CCAC
Constitutional Court
Art Collection

CCAC interview with Usha Seejarim – transcript

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Interviewer name (and acronym): Neo Diseko (ND)

Interviewee name (and acronym): Usha Seejarim (US)

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List of acronyms:

FUBA: Federated Union of Black Artists

START OF AUDIO RECORDING

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:00:33

ND: Okay, the first question was, please tell us a bit about where you grew up, and how you became an artist. You gave the following preliminary written answer: "I grew up in a small town called Balfour and then later in Lenasia. I am not sure how I became an artist. It just seemed like a natural path to follow for me."

US: Yeah. I wasn't sure how much detail you want about my childhood and my growing up.

ND: Well, I guess maybe in talking you want to pull some things out?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:01:39

US: Sure, okay. My mother was widowed at a young age. So I grew up with my sister and my mum and my grandparents. And I guess I had quite a basic, ordinary life. We moved to Lenasia when she got married. I was ten. And then I lived there until a few years ago, actually. There wasn't a conscious decision to be an artist. So that's why I struggled to answer that question. It wasn't like a decisive moment where I was like, "Yes, now I want to be an artist". It wasn't anything like that. So it just kind of happened. I guess in retrospect, it's like, okay, I can see that I was a creative child. I had an affinity for drawing, which I studied. When I was at high school, I went to Lenasia Secondary. The year that I was in it, then standard eight, my school didn't offer art. They had art the year before. And that year, the art teacher wasn't around. I'm not sure what happened. And I was very angry, because I wanted to– you had to choose your subjects. And I wanted to choose an art course and going to another school wasn't an option for my parents. They said "No, it's this". And so, in fact, when I got to standard nine, they offered that year's standard eight art. I wanted to fail standard nine on purpose, so that I could– [laughing]. But I did find out about alternative art education, and I discovered FUBA here in Newtown. And so from 14, 15 I attended FUBA on Saturdays. And yeah, so I know Bra Dave [David Koloane], Bra Pat [Kagiso Patrick Mautloa], Ma Bongi [Bongiwe Dhlomo-Mautloa]. Like from that age, 14, 15 years old.

ND: Oh my god. Wow.

US: And Samson Mnisi was a full time student there and he's been my buddy since.

ND: I mean, I guess you've been at it from a very young age.

US: Yeah, so I was a scholar, like it was even before I finished school.

ND: Well, it seems you gave us a bit more. Okay, and then the next question is, can you tell us more about how, when and why the work *Affairs of the Home* was made.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:04:14

US: Okay. There's quite a bit of detail there. I can summarise. Essentially, I found– I go to scrapyards quite often. I can't remember the year, but I had the boards for about two years I think before I

actually made something with them. And I used them when I prepared for my solo show, *Venus at Home*, which is a travelling museum show. It was managed by Art Source, Les Cohn. It first showed in Grahamstown and then at JAG and then at North-West University and at Durban Art Gallery. So it is a travelling museum solo show. But that was the first time I used these boards. So I bought them at a scrapyard. They were R20 each. And there's so many layers, like things that are wrong. Firstly, how did these boards get there? Was it vandalism? Was it theft? You know, it's an official sign essentially. The fact that it landed up at the scrapyard, the fact that I could buy it, 40 bucks for the two. And I had them forever in my studio, and I didn't know what to do with them. And this often happens with materials in my studio. And then when I was preparing for the show, it felt like it was its moment. The show was about notions of home, the title was *Venus at Home*, and I'd use a whole lot of found objects donated and collected: brooms, mops, irons, ironing boards. And so it felt like the right thing to put it like a kind of roof structure, like a house over an ironing board. Because I wanted to speak about the domestic space, home as a domestic space. And I mean, my work, I think, since then actually has been about the role of women within the domestic space, right. And when I made it, it felt cold, the metal of the sign. And I suppose what the sign stands for, felt cold, and I wanted to warm it up. So I thought a blanket inside would be nice. But I didn't want to just put any blanket, I wanted the blanket to have meaning. So I went to the Methodist Church, there next to, I call it Zuma's Court, on Small Street. Bishop Paul Verryn was at the church. He's been quite a contentious character, I suppose. But there were a number of refugees staying in the church, he was providing a kind of place to stay. And I had been there before once, where the whole bottom floor was full of people, you couldn't walk. There was a very strong, strong smell of stale sweat and urine mixed, and I expected the place to be filled like that. And when I went, I bought a new blanket, and I wanted to exchange it with somebody, and when I went there, it was empty. And there was just one woman there alone in a wheelchair. And so I met with her. And then I said to her, I'm an artist, and I want to make a work with a blanket. And I have a new blanket, and if you have a blanket, do you want to exchange it? So she said sure. She was in a wheelchair, she was from Limpopo. So she lives on the fourth floor of the building, there's no lift, we had to get guys to carry her up. So every day she gets somebody to carry her up and down. She had a child, she lived in this room with I think six other women, not a big room, a tiny room. And they all had kids, there was no water. So I don't know how she lived in this place. There was electricity, but no water. Anyway, she gave me her blanket, which is the blanket that's on the artwork, and I gave her a new blanket. It wasn't so important for me to document the specifics of who she was, more than this person who is homeless, who was living in this place that provides her some kind of refuge. And the blanket is something that's warm and comforting.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:08:34

