

CCAC Interview with Norman Catherine - Transcript

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FLC: My name is Francois Lion-Cachet, and I'm with Neo Diseko who is our documenter. We're here in Hartbeespoort with Norman Catherine, who we're interviewing today, the third of June 2021. So, I'll read out the questions. The first one is just kind of an introduction, I know there's a lot to say. Please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an artist.

NC: I was born in East London, in the Eastern Cape in 1949. I did a bit of after school art classes, nothing serious, every now and then. I mean, comics were the thing I had access to more than anything. I didn't have any access to books on art down in East London. Only when I went to art school, that's when I became familiar with local South African art, and international art, other than seeing, say, a Picasso print or something. I didn't even really know who he was. So there was not really much [art] education as far as that. Access to art was minimal. I failed Afrikaans in standard nine at high school [laughs]. I managed to persuade my parents to let me go to art school. At least you didn't have to have short hair, in the back and sides, and we didn't go do military training [laughs]. So, I went to art school instead, and did the art matric. It was just across the road from Selborne College, where I attended,

which is a very colonial kind of school, good at sports and everything, but I was shit at sports [laughs]. So anyway, I went there and that's the first time I thought maybe I would have something to do with art. I could get a job as a cartoonist at the newspaper or whatever. And then I became familiar with South African art and other art. Cecil Skotnes was somebody I was influenced by in the early stages when we had to do woodcuts for printmaking. So, Cecil Skotnes was probably my first influence and [then] Walter Battiss, he did a lot of wood blocks. Then, luckily, Cecil Skotnes saw a couple of my prints that I'd done at school for a project he liked, my woodcuts and linocuts. He said he could arrange a show in Johannesburg at Herbert Evans, a gallery downtown above the shop which was for young or new artists and I think I was the first artist that he opened. He opened that show of my sculptures, drawings, and printmaking. And from there, he said that if I'm going to do art, I'd have to get a job in Johannesburg. Whatever kind of job, maybe window dressing or something like that.

FLC: That would be in Joburg?

NC: Ja. Anyway, I wasn't in Joburg. I went to study and then I got a job back home after art school, as a printer-signwriter. I'd come up to Pretoria and I couldn't get a job, even at the zoo [laughs]. I knew Raymond Andrews, an artist who had his first job there. So I couldn't get any work in Pretoria. I did meet [Walter] Battiss, however, which was the best part of it and I did some printing for him, because of one of the university students there, Andrew Todd, he was one of the top students at that time. He knew Walter Battiss and he had a printing press in his little apartment and was doing prints for Walter. I helped with that printing and then I got my first print from Walter for helping with his printmaking. So that's my first meeting with Walter... and then I ran out of money, I suppose. I went back to East London and got a job as a printer-signwriter and did that for a year. Then I thought I got a job in Joburg in design or advertising. Well, I didn't have qualifications. A friend of mine had come and got that, but I thought I did and when I got here it wasn't really as such. I think my friend wanted me here with him [laughs]. But I did get a job for a little while in advertising and design, and whatnot. But all along I'd been doing my own printmaking... silk screening, especially, in my bedroom. I had a little screen with cardboard racks. And so I had been doing a show in KwaZulu Natal with the Durban Association of Arts, of my silkscreens. I just didn't have a good dealer but I did meet, in the early stages, Fernand Haenggi of Gallery 101 in Johannesburg, which was downtown. Madam Haenggi was his mother - they called her Madam Haenggi. And they were one of the main galleries. It was first called Gallery 101... in Jeppe Street, maybe? I can't remember but it's something like that. They were selling interesting work by Skotnes, and Battiss, I think Sydney Kumalo, and people like that. So, he or his mother had seen my work, and we exhibited my first airbrush works through them. But alongside Battiss and Skotnes, sort of in the same [laughs] show. So, that was sort of the beginning of getting into the art scene, although I was working in a design studio. After working in the studio for about a year only, I started freelancing. So, I did my own work and a bit of freelance work and then I met Linda Givon from Goodman Gallery and she liked my work. So from the early 70s, Goodman Gallery started selling my work after Gallery 101. They were probably the most well known gallery around. And that was really, I think, the first step of getting known, through them, as they would have known and they had well known artists in their

