Black artists have been captured in South African art history known. She notes that:

Critics and historians often contextualised the work of black South African artists within the parameters of their cultural origins and experiences, but often overlooked intercultural experiences and the concerns that have shaped black self-definition. Until relatively recently, art by black South Africans was collectively categorised in a historical timeframe as pioneers of realism, township, protest, transitional or struggle art and more recently as post-apartheid or rather blandly, contemporary art. Artists who did not fit into these categories tended, nonetheless, to be subsumed into them, often on the strength of only a fraction of their oeuvre. Such categorisation tended to obscure the many rich and complex responses to modernity and the individuality or visual language. ‘Black’ art was in part expected to be figurative, expressive and narrative. (2009: 14)

Leeb-du Toit’s statement surfaces the problematic positioning imposed on the work of Black South African artists by a host of writers who have made their life careers by casting the work of said Black artists in anthropological or ethnographic moulds. She points to a need to understand the strategy of Black self-definition and subjectivity. Leeb-du Toit’s statement was made in 2009, indicating the currency of such debates and the amount of work that still needs to be done to undo and avoid the limitations of much ethnographic art-historical writing. That being said, Leeb-du Toit speaks about the importance of understanding the intercultural experiences in Black artists’ works yet omits to mention the importance of understanding the artists’ intellectual project, which speaks to artists’ agency, artistic concepts and their meaning — the self-definition that she argues for. This is because Leeb-du Toit, in seeking to undo this tendency, also falls into the trap of collectivising her criticism without self-reflexivity.

Sabine Marschall writes about this form of criticism as a complicated interwoven strategy of ‘accommodation’ that is premised on notions of alignment (redress) and the problematic

positioning of connoisseurship and cultural brokerage of white scholars who in their interest in the so-called 'African art', have not done enough to exercise self-reflexivity, or at least, to be aware of their own complicity, even when they claim to be speaking against the dominant western culture. She argues that white liberal cultural brokers who "belong to the older generation that have grown up under a highly biased system of art education and collecting practice [...] display a personal and professional enthusiasm for African art often demonstrating a 'genuinely caring' attitude toward Black artists, whose talent they recognize and esteem" (2001: 54), but are not quite reflective of their own tendency to exhibit a "patronising and paternalistic attitude" (2001: 54). Though Marschall names the white liberal cultural brokers that she criticises to be Esmé Berman, Elza Miles and Joe Thorpe. It is not far-fetched to level the same argument against a younger generation of white writers like Leeb-du Toit (2009), and perhaps even Marschall (2001) herself.¹⁸⁷ This need for self-reflexivity is particularly necessary in these times as a lot of the paradigms of inscription are in a notable crisis. Fortunately, this has been called out much more in recent years by Black critical thinkers like Goniwe (2003, 2010), Khan (2006), Khan and Asfour (2018), Mahashe (2019) and Sincuba (2020) who now have the opportunity to dig through the histories of their own communities.,.

Putting all these considerations into practice, Chabani Mangayi, interviewed by Thengani Ngwenya, discusses two critical concepts that he used in writing the biographies of Es'kia Mphahlele and Gerard Sekoto. The first is the ethics of producing a biography, raising the issue of the representation, particularly the biographer's prejudice, a negotiation of voice, and 'heroisation'. The second is about what gets implicated in the writing of a biography, pointing out that biography is the nexus between private and public narratives. Discussing prejudice, voice and "heroisation," Manganyi cautions against the biographer's prejudice, arguing that biographers must work through their own biases first in order to remain objective about the person they are writing about. This, he argues, is a negotiation of voice, because for him "biography is about voice," meaning that the balancing of voice needs to be checked to ensure that the voice of the subject does not get overpowered by the voice of the biographer. He states, "from time to time you have to ask yourself which voice is speaking and so on" (2003: 432). The voice of the biographer here is understood as one that should only be interpreting "carefully researched facts alongside his [or her] own interpretation and analysis thereof" (2003: 431). In negotiating this notion of voice, he warns against interpretations that heroise, saying "there can be no heroisation when both the

¹⁸⁷ Their so called 'genuine' criticism of the workings of a system continues to inscribe paternalism and infantilism upon Black artists, yet they never really reflect on their own complicit positions.

grandeur and the lows in a man's life are placed side by side" (2003: 436). For Manganyi, heroisation is a lopsided presentation of someone and does not allow the reader to make up their mind about the person being studied. This echoes Chigumadzi's sentiment when writing about a generation of older women, not to write over their voices.

Manganyi's second point is about the function of biographies, which he says tells us about stories far beyond the person written about. To him, biographies are also an indication of societal concerns, what he refers to as "private troubles and public issues" (2003: 434). Elaborating on this, he states, "if you look closely enough at the private troubles of an individual in a particular society you have a very good chance of understanding the public troubles; that is the social fabric of that society" (2003: 434). In other words, Manganyi tells us about the need to acknowledge the internal and external factors of a person. Manganyi's work remains one of the select few biographies dedicated to artists. Others like Thami Mnyele and Durant Sihlali, are but a few who dedicate such attention to artists, particularly South African artists. There is still a wide gap of biographies and monographs of Black artists. As I wrote this chapter, I kept all these debates about the writing of auto-and-biography and biomythography in mind.

Feminist Biographies

Continuing this notion of reflexivity and the writing of reflexive biographies, Feminist historian Barbara Caine writes about how biographical writing on a woman that is produced by another woman connotes particular feminist epistemologies and ideologies. She states:

[...] many of the underlying methodological issues that are central to all biographical writing have been raised and reformulated as feminists have tended more and more to ask what precisely it is that interests and concerns us in the lives of other women. Are we interested primarily in the achievements of particular women – and if so, how do we evaluate and analyse them? Alternatively, do we seek another kind of approach to a biography which allows individual cases to illuminate a lot of women of a particular time, place and social group? (1994: 247)

Caine's proposition of a feminist methodology that is about situating the lives of women within the networks of their social surroundings articulates the critical need to understand the gendered nature through which biographies are generated. Caine's argument about a deliberate connectedness between biographer and the biographed can be related to Seyla Benhabib's notion of a "web of narrative" (2006: 1) in its "negotiat[ion] [of] the discrepancies between the self-representation and representations of self by others" (Coullie *et al.* 2006: 7) in the way that

biographies account for the “relationship of the individual and society at large” (Coullie *et al.* 2006: 7).

To further relate this idea of a ‘web of narrative’ are Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock’s feminist prism, of the “politics of choice” in their assertion that “working collectively is both a reaction against an oppressive condition and a progressive critique of it” (1998: 3).¹⁸⁸ This ‘political choice’ emphasises the importance of my own position within this research, which for me, is two-fold. First, that this political choice relates to the importance of studying the work of Black South African women artists as contributors to the larger gender-focused research in art — Msimang’s feminist solidarity. This is particularly important for me because, as a Black woman curator, I want to understand the history in which my work becomes situated.

Whereas the second point, which is related to the web of narratives of biographical writing that Benhabib articulates, has to do with the fact that I am writing as a Black woman on a woman artist who self-identified as ‘mixed race’. This is an important distinction to foreground as it complicates such a ‘political choice’ given our historical dispositions, which at times situates us within the web of narratives that makes us one, in the political Bikoan sense of ‘Black consciousness’, and at other times as politically, ideologically, physically and geographically different making our web of narratives one of severed parts that were caused by historical racial divides. As women in the arts, we are one, but as women of dissimilar generations, we are different, which in other words means, as women of diverse racial groups, we are also different. This difference as part of the web of narrative underscores Benhabib’s argument that representation “scaffolds agency” (2006: 1), which would mean that while our backgrounds might be different, such differences need to be foregrounded in negotiating the ‘autonomy’ of both our voices in ways that distinguish this work as biomythography and a re-membering. This would show where the ‘political choice’ and its ‘invention’ happens (Khan 2014: 92). Such an intervention within the context of feminism is one of a collective identification of gendered exclusion, meaning that a focus on a woman artist by another negotiates a complex and nuanced articulation of voice. It is an articulation that pays particular tribute to a voice that was “muted” (Motsemme 2004) by history and, to a large degree, also by the artist herself through her own deliberate acts of refusing to engage the art world.

¹⁸⁸ Parker and Pollock.1988. *Fifteen Years of Feminist Action: From Practical Strategies to Strategic Practices*, Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s movement 1970-1985, London: Padora, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, London, p3.

As Benhabib suggests, the intertwining of the ‘scaffold of agency’ is ‘dialogical’, arguing that by writing on another person (a biography), the biographer is indicatively writing about themselves; in other words, shared responsibility infers shared agency. This intertwined position of biographer and subject comes with having to negotiate the expectations of what Valerie’s perceived audiences might want to know about her; as warned by Kokoschka at the beginning of this chapter. It means being critical in reflecting on what our web of narratives and its implicated extended representations might mean in understanding the complex histories of Black subjecthood and humanisation; what Mahashe was stressing as self-reflexivity. It is in being self-reflexive that this multi-way narration is given credence.

