

CCAC Interview Transcript

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[SW]: The means that I had; the telephone; a computer; fax machine. Those days, it was faxes and things. Having that kind of access to technology to use the telephone and keep on phoning and nagging. In those days, they actually gave you a number, say you went to apply to get a house, you got a number. " This is your number, keep on asking and we'll let you know." But of course, most of the time, they don't let you know. And whenever you go back with that number, they used to go into a big room where all these files are. And if you were lucky, they could find your file. So nothing was computerised for a long time. And, yah, I didn't succeed. Eventually I went back to one of the people I had called. And I said, I just cannot believe that in this whole year, nobody's been able to help me. And because I had nagged him and I phone back to him, he said "I will help you to get a house in Devland.". There were other problems that were coming up with the building of the house. One of them was that the squatters, there were many many squatters on the other side of the road. So this organisation actually ended up working with the squatters and promising them some houses so that they would allow them to clear the land and build. And eventually, Sophie moved into her house with her three kids. She still lives there today. She's retired, she's got grandchildren herself, like I have. And she has a home. I extended the house for her because we

tried to get a loan from Absa bank, but Absa had red line that the district, and that comes out in the artbooks. So what happened was, I often have use rooibos and I had taken a project overseas called "Towards Mandela". I had used newspaper articles which I had cut up and put into rooibos tea bags, and then cast it in resin. So I thought I could, again use rooibos, because rooibos is healing. And getting a house is the first stage of healing. So I made the decision to do 1200 rooibos teabags, that was the amount of houses that were being built in Devland. And I gave a little notice up when I had the exhibition and said, each teabag represents the hope of one house for the future. So that people could drink the tea and bring it back to me to use. We rolled out 30 metres of canvas. And I've had all those tea bags to work with beforehand, but also ever since. You know, and I know that people who drink drank for tea, had a consciousness about the fact that there are people out there who need a house. And when they drink tea, they hopefully think about that. So I think that art in a way, art has a way of suggesting a different way of thinking. And I've had all those tea bags to work with beforehand, but also ever since. You know, and I know that people who drink drank for tea, had a consciousness about the fact that there are people out there who need a house. And when they drink tea, they hopefully think about that. So I think that art has a way of suggesting a different way of thinking. Something different. Using a found object to sort of tweak your idea and uhm, [...] I don't know, thats what artists do isnt it? We show something, and we hope that one could engage in discussion about it, and see things a little bit different to what you normally saw it before. It's like seeing a good film, you know, gives you something to talk about, gives you different issues that you might discuss or evoke discussion on different issues. And I think that for me, when you have an artwork, it's a lovely thing to then be able to say, I disagree or I agree, but I see this a little bit differently. So that's the educational part, I think of art that's important, because there is no subject that you can't talk about through art. Art allows you to talk about anything. Before I talk about the art, Happy Houses, I will show you how I used tea to speak about the positivity of getting a house. So I start off dark and I go through to light which means I use several layers of tea on the dark part and almost no tea on the last panel. And the numbers are quite important because they use numbers in all my works. And each teabag is numbered from one to 1200, speaking about the different houses. These are the names of some of the sculptures. The names of the art books I've taken some of them from street names: Zama Zama; Good News. That's the names that the people who live in Devland, gave those street names. I used them for the names of the houses. I have a third panel and is also quite interesting because I use barcoding to express the First World - Third world situation that many many people in this country, live in that situation where barcoding is so sophisticated. The houses that people work in are sophisticated, they have technology. but many people go home to if they have a home, they're still lighting the fire to cook, they don't have equipment, they are poor, they don't have

anything. So this discrepancy of the “haves” and the “have nots” comes through in the barcoding because spaza shops use barcoding that very few people have access to.

[TM]: Is the light part on the second and the third panel, intentional?