stable, like [Eduardo] Villa and [Cecil] Skotnes. I didn't plan any way of becoming an artist. I was probably naive, which was good [laughs]. Like, my expectations weren't that high. I didn't know you would have to, you know, to become well known or whatever, you'd have to do all these things like have many exhibitions and be in museums and collections and whatnot. So, I kind of went about it that if I could earn a hundred rand a month, I would be very happy [laughs] working for myself. And I did various book covers and illustrations for music album covers. I was doing quite a lot of that and not a lot of that paid me well. Music, especially, because they were people I knew [laughs]. In the 70s I went to California in the States and met a few people while I was still trying to become an artist. I was still traveling and I did work over in Los Angeles — I did movie poster work for a studio there. But at the same time the art directors and whatnot in Los Angeles, they liked my actual work which wasn't all suitable for that [movie poster work], but some of it was. So, I was actually getting work, but I was also actually selling some artwork when I went to show my portfolio, because it was not necessarily advertising work. There were things like *There's a Storm on the Bosses Farm* (1979), prints that I had done. Okay those prints were just in the early 80s, but leading to those works I did a lot of [surrealistic] airbrush work. So, I did have the opportunity to earn extra money through doing my own work and meeting people. Not getting a gallery, as such, to handle my work. Elsewhere, nobody would even look at you, [especially] being South African but that really didn't bug me. I was just there to carry on doing my art wherever, there or here. It was inspirational being there, and in New York. I enjoyed it and later I went there a lot more often. I was pretty much able to do my work full time from about 1980, I could do just my art. Although I still did album covers for people because I enjoyed it and other types of projects or book covers if it was something [interesting]. Usually, they would just use the work I'd already done. I didn't do what people wanted me to, you know. Usually I wouldn't have to do a lot to fit in with whatever the theme was. It was something I wanted to do.

FLC: So, an artist, not a designer?

NC: Ja, that's how I sort of became an artist. Just through perseverance, I think, in doing a lot of art. The thing is that you've got to have people who want your work. That's the difficulty for most artists. People want to buy your work and hang it up, because there is a large selection. Those days, there wasn't as much to select as there is now, so I can imagine it's much, much tougher now, because there are thousands more artists, and there are good artists coming up all the time. [Back] then there weren't that many people in South Africa. I'm talking about internationally it was different but yeah. And as I say, you could live in communes, and so it was still the hippy days, the 70s [laughs]. I enjoyed it, it was part of my thing, the 70s days... Hippies, you know, it was a different time. It was actually a fun time.

FLC: Can you tell us about the early stages of your career as an artist? I think you already touched on that, but the second part is how your distinct visual language or aesthetic was—

NC: Evolved—

FLC: —developed and evolved.

NC: Yeah. As I didn't have a really formal training at university, I didn't really know what to do. Let's say after the art matric, I sort of had a bit of my own something going. It was influenced, a lot, by people like Skotnes. But I really didn't know which direction to go in at all. I just went along with what was going on around me. Whether it was in music, international media, like Pink Floyd, for instance, the hole in the wall— was it—

FLC: Brick in the wall?

NC: Brick in the wall. So music, I would say in the early 70s — because it was such a revolution then, with Frank Zappa, Jimi Hendrix, and Pink Floyd. I mean everything was quite unique. Now everything sounds similar to somebody else, virtually. I think music influenced my art to a certain extent, because I didn't really know which artists or movements to [study/practice]. I was doing work for a guy called Ramsay MacKay, who was in a group called *Freedom's Children*. In the late 60s they were very popular, sort of the most advanced kind of group by the early 70s. I did a lot of work with Ramsay, in doing things like a little book for his writings called *Last Letters from the Wilderness* (1978). I'll give you a copy. So, I was involved with doing things where I was illustrating some stories that he wrote, but we were also working on artworks together. He would work on titles because he was quite a good writer. So, it involved trying to work out ideas for his music videos or whatever he was gonna do. We did some stop-frame animation work with a photographer. There was a lot of just gelling different things with a guy called Don Searll. He did a lot of music stuff, and so, there was a kind of mixture of that. It wasn't necessarily doing art that was just for galleries as such now or it didn't have the same meanings as it might have now. There were more spontaneous kinds of ideas that went with a mood. Also, partly what influenced my work quite a lot at times while in the States, I'd say, [pause] was the work of some of the comic artists. There were artists called *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists*, which is kind of surreal, like the absurd kind of art. The name of the cartoonist was Bob Leffman, and I worked in animation for a while in New York with Bob Blechman, he is one of the top American illustrators. He did a lot of *New Yorker* covers, and his animations were a well-known style. I worked there for a couple of months on the animation, purely for my imagination, or colour, so I was brought in to work on things like that. I often did things like that, just because they were fun. And I was able to live in New York for six months.

FLC: Were you influenced by Keith Haring?

