

CCAC Interview with Stefan Blom on 15/04/2021 on Google Meet - transcript

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Interviewer name (and acronym): Francois Lion-Cachet (FLC)

Interviewee name (and acronym): Stefan Blom (SB)

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List of acronyms:

EVM: Els van Mourik

SB: Stefan Blom

START OF AUDIO RECORDING: 00:03:32 [CCAC_Int_AUD_a_BlomStefan_20210415]

FLC: Okay, great. Okay, questions? Here we go. Please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an artist?

SB: I was born in Kimberly. When I was about three years old, we left Kimberly and moved to Kempton Park; then, I joined the military. Afterwards, I worked in the ad industry for a couple of years, and then I decided that I wanted to paint, so I moved to Cape Town. That's when I started a body of work, not only painting but sculpting more, more than anything. When I was actually finishing a body of work, I started approaching galleries, which was unsuccessful initially, especially in Cape Town. I took the exhibition back to Joburg and had it at the Karen MKerron gallery in Joburg at the time.

FLC: Which gallery was that? You said, Karen...

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:04:56

SB: MKerron, MKerron

FLC: Sorry, we might ask you for the spelling here and there, but we'll just indicate that if we're unsure in the transcription. So you already mentioned something about being in the military and everything, so I think this will come through in the next question. Can you tell us more about how, when, and why you made *Fly by Night Girl* and *Dushka*?

SB: Well, you know. It was a continuation of work. It wasn't deliberately using anything. You know, the military aspect of the work draws from my experience in the military. I had to deal with extreme emotions, and that's how you know that whenever I describe the feeling, I will draw on that experience. Not to a specific event but by extreme emotions; I attach whatever comes from that time as a symbol of sentiment. So the military in itself was... It turned my world upside down. And I... You know from school, being brought up very conservatively. Then the military I just knew after I finished the military service that I needed to... basically everything that I believed in, every value I had, had to be reassessed and looked at. So, I was a different person walking out of there from how I was brought up.

Dushka and *Fly by Night Girl*... I use the female figure for most of the artworks in that body of work. I use it all through my working experience. I speak about vulnerabilities for people in the minorities, not weaknesses; people that have been suppressed, those things that still touch my heart. Not only because of my own experiences in that scenario; I look at my childhood, I also grew up being dyslexic and not being accepted for that. You know, neither my parents nor school, so I did feel like, Just by that simple... Sorry, I am terribly nervous, but most of them are named after goddesses, powerful goddesses, making them very strong. Although I can sculpt any realism, I've kept it almost like mannequin figures because they're a big part of our lives. Looking into shop window toys and *Fly by Night Girl*, who is faceless, masked with a lovely Barbie face and then on the reverse side a traumatic side of her scripted in my language. A language I've used since I was eight years old, just to tell stories, and because I was so incapable of doing so in writing.

I don't expect a person to understand exactly what I said, but I completed the work by saying what I wanted to say in that work. None of the scripts that I use or pictograms don't sit well with most people. That doesn't sit well with me because it comes from such a desperate place. But in many ways, the work is named after a particular armour; and she is very well equipped with wings and mortar bombs. The name also suggests hate using the word prostitute or sex workers, but it just seems that that side of our community has been shifted aside. There's always that; it's almost like they are at the bottom of everyone. When it comes to their career choice, which most of the time is a desperate attempt to live right and to be able to make a living, that's basically where the name comes from.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:12:38

SB: SB: But still, she's powerful, and she's probably more equipped to live life than most people because it's been such a crazy difficult career choice, if I can put it that way. *Dushka* is indicative of her, you know, she's standing there, and she wants to be controlled. I don't want to make something just to be used, but she's made herself willing to do so. That speaks to how I view women generally, the desire to help and their input in life. Similar to how men have done through the ages and made the source out of it. She's made herself available to use, she is capable, and as I said, she speaks of that person who is willing and does not need to prove herself because she is equipped to show it off. Haha, what else do you need? [giggles]

FLC: Thank you. We're actually learning quite a lot from you, like, the works are getting a lot more depth. I mean, we have a fair bit of understanding of the fundamental premise that we've read in your book, *The DSHK*, is that how you say it?

