

CCAC Interview with Eugene Hön on 20/08/2020 at UJ FADA Gallery - edited transcript

Last updated: 28 April 2021

Project Name: HönEugene

Date of interview: 20/08/2020

Location of interview: UJ FADA Gallery

Language/s of interview: English with Afrikaans

Length of interview: 51:34

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

Interviewee name (and acronym): Eugene Hön (EH)

Name of translator, if applicable: N/a

Name of transcriber: Charles Mamorobela (CM), Francois Lion-Cachet

Notes on access and use, if applicable: The interviewee edited the transcript following the interview, and added footnotes and information in brackets to elaborate on select points.

Mode of interview: In person

Number of recordings: One

Audio file name(s) of interview: CCAC_Int_AUD_HonEugene_20200820

List of acronyms:

CM: Charles Mamorobela

FADA: Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture

UJ: University of Johannesburg

TM: Thina Miya

TWR: Technikon Witwatersrand

START OF AUDIO RECORDING: 00:01:22

FLC: So the first question, please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an artist?

EH: Okay so, I was born and grew up in Parow which is a town in the Cape. *Herstigte Nasionale Party wêreld* [Reconstituted National Party world]. I went to an Afrikaans school, because the neighbours and everybody were Afrikaans, even though we spoke English at home, and by the time I had to go to school I couldn't speak English or Afrikaans properly, because my family, my parents are very, hmmm... My mother's got standard six, my dad's got standard eight, so they're not seriously academic, if you know what I'm saying. So all my mates were Afrikaans. I therefore spoke this sort of bilingual

language talking about “jersey” and “garage”, which was totally unacceptable.¹ But I went to an Anglican church. So I was never really accepted, because our church service was at eight o'clock in the morning, and by nine o'clock I'm home, and then everybody else goes to the *Afrikaanse Kerk* [Afrikaans church] that starts at about 11 o'clock and I'm sitting around on the local *parkie*. A heathen! Does that make sense? And you know, I would have liked to change schools... be part of that cultural make up. And, I was quite an aloof person as a kid. I quickly didn't fit into my family's lifestyle. I don't know, maybe it comes from my granny and them. But I grew up in Parow and my family was quite poor. However my parents invested everything in us and our education.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:03:02

My mother never bought any jewellery, she never bought extravagant things for the home either, however they paid for all our education right through university. My middle brother studied to be a *veearts* [veterinarian]. He failed twice and my parents continued to pay for everything. That's quite extraordinary, and then they cooked and baked all our own food. They never bought bread, they never bought jam, they made jams, they made biscuits, they made everything— I had to wear my brother's clothes and my granny was like living with us, and she had this *laatlammetjie* [literal “late lamb”, late child]. So we were like living all together in this..., one of those railway type houses. Does it give you an idea? I didn't like it at all. I lived another life. I didn't fit in. I ran away twice from home, I was about four. And then also again at five or something like that, and my dad *moered* [hit] me, or my mother actually. And you know what, I never stayed at our house. I always went to neighbours' houses that were prettier. I don't know, there's something funny about me [laughter]. Enough information about me. But anyway, the fact that I was Afrikaans and English, and remember if you go to an Anglican church all your friends are in a English school and they could have their hair long and we had to cut ours short back and sides. And these cultural differences were shaping my character— I did not fit in, because I went to an Anglican church and an Afrikaans school. I didn't like khaki at all, you know in the Afrikaans schools *jy moet khaki dra* [you must wear khaki]. I refused. So there's this photograph of our class of me sitting with my white shirt, tie and grey shorts... In grade two, no it was grade [thinking to self: *dis sub-A, sub-B, standard een, twee, twee of drie. Ek kan nie meer onthou nie.*] And I'm walking around in my whites— [laughs], whilst the whole school wore khaki, How did I get away with it? Today I think back and I, anyway enough about that.

FLC: You told us about where you grew up, but not how you became an artist.

EH: Okay, so, I was always, as I said, drawn to things visual. You know, in the old days, you used to have those felt boards that they used to tell you Bible stories. In school, it's like a felt board and then they stick on the characters as they tell the story. Ja, and I was quite attracted to these drawings on that, and... always like, sort of artistically inclined. So I started to draw really, from a very, very, very young age and I did everything artistic.² You know? That was possible. And then I started failing subjects — I couldn't focus on learning. I was drawn to images and everything visual and I was impossible to keep still. Like really impossible. So I didn't, couldn't read anything, it was too boring. So I was very

¹ Afrikaner Nationalism was strictly enforced in government schools with the support of the Dutch Reformed Church. Not belonging to the church alienated one from the local community. This had an enormous impact on my development and eventually my worldview, including study preferences, enrolling at Michaelis to study Fine Art (UCT), rather than Stellenbosch University.