NC: I was gonna say before, I was. When I saw his work then, for the first time, it reminded me of Walter Battiss immediately. Some of Walter's work, not his watercolours necessarily but the rest of his work. I mean, obviously Keith Haring was influenced by oceanic art and hieroglyphics. But Battiss and Fook Island, I really enjoyed his work. And the other artist that I said was my favourite, is [Jean-Michel] Basquiat. I went to one of his first important shows at, I think it was at Mary Boone Gallery. We were there at the time and went to the opening. So, he's definitely one of my favourites. And there was

Kenny Scharf, who was more of a surrealist, his work looks like airbrushed album covers. There was also another guy who was also interesting and who's quite a big name now, called George Condo. Although I don't really like his work so much anymore, now that he's someone who's selling for huge amounts. I liked it then [and] he was from that period. So that era, really, I enjoyed that, and I think that influenced my work a lot. I think seeing it also brought back a bit of the more primitive side of my work. Seeing what I've done prior to that— I'll show you one or two things from some of my early work. I kind of brought back working on found objects and stuff like painted pieces of wood, and there were hieroglyphic things, similar to Keith Haring. I also was influenced by Paul Klee, the Swiss artist, when I was young. So, Paul Klee had quite an influence on my style, especially in the beginning, through his colours and everything. Paul Klee, and Picasso too, because of the influence from African art. I think my work is very much influenced by African art. Not any particular African art or country, but just in general. I think the biggest influence during my time in America was the influence of Mexican art on my work. Because in Los Angeles, especially, there are a lot of Mexican people and they have a lot of Mexican folk art there. For example, the Day of the Dead or All Saints Day based on Catholic, is very important to them, and they portray it in their figurines, cakes and scones. I mean, it's just so fun, in a way. I thought it was fun. Even the people we stayed with in LA were scared of the stuff. But they are fun. We collected a lot of these little figures, and skeletons, and funny scenes in a little box with little mirrors like in a bedroom. I've got lots of them that we collected there. And those Mexican [folk art] influenced, for instance, the *Speaker of the House* (1989). That started my work with my wire figures, painted cloths and skeleton faces, but others were different like satire on politics or some were just musicians.

FLC: But let's go over to that. The next few questions I'm actually going to combine into one. I want to ask you about the three different works of yours that we have in the collection. First being *Speaker of the House*, then *Hide and Seek* (date unknown). Do you recall that one? We recently had it reframed. I can look up a picture on my phone. And then *Apocalypse* (1980), the new one.

NC: Yes.

FLC: So, of all three, I think we should go one by one, starting with *Speaker of the House*. I want to hear how, when, and why you made the work, and the historical and current day themes you think the work speaks to?

NC: Well, *Apocalypse* would have been third...

FLC: We can start with *Apocalypse*.

NC: I think that work was influenced by a few different things. The movie *Apocalypse Now*. Unless I am mistaken, but it was after that. Firstly in referring to the title. The other thing is possibly the music of Pink Floyd and *The Wall*, because I did a number of works, also with walls and that related, because

my work was sort of evolved from being realistic to having surrealism in it. I used a lot of walls and buildings in my earlier airbrush works. So, it was quite an important theme, the wall, and it related to South Africa, to the situation we were in. And while staying in New York, I thought about South Africa more than I did when I was here. I could kind of see at a distance better than when I was here. So certain things, I don't know, just gelled better for me, in simpler terms. Because my work was more surreal and weird before it was more fantasy and became sort of bolder and simpler into these kinds of portraits like the boss or apocalypse. I mean, there's nothing more to it, to me, other than symbolising the idea of something being as simple as possible. A living thing that wasn't portraying any human face, or cartoon, or caricature and that just symbolised, for me, a moment in possibility, or hopefully not.

FLC: The perfectly manicured tree in front of the wall, is that the living thing and the possibility?

NC: Yes, it's very moving. I mean, all the lines in it were as if something's happening, nothing definite but a bit like a black hole. The whole thing kind of doesn't look well. It looks very serene. I don't know. It's kind of like this emotional thing within the series: simple, structured. I think I'd only done one tree before that, a little green tree. Somehow the green tree, I think I did the green tree before and I had never done a tree in that sort of look. It was nice but it didn't mean anything somehow, it was just somehow related to certain other themes I was trying to explore, I suppose, like the flags in *Premonition of War* (1980). So, I don't see individual works as being that important to me or great. If they work visually then I'm happy with it, but they're part of a series. So, I see those as really being part of a series of shots of things that all work together, rather than being a great piece of artwork in itself. And the flags that are in it with a red background, going for the blue of the South African flag which you weren't supposed to show pictures of, as a transition to the blue-greys of the flag like in the old World War One photographs. There were some of these blue-greys in World War Two and the boats, it was a bluey grey, and had a no-colour sort of feel. That sort of in-between stage and then the more violent looking the bricks on the flag. Again, similar ideas to the brick in the wall because it's not based on the same political things. Pink Floyd had very powerful messages and I think that sort of thing inspired me. The flag at the end of *Premonition of War* was a red flag, which was always the Rooi "Gevaar [Danger/Ngozi sign]" or the communist threat. So, that's why I ended the artwork with that flag. And the other ones flow into it, I mean, to me, I could have done the wall like the animation. So, I've never thought of myself as doing great paintings as such or each individual work being that, but just being part of a thought pattern of things that I've done without actually planning it. I never purposely went out to do a series of political or social commentary. Growing up, I didn't really know that much about politics or had that much influence either. It was kind of neutral and only after the '76 riots in Johannesburg did it become much more heightened in my work. Before that it was more fantasy, and so that just slowly crept in. I wasn't hanging out with activists but I did meet people like Paul Stopforth. So, I met them afterwards and it just grew from there, I think after my first trip to America. I didn't know anybody, I didn't have any connections and I'd worked with Penthouse a bit, they used my work for editorials on the inside. I just went there, met with them and did things, but looking from a distance I saw things a bit more clearly, I

