



JOHANN LOUW

Artist Room

03 . 10 . 20

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Text by Athi Mongezeleli Joja

Johann Louw's work is heavy. By this I do not just mean impenetrable, intense, or even depressing with its visual characteristics that might strike one at first glance. Rather, the potency of the work compels an imagining of a possibility, though latent, thereby inspiring a different reading of it. For instance, does Louw's work also carry some humour in it—can it? It seems not to in public imaginings as we rarely read or hear about it. However, humour and palatability appear to co-exist side by side with the nocturnal and strange in Louw's world. It is perhaps this duality—this yin and yang—that is responsible for the heaviness as one has to possess the capacity to appreciate the demanding nature of Louw's laborious repertoire. Though now a little too on the nose, heaviness is as much a curious term as is lightness.

Louw studied Fine Art at Stellenbosch University and graduated with a masters in 1992. He has exhibited widely and has participated in numerous international residencies. Indeed, he remains one of South Africa's more prominent painters—one of my own personal favourites at the very least. I cannot recall when or where I first came across Louw's work but I do remember the visceral intensity of that encounter. Like many, I had tried to situate Louw among a range of artists—likening his work to the Kentridges, Freuds, and Seville's of the world but I quickly realised how Louw's work refuses the narrative

security that permeates South African visual culture and discourse. At some point I registered something peculiar about it. I could never really say, at least not with conviction, that Louw's work deals with this or that subject. Even his titles foreclosed the possibility. I understood and related to the work at a visceral level. *Heavy* became a word I have since come to rely upon when thinking about Louw's work because I lacked an explanatory entry point.

I suppose my greatest battle with Louw was trying to comprehend my own fascination with his work. This perplexity inadvertently allowed me to read Louw differently—lightly—in order to fully appreciate the studious pursuit that informs his paintings. As such, I deduced a heaviness in his darkish colour palette and the funeral aura it instantiates—translating into an allegory for intensity via the repetitive looping and perennially expanding subject matters, compositions, motifs, poses, props, and figurative gestures that take on the form of a forensic study. Between his anomalous cinematic plots, his mere descriptive Afrikaans titles, and emotionally charged scenes, I can only assume some narrative arc exists. After all, narrative is the underbelly of much of our local art.

The human body, along with that of the animal—both central and

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ubiquitous—seems to always be captured in a state of mire and despondency. The palpability of human skin, of the flesh of the body—thick, saggy, contorted, and travailed—became material through which I anticipated the ins and outs of these scenes. But what we see is not necessarily what we always get with Louw. Instead, we are prompted, prodded, and invited to construct our own narratives. We have the relative liberty to read into the scenes to our hearts' content. This places the viewer relationally to the work, implicating them in whatever meanings they engender.

In some ways, Louw's work refuses to submit to the entrenched strategies of representation. That is, strategies whose overall creative disposition have become standardised, pliant, and at most times, didactic. This problem does not affect figurative art alone, but also abstract practices Louw seems to always be subtly challenging the lines between abstraction (not to be read as the mobilisation of non-figurative visual motifs but as a kind of narrative withholding) and figurativeness through his work—restraint of the familiar, or suspense of convention. This is not to say Louw's art should not mean or say something. Rather, what is peculiar in Louw's work is the way he "says"

things or suggests a questioning of the very prerogative to say and/or mean. A closer look of the work reveals this critical tension. One can not avoid seeing a strange vacillation between his passionate representations on the one side, and a sense of dispassionate withholding of narrative on the other.

Speaking to Louw on the phone recently, he let me in on a little secret. He said in this new body of work, narrative means are reluctantly adopted. Reluctant is the operative word here. It means they are used up to a certain extent. The thing is, he tells me, narratives quickly turn works of art into "illustrations." In the South African art context, this avoidance might sound like an insult. But considering how the sanctity of the narrative motif in art has rendered art into a news item, Louw's work retains the relative mystic of artistic creation. His avoidance of illustrations inspired him to create images that suspend the impulse for "telling" the story by narrative means. Thus I read this withholding not as luxuriating in silence or as neutralism; on the contrary. Louw seems to develop something else. In fact, this notable contradiction is itself indicative of Louw's restless and errant attempt to reconfigure the very premises of painting, and of artistic creation.