[SW]: Yes, because it starts off very dark, but you see the shape of the tea is also the shape of the plan of how Devland is laid out. I used that as well. I do an awful lot of research on it and you can see it more clearly here when its put on the wall in a row. So originally it stood on these clips. And then each artbook speaks about a different issue. The teabags talk about the fact that it is, very South African. The ground in Devland. One of the big issues of building house in Devland is , it is actually very clay land. Its ladened with clay so it's very soft. Houses have to have a special foundation there. It's called a slab waffle raft* foundation that has to be used to allow for a little bit of movement, because the ground is not that stable. So those were just one of the issues because when I extended Sophie's house, I had to stand there. I've been on the bricklaying course, I knew about foundations. And I made sure that when we added to the house, extended the house, that I did the proper foundation, because a lot of those houses, where people do the extension and they don't know that they got to have a special foundation, the house starts to crack up. So that's just some of the things you learn, when you get involved in a big project like this, where things are not very simple. I don't think that many of the people who've built houses in Devland knew about it.

[TM]: Are we correct in the title Healing art book?

[SW]: Healing art books, and this was just called, Healing in Devland. I used bandages because bandages are also healing. So I've used the small little plasters, to put the numbers on.

[TM]: What's the significance of the numbers next to the teabags? You know, the 23, 24, 25 to 31?

[SW]: That's housing numbers, you know. What was deliberate, is that the writing is deliberately dribbled because I want people who read it to struggle to read it, to understand the struggle that people without a house go through to get a house. The writings there is deliberately scribbled, so that you struggle.

[SW]: One of the questions was, how do I relate the anthropology to the, to the art. And I think that even though I only did my PhD, so much later in my life, I didn't know it's because, to me, this is art. All the research that I did is part of the knowledge that I gained in order to continue, in order to make decisions about the materials that I'm going to use and decisions about how I'm going to start my project. Because you have an idea, and that idea develops as you start. I never have an idea of how it's going to look in the end. We have no idea, that's part of the creative process; is to discover the idea, to work with it and to discard what's not working, and to develop what is working. And I think the reason that I take so long is that it becomes more and more interesting, the more research that you do, and the more you draw and paint. So your ideas for me, you can have brilliant ideas, but until you actually start working, and making things and throwing things out, and so on, nothing really happens. And an idea doesn't mean anything for an artist, unless it is actually, you have been working and you've got something to work with. So when I started with this

particular project, the ConCourt was asking artists to enter a competition, which I had entered, so that was actually how this started. And I had an idea that I wanted to do something very positive out of a very negative situation, because it was so shocking, to walk around the ConCourt, and to hear the stories of what had happened in those prisons, not only to Mandela, but also to political prisoners, and so on. The degradation and the humiliation of it all. And I thought, How can I talk about this, to find something positive in our society that I could use, and I thought of using the word Ubuntu, because, as Desmond Tutu said, "Your humanity is my humanity." And at that stage, I didn't think about the negative aspects that Ubuntu also has. I was looking at the positive side. But as I started working and learning more about what Ubuntu really meant, I was able to understand that they are negative and positive sides to the word. Anyway, I just took cardboard, wrote out the word Ubuntu, I had the idea to try and create a shadow that would, [...], I wanted to create a work that you looked at, and you didn't know really what the meaning behind the word was. So the shadow would then let you know the information about the word, the shadow reads Ubuntu. But when you look at the work, you think it's just shapes, you don't realise. So the sun shines on the sculpture every day between 10-11 in the morning. It could be about 30 metres across or 50 metres across, depending on the land. And people could gather there and sit in the shadow of respect and friendship when the shadow actually forms. So every, every month, the shadow is actually going to be either longer or shorter. Obviously the light on the sculpture is not going to give you the same effect as the sun. The sun doesn't cause the shadow to play out like that, but I have a program which shows you every month what happens to the shadow as it gets longer and longer. Eventually it's almost unreadable by the time it gets to November or in December because the shadow is very long. But most of the year you can actually read the shadow. These shapes that would be on this big open space will also be leaning at an angle of 30 degrees because leaning also has meaning. One leans towards one another in friendship, you lean on somebody to coerce them. So, we've got these opposite meanings, like the word itself Ubuntu, itself is loaded with meaning. And the sculptures wouldn't stand straight up and be part of the buildings or the trees, which are vertical, they would then also lean and differentiate themselves from other objects in that space.