would say. I think when I returned, my work slowly grew into something a little bit different to what it was then. It was more focused on commentary of a social sort of nature.

FLC: *Hide and Seek*? Do you recall the artwork?

NC: I know the name, but I can't remember.

FLC: Let me look up the image. You can perhaps speak to *Speaker of the House* for now.

NC: I'd done a series of these little figures, the same as *Speaker of the House* but it's much smaller. Little guys sitting on chairs, [depicting] different themes from religion, to businessmen and to gangsters [referring to *The Saint, Chairman, Serenade* (1987), and *Last Rites* (1991)]. There's always been a bit of that in my work, that gangster side of it which is still there because some of these politicians are gangsters anyway. But the speaker; that definitely evolved out of my interest in Mexican art and traditional African art, as well as roadside art or craft. So you know, I've mixed craft. I love the patterns in beadwork, and especially Ndebele beadwork. Even in the sort of look of my characters that I've evolved, they are painted like a pattern. And to me, whether they're animal patterns or they're geometric, the patterning has influenced the way I paint, or the colours used like our traditional craft. The other side of it is the satirical side, that kind of cartoon side of my work or even the Keith Haring side, those sculptures and that kind of activity. Well, I mean the subtlety I suppose in that, there may not be lots of depth in it but it's a momentary message, if that's what it is. And I thought about it and the characters in my sculptures, like *Speaker of the House*, are neither black nor white. Those were also done at the time of angst and rage, in a cartoon way. That was leading up to all the shit we had here with the AWB before everything changed, but it was quite tense so the speaker was like this crazed mixture of things - half animal, half human. I wasn't trying to realistically show a big right-wing guy, it was more cartoon-like, I think.

FLC: Okay. The other work is *Hide and Seek*. I found a photograph of it. It was donated to us by John Monat, in 2008. I don't know if you know him?

NC: No.

FLC: Do you recall it?

NC: Yes. I do recall it was a drawing on paper. Well work like this, especially *Hide and Seek*, I mean, shows my interest in primitive arts. I think I started breaking down works into small pieces. I mean, perhaps also influenced by people like Keith Haring. I think works like this might have been done in the States, or after it. But I did a lot of drawings of this kind of nature, where the key theory might have influenced me. There's also a German artist called A.R. Penck, who I like. If you look at his work, you'll see the connection... Penck was before Keith Haring, but I liked it because it was also similar to Haring.

FLC: So, I mentioned to you [discussion prior to interview] why I asked the question relating to the metaphor of a tree in *Apocalypse* and then within the context of the Constitutional Court being depicted as a tree. And then you also mentioned that you do a bit of gardening and you have depicted trees in your work. So, I wanted to hear about your thoughts about what the symbolism of the tree represents to you. Is there one symbolism or does it go wider than that?

NC: It's just a tree.

FLC: Especially in your work? [Pause]. You don't need to have an answer.

NC: I'm trying to think. [Laughs].

FLC: How many trees have you done in your work? Because you said you've done two, but...

NC: I've done very few trees. I mean, that was pretty much it of trees until I started getting into real trees [laughs]. But I mean, aside from the whole environmental thing which is important to me; I would rather live in a little hut next to a tree than live in a big house without a tree. So, a tree, I mean, it's a sculpture, firstly. The more I've grown I've got all these trees now, growing everywhere, and I spend a lot of time in the Eastern Cape where there are mostly indigenous trees. And they change all the time. Some of them die. I've planted certain trees from seeds and watched them grow. Ones you can't normally buy from like Queenstown, there's one that's like a coral tree, but it's a small one. And it has beautiful flowers, but it's from Queenstown. I forget the names now, but I'm constantly growing, doing a lot of that. Most of my time, other than doing my work, is spent with plants. But, unfortunately down in the Eastern Cape, not so much here. Because that's where I'm from, and maybe that's why I have more of an affinity with the environment down there, because that's where I grew up. Yeah, I don't really know what much else to say about trees.

