

Opening address by Usha Seejarim for *Uncanny stories*

I have a long-standing relationship with Unisa as I co-taught the Multimedia students many years ago together with Ania. These sessions were hugely inspiring for me and I learned much more than I taught. It is an honour to be here today and I thank you for the opportunity to open this exhibition.

The exhibition is curated by Gwenneth Miller and features work from Third Level students, Unisa Staff members, and collaborative projects as maquettes for developing the Unisa Science Campus Art Walk.

I have been privileged to be involved at some level or the other with each of these groups of participants on the show and I would like to speak about them each briefly. I was external examiner for the 3rd year artwork, and have been for 3rd and 4th years for the past few years. Since I am involved in a few other institutions on a part time bases I can see the difference between the work produced at Unisa and elsewhere. It surprises me each year how high the standard of artwork produced here is. It surprises me, because it would seem counter intuitive to study art, which is a very practical subject requiring lots of contact time, via correspondence. And despite this long-distance learning of such a practical subject, the outcomes are better than those who have contact. I am aghast at the lack of this standard at other institutions. I am not sure what exactly it is that you are doing right, but I suspect that it has something to do with the level of commitment from the lecturers.

I had the privilege of engaging some of these lecturers and other staff during a mentorship process last week. In a space where you are doctors and professors in your respective fields and where you are the one providing critical feedback to others, I can appreciate that it can't be a comfortable process to have the tables turned and less so to use that feedback to develop respective artistic work. It has to be said that it takes huge courage to be open to a process of vulnerability and I appreciate your openness to engage that process. Gwen has been sending me images of your work in progress post our session and it is really inspiring to see what has been happening and to be witness to the very considered shifts in each of the works and even more so to see it culminating towards this exhibition. It is even more encouraging to know that these artworks are being submitted as Creative Outputs. As a practicing artist, I know all too well how much of research and critical engagement goes into artmaking. In fact, in many ways, it may be easier to write an academic paper than to make an artwork that is discursive, critically considered as well as technically and aesthetically resolved.

The final segment of participants on this show are the collaborative Marquette proposals for the Science Campus Art Walk. I have been part of the judging process for the selection of these public artworks. The thing that excites me the most about public art is not its scale, because I have experienced tiny public artworks that have moved me in my core, it's not its longevity either, because there have been temporary public artworks that have had long lasting impact. It's the fact that contemporary art is placed in a public space where audiences that would be unlikely to walk into a gallery or museum are confronted with something that they need to make sense of. Of course, because of this, it comes with huge responsibility, both for the artist and the client. Specifically given our history of the questioning of monuments and our instigating the world to ask similar questions of their own monuments.

The commissioning and inclusion of the artworks on the science campus will completely transform that space from one that is dry and pedestrian to one that will insight intrigue. And if it does that in a meaningful way, then we have succeeded.

So after all these various interactions with Unisa over the past few weeks I have gotten to know most of these works on a level that is a bit more than casual.

This exhibition is called Uncanny stories and the curator describes this as a moment or process when the familiar becomes strange and the strange becomes familiar. She says that making art is about searching for the tensions between known and unknown, between ordinary existence and intriguing events. And isn't that the perfect explanation of the artmaking process. An alchemy happens when ordinariness is reconfigured into something magical, or something that is so difficult to make sense of is transformed into something tangible.

The artworks on exhibit here, through the lens of the uncanny create complex and multi layered conversations, which include Sue Clark's unpacking of public spaces, monuments and Kabelo Maja's use of the whistle as a symbol that represents the precarious state of ethics in contemporary societies.

Nombe Mpako's work present moments of vulnerability, resilience, perseverance, and victory as a comment of Gender Based Violence, reinforced by Hetta Pieterse's tangible experience of this articulated by her installation of vests. There is a strong theme of the relationship of virtual and physical. Not surprising given where we are in the world right now.

Chantel Essex – Ferreira's explores this through landscape and Daniel through healing the landscape with the simple tool of a line. These conversations create an ecology of uncanny no more evident in the systemic understanding of that which is seen and that which is hidden in Gwen Millar's exploration of mushrooms as a metaphor.

At the end of the day, as artists, as lecturers as institutions and even as students, we have a responsibility. To quote Sango Filita's use of the Xosa proverb *Isikhuni sibuya nomkhwezele* "burning firewood is managed by the one manning the fire". Whether we realise it or not, we are the ones manning the fire and it is our hands both individually and collectively to decide if the fire provides warmth and comfort or is destructive.

With that very heavy burden, I say well done to all who have contributed to this exhibition.