[TM]: I'm interested in what was the negative, like you said, there's the positive and the negative to the word.

[SW]: The negative is in the expectation that you should always treat people with Ubuntu, the expectation that you should help your family and friends at all times, can sometimes be a burden, especially if you have emigrated somewhere. And you have a family member coming to the country expecting that you are now in a position to help them, and very often, because of the situation in South Africa, it's so hard to get a job and so hard to make a life here for so many people. There are people who have succeeded. And that's amazing. Certainly, I think families do help each other. But there is that element of expectation of Ubuntu which can sometimes be too much for a person to be able to do, and may not be able, and they may not have the job themselves and may not have any money.

[TM]: Please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an artist.

[SW]: I was born in Johannesburg, I have lived here all my life. I went to school when I was 5 years old, And my teacher told my mother that I could paint or draw or maybe I had a bit of colour sense, I have no idea. And I started very early. I was 5 years old. My first drawing was of a chair. And I started with portraits. I always loved art. [...]. I always knew what I was going to do. I think I never realised as I was growing up, where art could actually lead. because art to me today is about everything that I experienced in my life. It's about everything, you know, what you interpret in all the subjects that you choose, everything is out there for you to work on. When I was growing up, you either did a portrait, or you do the landscape. Everything was categorised when I was growing up. Today it's so exciting because you can work with other people, you can collaborate, and art is about everything that is around you. And for me art is about how you think and how you interpret. And the message that you are trying to put across. What you are trying to say to other people who deal with [...]

[TM]: Can you tell us a bit more about how, when and why the artwork was made?

[SW]: So I wanted to talk about the actual houses themselves and I wanted to speak, [...], for the exhibition there were 30 art books that i created in order to show that these artbooks were actually about the housing project. I created structures that could hang these books, these works would be suspended inside a house. So that I could have like a little township of houses at the exhibition. People could walk down the rows of houses on either side. I used materials that that could speak about the situation in Devland, where the ground was not stable and special foundation had to be made. And again used the teabags for the idea of healing. Every time each resin slab that I made for each sculpture I also used little scrolls with information on it, about the houses and the land. And there's a lot of writing on the little scrolls that make you feel as if its something white, old and ancient. I used the bandages because the work is also healing. You can see in this particular work that I have given the Court, that I have used the little plasters and wrote on the plasters. So I would use writing in a way that is some way poetic. And that's all. Each house is completely different. There were issues about the fact that in Devland there were no trees and people had actually destroyed a lot of the trees that had been put there. And I thought that was very sad. I think today of course there is trees there and you can grow things and people have their own vegetable gardens and so on. [...] Devland was all very barren. So the ideas behind [...] where teabags are healing, bandages are healing, and getting a house is the first stage of healing. Would you like for me to read the poem?

[TM]: Yes please

[SW]: You know numbers were also very important because people who wanted the numbers couldn't, gave in their number, but their number didn't help them to, to find their house, to get the house they were waiting for. [...]. So this particular work is also named after a street.

[TM]:

[TM]:

[SW]: So, this is the poem.

We are a society of numbers. Our number is our identity. little birds living in little numbered nests. Our numbers say who we are, where we live, where we work, what we own, how much money we have, how much money we can borrow, how many children we have, how old we are, what we mean, how much power we have, how little power we have. Some of us have no number. Some of us do not even have a nest.

[TM]: It's on your website too.

[SW]: Yes of course.

[TM]: I remember about it. Thank you. That would make a beautiful artwork titled Healing Constitutional Courts. You would be literally healing it.

[SW]: The Museum Africa wrote me, I have got all these letters that I have put in for you to see. They had a housing project called Birds and the cornfield, which was a permanent thing they had put up in Museum Africa. This was like part of it.