FLC: All good. What inspired the title of your three artworks? I think you've already spoken to *Speaker of the House*, *Hide and Seek*, and *Apocalypse*. Then the next question is: "Why is it important for you to employ political satire in your work? Like commenting on South African politics. How has your approach changed from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa?"

NC: Okay. How's it changed? I think my work definitely became less political, since the change. I mean, I'm interested in world politics, anyway and so I'm kind of a news freak, in terms of watching international news. And so, my work has become much more widespread as far as the satire is concerned. I'm hardly doing anything that relates, as much, to a specific person, or party, or something in South Africa, as it's to do with my disgust with people like Donald Trump [laughs]. So, I think my work's much broader. It's generally to do with the kind of commercial-business-world type of characters and gangsters still, and the politics comes into it only if it's to do with gangsterism, and it's a broad

thing, not to do with any particular person or party, but more of a satire about people, internationally. Generally how they think these days, which is getting a lot less thoughtful. I mean, the conspiracies nowadays about things that you would think people would be better educated about. We are, but people are sort of more superstitious. So, my work's generally about how silly we are [laughs].

FLC: There are some exceptions, like the three Gupta brothers [*Brotherhood of the Shadow State* (2017)].

NC: Oh, yes. But it could apply to another country too, that image. But I'd say that what's happened to this country is quite tragic. And so that was one theme I did where I'd just been looking at the old work *There's a Storm on the Bosses farm* (1979), and the kind of gangster-ish side of it. I reworked that kind of look to now be a different thing altogether and it's a much broader thing, but that is specific to South Africa, the Shadow State. And, you know, so as far as politics, I certainly do watch that all the time. I'm very stuck on keeping up, or trying to, with things that are happening here. I'm just not illustrating them, like I used to. But generally, I think my work's not stuck to South African politics as such anymore. You know, I'm not stuck to anything, in fact. As far as my work and where it's going, I wouldn't know [laughs]. If I can do it and still enjoy myself, then that's more the thing, because I'm not trying to make any particular statements... at the moment, as such. I mean, I'm not saying I won't. I think it's about the mental health of the world [laughs] or my own. There are so many big issues now that it's hard to focus. I wouldn't be able to focus so much on just one thing.

FLC: How has the transition into a democratic South Africa influenced your work stylistically?

NC: [Pause].

FLC: Did it?

NC: I don't think it did [pause]. Stylistically, I mean, that's evolved all the time. It's changed my style, in a way. It's evolved. It goes both this way, and that way, and the other way. I try to create work that I think is a bit more positive; I try not to be negative in my work. Although my work seems to have both sides. It's tongue-in-cheek, some of the work, so I show the dark and the satirical side. Even in the earlier times like in the early 80s, my work was never really just dark. Never really tried to do blood, guts, and gore. It's been more stylistic, in a way, and it's all realistic. I don't know, you can look at it both ways. And then I've never really had one way of looking at things [laughs]. But I'd say my work's generally more fun. I like to just enjoy myself on it, now and then.

ND: I think that's really interesting, because I'm taken back to your reference of the Mexican Day of the Dead, and how that's sort of this light celebration of the dead, basically.

NC: Yeah.

ND: Day of the Dead is—

NC: A celebration of death.

ND: Yeah, a celebration of death. So, I find that quite potent and how that sort of moves into how you speak about democratic South Africa, like the influence that it's had on your work views.

NC: I think it did. It's funny, my Los Angeles friends that we were staying with, they thought this was horrible stuff, Mexican folk art and they live there and know Mexico. Whereas I saw the humour in it and, I mean, when they do the celebrations it's done as a party, it's a celebration. And the horror was just because you show skulls or skeletons, whereas people are more familiar with skulls and that now because Damien Hirst and others made it popular. Yeah, I think that did have quite an influence on my work, because it's kind of a fantasy, those celebrations, it's just fun. And I think they did take away the sense of going into the dark side. You know, if you look at Diane Victor's work compared to mine, she remains in a dark place and it's good, but I don't want to just dwell there.

FLC: Would you tell us the story of how, when and why *Speaker of the House* was donated to the Constitutional Court?

NC: Well, [pause]. What's his name?

FLC: Albie Sachs.

NC: Albie! I'd met him through a friend of ours, actually the one we stayed with in New York. I met him through her and that was when he was starting the collection, and he asked "Have you got anything to donate?" and I actually didn't know. That work had been done for a show in Pretoria and being a big piece, I actually didn't know what I was going to do with it afterwards because it didn't fit in here and it's meant for the indoors. And I just thought that would be a nice piece because of the theme of it. I hadn't done it to suit the Constitutional Court but it happened to be, I thought, the right subject matter for Albie and the court.

FLC: I think it got a good home. We've got a big enough building.