ND: And I guess then that will take us to our next question, which is what is the significance of using found materials, especially domestic objects in your work? And how can this then be related to a physical home? I think you've already touched briefly on that. But I'm more intrigued by not wanting to document the person who you exchanged blankets with. I think maybe if you could elaborate more on that.

US: Sure. It's consistent with not documenting any objects that are given to me. Like for *Venus at Home*, a number of people gave me their irons and their brooms and so on. For me, it's about the inherent history of the work without knowing the specifics. So it's about, like, when I work with these objects, I'm aware that it has a story to tell, but I like the intrigue of not knowing exactly whose it is and where it comes from. Because then it allows my imagination to go, but it also allows me to connect to the object with the object. I think knowing the specifics kind of takes away from it somehow, which seems kind of counterintuitive, right? But yeah, it's less important for me to know the exact details. It's more about the feeling. That's what it is. It's more about the feeling.

ND: What inspired the title of the artwork, the artwork being *Affairs of the Home*?

US: It was really a play with what was on the board, which is "Home Affairs". And I think *Affairs of the Home* opens up multiple readings of the home and the affairs of the home. So it is really just a play of words.

ND: It comes through very visually, I think it really does.

US: Yes, it does.

ND: Okay. Can you tell us more about how, when and why *People in Posterity* was made?

US: So I was invited, I can't remember the details. I think it was done through Artist Proof Studio. Or maybe, I can't remember hey, what year was that? It was a long time ago. Yeah, it was a print collection. And I was invited, it was to acknowledge ten years of democracy at the time. We were each given a theme to work with. And mine was something around the economy, which is why I had that

big windmill, and kind of a sense of expansion is what I wanted. And I use an actual coin in the print. But I really can't remember too much about that work [laughing].

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:11:49

ND: So it was a print project?

US: Yeah, like a print portfolio.

ND: And you were given a theme to sort of respond to.

US: Yes. And I was given the size of the lino, and then you work on a design, then you cut out your lino, and then they print it. And there were a number of editions, and I've been part of a few print portfolios like that.

ND: Oh okay. And how do you then sort of separate the work that you make as an artist and the things that you speak about in your work from these sorts of collaborations? Do you sometimes tie them in?

US: Yes, I do. I think when I was a younger artist, I felt compelled to respond exclusively to the brief. And now that I'm a little bit more experienced, I am finding more and more ways of integrating my work. I think, ultimately, like your sense of aesthetic can't change, your style can't change. So whatever you do has got your signature. But now it's, I mean, I have a very distinctive signature now. So now it's more consciously used. Yeah. But I was a bit more naive then.

ND: Okay. The next question is: to wish historical and current day themes would you say both the artworks speak to?

US: Yeah. I mean, we've spoken about housing. I think you mentioned housing in there. But I think more than housing, the notion of home and right now, I mean, the pandemic, we've been home-bound, we've been like, what's the word, not landlocked? Like, we can't get out of our home country, or if you're in another country. The idea of home has become so magnified, right? I mean, the scariest thing for me was during lockdown gender-based violence increased, because everybody was in the home together. Like how fucked up is that? That when there are families together, violence increases. I

mean, so there's so many themes, and, of course, the state of the world now with the emphasis on borders and belonging and who belongs where and in South Africa in particular. I mean, the way we treat our neighbours you know, so I think it has so many– there's so many discourses that you can fit into it.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:14:25

ND: It's interesting because you said your theme for the other work was around the economy. I think that can have a sort of recurring thread. I don't know.

US: Absolutely. And I think I did mention that.

ND: Okay, great. Then the next question is: how do you position yourself as an Indian female artist within the scope of South African contemporary art, and how does your background relate to these themes in your work?