[TM]: Given your part Art, part Anthropology PhD research, how do you visually draw the parallels between the two fields in your art practice specifically? Which, we have touched on.

[SW]: Yes we have, because as you can see, from all the various projects that I've done, that I get very involved in the project. It's very interactive. And I do an awful lot of research. And based on that research, and the artwork that I'm doing at the same time, that becomes the outcome of my work. So that when I started anthropology obviously, anthropology itself is a very, very deep and complex subject, but the fact is that I was used to doing the kind of research that is expected of anthropologists. And I've got one file in here that I can show you. This gives you an idea of the kind of research that I did for this project over here, the genealogy. And I think that's worth taking a picture of. Nothing's ever happened with this. This is the kind of work that I did, and it wasn't for PhD or anything. The artwork has to speak for itself, the research that you do is mainly what goes behind your decisions to do certain things in a way. But ultimately, it becomes very spontaneous. And that's our chip. So all of this doesn't come into the work itself, in that when you do the work, you can just work spontaneously and make things happen, because it's all part of you.

[TM]: Thank you. To which historical and current day things would you say your artwork speak to? Specifically Zama Zama.

[SW]: Just give me an example of what you mean by that.

[TM]: So for instance, it could essentially speak to maybe the idea of constitutionalism. This is more just an example. And wider themes. Broader themes. Or it could speak to housing. So that's

still a current day issue given the fact that we still have people who had numbers since I don't know when. And still haven't gotten the houses. Or maybe it could speak to how inefficient. Maybe the system or government is essentially, in the promises given to people.

[SW]: I think that if I am talking about why I became involved with a low cost housing, originally, I had no idea that it was going to become an art project but like, many of my subjects that I started with, were interesting to me because they were part of my life. I met interesting people and my work is hopefully interactive. So I think the housing project really started off just trying to find a house for somebody, but it became very interesting to me. And that's really how a lot of my artwork actually is. It starts off just with an idea. But it always has to do with something that affects me emotionally. And that I feel I want to say something about. I think I just allow the process to take me where I'm going, but it always starts with things are, about issues, there is always something that I want to talk about. And do something about.

[TM]: Which you still find relevant today...

[SW]: Absolutely, its very important for me, that's there's an educational aspect to it. I like the idea that people have their own opinions about things, but I also like to use art to encourage people to, or you hope that people will view your work, people will have other ideas, or a discussion will be evoked through the work that you produce. So I don't think a pretty picture, you know, if a picture is just a pretty picture, that's what is. For me, my work always has that educational aspect to it or that aspect of discussion, that it might evoke.

[TM]: What inspired the title of your artworks? Which you have already touched on. And said that it's the street names, right?

[SW]: So it started off with something concrete, which was the street names. But then as I had more experiences with the housing industry, I was able to bring in the idea of the situation that we find ourselves in, which I think today is even exacerbated. I mean, we are now living in a country where there are more people that are poorer than ever before. And more people without jobs, especially during COVID. And many more people without houses, and that's very sad, in light of how we have dealt with the housing situation. Because you cant do anything if you haven't gotten a [...].

[TM]: What is the relationship between your materials of choice, via rooibos tea and healing? And the concept of healing.

[SW]: So that we touched on, we have discussed that.

[TM]: How does the healing series connect to some of your other series of works?

[SW]: I think all my works are long term, but all of them a part of my life, life experiences.

[TM]: Could you tell us about the story of when and why this artwork was donated to the constitutional court trust?