NC: Yes. I mean, look, it's kind of a wild, cartoon-looking thing. You know, it's not as serious compared to other art, but it expresses something. I've never seen my work as being sophisticated in the way one should look at it. I'm a more spontaneous person with my work in that way. In formulating something, I usually am more spontaneous. And then I might, for whatever reason, start thinking about a work once I'm doing it, but I like things to happen [that way], and whether it's from an influence or whether it's formulated before I start a work, it just happens. It might just happen in a drawing first, and then I'll just

make the thing as a sculpture, and it'll evolve. And that's how my work sort of just evolved. I never set out to create a particular thing. Which is good and bad, but I mean, it's just the way I work.

FLC: It's your process. So I've got a question here that I think you already answered. The *Hide and Seek* work, which I showed you on my phone, was donated to us in 2008 by John Monat. I wanted to ask if you were aware of him donating.

NC: No, I have a feeling he bought it from Natalie Knight. Because I remember the work well, and I know she bought a couple of those, years back.

FLC: Thank you. It's a good cue for us to go do more research.

NC: I'll even check. We might have a record of her, if I sold it to her. I mean, I do like that work, I'll tell you why, and I know it well because I made a big carpet of it. It's at another place on the floor, but it's based on that. Obviously I like that work, that's why I did the carpet of it. And I'm trying to think why I did like it and what it actually means.

FLC: *Hide and Seek*, where do you think the title comes from?

NC: Well, it might sound absurd to you, but I only thought of it right now. There is a movie that I've seen called *Hide and Seek*. I've seen it but I don't know if I've watched it. But funny enough, when I was in Los Angeles in the late 80s, Warner Brothers were interested in an animated thing we'd designed. So I'd spent some time there and they wanted us to write a short thing for it. I mean, we didn't go around trying to sell it, but it just happened that they saw this thing and I was drawn into it, and we had to write the idea for this story. I actually called it *Hide and Seek*. The movie started with somebody in a room, something happened and he was throwing things out of the window. Anyway, that's where that title came from. It was an idea about hiding, being sought out or pursued and being persecuted. And, I mean, I've also run away from the cops [laughs]. I got away, luckily [laughs]. And that's why I called it that, obviously because that name was still in my head from having written a small script called *Hide and Seek*. And, just the feeling about it, I suppose, the one figure chasing another and all the little things in it, was what made me create the artwork.

FLC: And there's a lot in that to relate back to apartheid, especially.

NC: Yes.

FLC: And to our context. Could you tell us why you offered *Apocalypse* for donation to the Constitutional Court Trust?

NC: Well, I thought that, basically, it was what the Constitution stands for. I didn't know the tree was a symbol. I mean, I should have looked but I didn't realise that. I thought that series of works from that period would be nice for the collection, in that it was kind of at a strange time where nothing was really happening, but there was a lot about to happen. There was a lot of fear, angst and, you know, a lot of people left the country after '76 and moved to The States. I think of my references to South Africa, those were the works that were kind of strong and very simple.

FLC: I remember Karel Nel was full of praise for *Apocalypse*. He specifically said it's a very powerful work.

NC: Yeah, I mean, I like the work and I think it's one of our best of that series. That and I think the boss and the flags. I think in a way those three are my favourites of that whole series that I did.

FLC: I also wanted to ask you about *Brotherhood of the Shadow State*, which you also offered for donation. It was also in that batch. You would have seen the decision of the Committee.

NC: Yes...

FLC: What do you think about that? How do you feel about the decision?

NC: The decision? [Pause]. Actually, that's quite interesting, I think, [laughs]. Decision. I hadn't thought of it that way. But then I understood the reasoning for that.

FLC: Yeah, we're not a museum, we're a court. So, there is a consideration.

NC: Yes. I thought it would be ideal because of what's happening, but then—

FLC: It might still be, just not now.

NC: Yes, I'd be happy to give it, whenever. I think it would be a nice piece, because that's what's been happening, and that's all I've really said myself about things that have been going on in the last few years. I haven't been doing other kinds of work that relate to it (inaudible). I think it's a very simple work too. The mood of it and just, without knowing what it is, it has a presence. And, although it kind of looks like early work of mine, it has changed. I mean I've done a lot on Photoshop, so it evolved out of playing around with the early work. For me, there's kind of a link from then to now. And it's different from that one. I mean, if you look at the two together, there are differences. And for me, this whole saga is one of the biggest things that I'm listening to in terms of what's going on in this country.

FLC: The Zondo Commission.

NC: Ja. So, I wish it could be used more [laughs]. I wish it could be a nice big poster.

FLC: Leads me to my next question. As someone whose work is influenced by political narratives, how do you see art as being connected to justice or human rights in South Africa, or more universally? It's a big part of what our collection explores; the intersection between art and justice.

