

## Exploring Visual Cultures Project — *Visual narratives: What do I write?*

This presentation considers the Exploring Visual Cultures project (EVC) and its traces on both the European and African Continents. At present the African Continent is represented by Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa on this Project.

My selected title, *Visual narratives: What do I write?* references the difference between how Europe and Africa construct and document its art history. Africa being reliant on an oral and visual system and Europe being reliant on a visual and text-based system. The challenge that is evident, is the transformation of the dominant thinking system about visual cultures. Therefore the EVC project is so critical as it serves as a mediator and platform that encourages equal respect for the visual cultures in both Continents as art in a very broad sense refers to all human creative practices.

The EVC Project promotes the reasserting of knowledge about negated African objects, practices and past histories within which art history is embedded. Discussions on these areas are elaborated by Africans so that a dominant foreign thinking is not applied. Traditional African cultures are many, with their unique art practices and styles, which makes it complex and difficult to comprehend against a dominant world view. The reason for this complexity, is that traditional art remains an important functional part of daily life as expressions of religious beliefs and socio-cultural norms. Traditional artmaking was never a career choice for works to be sold. It is the processes of making and the socio-cultural norms attached to objects that construct what African art is. Writing about these processes and attached meaning and situated knowledge was possible in a publication of a book (October) on Visual Cultures in Africa initiated by the EVC Project as its first response to new knowledge generation.

The second major project by the EVC is the *Collective Memory* Exhibition that will be on the EVC web by the end of September, early October 2021. Having an online presence offers an immediate access to information of visuals and publications. The exhibition is a collection of contemporary artworks by students from all five participating countries in the EVC Project. It is envisaged that there will be a minimum of fifty works that represent these countries. The artworks created, deal with historical consciousness, works that represent our past and how these are interpreted in the present. The exhibition further considers the connection between the traditional and the contemporary and the conversations (both oral and text-based) that these artworks will illicit when curated.

I would like to introduce you to a selection of artworks created by South African students that I speak to in this presentation. There are three institutions represented and I selected two works from each institution.



Tshegofatso Tlatsi: University of Johannesburg



*Time to disrupt* (Ink and charcoal on canvas)

Tshegofatso's works are mainly informed by her emotions and personal experiences. Her works explore the deconstructing and constructing of one's identity, reality and beliefs as well as finding order and meaning in chaos. She deals with the black female body that consumes the space that it inhabits. The figures are uncomfortable and expressive of the situations many women experience in South Africa.



Tlotlo Sereisho: University of Johannesburg



*Rhodes Must Fall, a Mengelmoes* (Oil on canvas)

This work is a response to the 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement. It considers monuments that commemorate colonial heroes. It speaks to the histories of violence in Africa. The legacies of colonial rule and the anger and frustration that Black communities endured during this period.



Teboho Lebakeng: University of Pretoria



*An Alleged Southern Sotho Male*

Acrylic Paint and Umqomboti (traditional African beer) on Canvas

Lebakeng questions his current identity as a contemporary southern Sotho man. The influence of modern living has caused a disruption with his traditional lifestyle as an African. The relationship between him as tradition Sotho and contemporary African man has created a tension that is difficult to resolve. He questions his masculinity and active identity formation as well as his artmaking practices that contradict his supposed Sotho heritage.



Shenaz Mahomed : University of Pretoria



*The Quran and Jihad and The Quran and Peace, Mild Steel*

Mahomed reflects on her Islamic faith and how these influence present-day encounters. She looks at mapping relationships and traces of her practice into these objects. She uses patterns found on the traditional Quran book cover that is a protective covering. The number of laser-cut patterns reference the number of times the Quran mentions the word Jihad (war-164) and Peace (291). The idea of peace is proclaimed more often than the idea of war. The idea not to create pages within the book covers indicates the lack of knowledge that people have in understanding the Islamic faith.



Paballo Majela : Tshwane University of Technology



*Ha Wetsi 1*  
(Acrylic resin (M1), nails and wire)

Majela's work speaks of his history, violence against his forefathers and honour to King Wetsi. Majela is a descendant of the Makhlokwe clan once ruled by King Wetsi. Due to the shortage of food and water, they travelled to South Africa from the Central Republic of Congo and took refuge in a mountainous cave for safety. Over time the Makhlokwe people were accused of cattle theft and were attacked by the white farmers who bombed the cave in which they lived. Over 2000 clans people died and King Wetsi fled to another country. The rest of the survivors were absorbed into other clans.



Caitlin Greenberg: Tshwane University of Technology



*Unspoken Thoughts* (Diptych- Still and video 02: 57sec)

Greenberg explores her place as a White South African within our South African democracy. There is much anxiety and feelings of displacement amongst young White South Africans. Apart from these, there remains a felt tension between the Afrikaans and English-speaking White communities and Greenberg used the medium of glass and the process of her breath to convey these ideas. She stated, "The more I blow air into the sphere of molten glass, the more pressurised the fragile surface becomes. The tension created through the surface pressure symbolises my unspoken thoughts, my fragile voice, an expression of my filtered

thoughts—my restricted voice” and the restricted voice she mentions, is reference to her patriarchal upbringing.

The question remains, *What do I write?* as the histories of the past are embedded in the collective memories of the present. It is evident that in writing up a new art history, it is difficult knowledge to curate as one must understand where the work is situated so that true understanding takes place. It is for these reasons that the EVC project will play a pivotal role in sharing and representing information on visual cultures in Africa.