

The Voices of Women Museum space is as curatorial metaphor that which affirms many working-class homes - filled with colour in often contrasting and odd measure and often with plastic flowers and imitations of beauty that mimic the cliché of a romanticised landscape or 'a place I would rather be'. These are rendered in plastic table cloths and doilies - (like that which I am personally familiar with). It is as if I wish to pay homage to the home and family that raised me - in aspirational warmth and homely memory. This then becomes a fitting environment for such a portentous and complex narrative.



The Voices of Women Museum on Palmer Street is a womb-like space in burgundy reds with cool blue relief. It is a meditative incubator of a search for stillness that I propose - one where a form of cultural referencing is told by a set of people - 'ordinary' women. It invites us to read and meditate in silence on an oft forgotten truth and a life echoing so many memories, which reflect social, cultural and political experience.

*Voices of Women Museum*

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## *Dreams, Wishes & Expectations*

Coral Bijoux: Curator/ Artist





This work is an evolution from the five (5) *Conversations We Do Not Have* exhibitions that I have curated these past few years. These exhibitions have essentially looked at the Voices of Women Collection, where I have tried to gain a deeper understanding of the scope and authenticity of these intimately embroidered works. The inclusion of selected works by other South African and African artists from the MTN Art Collection sets up an interesting interface within the context of a South African art historical discourse. At the centre of this discussion are women or issues that affect women particularly and of course the curatorial eye (me) as I respond and reflect and reframe these multiple conversations, which makes reference to our multi-layered political and social discourse.

My focus is an interrogation of the dynamics of power – how I, we (women) are framed by the larger debates around gender and identity. I have been particularly interested to examine an idea where the notion of an 'ordinary' person is framed within the larger debates of where power resides. Class, race, gender, position, title, religion, humanity, are of course indices/indicators that are responsive to the built and natural environment; all of these factors form a locus of power and possible servitude. It is as an energy, a resource, that we have access to or are denied, it is a debate and reflection around power.

I have acknowledged and affirmed that we are women with stories, that weave in-between these many echoes of wishes, dreams and expectation that you see in this exhibition. I have become conscious of the yearning and expectation that are creatively embedded here, and that I have become both emotionally and intellectually conscious of the many wishes, dreams and expectations that we all have as an element integrated into the community of humans that yearn for integrity and dignity.



This exhibition 'space' - the emerging Voices of Women Museum, whose development has been frustrated repeatedly, underpins and affirms the curatorial narrative that I am seeking to make visible here. The Museum space that holds more than 3000 women's narratives that we have agreed to affirm and to hold within the broader South African historical narrative embroiders the curatorial framework. This framework seeks to make visible my voice as a creative woman wishing to shape and affirm the vision she has for her life. Upon reflection, this 'space' is also a metaphor for the life journeys of many women.

I consider that almost every simple or complex story told by a woman in this Museum refers to a deliberate necessity to shape personal, social and cultural space; a space which is often either denied or destroyed and seldom given unconditionally. Despite these challenges, these works also redefine a deep desire for both personal and social peace and justice. The notion of social peace is not a simple one. It reflects a deeply embedded social and cultural responsibility that frames the self within a conceptual idea that begins with the intimate space of 'family' – home, parents and children, - and projects into the larger social and political space where dreams and desires are often frustrated and denied. I identify strongly with these struggles and the subsequent struggles of many women in this narrative.

In this installation, pieces from the Voices of Women Collection focus on house and home, the disease of power inherent in stories of rape or abuse; stories of HIV/Aids and/or narratives of people living day to day lives who witness or experience the human endeavour. I have embedded my creative work and my 'voice' within the curatorial narrative. Like many of the 'voices' here, as an artist I wish to define my own space within the larger often hostile context of the 'survivalist' art world. It is not dissimilar in its yearning for a sense of space and embrace that all the other women both socially and metaphorically speak to.

My installation, *Dreams, wishes and expectations*, rendered in found plastic, affirms the metaphor of a problematic, 'throw away' material with all sorts of ecological implications. The affirming of those castaway materials into the considered and metaphorical creative work speaks to ideas of creativity and empowerment. The artistic or gallery space is laden with embedded historical power – that by all accounts appears to be an impenetrable edifice unless the encoded 'rule book' is followed.

This installation affirms a claim and a re-assertion of 'rite of passage' and an assertion to personal power. **Re-powered.** It serves as a metaphorical reminder of an ever-present threat to our comfortable ambivalence – one that we have created ourselves.

The snake metaphor which I quietly embed in many of my exhibitions, lies as a metaphor at the heart of the gender divide. The mythological negative referencing of 'snake' is a convenient curatorial device that frames the disempowered threat to the feminine. These metaphors have clear and obvious precedence in the many religious and cultural narratives that permeate the social, cultural and political arenas.

The entire Museum that frames this exhibition problematizes and interrogates the neutrality of the 'white cube' of many of our cultural spaces. The sensuality and warmth of this Museum interior space is also a critique of this predominant European and Colonial preconception.