This black subjecthood can be linked to Portia Malatjie’s (2011) location of autobiography as a part of a “Black feminist strategy”. Although her discussion of this strategy is within the context of analysing the work of South African artists Tracey Rose and Berni Searle, her arguments offer an interesting point about understanding the specificity of a Black feminist strategy as opposed to a broader feminist strategy. Illustrating this, she states:

In the biographical and autobiographical approach [...] there is an emphasis on the author. With regard to feminism, importance is given to the woman author who has gained grounds on which to insert herself into her own work, and therefore into the histories of art. Applying a feminist strategy of autobiography in reading and writing Searle’s and Rose’s work could be enabling, particularly from a black feminist perspective. Their artwork shows evidence of the use of autobiography, which allowed (black) women to insert themselves inside their artworks. While reclaiming their subjectivity through self-insertion and centralising their own bodies, black women also question, disrupt and subvert patriarchal structures by occupying the same representational spaces that have been reserved for men. (2011: 38–39)

This understanding of Black feminist autobiographical strategies will be useful when unpacking the work of Valerie. Thinking through feminist biography is important because it speaks to the idea of Black feminist subjectivities, which are based on the fact that research on women artists is set to address past exclusions of women in history. Valerie’s art career is set against the backdrop of past imbalances. This study is an attempt to rectify how this research is conducted, and it looks to feminism as a scholarly form that has been successful in calling out gendered injustices.

There is another consideration to make about the proximity or perhaps distance of Valerie’s and my inferred agency and subjectivities — in particular, subjectivities of difference. This has to do with the notion of engaging worlds and contexts that are far removed from each other, hers being

that of life living in the diaspora and mine located in South Africa. When I presented my PhD proposal in 2019, the feedback I received from one of my respondents was that I expand my project's geographic reading to incorporate Valerie's life in England. While she understood that I was interested in Valerie as South African and from the position of South African art, she pointed out that my research needed to tap into her life in London.

Conclusion

As this chapter has illustrated, emphasising artists' work potentially has a profound impact on disrupting what art history has failed to do in its insistence on racialising, gendering, ethnicism, and stereotyping of black artists' work. I hope that by emphasising a biomythographical reading of Valerie, newer understandings of her process and work will emerge.

Relating this understanding of biomythography to Valerie's subjectivity, I want to return to Kokoschka's early provocation (in this chapter's introduction) about the idea of "becoming human again at every instant" (1971/1974: npn). When one relates this idea of "becoming human again" to Valerie, it makes biomythography an ever more salient tool of humanising through the self-narrative since her world was never one of humanising but rather a world that was perpetually dehumanising.¹⁸⁹ Unlike Kokoschka, whose humanising world is part of the epistemic enlightenment bias constructed through the male-centred understanding of the world of Aristotle's, Plato's and Descartes', the biomythography of what Valerie saw speaks to an embodiment of perception. This line of thinking argues that while it is evident that Kokoschka influenced Valerie, biomythographically speaking, it is, however, clear that Valerie was not just humanising through what she saw but through what she felt and experienced that which she conveyed in the archive, as well as, writing and painting about her sense of betrayal, loneliness, and the rejection she experienced throughout her career. In other words, Valerie's becoming human is not just based on what the eye saw but how her seeing was constructed and continues to be constructed through race, gender, class, and ethnicity that hooks, Lorde, Boswell, and Khan, acutely point out in their different work on autobiography, biography, and biomythography. Khan beautifully captures this understanding through hooks' statement that biomythography is "to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonising eye" (in Khan 2014: 92). Thinking about this transition of humanising, from Kokoschka to Valerie,

¹⁸⁹ Her own testament when she said, "I know that certainly under the white government, they certainly didn't want me as a human being" (Desmore).

through the ocular ephemeral (the aural, tactile and phenomenological experiences) and physical objects, therefore somewhat differentiates them.

Conclusion

Valerie's story is poignant and fascinating. Like many Black South African artists of the early twentieth century, Valerie's art career is full of stories of unfulfilled promises. Despite starting her career at a young age and being promised fame, Valerie's unique path has been met with endless, limited recognition of her significant contributions to art history. Additionally, the ongoing societal burdens related to race in South Africa only amplify the pressure to live up to these initial expectations.

Despite moments of stagnation, career deviation and disappearance, the hope that one day, Valerie Desmore's name will make a grand return to contemporary records of South African modern art histories continues to be anticipated. The fact that Iziko has never realised the retrospective exhibition they promised her many years ago is a sad manifestation of the often-predestined dwarfed recognition of Black South African artists (In Valerie's archive, there is a letter from a curator at Iziko expressing a promise for a retrospective back in 2005). This is the irony of South Africa's democracy that even after all the claimed efforts and attention given to the different areas of historical neglect in the arts, since the overturn of apartheid, practices of selective acknowledgement still continue.¹⁹⁰ As this dissertation illustrates, South Africa is still haunted by its historical racial divides. These divides continue to reproduce uneven recognition of the artistic contributions of modern artists, such as in the case of Valerie. In this regard, Valerie's story illustrates that regardless of one's social status and financial privilege, prejudice remains set against Black artists in the art world, impacting how their artworks are framed and interpreted.

As Herbert, who I quote at the beginning of this dissertation, makes clear, there is no such thing as freedom of choice. Valerie, in her naivety, believed that leaving South Africa would free her from racism, yet as the story goes, she did not find total freedom elsewhere either. And while racism no longer framed how she could operate in the United Kingdom, other kinds of racialised limitations emerged. Some of these limitations were the results of the internalised psychological effects of her past, and some were part of the workings of global arts ecosystems that, in turn, reinforced South Africa's racist systems. This is echoed by the fact that expressionism was not favoured in England, as expressed by Valerie, which immediately reinforced an exclusion and

¹⁹⁰ Here I refer to revision exhibitions, retrospective focused on important, the hype about 'firsts' in history

invalidated her South African training, which, for an artist who already came from a place where she was excluded based on her race, inadvertently evoked a racialised rejection.

As I have mapped out, rejection played a central role in Valerie's life, from the father trying to get her into white schools to her own pushback and rejection of the system that was rejecting her. Even her high-profile fashion career did nothing to help elevate her chances of returning to visual art at a higher or more deserving status. Instead, she struggled to gain the attention of museums until the very end. After being rediscovered through the landmark exhibition *Land and Lives*, she found herself being persuaded by a handful of collectors who were in a rush to buy her work, since its value was set to accelerate after her appearance in this revision exhibition. This is indicative of the carelessness of these so-called moments of rediscovery. This is clear when we see her work being resold after a few years of being bought from her. As Fleck, in one of her interviews with Valerie, recalls; Valerie got really upset when she found out that the work that she had sold to a South African collector was resold through auction and exhibition¹⁹¹ within a period of five years for double the price of what she had sold it for. Furthermore, this resale did not yield any further opportunities for her directly since she did not get any other exhibition opportunities or more sales. This was not the kind of recognition she had anticipated following her return to the South African art market. Such a moment is typical of market trends that motivate many collectors to get into art buying. These moments reveal the motivation of buyers of many historical works, which is the understanding that her work would be more valuable now that she had been rediscovered. The change of the political climate at the end of apartheid meant increased provenance of the works of historically neglected artists as they are seen to be valuable assets in telling South Africa's atrocious history. Many collectors bought works of Black artists, understanding this market behaviour during-and-post-apartheid.

While I have argued for the consideration of a specific theoretical framework, biomythography and refusal as this thesis' central argument in engaging the art historical work of Valerie's art, there is a parallel to this, namely the use of varying methodologies for searching, studying and analysing her work. This approach recognises that art history is an encumbered field that can only be studied from a place that firstly recognises the chaos, prejudices and irreconcilability of its historical material and, secondly, locates the generative potential of self-reflexive writing and thinking practices. Encumbered methodologies are, therefore, a fundamental part of reading and writing about art, especially since biomythography and refusal perspectives are just two of many other

¹⁹¹ list exhibition curated by Siebrits

ways one could frame thinking about and sorting through Valerie's art and its histories. The methodology thus potentiates many other complex frameworks in the future.

In Chapter 1, we witness Valerie's struggles with rejection. Her move to London signalled her aspirations to participate in opportunities and possibilities, but rejection became, once again, a major point, so much so that her career trajectory diverted into fashion. Understanding these details in Valerie's career shows us the generative power of what Audre Lorde terms "progressive anger" (1984/2007: 127). For Lorde, there is power in anger directed at injustices, arguing that anger can potentiate progress and change when used correctly. Certainly, it spans into what I have engaged as refusal and how this refusal allows her to exercise agency in dealing with the art world's rejection.