NC: I fit into that accidentally, because I wasn't working alongside anybody, but just in making work, then I sort of linked with people, like Paul Stopforth, or people who were making political statements then. But that was accidental, I wasn't at university or following what people were doing. I think it's incredibly important, if artists can say something.

FLC: How important do you think art was to bring down the apartheid system? I'm thinking specifically about those works that Keith Haring did about apartheid. And that I think, internationally, was cause for a lot of pressure on the South African government. (Inaudible) did it?

NC: I don't know. I mean, there was another artist then named Sue Coe, I've got a book of her work on South Africa as well. She's a well-known person, but she did a lot on South Africa, and seeing that in New York also spurred me on, I think. Because when I got to New York in about 1983-4, I went back and forth and I saw her work at a gallery, it was called P.P.O.W Gallery, in New York. People had said, "well, you won't get a show, nobody will take you on". And, I knew some South Africans there, at that stage, ex South Africans. It was impossible to get anything, you know, let alone being unknown. That's one thing, but being South African was another, as well. But I did happen to get into Small Gallery, by accident, and they liked what I was doing. I did a small show there in the East Village. It was also where Sue Coe's gallery exhibition was and I think, seeing that at that time kind of gave me, maybe, some sort of push. In that somebody over there, whose work I admired, was about South Africa, where most people didn't care or know South Africa, where it is. Her work was very violent looking but strong, and that did also jolt me and I think it is important. I mean, it certainly jolted me into suddenly, sort of, seeing with my imagination. I remember the Keith Haring's, yeah I didn't see the South African ones so much, but her, Sue Coe. I'd actually be interested in seeing that book, sometime. I'll find it for you.

FLC: You had a book of her work?

NC: Yes. And that would have been in 1984, around there. I think there was a kind of strong link, even if they weren't working together, between South African artists doing work of that nature, at that time. There was some kind of link, now everything is just (inaudible). But then, I think, there was a strong feeling of what was going on and doing good work or interesting work.

FLC: Did you ever come across Feni while you were in New York?

NC: Yes, Feni, but not while I was there, I knew of his work here in South Africa. There were one or two people I'd met that had left, a few artists. Claude van Lingen also taught here and he was there in the States, and so I knew a few South Africans. So, in a way that period was more political. There was no escape, even being a South African in America. As I said, most people didn't care. They didn't know where South Africa was, but a lot of people did, as well. Generally, people are great, I must say but there were times when people made you feel unwanted there or they were suspicious of you, which is quite understandable.

FLC: I think that also helps in raising one's consciousness. You know that what's happening in South Africa isn't normal.

NC: Yes, I mean, I'm at a friend's apartment, for instance because she was connected to a lot of ANC people. I remember when one of them was really nervous about coming there, just because I was there, and I could be a spy. So, that whole thing was much more dramatised, being there, because you know when you're not in Soweto. It's a lot different, and from afar you can often see things more clearly. I think all those things just helped me focus on different things in my vocabulary, that I felt I could probably do something with.

FLC: Yes. Adding to that, how do you explore your positionality as a white, South African male in your practice?

NC: How do I explore it? My position?

FLC: Yes.

NC: As a white male? [laughs] What do you mean? How would I explore it?

FLC: Neo wrote the question.

NC: Oh, like, give me some clues.

ND: I mean, is it through responding to this idea of speaking to politics, perhaps? Is it consciously done? I think it's more of a consciousness of your positionality as a white man responding to these political dialogues.

NC: Yes...[pause].

ND: Consciously and unconsciously, also, I think...

FLC: You just spoke about what happened in New York and how you became conscious about what was happening in South Africa, and you reacted through your art.

NC: Now, though, you're sort of saying for now, how I would see myself, or think about it now. Well look, then I was much more aware of everything by being there, as I say, than by being here. And, I had a direction of something. Even in my own way of doing it, and it was quite different to everybody else who was doing political work. Other than, as you said, being influenced by Keith Haring, or that. [Pause]. I must say, I'm a little bit uncertain of my feelings about it, you know, just generally. I mean, at my age I'm quite well known, and I quite honestly prefer to be out of the spotlight, altogether. I mean, not altogether, but I'm not one for the spotlight. I was a little bit younger and naive then and it was great to do all this and that. I think then it was a lot easier to be an artist than it is now, it was easier to survive. Maybe because you only needed a hundred rand a month to survive back then, not because of any other reasons. There were less collectors, less opportunities; I suppose it's all relative.

FLC: I think your answer of saying that there's uncertainty, is also a good answer. It's in flux.