SB: Yeah, well, it is an acronym for the full name, which is impossible to pronounce.

FLC: But what you've said is very helpful. Thank you. It's nice to get a deeper understanding of the works. You have spoken to *Fly by Night Girl* and *Dushka*. And I think you have touched on the historical and current-day themes they talk to. And I think you also touched on the title of the works. So the next question is, how does your choice of materials speak to the themes you're grappling with? And then I'm thinking specifically of the car paint and the machine gun and the shininess of the works and, yeah, everything.

SB: I think the look and feel of the works are pretty contemporary. It's also made to be shiny with beautiful colours (inaudible 00:16:04); colours to look at, from a distance, beautiful, but, you know, on closer inspection, you'll see that it's different from what it seems to be from afar. I like the fact that I'm using fibreglass, first of all, because it is toxic and it is not biodegradable, but it's breakable. I've never wanted to have anything done in bronze, which is obviously very durable and will last forever. So, I don't concern myself with or particularly think of, 'Okay, I'm going to make a piece of work that will be around for another 500 years. I think that's good for people now, and that's most important to me. The materials I'm using degrade in time. The Constitutional Court and museums tend to look after work better than a private collector who might keep it outside. Even the steel, you know, stainless steel, is very durable. I think it will last until I die, and that's important to me.

FLC: It's interesting what you say about fibreglass being toxic. It immediately made me think of current-day discussions around toxic masculinity. How that's possibly something that comes through in your work, especially if you look at military culture, which you address in *Dushka*, exploiting the female figure and the woman's body. Would you say that is something that comes through your work?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:18:42

SB: Absolutely. Yeah. I can just sit back and think about how I have been brought up. It is interesting that in the questionnaire, you ask how do I define myself? You know, either gay or straight. I didn't expect that question. It is tricky for me...

FLC: That's an anonymous diversity questionnaire which you don't have to answer. Yeah. If you want to, you can.

SB: Yeah, so I suppose if you asked me when I was eighteen, I would have told you I'm a man because I'm attracted to women or by my sexuality. But you know that was back then; I've never really looked at myself having a female side. But if anything, that's how the new generation defines themselves and their sexual preferences; mine is also definite. If I look at women I have dated, they can probably also be similar to what attracts me. I just feel like sexual preferences are far too complex to define one single word by saying you're gay or straight. As an artist, I don't want to be called a man or male, or you know, I'm an artist. That's what I'm interested in doing, despite what my sexual preference is.

FLC: Thank you. You spoke to this already a little bit, but there might be something you'd like to add if there isn't something you can also say. What is the significance of the human body in your sculptures, especially the female figure? You've already spoken to it. I don't know if you feel that you've said everything? Or if you have something to add.

SB: I think the reality of the human figures [inaudible] is that I would comment on the human condition. So the obvious thing to do is by using figurative work, the female figure. I've tended to use the female figure to explore that sexuality is being exploited to such an extent, and it's only now that you see some kind of improvement. It is only lately that you see women flex and get paid more. The men got this trophy, you know those subtle things that shouldn't be, that in my mind should be changed, and I will fight for that course. I just think it is essential to do my thing, I suppose. And be some kind of, make my work worthwhile. And... getting myself a place in this world because what I'm doing is very important, Something I sometimes doubt.

FLC: Thank you. Next question. How important is studio time for your practice? And how do you navigate the time in and out of the studio?

SB: I'm better now. I used to work continuously. It's also critical to get somewhere since I haven't studied or anything of that sort. And yeah, just getting some kind of respect for what I'm doing or recognition for what I'm doing. It took a while. So yeah, it led to me working hard, and I'm better with it now. At least I can say I do spend time with the people around me, my friends and family, which I'm always terrible at. In the last little while, I've realised that those people are really important to me and sometimes I have to put work aside, which I've done now. I'm a bit of a workaholic. I'm always here early in the morning. Despite everything, I'm here before five. And I like that time. I love that time because that's when I'm most creative.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:25:55

FLC: Thank you. The next question is, could you tell us the story of when and why *Fly By Night girl* was donated to our collection? And you also *Dushka* on a long term loan at the same time? What made you donate? What made you loan to us?