What unfolds in Chapter 2 is the prospects of what this progressive anger can yield. From a deep dive into understanding biomythography and refusal as the analytical tool of the intersection between art, the personal and the historical to cross-disciplinary assessments of Valerie's dynamic art practice, this chapter reveals the potential function of encumbered methodologies. It shows what could potentially be understood as a renewed model of writing art history. Efforts have been made to map out this story throughout this dissertation.

Chapters 3 to 5 demonstrate how the theoretical framework presented in the Introduction and Chapters 2 and 6 can be applied to understand how Valerie illustrated her world through her artwork. Her family portrait, the story of her mother, and her self-portrait reveal how she used painting to heal, confronting the complex layers of her family history. In this light, what Valerie Desmore's story tells us is that it remains clear that there is still so much work to be done in terms of unpacking, consolidating and dealing with the complexities of race, racialised experiences and racism. This has required some attention to be given to the political concept of Blackness, what it means in relation to Valerie, to South Africa today and how it plays out within the visual arts. I have arrived at this conclusion after interrogating theories and encumbered methodologies with which I have thought about the effect of art's historical and contemporary contexts. It is an art historical inquiry that is attentive to the different sides of an artist's life and work. The dissertation presents this art history in relation to archival and curating practices articulating a method that addresses the impact of art histories in the contemporary. In that way, the dissertation is an invitation to think about the possibilities and limitations of contemporary writing about art history, not as an obsession with the past but how that past affects the contemporary reading of history.

By revealing the artist's role in the making of their own history, it also unsettles the art historical power dynamics that have always suggested that artists' careers only become relevant once written about by Western identifying art historians but that artists in their making and the archiving of their own practices are always thinking of themselves in the future. Valerie was a stubborn person. Though often doubting herself due to her racialisation, this never wavered her belief in the power of her art. Instead, it made the journey of her art career all the more powerful and interesting. Decisive, different and bold, Valerie was always very clear about why she became an artist and what her art did for her inner self. It is now left to the world to see the power of what she offers.

With every project, there is always more that could be done. There are many areas that this dissertation could have explored, but due to space and time, there are many things that this research project never got to cover, such as her exhibition history and other themes in her art (i.e. sibling rivalry, violence, tragedy, matrifocal/matricentric figures, metaphorically being consumed, object-hood, subject-hood and so forth). As I have indicated in the beginning this research is an offering of what could be a longer study around Valerie and methodologies of art historical writing. I hope this offering prompts more robust and complex future engagements with the visionary that is Valerie Desmore.

As I concluded this project, I once again returned to Valerie's books, where I found a quote by Ludwig Goldschieder that aptly reminded me why I started this project and some of the hurdles I have had to navigate through this journey. In his book *Art Without Epoch: Works of Distant Times Which Still Appeal to Modern Taste, 140 reproductions*, Goldschieder states, "In reality, the past changes as rapidly as the present, and it is the past as it appears to us today that I have tried to reproduce in this volume" (1937: npn). From this statement, two things stand out. First that the past is not fixed or immutable; it is constantly being reinterpreted and refashioned in light of the present. Second that the past that we know is the past as it appears to us today. It is filtered through our own experiences, biases, and understandings.

The first point is related to the concept of historical revisionism. This is the idea that our understanding of the past is constantly changing as new evidence comes to light and as our own perspectives shift. As demonstrated in this research, our view of Black women artists' role in art history has changed significantly over the past few decades. We now know a little more than we were often led to believe in the past about who these artists were and how they appeared in the art world. As new names continue to be discovered, the history also gets revised and rewritten.

The second point is related to the concept of presentism. This is the tendency to view the past through the lens of the present. We tend to interpret the past in terms of our own values and assumptions. For example, we might judge historical figures by the standards of our own time, even though those standards did not exist at the time. This can lead to a distorted view of the past. The statement by Goldschieder is, therefore, a reminder that our understanding of the past is always provisional and incomplete. The past is constantly being reinterpreted and refashioned in light of the present. This means that we should always be critical of our own understanding of the past and be open to new interpretations. This is why a self-reflexive praxis becomes a prerequisite.

Within this research, I have tried to highlight the importance of historical context - that when we try to understand the past, we need to be aware of the historical context in which it occurred. This includes the social, political, and economic conditions of the time. I have also tried to highlight the importance of bias. Our own biases can influence our understandings of the past. We need to be aware of our own biases and try to minimise claims of truth and how these claims impact our interpretation of the past. It is ultimately a call for humility, reminding us that we can never fully understand the past. We can only try to understand it as it appears to us today.

Valerie's work is important because it provides a platform for marginalised voices to be heard. Her work challenges dominant narratives and offers new ways of seeing the world. It is a powerful form of resistance and a celebration of the human spirit. It is an important reminder that resisting dominance does not always result in complete rejection and that it is possible to reclaim our own stories, even if those reclamations happen in quiet and out-of-the-limelight spaces. Valerie Elizabeth Helene Desmore shows us the power of art in challenging dominant narratives and creating new ways of seeing the world.

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¹⁹² [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Trek_\(newspaper\)/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Trek_(newspaper)/) *Trek* was a literary and arts magazine published by inmates at the [Topaz](#), Utah concentration camp between December 1942 and June 1943. Three quarterly of *Trek* were published. In the spring of 1944, a similar publication titled *All Aboard* appeared at Topaz. *Trek/All Aboard* featured literary work by a wide range of [Nisei](#) writers including [Toyo Suyemoto](#), [Toshio Mori](#), Jim Yamada, and [Larry Tajiri](#). [Mine Okubo](#) served as the art editor of *Trek*, providing many of the illustrations and the covers. For an analysis of *Trek/All Aboard* in the context of other literature produced in the camps see [Literature in camp](#). *Trek* Vol. 1, No. 1 December 1942 Editor: Jim Yamada Associate Editors: Taro Katayama, Marii Kyogoku, Bob Tsuda Art Editor: Mine Okubo Contributing Artist: Tom Yamamoto Chief Technician: Toku Okubo 30 pages.

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Exhibitions

- 1940 Central Girls' School group show at Ashbey's Galleries, dates unknown.
- 1942 1st 'one man' show at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town. Opened by Sir Herbert Stanley. The exhibition was sponsored by the New Group. Showed 50 paintings. 22 – 28 January 1942.
- 1943 2nd 'One man' show at Gainsborough Galleries in Johannesburg, 29 March – 3 April
- 3rd 'One man' show of Paintings and Drawings, Ashbey's Galleries in Cape Town, 16 – 30 November 1943.
- 1946 Came to London to Study at the Slade and also to escape racial persecution in South Africa. I have never gone back.
- 1947 Group Show with the Yellow Wood Studio? At Gainsborough Galleries, Johannesburg. January
- 4th 'One man' show at Gainsborough Galleries, Johannesburg. March
- Fundraising Group Show, Ashbey's Galleries Cape Town, June 4, one-day event
- 1949 Group Show, Royal Society Women Artists, London.
- 1997 *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Black Artists*, curated by Elza Miles. Johannesburg Art Gallery, November 1997 – 19 April 1998.
- 1997-8 *Land and Lives: A story of early African artists*, curated by Elza Miles Iziko National Art Gallery, 31 October – 13 December 1998.
- 2005 *Adams, Clarke, Desmore and Dollar Brand*, Curated by Warren Siebrits. Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art, Parkwood. 21 June - 14 July 2005.
- Cell. 0712261007 Tell. 011 327 0000 email enquiries@warrensiebrits.co.za
https://artthrob.co.za/05july/listings_gauteng.html
- 2006 *Paintings – Methven to Mashile*, curated by Warren Siebrits. Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art, Parkwood. 6 June – 21 July 2006.
- 2008 *Take Your Road and Travel Along: the advent of the Modern Black Painter in Africa* curated by Michael Stevenson and Joost Bosland. Booth 27, Joburg Art Fair, Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg. 13 – 16 March 2008.
- 2008 A private exhibition in France shortly after she dies.
- 2010 *Transformations: Women's art from the late nineteenth century 2010*, curated by Nessa Leibhammer, Reshma Chhiba and Musha Neluheni. Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1910-2010: From Pierneef to Gugulective*, Curated by Riason Naidoo, South African National Gallery, 15 April 2010 - 3 October 2010.

