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## ARTIST STATEMENT

**Marlise Keith** is known for her mixed media collages; large-scale drawings in pencil, ink, and acrylics; and most recently, for her small sculptures of fabric, embroidery and found objects. Her subject matter is vast, drawing inspiration from a mental medley of news headlines, colonial history, friends' pets, psychopathology, girlhood memories, dreams, her persistent, chronic migraines, and roadside memorials. Subjects too daunting, too confused, or too subliminal to articulate in neat words and sentences, are processed through mark-making; offering an alternative "understanding" of a world that often does not make sense in traditional, logical language. This violence emerges in plentiful paint; sometimes it is suggested by the very act of mark-making itself – paper is gouged, scratched, sanded, torn, folded, and nailed. The question of value is often explored through Keith's other choices of media. In her assemblages she juxtaposes found objects and media of varying value: Well-worn but beloved t-shirts, expensive gesso, broken curios, highly specialised micro-mosaic, R5 Store purchases and luxurious fabrics are combined and further worked with embroidery, intricate line, fur, paint,

and sequins. The creations seem to emerge directly from Keith's self-labelled mental "soup," equal parts cute and hideous, dark, and witty. The result is a richly layered body of work both violent and uncanny, made more surreal with a playful use of colour and humour. The latter draws in the viewer to a closer scrutiny of the darker complexities lurking beneath, which offer endless possibilities of meaning.

For this exhibition she states: "I spend a third of my life in bed with migraines. No amount of "right living," medical or alternative procedures bring relief, and the pain can get so intense that I disassociate from my body, I simply abandon it. A frequent image in my works is that of torn/cut/dismembered hands or other body parts. I visited Robben Island with my friend Lionel Davis, an artist, political activist, and erstwhile prisoner on the island. In the early days before the UN got to hear what was going on in Robben Island, the inmates were forced to dig a hole and bury problem prisoners up to their necks, then the guards urinated on them. If they asked for water the guards would pour this onto their faces. Water was a mixture of sea and fresh

water. Lionel had an interesting observation about the guards, they also only had access to this mix of water and their guarding facilities such as watch towers, were primitive in the extreme where they worked 24-hour shifts. He thought they were as much "prisoners" on the island as were the inmates. The line between the aggressor and the victim blurs. The image of buried heads in sands with liquid dripping onto their heads was a powerful one. On this trip I found an anchor in the connection to prisoners with just their heads showing. This resonates with me and my experience of regular migraines... the involuntary confinement, social restrictions, futile actions, and the reduction of the world to an isolated, dark room. I am at once, the jailor and the prisoner, the torturer, and the victim of torture. Lionel is known for his easy nature and happy booming laugh and I asked him how he managed to not become bitter, angry, or depressed. He said that making art saved him, enabled him to move on. His force of life is inspiring, and it strikes me that it is a choice he must make every single day. If his art saved him, so can mine. How though?

The Nkisi is a power figure used throughout the Congo Basin in Central Africa. Early travellers saw these as "fetishes" and "idols" but I prefer modern anthropology's term "power objects" or "charms." They could be human or animal figures that are easily identified by a collection of pegs, blades, nails, or other sharp objects stuck into its surface. Some figures contain a medicinal aspect in the head or more commonly the belly in which herbs or other secrets were sometimes stored. This is shielded by a piece of glass, mirror or other reflective surface that represents the 'other world' which is inhabited by the dead who can peer through, see potential enemies, and offer protection. The more nails in the traditional Nkisi, the more powerful the figure, the more protection or health to the owner of the Nkisi.

I decided to make my own power objects. I burden them with images, found objects, bits of fabric and torturous hope. I 'will' my drawings into power objects. I crowd the images with patten, mark, texture, and colour reflecting the malignant hope for migraine relief, the healthy return of a body that has once abandoned me."

## SHORT BIO

Marlise Keith (born 9 June 1972) is a South African artist working in ink, pencil and acrylics on canvas, board and glass (reverse glass painting). Her works can be found in a number of international collections in South Africa, America, Britain, Germany, Portugal and Sweden. She worked as an art teacher at Rustenburg High School for Girls in Cape Town until 2003.

Read more on the artist below.

## ARTWORKS ON EXHIBITION

## MORE BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON THE ARTIST

### ACADEMIC

1995 BA, Fine Arts Degree at the University of Pretoria.

1998-2001 Masters in Fine Arts, at the University of Stellenbosch.

### WORK EXPERIENCE

During my postgraduate studies, I worked at Dorp Street Gallery, managing minor clerical work, liaising with artists, as well as patrons, and assisting at exhibition openings. My experience in Interior Decorating (Savannah Interiors 1996-97), was used in shop dressing and display at this Gallery, and other shops such as ERA in Stellenbosch. During this period I also attended the Dorp Street Gallery stall at the Decorex exhibition at Spier in 1999.

2001-2003

In my final year of postgraduate study, I commenced teaching at Rustenburg High School for Girls in Cape Town. I taught Art, Textile and Graphic Design as well as Art history to Gr. 8-12. In 2003 I started teaching OBE Arts and Culture, to Gr. 8 and 9.

2004-2005

I was Head of the Production Design Department and taught Aesthetics at tertiary level (first to fourth year) at AFDA, the film and drama school in Observatory Cape Town.

2006

Full time artist. Freelancing in illustration, design and part time teaching.

2010

Part time teaching at the Spier Arts Academy, Art History and Classical drawing.

### COMPETITIONS AND AWARDS

1995

The Thembisa Fine Arts Awards, Kempton Park, and the SASOL New Signatures, Pretoria

1996-97



The Volkskas Atelier, Pretoria, and the SASOL New Signatures, Pretoria.

2006-8

Selected for the ABSA L'Atelier.

2006

Winner of the Sanlam Vuleka Art Competition.

2007

Selected as a top ten finalist at the ABSA L'Atelier.

2011

Hollard Insurance won the BASA award for Rat Race, the "Single Strategic

Project". On this piece I collaborated with the Spier Arts Academy's mosaic apprentices.

## RESIDENCIES

2007

Paris; Internationale Cité des Arts, 4 July – 27 August.

2020

Raumars, Finland, 3 November – 31 December.

## ADJUDICATION

2011

Served as regional judge for the ABSA L'Atelier, Belville.

2012

Served as national judge for ABSA L'Atelier, Johannesburg.

2013

Served as regional judge for the SASOL New Signatures, Michaelis Cape Town.

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Several group exhibitions and art fairs locally in South Africa and internationally in France and the UK.

## SELECTED RECENT SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2011

*Accidental Harvest* with Entropy at Upstairs at Bamboo, Melville JHB.

2013

*Furies*, Brundyn+, Cape Town.

2015

*Difficult Things*, Worldart, Cape Town.

2016

*Akrasia*, Worldart, Cape Town with various reviews and an article in Art South Africa.

2017

*A Feast for the eyes*, Nandos Soho, London with Henk Serfontein, Patrick Bongoy and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi

2019

*A Fragile Corridor*. Stellenbosch Woordfees.

2020

*Debris of a narrative*. DAOR Contemporary, Cape Town.















**BUSINESS HOURS:** Online gallery 24/7; special open hours as advertised; and by appointment

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