² Everything crafty and or arty, from Macramé to Ikebana Flower arrangements.

inquisitive, especially whilst on annual train and car trips to Zimbabwe, Rhodesia then, the changing landscape and cultures observed from the moving train and places of interest intrigued me. My family and teachers realised in standard seven, that something seriously needed to happen with my poor academic performance. So in standard eight, they said to me I must go to an art school,³ because I was already failing a number of subjects, like, three quarters of my subjects. And then, when I went from standard nine to ten they asked me to choose another art subject. I failed all three terms in matric, however, to everyone's surprise I passed my finals. And I got, ja, varsity entrance. Even though I failed maths. I got 14 percent for maths, because I didn't even go to math classes during matric. What's the point when you're getting 10 percent or something? I wasn't interested! But you know how the school system works. If you can't do standard six maths, they still put you through to standard seven, but they don't put you in standard six to do the six maths again. So, if you— there's no point in catching up. So by the time I got to matric ja, so luckily I got— If you have to see my matric certificate you will have a... you'll faint. I'm sure the university would— I've never produced it!
 [Laughs]

FLC: What school was this?

EH: Tygerberg High School in Parow. So eventually I got to university and then things just changed for me. I mean, I just couldn't believe that I could paint and draw every moment of every day, which was already by then— I was drawing a lot, and as my family was very involved in the church we used to do a lot of things for the church, you know like creative stuff.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:07:29

We had a theatre society, my dad was church warden, so he showed films and all my creative inspiration came from being exposed to these activities. Being the Anglican church with its religious ceremonies, especially at Easter, I had to carve the Passover candle... You know, it's *mos* [slang to emphasise the following word or term] ritualistic... And that kind of styling in the church is quite rigid, that is very different to an *Afrikaanse kerk*, because you don't... *jy't net die preekstoel* [you only have the pulpit], you don't go through all the other drama. And all the vestiture that we as altar boys and members of the choir wore... My mother and them were very involved. So, you know, all those things played a big role – that narratives that get transferred, and you know, it's like you would be exposed to your traditional cultural heritage and with it these illustrations and— I enjoyed the storytelling, because that was the only time that stories were told with supporting visuals. History was always presented boringly at school, read out of a book, *jy weet, Garibaldi se Rooi Hemde of wat hulle ook al was...* [you know, Garibaldi's Red Shirts or whatever they were]. So they stand there in class telling you these things. I mean, how boring. However if there was a movie... So I think, to be honest, I think that laid the foundation for my interest in films and my creativity.

When I was about 15 my... I lost my two best friends and then I became quite introvertish. I threw myself into doing art at the Tygerberg Art Centre, attending classes every afternoon and it was there that I met a very nice art teacher, Riana du Preeze, and she encouraged me to do another art subject - she introduced me to textile design. That sparked my interest in decoration and surface development.

³ I did a series of ink pen landscape drawings that was circulated in school to my teachers and one of them recommended that I enroll at the Tygerberg Art Centre. The facility recently opened its doors in service to the surrounding schools. I could then start the following year with formal art classes.

And we became very close, I visited her in Stellenbosch and so on and so. You know, the fact that I could go to art school from two o'clock to six o'clock at night also gave me the freedom to escape from all other classes like PT, maths and everything. Does it make sense? So I put a lot of effort into those two years when I was doing art and I therefore did exceptionally well in my portfolio to gain entry to study at Michaelis (UCT). I think they took a risk somehow, to just let me in, because I did not do well in my academic subjects. If that makes sense. And then when I got to university, I mean, I just couldn't believe it. I mean, how can you... you can draw every day, every minute. I was like obsessive. It was like, you know, it was like a total release of everything that you hated like sitting in class: you had to "shut up!" You're were not allowed to say a word, you know. Afrikaans schools were quite tough. It's not like... you see schools today where kids are noisy and I couldn't keep me quiet. So I always used to sit in front of the class. So, the art was a way of escapism. Does that make sense? Because then you become focused. So I think, in between that, somehow the fact that you can keep yourself busy, and it's visual, and it's— It also gave you a sense of confidence. You know what I mean, in your own ability. To explore and to render is something quite beautiful. And Michaelis was quite free, they let you be — not like Wits where they— they were quite rigid in their approach. They stood over you a lot.

FLC: Did you go to both?

EH: No, but I had quite a few friends that studied there and... I was friends with Alan Crump.⁴ We went for drinks every Thursday at Wits Club, when I was a lecturer here at the TWR Ceramic Department. So I got to understand the way they teach. They just taught very differently. Even nowadays, if you go to Michaelis... I don't know. That's the feeling I get. You're sort of left on your own, and they encourage self-exploration a lot more. I think the history of art programme is much more jacked up now, I would never have passed now... if I have to go there now [nervous laughing]. Over the years I started reading a lot more,⁵ I mean, I had to, I didn't have a choice. So I tried to catch up, and I mean that freedom to— Firstly, I did graphic design projects and the visual art projects at the same time. And I mean, that, just that idea that you're now doing it and people are critting it and evaluating your work... It just was another world, I mean. I would have done well in this Montessori school I think, you know like where you can get... where that visual connection with text made more sense, because once— it's like movies where the narrative and the— that always inspired me. You know, where you look at *Querelle* [by Rainer Werner Fassbinder] and those kinds of movies where the director is so obsessive with symbolism and its... through the cinematography that you kind of understand how narcissistic he is in getting his message across. Even the sandblasted windows and things are all part of the iconography, in the costume, in the— Those things always fascinated me. You know, that whole package.⁶