- 2012 *A Fragile Archive*, curated by Nontobeko Ntombela. Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 2015 *South African Art 1940 -1975*, curated by Antoinette Murdoch. Featured works of the JAG collection; Gerard Sekoto, George Pemba, Ernest Mancoba, Alexis Preller, Cecil Skotnes, Gladys Mgudlandlu, Valerie Desmore and Walter Battiss. Johannesburg Art Gallery. Brucedennill.co.za pARTcipate. 10 November.
- 2016 *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Johannesburg Art Gallery 16 – 19 November 2016.
<https://friendsofjag.org/portraiture>
- 2022-3 *When Rain Cloud Gather: Black Women Artists 1940-2000* Norval Foundation, Cape Town. Cocurated by Nontobeko Ntombela and Portia Malatjie, January 2022 to January 2023.
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// Appendices

Image Appendices

Additional selected images from the archives

Chapter 1

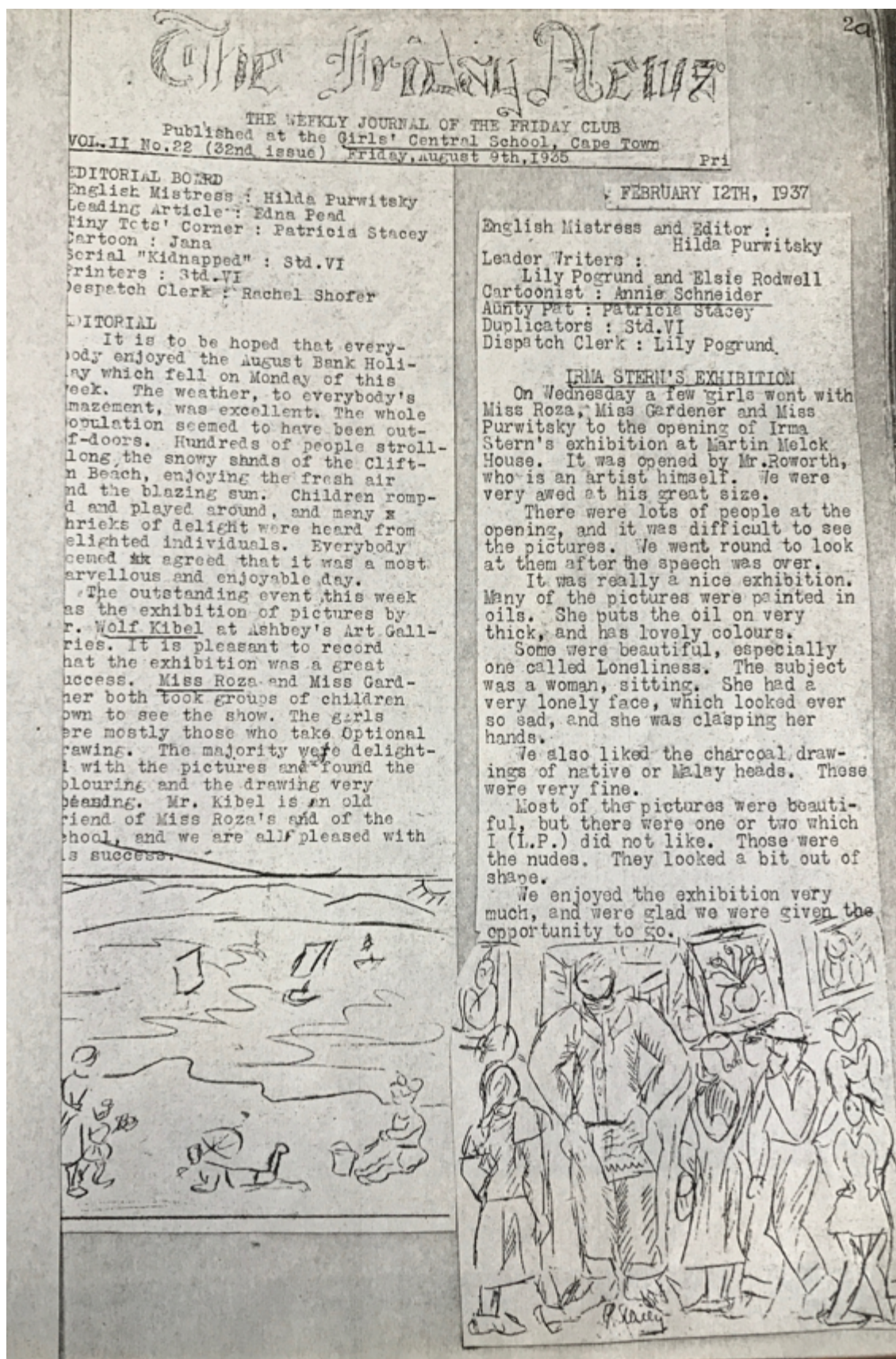


Figure 67: Central Girls' School's *The Friday News: The Weekly Journal of The Friday News*, February 12, 1937.

The Friday News

THE WEEKLY JOURNAL OF THE FRIDAY CLUB
 Published at the Girls' Central School, Cape Town
 Volume II No. 2 (13th issue) Friday, February 8th, 1935 Price 2d

EDITORIAL BOARD

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MISS ROZA'S COLUMN

A large number of parents have been to see me in connection with the new scheme operating from this year to pay all their children's school expenses in one amount rather than in dribbles and drabbles. I am very pleased to be able to say that the large majority are very pleased indeed with the new arrangement, for it means that once having paid the specified amount they have no further concern in the cost of their children's education for the year. In comparison with the costs at any other primary girls' school in town ours here are very reasonable indeed. They are inclusive of the use of all text-books in English, Afrikaans, history, geography, arithmetic, biology and science, library books, the weekly school newspaper, art materials, writing materials, stationery, sports games, Optional Programmes, school colours, etc., etc. Std.IV and all classes below will have sewing materials for garments provided as well. The fees quoted below are for the year, and may be paid in advance during February, in 2 instalments, - in February and June, or quarterly. They are as follows:

Stds.VI and V.....	£1.10s.0d.
Senior Modern.....	£1. 8s.0d.
Std.IV.....	£1. 6s.0d.
Std.III.....	£1. 1s.0d.
Jun.Mod., Little Modern...	£1. 0s.0d.
Stds.II and I.....	£1. 0s.0d.
Kindergarten.....	5s.0d.

EDITORIAL

On Wednesday the 6th inst. at 11 a.m. Sir Cecil Ffiorde K.O. opened an exhibition of work by Irma Stern. Miss Stern has for a long time taken an interest in our school, especially in the drawing classes, and we feel proud of the success which has attended her exhibition.

The exhibition consists of ninety-four drawings, paintings and water-colours. They are hung in a long well-lit room in St. George's Street, and one's first impression, as one enters, is a very happy one.

Irma Stern's colours are gay, bright and attractive, and the party of girls from this school who visited the exhibition had many favourites among the pictures. One chose a still-life with Iceland poppies, another preferred the oil-painting of books, a third was keen on the lovely charcoal drawings of the native heads. No.24, a water-colour of a Swazi girl was particularly interesting. It was very colourful, and the expression on her face was very striking. All the girls stood a long time before two portraits of people well known to us. One was Miss Roza and the other was Joyce Collins.



Figure 68: Central Girls' School's *The Friday News*: *The Weekly Journal of The Friday News*, February 8, 1935



Figure 69: Unknown Author, A Collection of Pictures: Ancient and Modern Reproduction, The Cape Argus, May 26, 1937



Figure 70: Was a Child Artist, Cape Times, Wednesday December 11, 1946

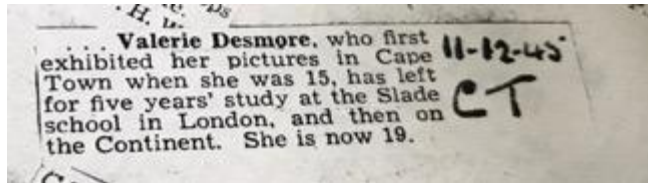


Figure 71: *Cape Times*, 11 December 1945

adm. *not*
10/11/44

Jan 45?

DESMORE

SESSION 19 -19

FACULTY: ARTS (Fine Art)

No.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON

SLADE SCHOOL OF FINE ART

Application for Admission to the School

Name (in full) VALERIE ELIZABETH HELENE DESMORE
Permanent Address Yassa, Gainsby Road, Three Anchor Bay, Cape Province, Union of South Africa
Proposed Address while attending the School Arrangements have not been made yet.
Date of birth (month and year) June, 1925 Nationality South African (British)

Previous ART education (full details, including Examinations and Scholarships, if any)
Privately supervised by Lorna Slom and Rippy Lipschitz - South African artists. See also letters of recommendations.

Previous general education (Schools and dates)
Primary Education:
St Mary's Convent School, Cape Town, 1931-1934
Borace Mann, Columbia University, New York, N.Y. 1934-1936
St. Paul's Central School, Cape Town, 1936-1938
Secondary Education: Holy Cross Convent School, Maitland, S.A., 1938-1941

Dates and particulars of London Matriculation or other Public Examination passed or contemplated
Course proposed in the Slade School: Number of days a week Full-time attendance
Whether Diploma course Diploma in Fine Art
(If ordinary qualification permit; other vice versa)
Subjects: DRAWING, PAINTING, DESIGN, ANATOMY, HISTORY OF ART, ENGRAVING, THEATRE DESIGN
(Cross out those not taken)

I HEREBY apply for admission in Letter post of January, 1945
(month and year)
Candidate's Signature Valerie Desmore Date 18th October 1944

The Parent or Guardian of a Candidate under 21 years of age should sign the following: I approve the foregoing application, and undertake to pay the fees as they become due.
Name Alfred Desmore
Address Yassa, Gainsby Road, Three Anchor Bay, Cape Province, Union of South Africa

NOTE.—All candidates for admission must be recommended by the Slade Professor, or by a member of his Staff acting for him. In general, specimens of work should be submitted at the time of application, either by post or at an interview to be arranged; together with a letter of recommendation from the Head of a School or some other competent authority.