NC: Not just because of that, but because of everything in the world, now. Let's talk about the 80s, or those times. America's changed too, a lot. So those times, the early 80s and that, things were a lot different in America compared to what they are now. The whole world's changed, and with COVID and all that, everything is uncertain. What is worth doing, now, as an artist? Do you know what I mean? You're just carrying on and churning out stuff because it sells, or because you can, or you've got shows booked up all over the world. It's a touring thing, like being a musician, you go on tour. [Pause] I would still like to do things that are meaningful to people, but also meaningful to me, even if it's not a deep meaningful thing; it has some value in that it makes other people feel good. Or they enjoy it. I think a lot of people enjoy my work more than I do [laughs]. And it's a struggle, for me anyway. I think in art too, maybe it's because I'm not part of a young group anymore, but things are spread out all over the place. There's no sort of core within the arts in South Africa that I'm a part of, unfortunately, but I'm sure there are younger artists that are doing things together, to say something together. But it's such a capitalistic world. I don't know how things like that work that easily, anymore. I don't think people are even interested in political art anymore. Collectors maybe, because of the value of it. But the general public? I'm not saying some of the world is not interested in deeper meaning and feelings [laughs]. I think, if anything, the deep meanings have probably shifted.

ND: I don't think our core focus is really around direct political narratives. I think the idea of politics has really spread out into other ventures, you know; politics around the body, politics of belonging, politics of displacement. It's like you were saying, things have really opened up with our generation of younger artists, I guess.

NC: Yeah. [Pause]. You know, you've caught me at a time where I haven't thought of things like that, much [laughs]. Or at all [laughs].

FLC: How do you feel about having your art form part of the Constitutional Court Art Collection today?

NC: Oh, well, I'm very happy, I mean, I feel privileged to at least have that sculpture up there and a piece. Because I think the Constitution and the court are incredibly important. To me, to have work in a place like that, is... Especially my work. The tree I can understand, but *Speaker of the House*, it's so wacky, and for me it's great to have that piece there.

FLC: It's an iconic work, and people love it.

NC: And it's also for younger people. Even if you're not art educated, I think, my work can appeal to people who don't have any art education. The same as, I think, Keith Haring's work and some of Battiss's work.

FLC: Are you mindful of conservation when making art?

NC: I am more mindful now [laughs], after having fixed that one [laughs, refers to *Speaker of the House*]. But, when I look at a lot of other [works] like the experimental stuff, it's still something that if it's looked after, it will last. Look, if somebody's gonna spend a lot of money, they'd be pissed if it falls apart [laughs]. I am mindful of that but back then I didn't really know too much [about conservation]. And because road-side art wasn't made to last forever, either [laughs]. Stuff will last, it could be in any medium. Anyway, it's done in a way that somebody else could come and clean it up even if I wasn't there. It's simple enough that somebody else could do it.

FLC: They couldn't paint it like you did, so I'm glad you got to work on it.

NC: Just as well I did fix it up myself. Somebody else wouldn't have known how to. I could just do it. Look, it is important but in the end, it's only money and it could be looked after if it was in a giant box, but it cost a fortune [laughs]. No, I didn't actually think too much, then. I was too much in the field, especially when I did those. I was just making things and as long as they could hold together for a while, that was all that I worried about then. I do, obviously, think that if you're going to sell work for lots of money, then it should last a reasonable amount of time.

FLC: Do you have specific recommendations for the conservation of your works that we have? It's a standard question we ask artists, to kind of get their advice, but I think you've already given a lot of that information to Thina [Miya].

NC: Yes, I have. On *Speaker of the House*.

FLC: I think we do have that on record.

NC: Yeah.

FLC: Do you have any recommendations on the presentation of these three artworks that we have?

NC: No, I mean, the sculpture [in the public gallery], looks like from the photographs, to be in the right place. I don't know if there are other places that it could go. *Apocalypse* is sort of a lonely work, but it's something brewing. It's kind of a lonely thing, that tree, on its own.

FLC: I think it's in a good spot.

NC: It looks like it, from the photographs. I'm happy with it there. Well, I think the tree, it would be nice to kind of have it on its own. If it's just a spot that's not right next to something. It almost needs to be in a little spot where it's dark.

FLC: There's a spot that I think could work for it. I'll mention it to Thina.

NC: Yeah. Funny enough, spending time in The States, made me more attuned to what I liked in South Africa, and what I liked in art, too. To the extent that I thought, "no, I'd rather stay here, live here". Because I thought maybe by being here, you're not going to have the exposure that you would if you lived there, or that you could [sic]. Obviously there's more competition there too, they have a huge market and... so it's weird. I actually felt the work, and the art that I enjoyed, like Battiss, Skotnes, the African art, and the traditional art, Mexican art and people like Haring and Basquiat, kind of mixed with what I enjoyed of this country. Yeah, not just specific artists but street art or road art [pause].

FLC: Yes. Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to be recorded as part of this interview?

NC: [Pause] No, I don't think so.

FLC: Thank you for your time, we appreciate it.