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:12:13

⁴ I met Alan Crump in my first year of lecturing at the Technikon Witwatersrand in 1986 (merged with RAU to become the University of Johannesburg). One of my students, Sue Sellschop, her husband was Prof Friedel Sellschop, a Deputy Vice Chancellor at WITS (Research). Through her we used to gain access to the Wits Club, to meet up regularly for Thursday drinks, to discuss art, craft and design, mostly with Peter Schutzch to be honest. I eventually served with Alan Crump and Karel Nel on the Johannesburg Art Gallery Committee.

⁵ As a lecturer I had to read a lot more to be able to mentor students in Ceramic Sculpture and as my concepts developed, so did my hunger for knowledge in a range of subject matter, especially the history of ceramics including african myths and narratives.

⁶ The Labia movie theatre was right opposite Michaelis and a wide range of art films were available to view under strict censorship regulations (number of screenings). The narratives and cinematography influenced my work enormously.

Which enticed me and kind of laid the foundation for the conceptual development of my work. Ceramics is all about ornament and ornamentation and decoration. Form and surface development. So, when I got there, I was very excited.

FLC: Thank you.

EH: It's a whole package of creativity⁷ in one thing, just to get through everything. [Shouting:] “Just short! Cut me short! Stop it now! Stop talking!”

FLC: Next question. Can you tell us more about the creative process of making *Exquisite Slave*, *Popsy*, *Popsie*? The sculpture is characterised by great detail, how long does it take to create a sculpture like this?

EH: Well, first and foremost, this is the file that gave rise to [points to red lever arch file]— so if you think I didn't read... [refers to content in the file]. And these were the visual influences [showing his sketchbook] and then this is the entire document I read to create the work... And this is a study done on South African prisons. They interviewed prisoners, they talked about the old problem around sexuality in prisons, “*daai ding*” [that thing], and it even starts off with it... Somewhere here it talks about sex in prison, you know, the whole context for the work... relationships in prison, especially the defending of their masculinity, what it means... and the 28's, the dominant prison gang, were very violent towards fellow inmates, if you refuse to do “*daai ding*”, because I mean, people got into prisons for white collar crime, rather than more serious crimes such as child abuse, the rape of a woman, and or murder or— And then they were subjected to sexual abuse in prison—Inmates had to assault a prison warden and or fellow inmate, they had to stab somebody in the neck, but not kill them, as an act to defend their masculinity. If not, they had to befriend somebody, this is done subtly, where a fellow inmate takes possession of that person to provide them with protection, otherwise the 28's would come along and gang rape you. And I got quite taken by some of the interviews and what happens to a prisoner when they surrender themselves to be somebody's *wyfie* [wifey]. How does that change their character / lives— especially when they are released after two, three, four, five years. How do they relate to their family, especially their wives and children? A woman from America left a comment on my blog, she said that you know, it's quite interesting, that it's happening here in America and it happens in all prisons. It's not just, you know what I mean? How does it affect people's lives? And sometimes inmates on their release go out and look for the people that raped them or did this, *daai ding*, and they take action against those perpetrators, for some people that were really, like brutally treated. And you can't just go to another prison, it's almost as if, say, you ask for transfer because you've been victimised, then that memory of it moves with you and the stigma of, or whatever, so you can't escape it almost.

And all the reference material or the... vocabulary of what it... how these things are read and interpreted is sort of captured in some of these interviews, and so on. I found this document by chance, it's not like I went online to a prison service. I just googled the right words. I was doing a blog post once a week, and I was looking at all kinds of topics. This sculpture formed part of a whole series on homosexuality. What happened is I discovered the origin of my name, Eugene and its association

⁷ Suzette Munnik, the head of Ceramic Department at the time, taught ceramic History and was adverse with the use of the words non-functional and functional, in defining Art and functional ware. She introduced me, and the students to the diverse range of functions a product could have, a utilitarian, decorative, expressive and ornamental function, including a ritual function and in some artefacts all of the above.

with eugenics, which in Greek means well-born. But then, you know, I mean how this finds you, you know? Especially when I discovered but you're not so well born, you know, you *mos* now gay and you have to go and tell your parents and, and that's where the study started.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:16:33.