Recommended for admission by:
Randolph Schwabe
SLADE PROFESSOR.
Date Nov. 6, 1944



Figure 72: Valerie Desmore's college application to the Slade

FELIX GROSS

MANAGING EDITOR
THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS AGENCY

P.O. Box 682,

CAPE TOWN

/TK Phone 3-0817
2-2666 (private)

19th December, 1944.

Mr. Abe J.B. Desmore,
Yarra,
Grimsby Road,
Three Anchor Bay.

Dear Mr. Desmore,

I wish to assure you that I firmly believe it necessary that your daughter Valerie should go abroad for her training. I consider her an extremely gifted and highly intelligent young lady, whose work and art I admire greatly and I strongly believe in her natural gift as a painter. I have seen most of Valerie's paintings and studies and from them I formed the opinion that there is a great future in store for her provided she receives not only the necessary technical training but also that her education is furthered by the cultural facilities of London's museums, exhibitions and lectures. I do not believe that, under the prevailing conditions, Valerie can obtain the same teaching in South Africa as she would in London. I am convinced that Valerie, whom I know as a very studious, serious and ambitious young girl, will seize every opportunity to further her art. I also believe that with the proper training in London, Valerie will make her way in the world of art and become a great artistic asset to our country and thus bring honour to her home town as well as to South Africa.

For these reasons I consider it imperative that she should be given the chance to commence her studies in London as soon as possible.

I remain, dear sir,

Yours very sincerely,

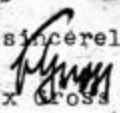

Felix Gross (Ph.D.)

Figure 73: Valerie Desmore's letter of support for her application from Dr Felix Gross.



UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA.—UNIE VAN SUID-AFRIKA.

DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND ASIATIC AFFAIRS,
DEPARTEMENT VAN IMMIGRASIE EN ASIATESAKE.

P.O. Box } 244, PRETORIA.
POSBUS }

17. 5. 1945

PERMIT TO LEAVE THE UNION, ISSUED UNDER EMERGENCY REGULATIONS.
PERMIT OM DIE UNIE TE VERLAAT, UITGEREIK KRAGTENS DIE NOODREGULASIES.

Departure from the Union must take place on or before 17. 11. 1945
Die Houer moet die Unie verlaat voor of op
after which date this permit ceases to be valid.
na welke datum die geldigheid van hierdie permit verstryk.

Permission is hereby granted to the bearer,
Vergunning word hierby verleen aan die draer.

M Ms. Valerie Elizabeth H. Desmore
of Union nationality, the holder of Passport No. _____
van _____ nasionaliteit, die houer van paspoort

issued at _____
uitgereik te _____

on the _____ to leave the Union of South Africa for the
op _____ om die Unie van Suid-Afrika te verlaat met

purpose of proceeding to England
die doel om na _____ te gaan.

Object of journey Study purposes
Doel van reis _____

Valerie Desmore
Signature of Bearer / Handtekening van Draer.
D. D. D. D.
Commissioner for Immigration and Asiatic Affairs.
Kommissaris van Immigrasie en Asiatesake.

N.B.—This permit is valid for only one journey from the Union of South Africa and must be surrendered to the Immigration Officer on board ship or at the border station on departure.

L.W.—Hierdie permit is slegs vir een reis uit die Unie van Suid-Afrika geldig en moet by vertrek aan die Immigrasie beampte aan boord van die skip of by die grens afgegee word.

Figure 74: Valerie Desmore's travel permit for England

First Entry Form

Jan. 1946

P

SESSION 1945-1946

5176

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

FACULTY OF ARTS: SLADE SCHOOL

Time	
Year	1
Age	

Name in full DESMORE VALERIE, ELIZABETH, HELENE

Address while attending the College. ^{*At Home} Lodgings Hostel | 14, Edith Road, Barons Court, London W.14

Home address (if not as above) "Yana", Grimsby Rd. Three Archers Bay, C. Town, South Africa.

Date of Birth 29 June 1925 Nationality Union National

Previous place of education Holy Cross Convent, Cape Town

Scholarship or Exhibition tenable at College

Are you a Candidate for the Fine Art Diploma? No

Name and Address of Parent or Guardian "Yana", Grimsby Road, Cape Town S. Africa.

^(The person named here undertakes to be responsible for the payment of College dues) Valerie Desmore

Initials of Officers approving	No. of days per week	PARTICULARS OF PROPOSED COURSE	For Office use only	
			Fee	Account No.
BNS	1st Term			
	2nd Term	4. Painting, Drawing, Anatomy History of art, Perspective	12 10 6	Enter by 2nd term
	3rd Term	4. Painting, Drawing, Anatomy History of Art, Perspective	13 2 6	1478
			11 11 -	677

Initials of Officers approving	ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS

Declaration of Adhesion to Regulations.

I, the undersigned, do hereby engage that I will conform to such regulations as have been, or may be, made for the maintenance of order in the College and in the Classes which I attend.

Initials of Student at opening of Session: VEHD
Date of initialling: Jan 7 1946

Signed Valerie Desmore
Date Jan 6, 1946

*When this form has been completed by a student and his entry accepted by the College, all the fees therein prescribed become due.

Figure 75 (a): Valerie Desmore's registration form illustrating the courses she took from Jan 1946

Re-Entry Form

SESSION 1946 -1947.

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
 FACULTY OF ARTS: SLADE SCHOOL

5176

Time	Sept
Year	1946
Age	28

Name in full DESMORE · VALERIE, ELIZABETH, HELENK.
 Address while attending College 52, Holland Park, W.11.
 Home address (if not as above) "Yarra", Grimshy road, Thee Inchor Bay, Cape Town.
 Date of FIRST ENTRY January 1946
 Scholarship or Exhibition tenable at College _____
 Are you a Candidate for the Fine Art Diploma? _____
 Name and Address of Parent or Guardian Mr Abe Desmore, "Yarra", Grimshy road, Cape Town.
 (The person named here undertakes to be responsible for the payment of College dues) Valerie Desmore

Initials of Officers approving	No. of days per week	PARTICULARS OF PROPOSED COURSE	For Office use only		
			Fee	Account No.	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px;"></div>	1st Term	5½ Perspective Anatomy, History of Art, Painting, Drawing.	1 11 6 12 12 - 2 - - 16 3 6	Bal. of over as by, J.C. M.I. { 29/8-6 } (M.I.) { +3-11-6 }	
	2nd Term	5½ Ditto	11 11 -		
	3rd Term	5½ Ditto.	11 11 -		
ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS					
Initials of Officers approving					
<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px;"></div>					

Declaration of Adhesion to Regulations.

I, the undersigned, do hereby engage that I will conform to such regulations as have been, or may be, made for the maintenance of order in the College and in the Classes which I attend.

Initials of Student at opening of Session VEHLO
 Date of Initialling 17 Sept 1946

Signed Valerie Desmore
 Date 17, Sept 1946



Figure 75 (b): Valerie Desmore's registration form illustrating the courses she took from Sept 1946



Figure 76: Promotion card of Desmore's shop called 'Liza Doolittle, located Covent Garden 1978.

