



J E A N N E T T E U N I T E
S E N T E N C E S



SENTENCES: Flight & Trajectory studies

I have known Jeannette Unite for many years. As colleagues we taught at the Frank Joubert Art Centre – a wonderful locus of creative energy and tuition. As artists we continue to share ideas and practical experience and remain abidingly interested in the unfolding story of each other's work.

I recently came across a few notes – jottings made by me for an opening address at an exhibition of Jeannette's work at her Valkenburg studio. Reading through them, I was reminded of a central core in Jeannette's work. A passage from those jottings reads:

'We were talking about the Art Centre [Frank Joubert] yesterday and Jeannette described it as a place for personal growth, a place for creativity and healing. To me her description was interesting in that as well as describing the Art Centre, it brought together three components of her own painting and printmaking. For Jeannette her art is a psychological space to locate space, to embrace pain as well as pleasure and always to find a way through towards wholeness and self-healing. And to me the pleasure of Jeannette's painting is that this is done with a delectable, generous and appetising mess and smudge and smear and tracery of paint or ink or charcoal. There is always a felt manoeuvring between spontaneity and control, abandonment and restraint, spillage and the damming of both materials and feelings.'

This is true of her paintings on the **SENTENCES** exhibition.

Anne Emslie (March 2001)



Collage of internal exploration



Developing format through collage studies

SENTENCES

The title of the exhibition, **SENTENCES**, came out of a Thupelo workshop at the National Gallery in Cape Town. As artists work alongside each other, dialogue spontaneously develops – Jeannette was playing with collage and then sequencing separate collages, like frames in an animation strip. One of the international artists at the workshop, Chris Cozier, from Trinidad, recognised the calligraphic nature of the work – ‘like handwriting out of focus’, he said. The idea for a new exhibition was born.

The new series reads like handwriting out of focus. It is intended that the viewer sense meaning through the quality, speed and urgency of the mark. The series is constructed on marine plywood and consists of seven-panelled composite works. They read like an alphabet that requires decoding, a contemporary hieroglyphic system.

In the studio; September 2000
Work towards March 2001 exhibition





Visual Sentences: Fire Dance study

THE METAPHOR OF THE SENTENCE

Each series is conceived as a visual sentence. The seven paintings, like words, are separate and yet linked. There is a connecting matrix of theme, colour and gesture. The number seven takes on special significance. It is, for example, a number signifying completion – like the seven days in a week.

Then there is a play on the word 'sentence', for in some respects the artist sees herself as having served a metaphorical sentence of imprisonment to the memory and repercussions of certain painful experiences in the past. As she expresses it, 'The work explores both enchainment to the past and liberation from it.'



Sentences: Fire dancing

THE HANDWRITING

"In my paintings, mark-making is important. Like making good food, the ingredients count." Gestures and marks are the building blocks of Jeannette Uite's paintings and drawings. "I like to make varied, fluid marks. I like sensuality of surface. There must be contrast and tension in the marks to achieve a visual drama. And then the energy of the mark-making must be appropriate to the meaning of the work."

As Jeannette frequently works in an abstract or quasi-abstract manner, the mark-making becomes the vehicle for meaning. Working in an abstract idiom has been a way for her to secretively describe a narrative – one that can only be interpreted through gestures and marks, not read in images.



Sentences: Internal Reality (& Transition)



Sentences: Fire-dancing Red



Sentences: Flight Trajectory



Sentences: Internal Visceral

SOME THEMES

Some of the themes, such as the internal mask and flight evident in the work on exhibition, are recurrent. "I dip into them again, re-inventing and exploring further." Other themes, like the fire dance, emerge for the first time.

BONES AND BODY IMAGERY

The imagery of bones has long fascinated Jeannette:

'A number of years ago I was the victim of a serious physical attack. As an artist, I worked with the trauma, finding imagery and iconography that explored my inner state. It started with the construction of a mask from X-rays, fabric and multi-media.'