So I did one on the derogatory gay slang word 'pansy', which looks — and I found a significant piece of writing, a description of pansy flowers referring to nurserymen.⁸ They favour the pansy for its multi-colourism, it's a whole thing. So I made a sculpture of that. I also looked at how the Roman Catholic church and Protestants conducted sodomy trials and sentenced gays to be strangled to death in public. There was an edict,⁹ if you got caught— because you... defiled your own masculinity. You became part of the third sex like a woman, because remember women were categorised and treated the same as slaves (men's possessions), and all that shit [laughs nervously]. So, it really— I needed to analyse this and deal with it in my own life, being a Christian (born again). You can't be an artist and sculptor and not at some point kind of investigate what it means— those days. Remember, we lived in South Africa where it was also taboo and... it's different now. It's not necessarily easy to come out, even today. But those kinds of issues matter. So it wasn't just a study into creating that sculpture for issues around masculinity in prisons, it was also dealing with the religious aspects for months. I was responding to the Roman Catholic Church dealing with issues of sexuality (paedophilia and homosexuality), posting things on my blog, how the university accepted that I don't know. But what was interesting for me is that I wasn't Anglican any more, and the Catholics and Anglicans are very quite similar. They wouldn't accept homosexuals into the community, these are things that are posted on my blog, and they would excommunicate gays, they wouldn't give them communion. But their own priests that were paedophiles were allowed to serve communion, and I used to write to the Pope and it caused quite a stir on the blog internationally. I was getting like quite a few responses, because I understood that, do you know what I mean? And remember, my parents are very religious, my whole family, my brother was a deacon in the Anglican church. So I had to deal with those issues— Luckily the Anglican church became quite liberated with Tutu being the bishop, and so on, but even then, the Anglican Church when bishop Tutu left became even more conservative and there were a few priests that came out— But, you know, they accept it but they don't accept it. It's not like they entertain it in a way that makes you feel welcome and part of the community, you know. So this piece fits into that study of looking. I also did one work titled *Government Inspected Meat*,¹⁰ a term applied to gay American servicemen— You could be gay and serve in the American army and go to war for America, but you weren't allowed to come out in your sexuality or weren't allowed to talk about it. So it's a don't ask don't tell policy. So I did a sculpture on that as well. Man in camouflage, in a little copper lustred pants, and decorated with forget-me-nots on and I looked at a whole lot of related

⁸ Pansy, Trimardeau or Giant Pansy. Hardy. Entirely distinct and beautiful race, with flowers of the richest and most varied shades of colour. The plants are of a vigorous and compact growth, and the flowers are each marked with three large blotches or spots. They are of fine form and size hitherto unattained in this genus - the largest of the Pansy family. Pansies are a great specialty with some colonial nurserymen, and very fine varieties can be obtained at reasonable price. The description resonates with rents/ gay adverts - to hook up with their own kind. (GRINDR)

⁹ The sodomy purge of 1730, especially in the Netherlands (Placat posted in every town). 250 men were summoned, 60 men were sentenced to death. In Amsterdam, Pieter Marteyn, Janes Sohn and Johannes Keep, decorator, were strangled and burnt to death.

¹⁰ The title of the work "*Government Inspected Meat*" is gay slang for those men that have successfully qualified to serve in the armed forces despite their sexual orientation. The work therefore calls into question the fact that such individuals qualify to serve their country only when their sexual orientation is closeted (especially in America - with their Don't Ask Don't Tell policy.)

material (especially the work and life of the gay war Poet, Siegfried Sassoon)— And I studied all of those in the same way that I studied these, because I always, you know, because I wasn't very academically inclined at school and I wasn't, I over.... how can I say... I was so scared, my work wasn't going to be substantial enough. Does it make sense? And when you work with symbols and things, and I always use the evocative aspect of literature or text to kind of lay the foundation for the gestalt of the piece, but also in the decoration of it, it almost reinforces the concept behind the work and the process is part of the final statement, like you could see here [refers to works part of his solo exhibition *Manufactured Distractions and Intersections: Digital Ceramic Transferware* (UJ FADA Gallery, August 2020)], the broken thing is part of that narrative, because people's lives are broken now. You can't make work like this, if you didn't get the gist of it, if you don't really delve into understanding of people's circumstances, because otherwise, how can you talk about it? You know, I haven't been to prison. So there had to be some authenticity there in understanding their plight, because if it was not talked about in prison, you know, and people don't want to talk about it when they come out of prison, because then their own situation and environment is going to be challenged. I mean, how would you still respect this person when you know what someone's done to them? So if you move from prison to prison, there's also no escape, so I felt it necessary to sort of highlight these issues, and you know even here and now it is a little bit frowned upon, because a lot of these historical acts of abuse are now forgotten (Sodomy Edict). I mean, abuse of women and homosexuality, at that time wasn't like really topical here, not addressed and or discussed in safe spaces, because we don't, we don't have a serious scholarship program here and I'll say this openly.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:22:17

When I was at university and you were gay people were forcing you to come out. I lived in an environment at Michaelis, you know, they challenged you. If you said you were Christian then they attacked you, you know, they wanted to— you know what I mean? Because it was a real academic, challenging environment you're living in. I almost lived in denial of those things when I was at Michaelis, do you know what I mean, so— It was— and people. I had relationships with people and at some point I felt this work was necessary to, to kind of be honest about my sexuality and also about my past, because you almost lived a lie. You know, it's easy when you're in a heterosexual relationship, people say why don't you just be honest with me, but they don't understand the struggle within you. Especially when you... all my friends are like heterosexual, all my art friends were heterosexual, it's not like, you know what I mean? It was just difficult certain things. So this work is borne out of that whole process of maybe... **my artwork came out, how's that?** You know when you when you deal with the issues and—

FLC: That might be the title for the interview.