Johann Louw
Kastenades, met stillewe
2020
Oil on Canvas
125 x 122 cm



Johann Louw
Gebrilde man, en aap
2020
Oil on Canvas
46 x 122 cm



Johann Louw
Russiese storie in die Groot Karoo, met hond
2020
Oil on Canvas
122 x 137 cm





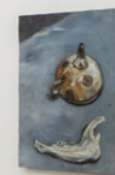
Johann Louw
Barok - stillewe, met aap
2020
Oil on Canvas
61 x 120 cm



Johann Louw
Te voet; skemer
2020
Oil on Canvas
102 x 135 cm



Johann Louw
Woeste gevegte
2020
Oil on Canvas
209 x 143 cm





Johann Louw
Klein stillewe, met 2 objekte
2020
Oil on Canvas
62.5 x 42.5 cm



Johann Louw
Poussin se oggendwandeling
2020
Oil on Canvas
122 x 212 cm



Johann Louw
Stillewe, met muishond
2020
Oil on Canvas
104 x 93 cm



Johann Louw
Gifdam, met Gilles
2020
Oil on Canvas
122 x 142 cm



Johann Louw | Artist Room | 2020 | Installation View

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Johann Louw was born in 1965 in Bellville, South Africa. He currently lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa. Louw graduated with a Masters in Fine Art from Stellenbosch University in 1992, and has since exhibited widely, both in South Africa and abroad. In 2007, the Sanlam Art Collection presented a mid-career retrospective as a tribute to Louw's extensive output and distinguished career over the past two decades. This exhibition toured the country in 2008 and 2009, and was accompanied by a publication on the artist. Louw was awarded the Ampersand Fellowship in 2014.

In 2020, Louw presented a solo body of work as part of SMAC Gallery's ongoing project, *Artist Room*, in Cape Town, South Africa. His work was included in SMAC Gallery's group presentation at the 2020 Investec Cape Town Art Fair at the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) in Cape Town, South Africa. Further group exhibitions in 2020 include *A Show of Solidarity* at SMAC Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa, and *SHAPING THINGS: An exploration of clay and ceramics in contemporary South African art practice* at SMAC Gallery in Stellenbosch, South Africa. In 2019 SMAC Gallery presented Louw's body of work at the SOLO section at FNB Art Joburg at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa. His work was also included in the Ampersand Award 21 years celebration exhibition, curated by Gordon Froud at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) in Johannesburg, South Africa. Earlier that year Louw presented a solo exhibition, entitled *Lacrimosa*, at SMAC Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa. In 2018 Louw presented a solo booth with SMAC Gallery at Istanbul Contemporary in Istanbul, Turkey; participated in a group show, entitled *Endless Horizons Gráfica*

Sudafricana, at the Mexican Art Expo in Mexico City, Mexico and, *Forward? Forward! Forward...* at Stellenbosch University Museum in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

In 2009, Louw was selected to form part of *Linguaggi del Mondo: Languages of the World*, an official collateral exhibition to the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. In 2010 he exhibited in *Environmental Concern and Human Existence* at the 4th Beijing International Art Biennale, China, and *Paralleli* – the official exhibition of the Sabbionetta Biennale for Contemporary Art in Italy. He was included in *Home Truths*, curated by Micheal Godby, at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, and later at the Sanlam Art Gallery in Belville. In the same year, the Association of Visual Art (AVA) Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa presented a solo exhibition of works by Johann Louw, entitled *AVA Alumni: Johann Louw*.

Earlier solo exhibitions include: *Der Abschied* at SMAC Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2017; *Loog* at SMAC Gallery in Stellenbosch, South Africa in 2016; *New Paintings* in 2010 at SMAC in Stellenbosch, *Terugkoms van Cythera (Return from Cythera)* in 2013 at SMAC Gallery in Cape Town, and *Gestaltes*, an exhibition of large scale works on paper at SMAC in Cape Town, in 2014. The University of Johannesburg Art Gallery presented his *Et in Arcadia Ego* in 2013.

Selected collections include: Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa; Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa; Sasol Art Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa and the Spier Art Collection, Cape Town, South Africa.



JOHANN LOUW

CURRICULUM VITAE

smac

BIOGRAPHY

Born 1965, Bellville, South Africa.

Lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa.

EDUCATION

2018 Master of Fine Arts (MA), University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

2015 Bachelors of Fine Art (BA), University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

2014 Artist in Residence, The Ampersand Foundation, New York City, USA.

The Ampersand Foundation Fellowship Award, New York City, USA.