[SW]: So at the time I knew Albie Saschs and I used to go quite a lot to the ConCourt. I had gotten involved with the competition. So I was also interested in the architecture of the building, of the new Constitutional Court. I had become involved with or let's say, I had been taken around the the old fort, and I had seen what was going on over there. So when I entered the competition, I was actually quite excited about the idea of the new Constitutional Court because it was it was something that was going to be a very fare place compared to God forbid, you know, the prisons. So the prisons were shocking in themselves but the new Constitutional Court was the positive aspect of the future. And I think Willem Boshoff's wife was involved with the writing of the new Constitution. Is that right? Yah I think she, together with Albie Saschs, and one other person were involved with the writing of our new Constitution. And Apartheid had been so frighteningly insane. Unfair. And here was the new Constitutional Court being there to say that we are going to be, we are going to handle everything differently. We going to be fair, I just love the way the architecture of the Court was thought about, when they built it. So that even in the arrangement of the way the judges sit in relation to the people. There's a lot of thought that went into it. And I was impressed. I think it's a privilege to have a work in the Constitutional Court. An artwork in the Constitutional Court, because people get taken around and are able to discuss with the various issues that artists have brought up. And there's something they say about if you live in interesting times, there's a Chinese proverb written, it says It's a curse to live in interesting times, but if you live in difficult and interesting times, artists are able to express themselves about things they know that are happening in the world around them. And I think that's why in South Africa, we have so many good artists. Because the issues that happen around us touch us, they effect us. And in many ways its actually much more difficult, we are living in very difficult times. And things are not always pretty. But artists are able to express better, what they know and because we experience these things around us, the crime the poverty, all these things that are normally, things that happen to other people happen very much to ourselves. And we have artists that are able to talk about these issues and to express these issues because its become part of what they know.

[TM]: So was the artwork donated through a call out or a competition?

[SW]: I think that. When you speak about a call out, I think that they let artists know that they could submit work to be donated to the Court. I don't think that, its not going to work with just being accepted. The work was vetted. And approved before it was taken in, and Albie had this very big interest in building a really meaningful collection. And that's the collection that you show people.

[TM]: Definitely, thank you so much. How do you feel about having your work as part of the Constitutional Court art collection?

[SW]: Like I said, I think it is a privilege to do that.

[TM]: How do you see art as being connected to justice or human rights in South Africa? Or more so universally?

[SW]: I think its intimately connected to all issues and that artists need to speak about things that affect them deeply. They are expressed through the art in a way that is very powerful. Its not always powerfully expressed but it certainly can evoke discussion and bring about awareness in a positive way sometimes than just writing about it or just reading about it. and I think particularly, this subject is something that people don't really want to hear about. You don't want to know about homeless people. You see them every day on the street. Very often you just wish they wouldn't come to your window and ask for things. You see so much poverty around you and you really don't know what to do about it. What healing does with the teabag is it brings, it takes something that you drink that heals you that is is warm and enjoyable. And you able to think about that subject without all these other conflicting issues that you now have to face and it's a very positive way of telling stories to people and getting people to contribute without feeling guilt, because we live in this country, where we feel we cant fix everything.

[TM]: Are you mindful of conservation or preservation requirements when making artworks?

[SW]: Very. There are two aspects to it. There are artworks that get done that are made of organic things that eventually just disintegrate, and that is intentional. But when it is not intentional, I think you owe it to people who you sell your artwork to, or give your art to, that your art should last. And you should be aware of things that are acid free. And if something is organic, which is quite interesting because the teabags are actually very organic and you would think that they would actually disintegrate but if you don't mishandle them, they actually wont. Some of them, in the work, were deliberately broken open. And having a look at this work for example. This was originally like that, I did not try to touch that, you could see that there, resin has been poured into the tea. So that the teabag remains open. This one had actually cracked. So I have put another teabag paper in front of it. This one was like that, you could actually see that the resin's been poured over. So that you could see that the teabag in the tea had been used. So I was happy with

leaving some of it the way it was originally because that was how it was intended. But its also not a big deal that a teabag breaks because it is an organic thing.

[TM]: You have any recommendation on the presentation of the work? I think you have told me already exactly what you required.

[SW]: So I would love to have the main work somewhere where people could hear about it because the more you talk about it the more awareness you bring about that subject matter.

[TM]: And obviously covered in glass with the scrolls presented right next to it.