EH: But do you know what I mean? Where it was also necessary for me to make this decision (to come out), because I was very influential in the art world. I co-founded and co-managed the Crafts Council of South Africa, I was chairperson of the Ceramic Society Council of South Africa. I was on the Johannesburg biennale committee. I did the publication to promote the Africus Johannesburg 1995 Biennale, the editors of *Revue Noire*, appointed me to coordinate the issue on South Africa. I was also on the Contemporary Art Gallery committee and I don't know how many other ones. I also served on the SA Export Council when I came out, it was therefore quite important that my work manifested it, whether— It was me being honest with those things, and, you know, I just felt making it visible. Because I was dean here as well, remember? So it was really problematic [laughing]. So, you know

what I mean, I wanted to be honest with myself and in this position, and if you do that then the people are more acceptable of you. When I was at varsity I hid these things, so... The work is borne out of a personal experience. Each one of these pieces that I made in this series, is borne out of a serious investigation to make sure that there's authenticity in its symbolism. Is that enough? I mean, you could even get this file. It's not like I'm gonna look at it again. I was also interested in tattoos and one of the first books I read was *Written on the Body* [Jane Caplan (editor)], which is, you know, the whole barbarian thing, that British deny, their own heritage because the British were all tattooed. Tattoos play such an important role in prisons, especially in Russia - as a signifier. So I incorporated the ceramic figure with readymade ceramic transfer decorations; dealing with the surface (in making meaning), does that make sense? I also did a series of slip cast rats that took the theme of homosexuality further, where I made little rats, painted them pink with colour, simulating human skin and then I did tattoo decorations on them (painted and incised). On some of these sculptures I also incorporated tattoos that were forcibly applied to gays in Russian prisons; the one is like a heart with little hairs on and a little anus sign in the middle. So it's kind of a radical image. It's kind of like that *skopo* [in his artwork *Violent Vicissitude 1*], you know what I mean? When you look at it, because it's a beautiful at first and then the symbolism is fully understood— it's almost like a sort of bum, if you know what I mean, referring to sodomy and I was able to use the blue cobalt for the blue ink, and then I added a bit of red— because when you do a tattoo it's also— it bleeds a little bit. So it's that whole thing of you know, the pain of getting the tattoo and the pain of sexual abuse in the prison, and then I did the Catholic ones with the heart, the sacred heart - two standing opposite each other, in a pair.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:25:51

The rats could be animated so they talked to each other and their tails were one in gold and one in silver (lustre) and it looked like points, like a stiletto shoe point. So they're like weapons, in conflict with each other (opposing each other)— and I wanted to put them in churches on the altar [laughing]. Do you know what I'm saying? I think, how are we doing for time? I can tell you, I can go on forever.

FLC: I can ask you the next question so long.

EH: Yes, do that.

FLC: I think there's kind of an overlap with what you already told us, but I'm still going to ask it.

EH: That's fine.

FLC: What was your reason for addressing sexual violence in prisons as the subject matter in this artwork and to which historical and current day themes would you say *Exquisite Slave*, *Popsie*, *Popsy* speaks to?

EH: No, so I think, I wanted to capture the whole spectrum of sexual violence. I looked at the abuse in the church and the prisons, you know what I mean, I highlighted the struggle of gays in the army. I dealt with gay slang word 'pansy' from a bullying perspective, embracing the derogatory words that we are called. It's funny, my school mates called me those things but it never really affected me... it's almost like you're imprisoned in your... yourself. Do you know what I mean? Like you're living this lie and you have to deal with the abuse, and people accuse you of this horrible act. I mean, I was dating a woman in the art world and it was really terrible! It wasn't very nice. I mean, I was dating somebody

and then I realised I could not go on living like this (a lie), I had to make a choice. And there were a number of other women (close friends) who wanted to be in a relationship with me and then I always knew in the back of my mind I don't know how they're going to deal with this other side. Because women are sometimes attracted to sort of gay men, you know, and I'm not your sort of typical gay man, you know, some people still kind of look at me if I really am gay, or whatever, whether I'm living a lie or whatever. It was there and then that I decided to come out, to be honest with myself, my family and friends – it took a while.

Oh, and I also did a series of platters featuring transfers of pansies where I put all the quotes by the Pope and text about Islamic views on sodomy onto platters juxtaposing the pansies with flies and text. I'm looking for the— *ag* it's not so important that I show these and the tattooed rats, I can show you another time...