Sentences: Internal Reality | Collection Fehrsch architects



Fragile Structure 8 | Collection Lamberth



Fragile Structure 11 | Collection Lamberth



Fragile Structure Mask | Artist's collection

The mask was a fragile, disintegrating structure with skeletal aspects and references to the role of masks in Africa. It alluded to the power of ritual and the constant desire to transcend painful experience. The bones that appear in the artist's work at this time relate to feelings of physical and emotional fragility. Rib cages, for example, hold the memory of having been stabbed and encountering an overwhelming awareness of mortality. Jeannette Unite speaks about this:

'The bones are about death and decay and the transience of life. In one of the **SENTENCE** sequences they appear with turgid, gestural paint-stuff reminiscent of guts and wounds.'





Thresholds: The Locust Years;
Collection Clifford Chance, Brussels



Thresholds: The Locust Years;
Collection Clifford Chance, Brussels



Thresholds: From the Edge;
Collection Hendry, West Coast South Africa

FLIGHT AND TRAJECTORY

Here the artist explores a realm of transcendent imagery – like the Egyptian Phoenix that rose from the ashes.

‘Both in myself and in my work I am polarised between extremes. Often there is tension between being physically incarcerated and bound on one level and then being exuberantly free, liberated and buoyant on another.’

The Icarus myth holds a particular interest for Jeannette Unite:

‘For I am like Icarus, who was advised to take a moderate path and did not. I am extreme by nature. It can be exhausting.’

In her trajectory paintings, she attempts to convey liquid movement, large and fulsome gestures and sweeps of paint (like giant calligraphy in the air or arcs of flight), which again link process to the notion and theme of flight and trajectory.

The fire-dance paintings are concerned with movement in another way. They came at a time when the artist was in a creative cul-de-sac:

‘A friend came to visit with photographs of Vlam – a fantastic theatrical production involving fire dance that took place on the site of the old District Six on the slopes of Table Mountain. It was a phantasmagoria of movement and fire sculptures. In the darkness I was intrigued by the fire-dancing arcs and whorls that looked calligraphic.’

This connection of the fire-dancing to writing is explored in a number of the **SENTENCES** series. In addition, fire is in itself a potent symbol of transmutation. The relationship of fire to alchemy is of interest to the artist.



Thresholds: Flight; Collection D.Units, Cape Town



Animation Clips: Trajectory – at Softserve, November 1999



Thresholds: Breaking Through: Collection SWISS/RE, Cape Town



Separation
Collection Clifford Chance,
Brussels



We Meet Again I
Collection Neave,
Cape Town



We Meet Again II
Collection Buchanan,
British Consulate

'Fire is profound. It transforms materials. It consumes the old and something new is born – clay is mud and becomes stone. Alchemy on the ethereal level is about altering perception and consciousness from lead-like to gold-like. It's not about understanding. It is about 'innerstanding'. I see the process of art making as alchemical, about personal transformation. It's about becoming other.'



Nelard House Foyer commission, Collection Robie Properties





Thresholds: In the Tunnel Blue
Collection Clifford Chance, Brussels

WORKING WITH MYTH

Following the trail of universal truths contained within myth, Jeannette Unite sometimes takes a particular myth as a starting point for a work. The sequence in this exhibition that refers to the Minotaur is a case in point. This myth is about the Queen of Crete.

'She fell in lust with the bull. And to fool the bull she got Daedalus the carpenter to construct a cow. With this she seduced the bull. And from this union (and perverse manifestation of sexuality) came the Minotaur – half beast, half man. And the labyrinth was constructed to conceal the shame. The Minotaur consumed seven innocent youths and maidens every three years.'

The Minotaur emerged from the artist's own personal labyrinth. He is a reference to a childhood incestuous experience:

'My previous stepfather is my Minotaur. The labyrinth is the tunnel in my work. It is a dark space in my personal journey.'