US: Okay. I always struggle with that, because Indian artist means I'm from India. And I'm not from India. I'm South African. And I'm South African of Indian descent. So I mean, I'm third and fourth generation South African, my national identity is not Indian, it is South African. My cultural identity is Indian. And I'm not a practising– I'm not a religious person. And I don't practice any kind of religious practice. I grew up Hindu. And I grew up, obviously, thanks to apartheid, with a very strong cultural identity, because of the *Group Areas Act*, because of how we were all kind of put together. And that does filter into some works. But it's not, it's not the driving aesthetic of my work at all. I think I'm influenced by many different things. And the way I position myself, I'd like to think that the work that I make is positioned within current discourses and the strength of what I do comes from the strength of the work, more than whether I'm Indian or South African [laughs]. And even as a woman, and as a woman of colour. I mean, I don't want to be included on the show because there aren't enough women on the show. Or there aren't enough women of colour on the show. I want to be included on the show because of the strength of my work. So it's a tricky one that, yeah, so consciously, I think my position is the value of the work. Yeah.

ND: Great.

US: Do you agree?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:16:40

ND: Yeah, I agree [laughs]. Could you tell us the story of when and why *Affairs of the Home* was donated to the Constitutional Court Trust?

US: Was it last year or the year before? Last year, okay. Yeah, I got an invitation. An email invitation to submit a work. There were some questions that I had raised. I don't know if you want to talk about that? I was a bit critical of the process. It's not necessary to document that if you don't want to.

FLC: We can, it's fascinating.

US: Okay. I was concerned about the nature of the collection and the approach to... that artists were... that there was a kind of open call to donate work without being compensated for it. And my question was really around the curation of the collection. Like how do you curate a critically engaged collection when the collection is made up of donated work, as opposed to acquiring specific works that have a specific narrative that you want to create this story of this collection? So that was my issue. And I think that there are key works that may be relevant to the collection, but those artists may not be in a position to donate work. And how is a collection such as this actually supporting artists apart from exposure, apart from what you get for having your artwork here? I mean, there are so many artists, and right now especially, there are so many artists who are really struggling. And I'm talking about artists who are making, you know, significant work that speaks to the history of our country, the current state of the world, whose work would be key for the collection. But how is the collection, acquiring those works to fit the story, to fit the gaps in the story. So that is my, my criticism.

ND: Okay. And then the story of how did you then end up actually deciding to make the donation?

US: So I thought about it. Yeah, I thought about what it would mean to have my work in the collection. And I also thought a lot about what work would fit the collection. It's not just about being here, but if there is a work that's relevant to the Constitutional Court, to this collection, that would add value to it. And I toyed between two pieces. It was either this work or another work that I had made which is a silkscreen print, which I made in response to the finding of the hominoid Naledi. When Naledi was discovered by the archaeologist, I forget his name. Anyway, I heard him on the radio and he spoke about this discovery of this hominid skull in South Africa, and she predates other hominids, which he claims means that she is the kind of start of the human race across the globe. There's different

theories that suggest there's different... you know, but essentially what he was saying is that even Westerners, like everybody, is African, like everybody descended from her. So I just thought about this, and I thought, how incredible, given, like, all the identity problems in the world, that actually, everybody's African [laughs]. And so I made a silkscreen work that says, ultimately, we are all African. And it's Naledi. So I thought about that piece. And then I thought about this piece, and then I decided that this was a better piece for the collection. Yeah.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:21:03

ND: I mean, they're still quite similar in what they sort of speak about. But yeah. I think this is a beautiful piece for the collection.

US: Yeah. The other one's also just a flat, it's an A2 size print. I thought this has a stronger presence.

ND: And a lot more edgier, if anything.

US: Yes. And it's also more South African based where that has a broader kind of reading.

ND: Did you know that *People of Posterity* was accepted into the CCAC as were the other works of the Resistance, Reconstruction, Reconciliation portfolio, donated to us by the MTN SA Foundation?

US: No, I didn't. I only found out when I came to deliver this work.

ND: Well–

US: Now I know.

ND: Okay, now you know [laughing]. As someone who also works with public art, what role does public art play in addressing some of the complex themes in your work?

US: I think I enjoy the dynamics of public art because they're so different from museum work or gallery work. And the biggest thing, which is what I said is, that the audience is the public. Whereas the audience in a museum or a gallery, is somebody who goes to the gallery, and in a country where art education is so minimal, lots of people, ordinary people, don't know that I can go to a museum, it

doesn't cost me anything, I can look at the work, I can walk into a gallery and experience that. Of course, there's other layers of feeling comfortable enough to do so, or welcomed enough to do so. But that's another discussion. But public art is in the public, which also puts a responsibility on the artist to make something that is comfortable for people who live around the work or work around the work, right? But I'm acutely aware of all these dynamics as an artist who makes public art. What was the second part of the question? What is the role of...?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:23:28

ND: Yes, so also, in addressing some of the complex themes, maybe it's more to also say, the relationships between actually the two modes of working: so the work that you make for museums and galleries, and public art. Where's the, sort of...