FLC: What inspired the title of your artwork *Exquisite Slave, Popsie, Popsy*?

EH: And the *wyfie* thing. I think it's... it's also to do with the poppy flower that I used as decoration, you know, the war symbol of remembrance. So the words *wyfie* and *popsie* sort of resonated with the idea... I was trying to add a humorous element to the work as well and I think that sort of inspired the title of it. To make it a little bit more light hearted. Ja, and I like the *popsie* side (attractive young woman) and the *wyfie* linked (being someone's *wyfie*). And the exquisite slave was painted with the gold lustre on the black with the poppy transfer on it. You know that the poppy is the First World War symbol of remembrance . And it's a struggle in prisons, it's like war.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:30:22

You know, it's like gangs are there, it's... it must be terrible, living in that violent environment (you need protection – from dominant males). Do you know what I mean? It's all these men in the prison and they're all having sexual desires and if you think about how heterosexual men behave outside the, the prison, yeah in reality, and they had to deal with *daai ding* (desperate sexual needs), it's so terrible— It would've happened in reality, no, but in prisons it's the common thing /place. And I think that's where the *exquisite slave* comes in because, you know, also a lot of my gay friends are always like, well those days— I have like very serious motorbike friends who are gay and they're all into these sort of hetero look and style... they have heterosexual friends but they also fantasize about their friends. You know us gays are very promiscuous. Anyway, let's not go there it's too... too ridiculous for words. Ja, so you know this. Ja, anyway.

FLC: Okay. Next question. Could you tell us the story of when and why this artwork was donated to the Constitutional Court Trust?

EH: Did you see on my blog the words that they wrote? The... Albie Sachs... I think it's here... [looking for the quote on his blog <https://eugenehon.blogspot.com/>]. Oh yeah, they accepted the donation of the work with these kind words: "The artwork committee of the Constitutional Court met last week and they are delighted to accept your work *Exquisite Slave, Popsie, Popsy* into the collection. They felt that the sensitive and humorous way in which you betrayed difficult human issues is perfect for the collection. Obviously, excellent technically..." Wah wah wah wah. But, Kim Berman and the Artist Proof Studio did the prints of the Constitution for the Court and when they conceived of the building – they also commissioned artists to make work as part of the gestalt of the building. To complement

the permanent structure. I started selling a lot of these works and I felt that one of these works should be part of the collection. It would reach far more people than when it's in... in somebody's home. And I felt this piece, because it's dealing with issues of sexuality, that are not normally spoken about, it will complement the Constitutional Court collection well.. I don't think people would necessarily be drawn to this piece for their house. Somebody wanted to buy the *Giant Pansy*. It was advertised in the newspapers but they could not live with the actual subject matter, even though they liked it. I finished my stint as dean and I then went back into my studio and I started making this series. It was an honest departure point, I had to deal with these issues first. I felt a collection like that would make perfect sense for this work. Because of its— It's something that people don't talk about. *Daai ding*, as mentioned before? It's a very important thing, at some point I wanted to incorporate that in the title. And it's such a complex thing. I mean, look at the file, the thickness of that thing, and we— *that thing* [laughs] and we don't talk about it. Here is a sculpture that for me works within this environment, and when I saw the building I thought... it would make... it would just maybe be the perfect place for it. So every time people walk past it, whilst on display, it will be a reminder that there are issues like these (Daai Ding), that you can't talk about, but needs to be addressed, at least be aware of. It happens on a daily basis in our prisons and we're not doing anything about it, because how are you going to deal with it? It's such a hugely complex issue. You can't separate people in prison, and now prisons are so overcrowded, it makes the issue even more difficult. So, I think that for me that just sealed it, sealed it for me. Does that answer the question?

FLC: Yes. Thank you.

EH: Okay.

FLC: How do you feel about having your work part of the Constitutional Court Art Collection? Additionally, what does the CCAC represent to you?

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EH: I mean, you know that I think that it's— I've already did a blog post that you have the most beautiful building [in the world]. But I think it's the whole design concept... and I think the building with its art collection, and the way it operates, is for me, like, how can I put it... It's... it's... It represents almost the ideals and the promise of how we could see South Africa to be. Don't you know, do you know what I'm saying? Here you have a group of people who came together, who had a vision, and that vision is looking at human rights issues and everything associated with it, and we have very complex issues to deal with: language, how many... 21... how many are there?

CM: 11.