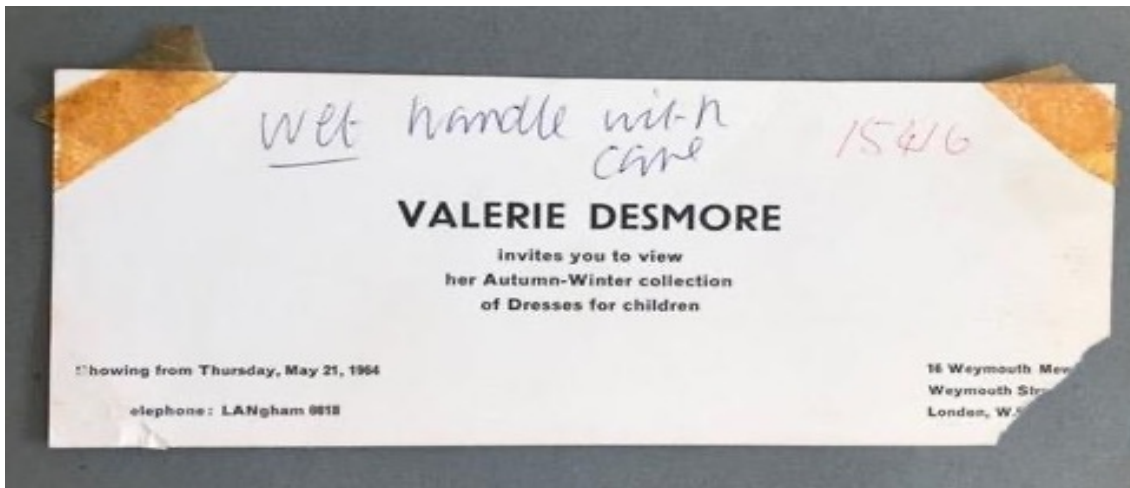


Figure 77: Invitation to Valerie Desmore's pop-up fashion shows May 21, 1964



Figure 78: Invitation cover of Valerie Desmore's pop-up fashion shows May 21, 1964



Figure 79: Photoshoot of Valerie Desmore's children's dresses
 Figure 80: Valerie Desmore's Fashion show, picture 3



Figure 81: The Sunday Times, December 2, 1962
 Figure 82: Let's Face It- Little girls don't want to be chic... with an eye on the Christmas party, Jill Butterfield Junior Fashion Page



Figure 83: Let's Face It- Little girls don't want to be chic... with an eye on the Christmas party, Jill Butterfield Junior Fashion Page

Figure 84: Junior Age, December 1962; For Tots with Figure Problems..., The Daily Express, March 21, 1963.

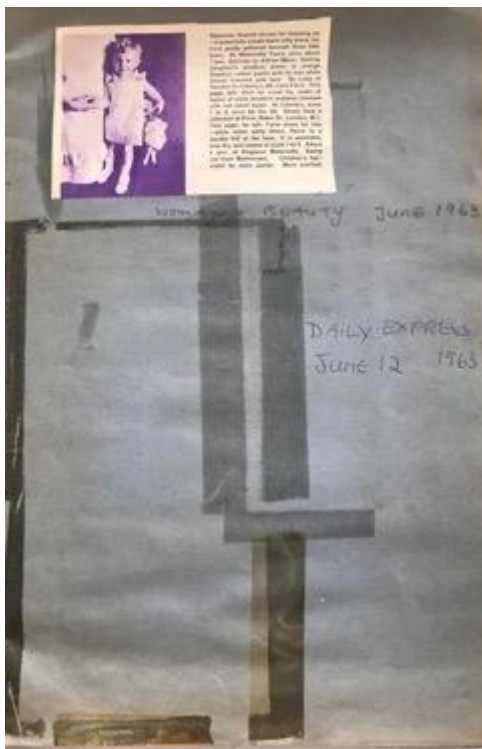


Figure 85: Woman and Beauty, June 1963; Daily Express, June 12, 1963

Figure 86: Back to School and in the search of new summer ideas fashion goes into the boys' classroom.



Figure 87: Real Life Pop for Parties, Harpers Queen, March 27, 1963.

Figure 88: page 2, Real Life Pop for Parties, Harpers Queen, March 27, 1963.



Figure 89: Harpers Bazaar, December 1963



Figure 90: Stock Plus the Denim Dodge, page 4 of Harpers Bazaar, December 1963
 Figure 91: Page 5 of Harpers Bazaar, December 1963



Figure 92: Simple-But Pretty is the Motto,
 Figure 93: In A Woman's World by Margert Melrose, Pinafores and Black Velvet



Figure 94: Woman and Beauty 1963



Figure 95: Woman and Beauty 1964



Figure 96: Vanity Fair 1963



Figure 97: Vanity Fair, December 1963

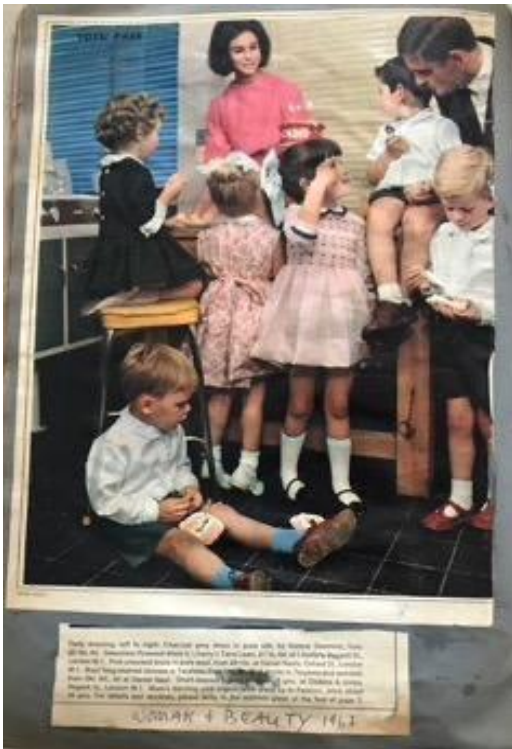


Figure 98: Woman and Beauty 1963

Figure 99: A Child is a Woman in a Frilly Petticoat, Woman and Beauty, February 1964.



Figure 100: Dress U, Jill Butterfield; 1963. Daily Telegraph. June 14



Figure 101: Four Dresses and Changes from 10gns, Penny (Graham) looks after your pounds



Figure 102: Artists Mathews is to Take a Slow Boat East ...painting as he goes. The Evening Standard, Tuesday

Valerie Desmore C.V.

- 1925 Born in Cape Town to mixed race parents who were both Teachers.
- 1936 The family went to New York where my father did his Masters degree at Columbia University. There I won a Scholarship to 'Horace Mann' Experimental school.
- 1938 Returned to South Africa + Painted for the first time. I was encouraged by Kippy, Gregoire Bogaard + Roga van Gelderen. I studied briefly with Irma ^{Stem}.
- 1942 1st 'one man' show at the Argus gallery e.t.
- 1943 2nd 'one man' show at Gainsborough gallery, Johannesburg
- 1943 3rd 'one man' show at Ashby's gallery e.t.
- 1946 Came to London to study at the Slade + also to escape Racial Persecution in S.A. I have never gone back.
- 1947 4th 'one man' show at Gainsborough gallery.
- 1948 met Kokoschka + became his pupil. J. Vely
- 1951 studied fashion at St Martins. I needed a job and didn't want to 'Prostitute my Art'
- 1952 Various Jobs as a designer in fashion.
- 1962 1st fashion collection under my own label
- 1963 2nd fashion collection under my own label
- 1964 2nd fashion Collection under my own label
- 1965 Joined Marks + Spencer as a fashion designer was there for 18 years. P.T.O

Figure 103: Handwritten CV by Valerie Desmore

1978 Had my own Designer Shop in Covent
Garden.
1982 Retired early from Marks & Spencer
1982 Painting full time at Last!!

Figure 104: page 2 of Handwritten CV by Valerie Desmore

1971 MUM Design School
1972 MUM Design School
1973 MUM Design School

to avoid ~~the~~ ^{parents who were} ~~teachers~~ ^{teachers}.

Born in Cape Town to mixed race ~~teachers~~ ^{parents who were teachers}.

1925

1935 scholarship Horace Mann School Attached to Columbia University New York

1937 Girls Central School

Born Cape Town 1925 To mixed race parents who were teachers.

Scholarship to Horace Mann School Attached to Columbia University New York.

1936

~~Because~~ my father was doing his master's Degree at Columbia University.

1938 painted for first time encouraged by Knudt Gregoire and Fritz galler & Lippman Lipschitz.

~~1942~~ 1st one man show 1942 Cape Town.

1943 2nd gainstamph 1943 Johannesburg.

1943 3 Ashbees Galleries 1943 Cape Town

1946 went to Ben Day's to the stage to escape racial persecution.

1947 4 Gainstamph galleries 1947 Johannesburg.

1946 Slade School of Art.

1948 met Kokotkik Kokotkacha who took me as a pupil.

1951 studied fashion at St Martins School of Art. Then various jobs as a fashion designer. ^{because I read it} ^{the main}

1962 1st collection under my own label.

1963 2nd collection under my own label.

1964 3rd collection under my own label.

1965 Fashion Designer for Marks & Spencer 18 yrs.

Figure 105: Another Handwritten CV by Valerie Desmore – with annotations of other personal information.