SB: When I heard that the Constitutional Court is interested in my work... Obviously, if I have to think of anywhere in the world, I would have loved my work to be. It is the Constitutional Court.

FLC: That's great.

SB: No, honestly, I can't think of a better place because when I came out of the military, that was my mission there; to do something to rectify the wrongs that have been going on in the country. The Berman Contemporary exhibited the work at a restaurant, and the artwork was standing outside. Your curator came; she was having a meal there, I think. She saw the work and wanted to get the work; that's how it happened. I suppose having an exhibition at the restaurant was something really good happening for me. And I'm so pleased that I've trusted the gallery in doing whatever they did despite how I felt at the time. It is a big surprise. One of the biggest highlights in my whole career. And I can honestly say I'll probably retire knowing that it is enough.

FLC: What work was standing outside of the restaurant was a *Dushka* or *Fly By Night Girl*?

SB: *Fly By Night Girl*

FLC: So that's the one you donated? And why did you specifically loan *Dushka* to accompany *Fly By Night Girl*?

SB: Yeah, I was asked if they can take it on a long-term loan, and I still don't know exactly what that means. In fact, they can just keep it because I can't have any other work back. After all, I don't have space for it.

FLC: Do you remember who the curator was at the time? Might it have been Stacey or Melissa? I'm not sure. Do you remember the name?

SB: It was Melissa... What's her surname?

FLC: Melissa Goba.

SB: Yeah. Okay.

FLC: So you already touched on this... How do you feel about having your work in the Constitutional Art Collection today? And what makes the CCAC as a collective art collection and the Building which in itself is an artwork and having your art in the building and part of the collection. What does that mean to you? You already spoke to this but, yes...?

SB: It's an incredible honour to be there. You know, not in my wildest dreams could I have thought that I would have my work there, although I was aware of the collection. Since my early days, just

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SB: Sitting at the Joubert Park, I remember looking at David's [inaudible] work outside the Johannesburg Art Gallery and thinking, you know, what it takes for an artist to get his work there. The first exhibition that I had to participate in, the day before the FNB Vito awards, was fantastic. I still couldn't imagine having my work there. The work gets an honour to be in between people fighting a cause that I've been so aware of, that I've been involved in and fighting all my life for. Cape Town is more involved than ever in helping set up the District Six museum and participating in other exhibitions dealing with apartheid and specific events. Yeah, so it's been very focused on... it is very South African and African, and I like that. I like viewing myself as an African and South African. And yeah, it's my country, and I love the people here.

FLC: Thank you. How do you see artists being connected to justice or human rights in South Africa, more universally? So it's something our collection explores the intersection of art and justice. And I think your works also speak to that. What do you think is the role of art concerning justice?

SB: Well, I think, first of all, I have to look at who would view art and who would meet art with an open mind to be influenced by it. People that come to the Constitutional Court are more than that. I find the history of apartheid interesting. It is now a word that you hear from every nation in this world. Just imagine that part of our history has had such a significant impact on the world. So obviously, what we do here and how we deal with apartheid... Our fight at the moment is still due to that. I think the world is looking at us making a success out of it. I believe that its relevance is enormous. Yeah.

FLC: I haven't thought about it like that before, what happens in South Africa matters to the world. And that, yeah, it's quite special and deep. And we might quote you. You spoke to this briefly. Are you mindful of conservation when making art, either preservation or restoration requirements to ensure the longevity of the work? You spoke to that a bit. But the question more specifically is focused on, do you have specific recommendations for conserving the works we have in our collection?

SB: Obviously, indoors is the best place for that. Metalwork will last for a very, very long time. The fibreglass is coated with layers of paint and then a protective coating on that. So there's not that much that can damage it. It is painted with automotive paint. It is obviously one of the most durable paints that are. If you let the fibreglass stand out and die outside and be exposed to weather conditions, it will get damaged. It will last for a long time if you look after it. You'll have to wash it with soap, and that's fine, even the metal, you can use Mr Min on it, anything.

