

W women's work as artistic practice - Gatherings at Origins Centre

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Origins Centre was honoured to host Bev Butkow's exhibition re-weaving m/other and the series of gatherings and conversation that were held during the exhibition. The Origins space seemed like the perfect fit as it offers a dynamic mix of art and science – a museum that tells the story about the origins of art and of cultural and symbolic expression. The origins not just of how we became human, but of what makes us human. The museum provides visitors with a multi-sensory experience of Africa's complex heritage – beginning with the origins of humankind in Africa and then weaving through the development of technology, art, culture and symbolism. The journey continues with an exploration of the diverse southern African rock art traditions, highlighting the lifeways, art and cultures of the indigenous San and Khoe peoples and their ancestors. These ancient archaeological stories, rock art masterpieces and belief systems are illustrated and honoured through contemporary art installations by well-known South African artists.

Origins Centre is a multi-disciplinary space at Wits where African histories, peoples and environment, art and lifeways are celebrated and remembered. Programming encourages discussion, and finding creative ways to communicate, display, preserve and research the African past and indigenous knowledge systems, while ensuring ethical and reflective knowledge construction within the field. One focus area of Origins Centre is to transform the museum experience from a static, one-sided information giving source, to a more interactive experience that gives voice, opinion and agency to the visitor. Part of that is hosting workshops, conversations, events and exhibitions that bring in different voices, different ways of seeing things, and multiple narratives about the past, society, knowledge formation and heritage.

In many archaeological narratives, individual stories are lost. We need to question what the role of an individual was in the past and how we can (or might) see it. Further, the role and voices of women and children are often lost in archaeological and historical narratives – or their roles assumed in interpretations. So, the gatherings curated by Bev Butkow and Candice Allison focusing on women's work tied in well both with the museum's vision to encourage open and thought-provoking conversations, but also to think of the role of women in everyday life, in artmaking, in storytelling, and to rethink how narratives are woven. The gatherings brought together a wonderful variety of "academics / thinkers / creatives" in southern Africa to think and converse around a series of broader themes – bringing in topics of materiality, labour, action, bodies, environments and remembering.

It was fitting that the conversations were hosted in the 'Tapestry Room' featuring 11 beautiful panels that were designed by Tamar Mason and created by her and a collective of 80 craftswomen from three groups – the Mapula Project in the Winterveld, NW Province, Ikageng from the Bus Factory in Joburg's Newtown, Kosikona women from Kwaggafontein, Mpumalanga. The works illustrate, through images, the history of the San and the harsh and beautiful histories of the indigenous cultures southern Africa. The 11 panels, each 4.5 m x 2 m, incorporate images from rock art panels from around South Africa, ethnography, history, oral history, cultural practices and indigenous knowledge. They also include San contemporary artists' imagery from the Kuru Project in Botswana, the !Xun and Khwe from South Africa and Ekoka in Namibia. The final panel is a wish for the future - embracing the children of southern Africa's future and celebrating our diversity, indigenous cultures and languages.

Having Bev and Candice's gatherings in this space at Origins Centre continued the journey of the embroideries and the women who made them. Stories of community, sharing, collaboration and art-making, prompting diverse voices to be heard and inspiring reflections on the female's role - and females artists' role - in southern Africa and beyond.

Note:

A series of creative gatherings around the theme of 'women's work as artistic practice' were held at the Origins Centre at University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in August/September 2023. While archiving and analysing the proceedings of these gatherings, a series of texts were commissioned from a group of distinguished writer-thinkers. These writers – Candice Allison, Laura de Harde, Tammy Hodgskiss Reynard, Anthea Buys, Sharlene Khan, and Dee Marco – each contribute a unique perspective to the themes of women's creative practice, the body, materiality, nurturing, and the traces we leave behind. These texts are designed to challenge, inspire, and expand our collective consciousness.

The living repository of the creative gatherings can be accessed here:

<https://womencreativesgathering.webflow.io>

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