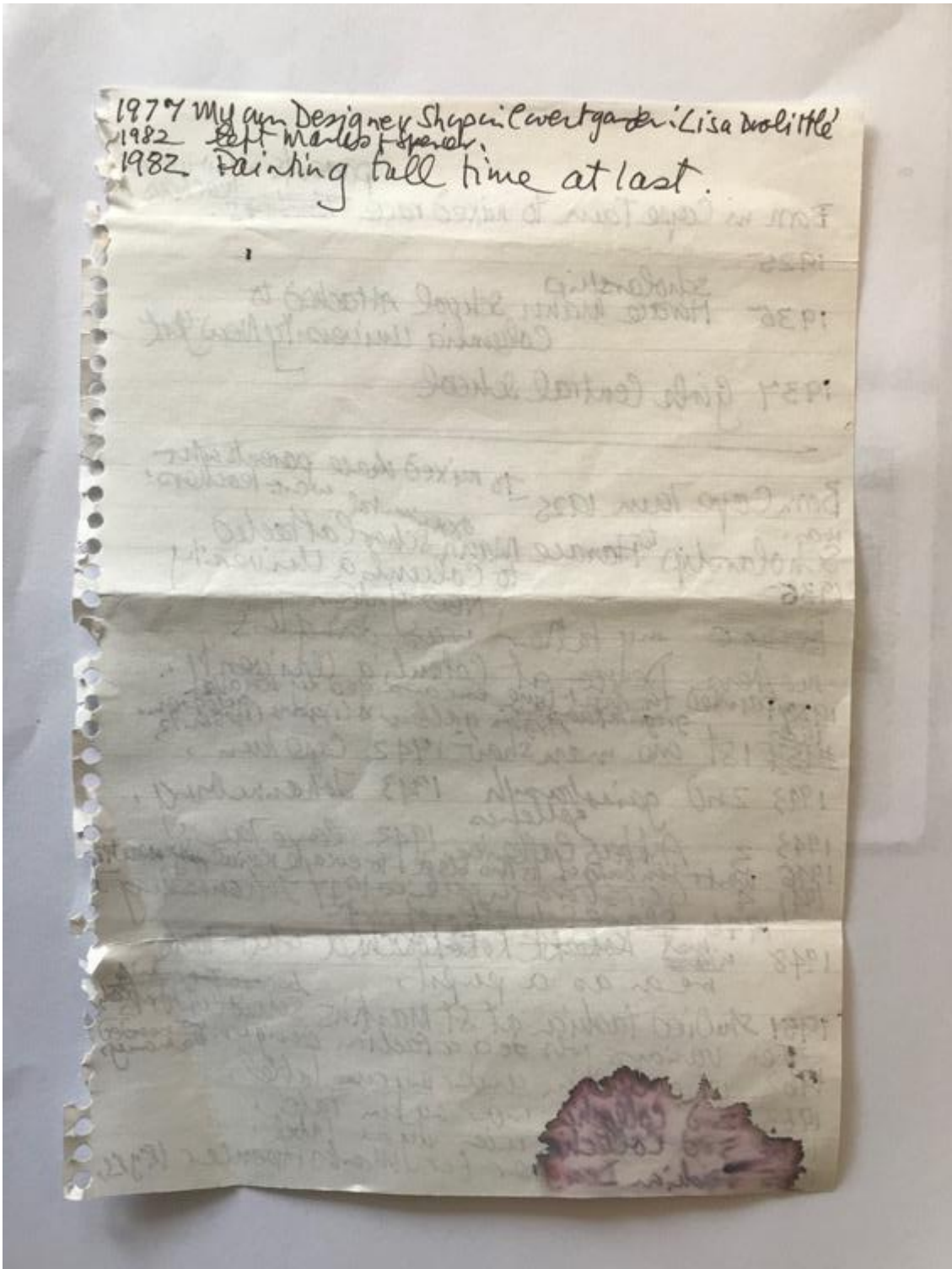


Figure 106: page 2 Handwritten CV by Valerie Desmore – with annotations of other personal information.

Valerie Desmar.
29.6.1925 Cape Town,
Exhibited 6 times as a child prodigy in South Africa.
Slade school of Art. 1946

Kokoshka 1947 onwards.

St Martins School of Art 1952 Fashion Design.

worked as fashion designer
1956 to 1981
lastly with Marks + Spencer for 18 yrs.

Since 1982 painting + Drawing
+ experimenting with copy printing.

Figure 107: Another CV written on a piece of paper torn from a notepad

One Man Shows.

Argus Gallery Jan 22 1942 Cape Town

Gainsborough Galleries Johannesburg Apr 13
1943

Ashbeys Galleries Cape Town Nov 16 1943

Gainsborough Galleries Johannesburg May 12 1947

Group Show in England
Royal Society Women Artists London ~~1947~~
~~1948~~
1949

Figure 108: A list of Valerie Desmore's One Man Shows written on a page torn from a notebook.

As Valerie's painting took off dramatically, Roza began exhibiting her works and it was at these exhibitions that leading South African artists and critics noticed her. They recognised her as a child with talent and tenacity. Too soon though, it was time for Valerie to leave Roza's school. She was old enough to attend high school. Again no school would have her, she says. Racial discrimination forced her to look for alternatives. Roza was furious. Valerie remembers Roza going off to Woolworths to buy a wedding ring. Pretending to be her mother, Roza enrolled Valerie at another convent. Unfortunately it was a commercial school: typing, bookkeeping, shorthand. The school even barred her from the library where she was spending most of her time reading novels. Subsequently, Valerie's interest in schoolwork disappeared. She decided, at 15, to give up formal education altogether and left school to paint in her studio at home.

With encouragement from Lippy Lipshitz and Gregoire Boonzaaier, and guidance from Irma Stern, she developed artistically, had a few solo exhibitions, and sold her work. Meanwhile Valerie and her family realised that ~~it~~ would be wonderful if she could study in England. She saved the money she earned from selling paintings. With references from local artists and critics, her father helped her organise a place at the Slade School of Art in London. So at the end of the second world war, Valerie left Cape Town. 'I knew I had to go. I wanted to go. It was unstoppable. But that first night on the boat, I cried all night. The uncertainty of what lay ahead terrified me.'

London was not quite what Valerie had planned. The dry academic approach of the Slade School didn't suit her and she spent more time at the Odeon cinema watching movies than attending ~~classical~~ drawing classes. Eventually she left the school without completing her degree.

She did have fun, though. She shared a flat with a few girlfriends; possible one of the first all-female flat shares in London. It was at this time that Valerie first came across an Oskar Kokoschka painting. Kokoschka was a ^{an expressionist} Jewish-Austrian artist living in London. (Incidentally, he is one of my favourite artists.) She immediately wrote him a fan letter. He replied and suggested they meet at his London studio. So began a very formative relationship: a relationship that sent her creativity into overdrive. 'He was a fabulous man', Valerie recalls. 'He instructed me to never do anything I didn't want to do. He guided me to paint about myself, to paint about my life. He didn't tell me how to paint but told me not be decorative, not to paint pretty paintings. Without knowing it, I was becoming an expressionist artist. ^{OK so he was right.} Oskar made me have a breakthrough into what I think is the most interesting school of art.'

Oskar invited Valerie to many ~~exotic~~ bohemian parties where she met interesting people. Some became friends, ~~others lovers~~. (At last Valerie felt free from the colour prejudices that had marred her ~~early~~ life. ^{Next Time})

Early in her life, Valerie decided she was not going to marry. The possibility of being a wife appalled her. 'Domesticity, I knew was the worst thing in the world. I dreaded the idea of a little flat, little children, with a little husband. What I wanted was lots of sex, romance, and adventure'. To be assured of the necessary financial independence, Valerie decided to study fashion design at St Martins' School of Art. Dressing up and watching the artistic creations in fashion had always interested her.

not about clothes
modeling + fashion

Figure 110: Jackie May unpublished article on Valerie found in the Fleck archive, second page

after one year at St Mark's reading the same
 she joined the textile firm. Handclass as a designer. etc etc

On qualifying as a designer Valerie had a boutique in Convent Garden for a few years. Later she joined Marks and Spencer. ^{in the late 80s had a Designers shop etc etc}
 Her painting never became secondary: she didn't paint during her years as a fashion designer. She couldn't be a Sunday painter. 'I gave up painting to make a living. At times designing clothes was boring. I was good at it. Although designing for a big company is very restricting, I decided to stick to it. It was a good secure base and as a result I have never depended on anybody else'.

However, Valerie always yearned to paint. Eventually she decided to take a very early retirement and devote herself exclusively to painting once again. Over the years she has consistently remained versatile in both subject matter and style. (Her paintings are the antithesis of this elegant, petite woman.) They powerfully explore the complexities of being a woman, of being black: particularly of being. They reveal too, something about Valerie, which has already become obvious during my visit. She has prepared the most unusual and delicious meal; she tells me the Kimono she is wearing is a pyjama set she ordered from a catalogue. I hear of long holidays and surprise meetings with Henry Miller. Valerie has an openness to experience that has provided her with a rich reference for her art. She is alive to her environment: her painting responds to it.

Now at 72, her works are on exhibit again. Last year Dr Elsa Miles, the Johannesburg National Gallery's art curator, bought ^{three} ~~two~~ of Valerie's paintings. Two of these are in the Land of lives: Black Pioneer Artists exhibition that opens at Cape Town National Gallery in October.