The Minotaur: Emerging from the Labyrinth



Jeannette Unite walks her dog regularly on Table Mountain. And one day she found an incredible cave, like the mouth of a tunnel.

'It seemed like a mysterious and mystical place that struck me with tremendous resonance, and I took photographs. Later I revisited it with a group of art students and we wrapped it with a hundred metres of fabric, Christo style. It was an act of transformation. It made it photogenic! It was like an act of veiling, concealing, revealing, dressing a wound.'

Thresholds: The Tunnel I, Collection Clifford Chance, Brussels



Thresholds: The Tunnel II, Collection Clifford Chance, Brussels





THE EL GRECO FORMAT

The individual paintings have an elongated format reminiscent of spiritual painting like that found in altarpiece art and the work of El Greco. Jeannette wants the viewer to make this connection with religious art, even if only on a subliminal level.

Thus she is working with two formats at the same time: the individual vertical format of each painting and the horizontal format of the sequence, and the window-like grid that offers the viewer another painted reality.

Thresholds: That Moment, Collection Hendry, Brussels



Installing exhibition at Irma Stern
Thresholds: Ascension (Diptych), Collection Doolie, Cape Town



Thresholds: Guardian Angel,
Collection O'Connor, Dublin



Thresholds: Dark Angel,
Collection De Villiers, Cape Town



Thresholds: Angel, Collection unknown



REVISITING EXPERIENCE

"Some of my work, like that which deals with the attack I survived, is about revisiting moments of extreme experience. Oliver Sacks suggests that 'the disposition to re-collect comes with changes and separations from people, places and events and situations – especially of great significance – deeply loved or hated.'
(An Anthropologist on Mars)

Interested in the notion of nostalgia, Jeannette Unite suggests that we 'edit and re-edit ourselves with visually recollected fragments of our past, creating our own personal narratives.' She understands memory to be a subjective construct of the present. The notion of memory as fluid is an aspect of the work, especially evident in the medium of film animation with which she has recently been engaged.

Victory, Collection Calabrese, New York





Internal Landscape: Installation at Vezendal Frank Joubert Art Centre

THE RESONANCE OF IMAGES

Images resonate on more than one level. Take for example the image of the strelitzia, and that of paradise:

"For my brother and myself, as children, our Grandmother's garden was a paradise. To my young eyes it was huge and filled with wonders. There was a lawn like a meadow. I remember the jacaranda tree, the gardener who grew dagga alongside the tennis court, the red bottlebrush tree out of which my brother fell. And then the strelitzias. We knew them as the crane flower or the bird flower. In my paintings strelitzias often carry the echo of the bird and birds can also be strelitzias."

While it was a paradise, her grandmother's garden has now come to represent, from an adult perspective, a deadly paradise – for beautiful as it was, and as much as it represented freedom, it was also the location of innocence lost, a coming out of paradise, several uncomfortable experiences.

"I once dreamt that I walked into a Bluebeard's room full of female body parts instead of the art material storeroom at the Frank Joubert Art Centre. I took it to mean that difficult experiences have born fruit in my work as a source and point of departure.

I suppose my strelitzia paintings refer to the deadly paradise when they become bone-like and jagged and sharp. Simultaneously they are exotic dripping visceral juices, the sexual organs of plants."



Red Strelitzia's. Disney employer, USA

Strelitzia's studies





Sentences: Trajectory. Tixpelo workshop, The National Gallery, October 1999.

THE MAKING OF AN ANIMATION VIDEO

Working in the medium of animation video is a new departure, Jeannette Unite comments:

'I have always wanted to animate paintings while they were happening, so as to be able to capture their growing and changing. My paintings are about energy and movement. The continuous movement of animation seems to complement the themes of my work. I have been transforming images and sequencing them. Thus a single image of a painting can be turned into a sequence of thirty magic paintings that I have taken a part in creating but that also have a life of their own.'