EH: Oh it is 11 official languages, ja sorry, and all the provinces and all the, the kind of Western influences especially evangelist based spirituality and its impact on traditional values that's spreading across the country. Then there are issues of cultural diversity whilst preserving our heritage, of all these different historical colonial places and towns – names changes etc. All contentious issues a court like this can deal with. I remember a historical case that had to deal with handing over inheritance to a deserving woman of the family, instead of the local chief. It was most interesting. So, the building... even its physicality and the way the carpet design features a shadow of a tree, it's almost like you're sitting under the tree and discussing critical issues, that how it's supposed to

function, like a 'palaver'. So its art collection should reflect what is actually happening there, but the way the detail of that building is put together, the way the garden looks, the way the building is sculpted... For me, it's the only built space, that's new, that embodies what we can do when you get it right. Like we don't spend millions on, you know if you go to America their art museums are like built by the best architects in the world, they cost millions to design and construct, and they become like a monument to architecture. The Constitutional Court building represents something iconic in structure. It's in its bespoke doors, in its crafted light fittings, in every aspect of its gestalt. And you see in the construction almost, there's a bit of warlike zones in it, in the way the concrete sits in the metal. So ja, so for me the artwork and everything comes together. Now honestly, I'm not so happy about the Apartheid Museum, I think that could be— but the Constitutional Court for me— I mean, it's still a beautiful building and but it's also got a certain authenticity and rawness about it, in the way that the benches work and so on, it's not velvet glamour, that it can so easily have been if it were not for the forward looking vision of Albie Sachs and his team. Even the gardens are subtle and— But there's a sophistication there. I'm so glad you got this new grant because, do you know what I mean, it just keeps it on that level that it needs to function as an art museum and a court because... there's also a certain amount of opulence there, the artworks are delicate, some of them, you know what I mean? And it's quite funny that I should have this exhibition and the piece in question is being restored. That was such a funny thing to me, when you sent those images of the work in pieces to me on Facebook. Because I sort of looked at it... It's almost as if it's going to be resurrected, that it's become part of this collection now (broken but restored), because it's itself gone through the shards business. Do you know, it's fragile, so fragile.

TM: And it broke on the way there.

EH: Again? Yes, but I think that was, that piece was loose. Ja. And he [the conservator] would have had to break it anyway. Because you can't glue, you can't put glue in where you can't get the glue.

TM: He said thank God it broke, actually, because if it didn't break—

EH: I would have had to do it.

TM: No, he said then the restoration wouldn't have been as perfect as it is right now, you know.

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EH: So that— I knew that already, but I mean, ja it doesn't matter.

FLC: Next question. How do you see art as being connected to justice or human rights in South Africa or more universally?

EH: I don't know, there was a time when it was like that, I don't know if it's like that anymore. Do you know what I mean? I think there was a real activism in art during apartheid and everything, now it's become so blurred—

FLC: Resistance art.

EH: Ja, and I think what's happening now... I mean, it's almost like you're an outsider when you deal with those things. I think art schools have become far more academic, research orientated. So you deal with issues in a far more complex way... identity issues in... you know, you know what I'm saying? And it's also governed, because most of the art schools are still white lecturers as well. And to become a lecturer now is even more difficult because you must have a masters and preferably a doctorate to become a lecturer. To find the time and the resources to support yourself and the family whilst studying is very difficult. People are still living at home when they turn 30, so you know, and the pressures in people of colour's homes where people have to provide— Sorry, it's a long-winded way around it but, and then, you know you then have to function in this machine to mentor others and often master's year is about doing research rather than practicing. Finding qualified and experienced lecturers of colour to mentor and supervise others is hard to find. Wits is the only one that's got like a coursework master's which is more focussed... but even then it's often about making art and not addressing relevant social issues. You know what I mean it... it's about being at the cutting edge of where art is functioning and making. I mean Kentridge's work is most certainly more ingrained in current cultural issues. But I think it's, it's very different. There's certain people that are doing it, but I'm not so aware of it, you know.

FLC: Are you doing it?

EH: I think I'm raising issues of awareness around poverty and the destitute you know, it's difficult because you're not living in those circumstances, if you talk about that, you know, it's a problem. Like you can't... deal with feminist issues in this way; you will be objectifying the female body if you do, the whole landscape of art-making is shifted so radically. But in this work, that if you look closely at the last work, the works here with the ants, flies, chameleons and the skopo [*Violent Vicissitude II*], I ordered this book during lockdown, *A Passion for Porcelain* – creating new connections and ways of understanding the material porcelain. And in it, when I bought the book, it arrived well as soon as the first planes could land, just before my solo exhibition was launched. So I opened the book and I paged through it and something caught my eye, one of the writers described an interesting aspect of a Baroque ceramic, covered in excessive decoration, that was displayed in a French chateau on the floor. The ceilings were also painted in the Baroque style, but in-between all the Baroque motives and excessive decoration was

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white sections left undecorated, so that your eyes could rest and that apparently this was a Baroque device. I also remember reading Edmund de Waal's book on porcelain, providing insight into the ceramists' obsession with the whiteness of the porcelain. The thought that came to me was here is another fucking thing that underscores white ideals, this whiteness of the product, you know what I'm saying! Like a White God, white everything.. even the porcelain had to be as white as can be for, even if it was for maximum colour effect. I mean how do you escape that? When I was therefore confronted with the excessiveness of my own decoration in the series of works titled, *Manufactured Distractions* and *Intersections*, I felt the need to borrow the device to create spaces of whiteness in the final works created for the exhibition. Remember one can't print white in transfers, the whiteness shines through from the body, it is the underlying skin of the ready-made porcelain vessels. I therefore borrowed the device to reflect white privilege as it contrasts sharply with the iconography of the destitute. Ceramics is breakable, ceramics is... it's something you have to create a space for. It's, you know what I

mean? It's not like a sculpture that sits in the garden, cast in bronze and it can easily break, it's fragile and—

FLC: White fragility.