Figure 111: Jackie May unpublished article on Valerie found in the Fleck archive, third page.

Valerie,
let me know what you think.
Not enough on the family but
that deserves its own story -
yours first. Speak to you soon.
love, Jackie

Figure 112: Jackie May unpublished article on Valerie found in the Fleck archive, third page

my father My Storey, the Cape of no Hope.
 Abraham, Abe, loved camping; possibly
 because he had enjoyed his ^{later} ~~later~~
 the first world war 1914-1918 ^{Death + Destruction} in Central Africa.
 He joined the ~~the~~ ^{second} ~~coloured~~ ^{coloured} Cape Corps + rose
 to be sergeant. His Sergeant Major ^{known to me as}
 Mr Salida ^{later} became my Aunt Vera's
 father-in-law. She ^{later} ~~later~~ married Vernon ^{his eldest} ~~son,~~
^{no was} ~~not~~ a Carpenter + then a teacher
 or perhaps he taught carpentry in a school ^{Junior}
~~I forget.~~ He wrote a book about the
 'second Coloured Cape Corps' experiences
 in ~~the~~ Central Africa. He would,
 when I was 3 or 4 ^{yo} ^{read} me
 with stories of pygmies in the jungles
 of Central Africa ^{making me cry + not sleeping} ~~to take me to bed~~
 Broken Hill where his platoon beat the
 Germans, the ancient ~~ruins~~ ^{Ruins} of
 a long dead African ^{civilization} ~~culture~~ in
 Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) built of ^{no} ~~brick~~ ^{mudhuts}
~~Abe~~ ^{Abe (pronounced Ahe)} ground his ~~teeth~~ ^{teeth} a lot
 I used to see his jaws ^{wearing away} ~~grinding~~ his teeth
 into his gums - grind - grind - grind.

Figure 113: Note, My Storey: Cape of no Hope, Valerie Desmore Archive

2

I do the same now - & realize
 this grinding of teeth is an expression
 of the tension one lives under.
 I expect we ~~became~~ ~~are~~ teeth
 grinders when the white men came
 to the mid shores of the Cape of
 Good Hope 300 yrs ago & killed ^{the fair gene} ^{the Khoi-Khoi}
 The ironic thing is that ~~at~~ this
 fair Cape, the fairest in ^{with its name} the world
 could now be called the Cape of No Hope
 (no hope of peace or happiness
 for Black, Brown, or white),
 Miss Kees - Little Yellow Windows
 A studio for ex-pupils of her
 school. Girls Central. 14/11 - 15/11
 St Mary's Dominican Convent.
 4 yrs - 92 yrs.
 Refused to talk to me

Figure 114: Notes, I Do The Same Now, Valerie Desmore Archive

4

I've just had a thought about why I'm writing this —
 no — not for publicity — yes —
 to let people know —
 but more expressly to 'Get it off
 my chest'

Getting it off your chest
 means many profound things,
 firstly — to confess. You are guilty
 & to confess removes the guilt. (I was
 from 4 to 9 1/2 yrs in a Catholic Boarding School)
 Cross your arms when you sleep ^{to keep} evil away
 (means ~~don't~~ ^{means that} masturbation ^{of course.})

Guilt because you're not white in
 a country where the correct 'Blanco'
 is Paramount. I was white to
 look at but my English school friends
 called me, Cherry Blossom —
~~After~~ ^{AKA} the Blk Shoe Polish!

Figure 115: Notes, I've Just had a thought, Valerie Desmore Archive

5

Also about teeth grinding + Tension.
Perhaps the Hypertension I've been
treated for 25 yrs will be helped
in 'getting it off my chest'
or to get the devils out of
my head.

'getting it off my chest'
Expressing myself. NO. NO. NO.
I don't want pity.
I just want Justice, Recognition

88	151
08	051
<u>051</u>	81

151
051

Figure 116: Notes Also about Teeth Grinding, Valerie Desmore Archive

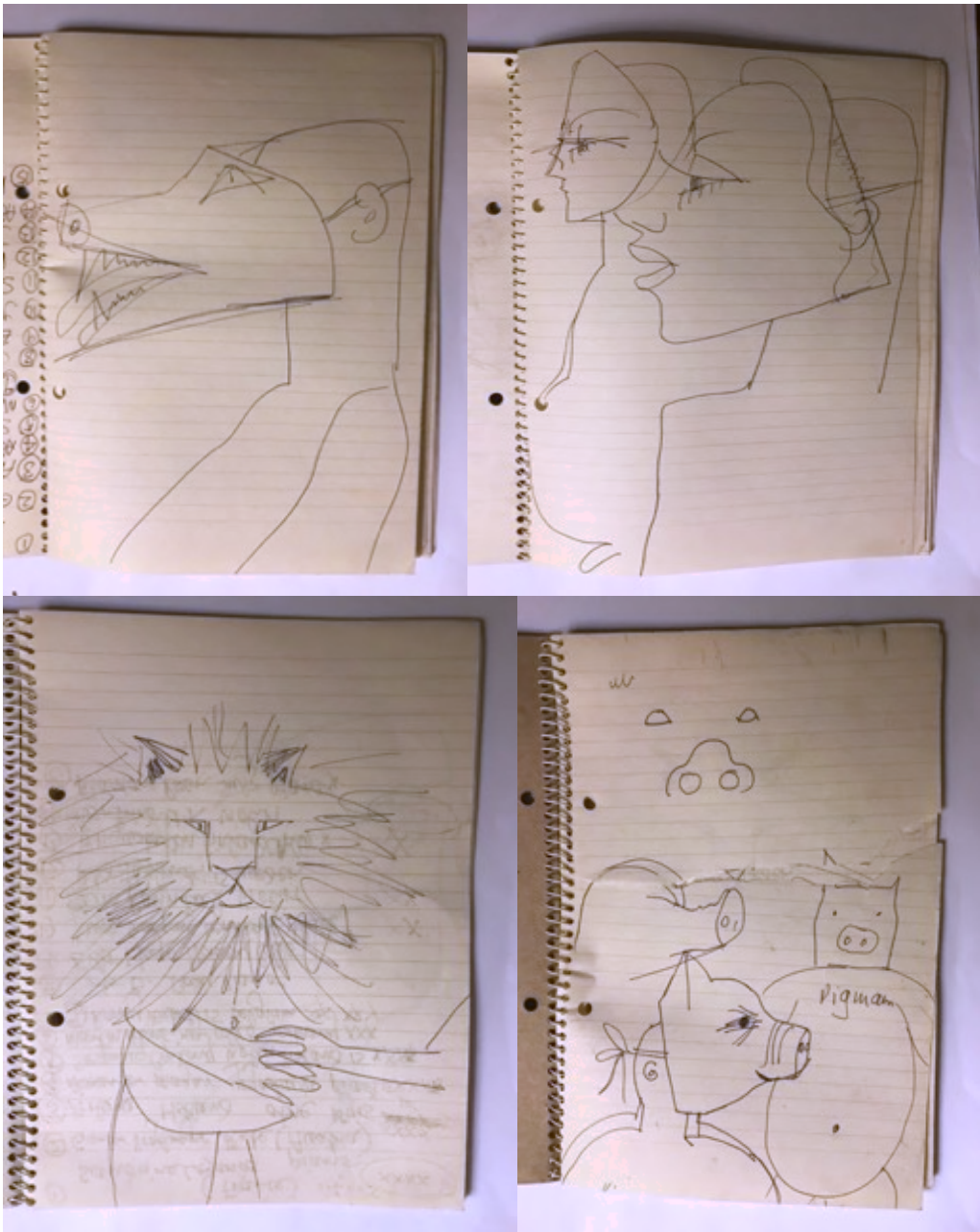


Figure 117: notepad drawings of various animal masks, undated, various sizes. Fleck archive.

Unpublished Interviews

- Valerie Desmore, Wendy Pickstone-Taylor, Lionel Bowman and Dhelia, 1998.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Artistic Talent and Freedom. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Childhood Memories. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Elocution and Art Shows. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Family Secret. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Living in the Cape as a Young Child. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. New York Horrace Mann. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Painting Secrets. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Shrink and Suicide. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Start School. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Wellington. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. What do yo mean honest. 2000–2006.
- Fiona Fleck and Valerie Desmore. Your parents. 2000–2006.
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Warren Siebrits. 2019.
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Elza Miles. 12 September 2019. Wits University.
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Fiona Fleck. 2019 - 2021
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Simon Pickstone-Taylor. 2019. Lekkerwijn.
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Simon Pickstone-Taylor. 2020. Paarl.
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Emma Bedford. email communication
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Hadyen Proud. email communication
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Gavin Watkins. 29 August 2019. email communication
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Jackie May. 22 July 2021. Online interview.
- Nontobeko Ntombela and Marilyn Martin. July 2020. email communication