2011 Artist in Residence, Nirox Foundation Sculpture Park, Arts on Main, Johannesburg, South Africa.

2010 Artist in Residence, Le Atelier Pons, Paris, France.

1991 Standard Bank Drawing Competition Award, Grahamstown, South Africa.

1989 Volkskas Atelier Merit – Award, Pretoria, South Africa.

HSRC Bursary for Postgraduate Study, Pretoria, South Africa.

1988 Rolfes Student Art – Merit Award, Durban, South Africa.

Volkskas Atelier – Merit Award, Pretoria, South Africa.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS & PRESENTATIONS

2020 Artist Room, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2019 FNB Art Joburg (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Lacrimosa, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2018 Contemporary Istanbul (SMAC Gallery), Istanbul, Turkey.

2017 'Der Abschied', SMAC Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

AVA Alumni: Johann Louw, Association for Visual Arts Gallery (AVA), Cape Town, South Africa.

2016 Loog, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2015 Gestaltes, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2013 Et in Arcadia Ego, in Collaboration with SMAC Gallery, University of Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Terugkoms van Cythera, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2010 New Paintings, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

2007 Johann Louw: A Mid-Career Retrospective, Sanlam Art Collection; Sanlam Art Gallery, Bellville, South Africa. The exhibition travelled to: Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria; Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein and SASOL Museum, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Untitled, KKNK, Oudtshoorn, South Africa.

Gaze, Erdmann Contemporary, Cape Town, South Africa.

2005 Recent and Not So Recent Paintings by Johann Louw, Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, South Africa.

2003 Sixth Solo Exhibition, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

2001 Fifth Solo Exhibition, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

1999 Fourth Solo Exhibition, Harris Fine Art Gallery, Wynberg, Cape Town, South Africa.

Third Solo Exhibition, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

1998 Second Solo Exhibition, Association of Visual Arts, Cape Town, South Africa.

1996 First Solo Exhibition, Association of Visual Arts, Cape Town, South Africa.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS & PRESENTATIONS

2020 SHAPING THINGS: An exploration of clay and ceramics in contemporary South African art practice, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Investec Cape Town Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC), Cape Town, South Africa.

A Show of Solidarity, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2019 That Was Then, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

Ampersand Foundation Award 21 years celebration exhibition, University of Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Investec Cape Town Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC), Cape Town, South Africa.

2018 Forward? Forward! Forward..., Stellenbosch University Museum, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Wish You Were Here, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

Endless Horizons [Travelling Exhibition], Taller Rufino Tamayo, Oaxaca, Mexico.

FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Impressions, Association of Arts Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

- 2017** *X: Part III*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- X: Part I*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- Cape Town Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC), Cape Town, South Africa.
- X: Part II*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- 2016** FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- UPSTART/STARTUP*, SMAC Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Home truths: Domestic Interiors in South African Collections*, IZIKO South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Cape Town Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC), Cape Town, South Africa.
- SUMMER SHOW '16*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- 2015** FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Cape Town Art Fair, SMAC Gallery, The Avenue, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 2014** *PAPERWORK: An Exhibition of Contemporary South African Works on Paper*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- Cape Town Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), The Pavilion, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Miart (SMAC Gallery), Fieromilanocity, Milan, Italy.
- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2013** *The Xmas Show*, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- ARCOMadrid (SMAC Gallery), IFEMA- Feira de Madrid, Madrid, Spain.
- Cape Town Art Fair, (SMAC Gallery), The Lookout, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Weerberug*, Curated by Luan Nel, Aardklop National Festival, Potchefstroom, South Africa.
- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- SPI National Portrait Award Finalist Exhibition*, Sanlam Private Investments in Collaboration with Rust-en-Vrede Art Gallery, Rust-en-Vrede Art Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Vanitas*, Curated by Clare Menck, Dorp Street Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- The Loom Of The Land*, curated by Anton Kannemeyer, STEVENSON, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2012** *PAINT I: Contemporary South African Painting 2002 – 2012*, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Collection 17*, SMAC Gallery, Aardklop National Festival, Potchefstroom, South Africa.
- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Collection 16*, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Contemporary Selection*, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Contemporary Selection*, SMAC Plus, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 2011** *Collection 15*, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa. *Collection 14*, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Designs of Time*, Fried Contemporary, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Collection 13*, SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2010** *Painters Who Print*, [Travelling Exhibition], Aardklop Kunstefees, Potchefstroom; The Gallery at Grande Provance, Franschoek, South Africa.
- Paralleli*, Official Exhibition of the 2nd Sabbionetta Biennale, Palazzo Ducale, Sabbionetta, Italy.
- Index 40: Leading works from the Sanlam Art Collection* [Travelling Exhibition]; SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch; Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein; University of Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg; Sanlam Art Gallery, Bellville, South Africa.
- Divisions: Aspects of South African Art 1948-2010*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- Rendezvous: Focus Original Lithography*, University of Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Environmental Concern and Human Existence*, Group Exhibition of the 4th Beijing International Art Biennale, The National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China.
- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2009** *I Linguaggi del Mondo: Languages of the World*, Exhibition at the 53rd Venice Biennale, Palazzo Querini Art House, Venice, Italy.
- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2008** *Collection 10*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- Home is my Castle*, Erdmann Contemporary, Cape Town, South Africa.