[SW]: I think it would be nice if one could actually see the inside, so lots of people know whats inside, because artworks, we often very worried to touch, but that's actually also why I don't mind so much if something does break. Its not a train smash, we'll put another teabag there, we'll put another bag if it breaks. Not all art has to be stood back from, rather that people actually are able to go up and touch it. This is work that is about something personal, it about something very personal. And I like people to engage with my work, I don't mind if they touch it. Its different if it's a piece of white paper, and you put it behind glad.

[TM]: Is there anything you would like to add to be recorded in this interview?

[SW]: Nah, I think I have said everything.

[TM]: I wanted to ask if maybe some of the other themes and other series of work we have spoken about could come here, just as more additional information?

[SW]: Yes, like the Taxi hand signs we had hardly spoken about. I actually wanted to speak very much about the future we choose, which is the latest work that I have done. So maybe I can give you information on that.

[TM]: What did you say the series is?

[SW]: Its called The Future We Choose. This little piece, is quite interesting because it shows you how I used the particular taxi hand sign to talk about COVID. This taxi hand sign means "I have only got a little bit of money but can you give me a lift" and the taxi drivers call it petrol money. So they use, even if you got like R1 and you haven't got enough money to pay for more, and they've

got space they'll just put you in and you come with and they'll use that money for petrol. So here I also included the rooster, during this time of COVID because a rooster or chickens might carry the virus but also they wake you up every morning, to remind you of the time because living in COVID for me, I always like often didn't know what day it was. I was here for months and months without going out. The rooster is just warning you of the COVID but its also giving you the time of day. So this one is called The Future We Choose, each one of these hand signs has a different meaning. People were gathering, created this tap in the township, all over the place, im sure you have seen a makeshift tap where many people go to gather water.

[TM]: Yes

[SW]: And during covid they weren't really allowed, they weren't supposed to be gathering anywhere, they were supposed to be home, but the problem was there were so many poor people and just didn't have water that that's where they go or they don't get their water. But look, in between the hands I have drawn that, which is one of the things that was supposed to carry the virus. I have used taxi hands signs and gestures that catch water in this work. And then this one, was sold to the head of climate change in London, at a bank. It's a very small little work, not much bigger than the one I just showed you. And its made of makeup. The whole thing is made of makeup, except for the rooster. The rooster was painted but all of this is just makeup, and glue, and resin. So you can see that, how the material, it doesn't look like any of my work but I actual fact I have used shoe polish. And I've used glue and resin underneath it to get to create the texture and then I've just used makeup. So, the materials seem to come back when I work, they come back into my work again but always in a different way. You asked me about material. Im just different in the way that I don't like using same material for every project. I always feel that a particular issue might require me to use a completely different material so I can go from numbers that exist on this work which are done on check book stuff, to that picture of that old lady sitting in her garden on her own, no grandchildren, only the rooster for company. Even though the subject matters are completely different, there is a relationship between all of the works that I do that either got the numbers or there's some element of it that keeps coming back. Glue. Resin. I have used it often in my work and if you have a look at the [...] one, this is made of parts. You can flatten this. I did this drawing of all of this. And its 5 pieces that can open. They [...] all the houses like that, using steel. So when I want to use steel, I use steel but my materials are resin, wood. This is silicon. I did this at Tshwane University with students. So it was a whole big project that I did with students where we cast this with my original carved piece and we used the cast to make all of these out of silicon and we documented how each different silicon product reacted with that work.

So you can see again, this is aluminium, steel, all different materials. I don't allow myself to be restricted by sticking to the same material and I use realistic work when I need to, if I am trying to communicate something. So all of these things are different tools that I use to communicate what's important to that particular work. People just think those are just squares and things but they are actually for the blind. This one is inroad, into the city by the taxis. Different directions that the taxis go. So it's all connected. I allow myself to play with different materials that are going to communicate what I need to communicate. In this case, texture was very important to the blind project. But this is for sighted people and blind people can't feel these works but I have used the blind word to communicate with sighted people.

[TM]: Thank you.