EH: And also decoration was a crime when I studied. So you, I wasn't allowed to decorate my sculptures at all, they had to be about the form and shape (modernism deemed decoration a crime), you know bronzes... you didn't even decorate them. You patinated them you know, and there were only three colour choices. The various colour oxide looks; iron, copper and or the cobalt look... and that's it. And when I studied they said "no *dekorasio* [decoration] on your ceramics". So you know, when I started making these highly decorated ceramic pieces, it was quite liberating. Celebrating craft in making Fine Art statements, as is evident in the work of Nicholas Hlobo and as demonstrated in the use of embroidery by Igshaan Adams. We are all using crafts techniques and processes in the execution of contemporary art statements, and ceramics is all about that. So I've always tried to sort of link those things art and craft traditions which... I don't know if I answered that brilliantly, but anyway.

FLC: You have, thank you. Do you have any recommendations on the preservation and presentation of *Exquisite Slave*?

EH: Preservation? You know, it is a... ceramics, I've spoken to, what was her name? Sue, who was the administrator at Standard Bank, and even there they had to make a decision do they collect ceramics because it is so difficult to, because as soon as you cover a ceramic piece it loses its fragility. You know what I mean? The bubble wrap doesn't reveal what's underneath it if it's well wrapped. Julia Charlton (WAM) took me through their whole collection when I was curating the Keiskamma Tapestries exhibition at FADA Gallery two years ago. And you know, they display— She's like fanatical about those things and the shelves were open, the ceramics stand on the open shelves uncovered, and often that's better than trying to cover them. Because as soon as you cover you don't know what it is and then people pick it up (covered) and they move it around and they don't know where to put the weight, when carrying and or lifting the work, you know. So, my recommendations are: try and keep things unwrapped, and I mean with my ceramics you just put under a tap and wash it (gently wash it – if it is a sculpture and or a vase, but not a traditional African pit fired vessel – it is too porous and fragile)... So, especially indigenous ceramic vessels, because if you cover them the tape can easily damage the burnished surface.

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People also like to pick up the vessel where there's an opening, and it can't carry the weight, because the clay is so brittle. Lift it up with both hands from the bottom. So, I would have it on display on the bottom row of very steady shelves, that would be my recommendation. If it's not on display, maybe, you know, keep all the ceramics together and just keep them open. They've got those metal shelves and they put them all together and you can still see them. Then you treat that shelf with care that it deserve., Ja.

FLC: And the presentation? Any recommendations on the presentation?

EH: Ag you know it's fine. It's more that viewers in this country don't necessarily go to museums that often. So one has to, like you can see I display these, I put these platforms down on the floor with the plinths on top of them so people can't get too close to the work. Like with all your artwork, I wouldn't let people get too close. Yeah, photographs are fine because they're behind glass, but other stuff. I remember when I was drawing with my ballpoint pen in Musée Guimet in Paris, this woman was shouting at me in French, at the time I did not know what she was shouting about. And eventually somebody came up to me. She wants to give you a pencil. She's scared that you can scratch the wooden sculpture with the pen, so why didn't she just bring me a pencil? People can get quite mad, I don't know sometimes— [laughing]. It was quite funny, because I was just carrying on drawing, I didn't know she was *gilling* [yelling] at me, you know. And there were school kids and everybody around, they must've thought I wasn't quite all there, anyway. But ja, ceramics is a bit of a problem you know. I would, put it somewhere against a wall — I'm very aware of, if I'm in a space, what's behind me, because I'm always moving in this space, or in the ceramic department where people are making things on tables and things that are drying and they are even more fragile, than when they are here (fired). So you become very conscious of your space and your environment. Whilst in the gallery and the museums... there's things behind them and around them, I almost wonder why aren't there more things damaged? You know, like that man who went to sit on the plaster cast and broke the foot (whilst taking a selfie). Did you see that on the news recently, overseas? There was plaster cast of a marble sculpture, so this man was in this exhibition space and he, it was all painted white, but he must've thought it was marble, but it was the plaster models of the artist Canova, one of his sculptures, so the person went to sit on it and it got damaged... broke the foot. But it is a problem, isn't it? Ag you know, that's also alright.

FLC: Is there anything else you would like to add to be recorded in this interview?

EH: I think I talked enough. I'm sure you're tired. We can have a chocolate now.

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