FLC: My colleague Thina deals quite a bit more with conservation than I do. I know she's listening attentively. But we have recently cleaned the works, our intern Neo, who's also in the office, is listening to the interview. They've also been working on the cleaning of the sculpture.

SB: Yeah,

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:36:05

FLC: I think they're looking much better. I think there was one specific question we had. I think it's *Fly by Night Girl*. She's standing on a circular thing and inside of that is dusty. What would your recommendation be to clean that? just by literally just trying to use a brush or something just to get the dust-out?

SB: Yes Even when you take soapy water, wash it out. It's hard to damage that surface. It's really, really hard...

FLC: What Neo did notice that you did add, I think the titles of the works with pencil onto the fibreglass. So we were quite mindful of not washing that so that the pencil doesn't come off? I don't know if you perhaps put...

SB: That wouldn't be a pencil. It's definitely painted. The colour might look like a pencil, but it's not.

FLC: It's good that we know. Thank you. Do you have any recommendations on the presentation of the artworks? If we present tours and present the works when we do display them? How should they be displayed? How should we present them? Would you like to see us present them in a specific way?

SB: Obviously, where they're standing is beautiful. I like that they are being viewed from the bottom up as well. So it's a perfect, perfect space. *Dushka* though should be installed preferably with the gun showing up. if it's lower, it makes it look like it's shooting into the ground than up.

FLC: That is actually something we fixed. When we joined the CCT, the gun was pointing down, then We saw in your catalogue that it was pointing upwards. Okay, thank you. The last question is, is there anything else you would like to be recorded in this interview? But I think we can extend this question to both you and Els. Also, if you perhaps have something that you think is worth adding. You also have a deep insight into Stefan's work. So I don't know if there's anything you would like to add perhaps.

EVM: Stefan, first is there anything you want to add? It's your interview.

SB: This is something I would like to add: the fact that whatever I said, you know... what comes out of my mouth, is not always what's in my head. It's just a downfall for me. For some reason, there's not a fantastic connection between my brain and my mouth. I just hope that I've made some clear and quick answers to my question. I just always say that. Sometimes, I do get asked questions about my work that I feel like it's almost like going to an author of the book and asking him to do a painting to explain the text. I think what I do is relevant and suitable, but explaining it is sometimes the problem.

FLC: I think you did really well. And it's very nice for us to be interviewing artists because their primary medium is visual. So it's also interesting in these interviews, and by doing the transcriptions, you really see the personality of the artists coming through. It's something we love to capture, and it's not always polished and perfect; we're not writing novels. It is nice to kind of be recording a moment in time with the artists, and it's interesting, that interplay between text and visual, because being in the court, in a space where they're working with legal documents, and it's very textual, it's also **TIME**

ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:40:53

FLC: interesting having all these artworks that kind of add a visual element to the court that makes it much more accessible. So I think there are word people and there are visual people, and it's interesting to see how they complement each other.

SB: Absolutely. Thank you very much for having me. I was looking forward to having it in Joburg, but it's not possible for me at the moment. I'll definitely come and see you as soon as I am in Joburg.

FLC: Els, do you have something to add?

EVM: Yeah, the point is, I know all his sculptures, which we sometimes show here in the gallery. And you know, if you ever show his work and would like to show more of his sculptures because some of them are just so incredible. Whenever we open them up and show them, I find something different to look at, and the special one with the hat, where you can look into and see all these little soldiers walking around and working there. It's just amazing. So, yeah, just think about that. If you ever want to share more of his work, we have them here in storage, and it's nice to show some of it, especially two of his other works. I think they fit so well with the current two you have to court.

FLC: You know which one specifically do you recall their titles?

EVM: Do you know the titles, Stefan?

FLC: Not to put you on the spot with you can also let us know via email, it'll be nice to...

EVM: I'll let you know by email because he knows exactly where I'm talking about. So it's the one with...

SB: I can quickly show you.