The animation has been set to the music of Rachmaninoff – the 3rd movement of the Piano Concerto No 2 in C minor. It is a piece of music that Jeannette Unite found at age 14 in her grandmother's record collection. She comments:

'I'd like it to play at my funeral and like to think of it as a theme song. I adore the way it is at times dramatically passionate and then settles into lyricism. This is something that I, too, try to achieve in my work.'



Animation for Sentences

J E A N N E T T E U N I T E

- 1981-1985 Michaelis School of Fine Art
 1984 Gallery 709, Managed Franschhoek Art & Cultural centre
 1987-1997 Frank Joubert Art Centre
 Printmaker and specialist art educator
 Part-time and substitute lecturer at tertiary institutions
 2000 Art Education training at VUKANI, Nyanga, for EMEP

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *Sensuous Images*, Wandel Street Gallery
 1993 AVA
 1995 Chelsea Gallery, AVA
 1999 *Thresholds*, Irma Stern Museum, UCT
 2001 *Sentences*, Bell-Roberts Contemporary

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1981 Kellogg's Young Artists exhibition, Award Winner
 1989 Red Cross Charity Plates exhibition, Travelled nationally
 1990 *Critics Choice*, Association of Arts
 1991 Opening Exhibition, IN-FIN-ART Gallery
 1992 *Flash of the Spirit*, Baxter Theatre Gallery
 Art Now, AVA
 1993 *Aids awareness*, Irma Stern Museum, UCT
Brides, Seeff Trust Gallery
Peace, Seeff Trust Gallery
South Africa in Black and White, Seeff Trust Gallery
Woman on man, Man on Woman, Seeff Trust Gallery
Functional Art, Print Triennial
 Musee D'art Contemp International, France
 1995 Group Exhibition, Seeff Trust Gallery
 1999 *Paper Prayers*, Hardground's Travelling Show
Celebrating the Power of Woman, Baxter Theatre Gallery
 1 Nov Absolut Vodka, AVA
 1 Nov Inauguration Exhibition, S.A. Libraries
 5 Nov Public Eye Event *Soft Serve*, S.A. National Gallery
 1 Dec World Parliament of Religions
 2000 8 April *Artichoke*, Multi-media Event, Sandton Civic Gallery, JHB
 2001 *Absolut Secret*, AVA
HeartFelt, Red Cross, The Foundry



I would like to thank the following institutions and suppliers, colleagues, agents and friends who have assisted in making this exhibition possible and pulling it together.

AUTOTYPE	T-SHIRTS & PRINT SUPPLIERS	021 448 1540
BASA	BUSINESS AND ARTS S.A.	011 784 5994
DPS	DESIGN & PRINTING	021 422 1100
NOR SERVICES	PAPER & STATIONERY	021 511 3811
OLD MUTUAL	WEB DESIGN AND VIDEO	
PLAYROOM	VIDEO EDITTING	082 377 5200
SAGER INTERIORS	INTERIOR DECOR	021 465 4096
TIMBERCITY	PRESENTATION BOARDS	021 447 4075

ANNE EMSLIE, AUTHOR AND VISUAL ARTIST FOR INTERPRETING AND WRITING ON MY WORK AT RIDICULOUSLY SHORT NOTICE.

Lynne Lomofaki, Koeka Stander for their support and professional guidance, Marianne Thamm and Glynnis Poncon for proofing, Albert for the use of his digital camera. And the gallerists Suzette and Brendon Bell-Roberts for their adventurous spirits and professionalism and Abbey for her brilliant design skills and patience. And a huge thank you to my patrons and collectors for their faith in my process.

Jeannette Unite
 + 27 (0)82 9251834
junite@africa.com
www.unite.co.za

Bell-Roberts
 CONTEMPORARY

199 Loop Street
 Cape Town, South Africa
 + 27(0)21 422 11 00
www.bell-roberts.com