US: Yeah, I mean, more and more, the line is getting blurred, which is good, because more and more, it's saying the same thing. And I can perhaps speak about the most recent public artwork that I made, which is for the Radisson RED hotel in Rosebank.

ND: It's so beautiful, I've taken pictures with it.

US: So I've made these two very large wings, made out of ironing bases. And, I mean, I started making smaller wings in my studio in preparation for my show, which just opened like three weeks ago. And when I was approached, when this opportunity came up, I just thought, wow, imagine if I could make these massive wings out of all these hundreds of ironing bases. So there was a complete synergy with what was happening in the studio and the idea to expand what I was making in the studio on a larger scale. And then after a whole process of, you know, submitting a design and so on, they approved it. And it was such a great process to just, to drive your own concept into a public space, as opposed to responding to a brief where it's somebody else's agenda, you know? So to fit your concept with obviously the aesthetic and the branding of this corporate identity, but to have strongly my own branding. Yeah.

ND: I guess I have one more question, where did you get so many irons?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:25:23

US: [Laughs] I iron a lot! No, I get them in the scrapyard. I bought a skipfull. Yeah, I went to a scrapyard and I wanted to buy a few. And then he said, he showed it to me, there was a skip load. And I said, how much does it cost? And he gave me a cost per kilo. And then I was like, how much is a kilo? Is it like two irons, is it 20 irons? And he was like, how many do you want? I said, I don't know, how many can fit in my car? Like, there was this like, not a sense of what it would cost and how much there is. And when I saw in the skip, the whole skip was full, I had some money and I said how much for the whole skip? He said do you want all of it? I said, yeah, if you deliver. If you deliver, I'll take all of it. And then he worked it out and it was three tonnes. So I bought three tonnes of ironing bases, and subsequent to that I bought another 2 tonnes of full irons, broken but with the plastic parts on. So yeah. And I've waded through a percentage of it. I don't know how much.

ND: I also wondered why the red as well?

US: So the red was to tie into the Radisson RED. But, interestingly enough, I've been working with red outside of that recently. And also, the iron has like two layers. It's got a softer metal that covers the base. And when you strip that off, there's a glue that is used to join it. And that's red. It's this marooney red. Most of them. But also, it was quite a mission to strip them and clean them. And I mean, that took a few months alone.

ND: I know, it's a beautiful piece.

US: Thank you. Yeah, it's a very accessible piece, which is what I like. And it's interactive.

ND: Yeah, I've seen a lot of pictures on social media, people have really been engaging with it. It's beautiful to see.

US: They're launching on the ninth of July. The hotel.

ND: Are you mindful of conservation when making art? For example, the preservation and restoration requirements to ensure the longevity of the work and do you have any specific recommendations for conservation?

US: Yeah, I mean, the paperwork is made on archival paper, I assume it's framed with that in mind. But I mean, the nature of my work is to use found objects and to kind of keep the honesty of the material.

So I don't know, maybe these signage boards will rust at some point a bit more. But that is the nature of it. But I don't have any recommendations for preserving.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:28:37

ND: Okay. So you wouldn't mind if they do rust?

US: No, not at all. I mean, that's what it is. Right?

ND: Yeah. Because I can imagine working with found materials, when you don't even think about conservation.

US: Yeah. I mean, I made one work with sponges, like pot scraping sponges, and when I made the work, the colours were very bright. And within a few months, the colours started fading, but that's what it is, you know. And then I thought, well how can I preserve this? Like, whatever I paint it with, it's a sponge, it's gonna pull it in. I always think about, obviously, like, if I weld something, if I use steel, that I use the right kind of paint and so on. Like for the Radisson piece I did extensive research into what kind of paint to use, that's UV protected that has a longer duration with the weather elements and so on.

ND: Right. Then the next question is: do you have any recommendations on the curatorial presentations of these artworks?

US: I think– will it shift? Do you rotate works at different times? Or does it stay like that indefinitely?

ND: As Francois was saying, there's a rotation coming up in the next month or so–

FLC: Of the private areas. Normally it's shown for six months at a time in one specific spot. That's in the public gallery. In the private areas, it gets rotated once a year. And if it's not on display, it's in storage. So it will move around in the next few years.

US: I mean, I think I trust you as curators and custodians of the work and the collection to make kind of conceptual links and curatorial crossovers and flow. Yeah.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:31:00

ND: Okay. Then, this is the last question. Is there anything you would like to add to be recorded in this interview?

US: No, I don't think so. I mean, we've spoken a lot unless you have any other questions.

ND: No, I think that is it from my end. Okay, great.