- FNB Joburg Art Fair (SMAC Gallery), Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Johann Louw & Sanell Aggenbach: Portraits*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- 2007** *Collection 6*, SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- 2006** *Out of Context*, Erdmann Contemporary, Cape Town, South Africa.
Drawings & Prints, Art on Paper, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2004** *New Identities*, Group show of South African artists, Bochum Kunsthalle, Germany.
- 2003** *Group Show*, Strydom Gallery, George, South Africa
- 2002** *Three Person Show*, with Clare Menck and Kennet Sinclair, Tokara, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- 1999** *Postcards from the Edge*, Axis Gallery, New York, USA.
- 1998** *Garob*, Knysna Fine Art Gallery, Knysna, South Africa.
Vital Signs, Australia National University (ANU) School of Art Gallery, Canberra, Australia.
Private Histories, Munich, Germany.
Landscape, Association for Visual Arts Gallery (AVA), Cape Town, South Africa.
Summer Salon, with Rose Korber, Bay Hotel, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1997** *Three-person show*, Primart, Cape Town, South Africa.
Unplugged 2, Rembrandt Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
Love (artwork in collaboration with Clare Menck), The Lounge, Cape Town, South Africa.
Die Ses : A Sculptural Requiem, (in collaboration with Clare Menck), Zonnebloem Estate/ District Six, Cape Town, South Africa.
Cyst : works in paint, [Travelling Exhibition], Fringe Exhibition for Cape Town Biennale, Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town, Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 1996** *Group Exhibition*, Dorp Street Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
Portraits, The Planet Contemporary Art Site, Cape Town, South Africa.
Group Exhibition, Primart Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
Group Exhibition, Labia Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1995** *Committee's Choice*, Association for Visual Arts (AVA), Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1994** *Staff Exhibition*, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
Displacements – South African Works on Paper, The Block Museum, Chicago, USA.
- 1991** *The Triennial Exhibition*, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1990** *Critic's Choice Exhibition*, Association for Visual Arts Gallery (AVA), Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1989** *Nudes Exhibition*, Association for Visual Arts Gallery (AVA), Cape Town, South Africa.

COLLECTIONS

Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
 Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
 Durban Art Gallery, Durban, South Africa.
 University of Stellenbosch Collection, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
 Sasol Art Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa.
 University of Cape Town Collection, Cape Town, South Africa.
 Spier Art Collection, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
 Pepkor, Cape Town, South Africa.
 Media24, Cape Town, South Africa.
 Sanlam Collection Cape Town, South Africa.
 Old Mutual, London, UK.
 Johannesburg Stock Exchange, Johannesburg, South Africa.
 ABSA Bank, Johannesburg, South Africa.
 JP Morgan Ltd, Johannesburg, South Africa.
 Bochum Kunsthalle, Germany.
 Johann C Porer Collection on loan to University of Cape Town, Oppenheimer Library, South Africa.
 Hollards, Johannesburg, South Africa.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact SMAC Gallery for more information or any other queries.

STELLENBOSCH

1st Floor, De Wet Centre
Church Street
Stellenbosch, 7600
T +27 (0)21 887 3607

CAPE TOWN

1st Floor, The Palms
145 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock
T +27 (0)21 461 1029

smac

info@smacgallery.com
www.smacgallery.com