FLC: When I paged through the catalogue of DSHK. I wished I could see that exhibition and all those sculptures together. When you see all of them together, they are quite impressive.

EVM: It is impressive when you see them together. It's especially because he has written on it also in his own language, which he had developed since he was eight years old. So that's what you find in lots of his other works. [Stefan shows the catalogue] Yes, that one. I love that one. That one on the right. Yeah.

SB: Inside is that...

EVM: It's all little soldiers there. Where's the belly?

SB: The belly?

EVM: The belly? Yeah.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:44:00

SB: The Pink?

EVM: No, not the pink. She has a yellow hat and she looks [inaudible] a little bit. I always have to look up a name so I always remember it in a picture and then an image so yes, [Stefan finds the photograph] that one and that's the belly. So yeah...

FLC: There's one I can't remember. I just remember the visuality of it. It's like a man standing in his cloak. And I think at the back of the cloak, there's a dagger or something. Or it's like a slip, a red slip.

SB: That's when I do use the male figure. It's normally me. That sculpture has symbols on there or pictograms, that was when I did.. the records that I had from when I was eight years old. They are all there.

FLC: Stefan. There's the appendix, as well, the background information of as I said, this is anonymous, we won't be crediting it with your interview. So you can say if you prefer to go through it now and we'll make note of it, or you can do it on your own time when you sign the consent form as well. And I know you raised your feelings about labelling your gender, and your sexual preferences. And just to let you know, in the past artists felt uncomfortable with this, I've also just like, scratched out, scratched it out or wrote a poem next to it. So it really is open to your artistic answer as well. You don't need to fit into the exact box. But it is also quite nice to see boxes on. So I don't know if you would like to go through it now. Give us answers or via email. What do you prefer?

SB: I'll do it via email? Yes. And I can send it back to you.

FLC: Okay, Thina did ask me to ask you another question.

EVM: Just Francois, I'm going to Cape Town at the beginning of May. So Stefan can fill in the forms and I can take them with me also.

FLC: Whatever works,

EVM: Whatever works for you both. So...

FLC: Okay, thank you. Thina said here I'm interested in the language that Stefan developed when he was eight. Can you possibly tell us more about it and its development?

EVM: That's another life story.

SB: It definitely comes from being desperate to tell stories. (Inaudible author's name) is a highly fantastic writer. I looked up to him and was sort of jealous of him being able to tell a story so beautifully. That you can actually picture it in your mind, and I couldn't do it. Obviously, if I look at the page, it seems like language on a different planet, so I just recorded that. Everything that I wanted to remember, every event that was significant to me. In one way, I kept a diary of my life. With this, if you really think of the kind of symbols and shapes, you can draw so many. But it's how you arrange them and how they play against each other or with each other.

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SB: It made much more sense to me. It makes perfect sense because I could tell a story in one line that will trigger the specific event in my mind. That's how it happened, and I've only started really using it in the work that you have. I just have the confidence to actually do it. It's got a lot of meaning to me. It reminds me of really, really fantastic times and shit times, [giggles] bad times.

FLC: I also have one more question. I wanted to ask you about the DSHK series as a whole, that exhibition as a whole. Are they prevalent themes coming through in that because we've focused specifically on the two artworks that we have, but we haven't really looked at the series and exhibition they form part of? Does each specific work in that catalogue in that exhibition speak to different facets of your lived experiences and artworks? Or would you say some themes are running through everything?

SB: Yeah, I think they're individual, every single one. I think the thing that connects them is their look and the materials and time they were done. I believe that links and probably everything that I've done up to that point were placed in that body of work.

FLC: Thank you very much.

SB: Okay. Lovely speaking to you.

FLC: Nice meeting you virtually. It's just that appendix and the consent form. If you can complete it digitally and just email it to us, that would be great. If Els needs to bring it back. That would also be fine. Please let us know when you're in Joburg.

SB: Thank you very much.

FLC: Thank you, Thina. You don't have anything to add? [Thina Nods] You're good? Okay. Thank you for your time.

SB: Thanks very much. Thanks.

EVM: Thank you very much. ciao.

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