



## **This week's featured artist**

### **Gwen Miller**

**Gwen Miller will have a solo exhibition at the Association of Arts Pretoria from 3 September to 19 September this year. We asked her to tell us a little more about herself.**

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#### **How would you describe yourself and how do you think others describe you?**

The late Ingrid Stevens (Pretoria News, Review 1997) commented that my work reveals “something of her nature...Here is certainty and hesitation, knowing and searching, finding and rejecting in the struggle for image-making that can express the complexity of her ideas.”

I suppose this reflects both a personality of a focussed art researcher/artist and my experience of life in general, which is at once grounded yet at times it is as though one is stumbling through an entangled forest. I’m invested in people whether it is family, friends, students or colleagues. I’m committed to building a world of relationships and art that is ethical and thoughtful.

For more information please visit <https://www.gwennethmiller.com/>

#### **When did you realise that you wanted to become an artist?**

I loved the art and technology classes at primary school whether it was using a paintbrush or a jigsaw. The school principal, Mr van Wyk, was an artist and thus the school had a large lovely art class. He often took us out of the class to draw and paint and I still love this process of fiddling in my sketchbook when I’m out-and-about. At high school we did not have art as a subject, but I volunteered to do the school stage decor and painted posters, whenever the opportunity presented itself. My English teacher, Essie Henrico, who is also an artist, planted the seed of art as a career, though at the time I thought it would not be possible.

### **Tell us about your artistic journey and your preferred medium**

The idea was that I should follow a career in Biology, but the experience of taking a figure drawing entrance test at university and sitting in a studio in front of an easel, changed my journey. My art and academic career have always been intertwined. I did a BA in Fine Art majoring in Painting, Drawing and Graphic Design. As a student I was immersed in the philosophy and aesthetic of the Neo-Romantics and Trans-avant Garde.

After a few years of teaching art on secondary level I was appointed as art lecturer at Potch at the age of 27. I was actively involved in exhibitions and when I moved to Pretoria in 1992, I started my Masters at UP. I taught part time at Open Window, and was appointed at Unisa in the Art Department in the year I held my Masters exhibition. During this time I immersed myself in several local and African collaborative and community projects, which opened another world for me.

I also experimented with digital processes and discovered a world of art influenced by newer technologies. I've since completed my PhD at Unisa in practice-led research with a focus on intermediality. Broadly speaking it deals with the reciprocity between digital and analogue media, in a target group of artists, my own practice and interdisciplinary theory. The current body of work is a return to my loved medium of drawing and painting, but several of the works include digital collages, either within their planning or as end products.

### **When are you at your most creative? What inspires you?**

I love working at night, when the energy around me becomes quiet. Also, during sabbaticals, when my academic duties are less. Yet, at the peak of academic studio sessions I find teaching very creative – it has the same energy as collaborative projects.

What inspires me? Sometimes it is an event or a site, other times work created by other artists. Influence also comes from theories, systems and new technologies, and exploring the links between these different influences. Art is a way of thinking through issues that confront me – having lost my husband to cancer in August 2019, much of what I create at present is a process of dealing with trauma, finding connections that can keep me giving and caring.

### **Who or what has had the biggest influence on your career as an artist?**

Growing up in difficult circumstances, my redhead mom used to tell me that the only way "out of this hole" is via studying and finding pleasure in your work. The desire to make stuff, to reflect through making and to be lost in a mind-state that creative production generates, is an important driving force. But I've had many mentors through my life – artists, fellow colleagues and often students. Working in the environment of tertiary institutions is immensely stimulating and has a major impact on my methodologies. I'm influenced by theories of reciprocity, generative systems, narratives, and earlier on, theories around the sublime. Keep in mind that art theory itself is inherently theoretical discourse generated by practice of art and life itself.

**Do you like travelling, what is your favourite destination and does travelling have an influence on your work?**

I've travelled widely and one of the major benefits has been the critical re-evaluation of my perspectives upon returning to South Africa. Of course COVID-19 has prompted a refocusing on the immediate environment and an inner journey of discovery.

**What do you consider as the highlight of your artistic career?**

Achieving my Doctorate through practice-led research is significant not only academically but for the impact it's had on my artmaking. It crystallised the value of reflection through art, offered close working with artists I admire, and humbled me with its demands. An earlier highlight was the Journey to Freedom narratives (2003-2008) project, which I directed. This was a massive collaborative project, with a wide reach (it travelled internationally) and touched several communities' lives.

**Which South African artist do you admire and why?**

I admire a multitude of artists and many who work entirely differently to my own approach. I admire the way Zyma Amien adapts her media as an embodiment of her ethic of care towards women; I'm inspired by the work of artists like Usha Seejarim and Carolyn Parton that make me think afresh about ordinary stuff invested with new value. I love the uncanny narrative unfolding in the animation by Lebohang Kganye; the ink drawings of Minette Vári where memory is mined in the remediation of personal archives; the disruption of paint via digital processes in Frikkie Eksteen's contemplation of moral dilemmas and Colleen Alborough's multimedia installations which involves physical computing ...this will be an endless list.

**You are currently working towards an exhibition. Please tell us more?**

Titled "Enfolding", the body of work references how people in our lives are enfolding in sites and objects, and even in their absence, embedded in our tangible world. I produced sets of ink drawings, and digital works, and I am in the process of creating oil paintings. The works are meditative and introspective, and deal with our vulnerability and temporary existence. There is a series of images of the local park where I organized the planting of 23 trees with the help of friends, family and Tshwane Parks employees in memory of my husband Stefan, drawn in inky smudges and stained grounds. I'm also working on a series reflecting on medical care, hospital rooms or folded blankets at the end of a mattress. The third series of work deals with places and simple gifted objects imbued with memory. The embracing values of communities of people are deeply embedded in the different images and titles. It is a series of works that helped me to keep breathing in a time of mourning.

**What is your message to South Africans during this difficult time?**

If we can view this disturbing era in the light of our own vulnerability, and keep on caring about the fabric of our relational world, there will be compassion. Be immensely grateful for the blessing of life.



Gwen - 18 months old



Gwen - 11 years old



A recent photo of Gwen

**Older work**



**River of Forgetfulness, 1997**  
charcoal, encaustic and oil on wood  
90,5 cm x 122 cm  
Private Collection

**Forthcoming exhibition**



**Jared's gifts, 2019**  
ink and watercolour on paper  
20 cm x 30 cm



**Sanctuary, 1993**  
ink on paper  
60 cm x 84 cm  
Private collection



**Ascension, 2020**  
ultrachrome inks on acid free Cotton paper  
45 cm x 60 cm



**Songs from the woods, 1992**  
oil on canvas  
123 cm x 164 cm  
Artist's collection



**Wine farm visits, 2018-2020**  
ink and watercolour on paper  
57 cm x 66 cm



**Pine stack, 1991**  
ink on paper  
75 cm x 50 cm  
Artist's collection



**Sorrow, 2020**  
ink on paper  
50 cm x 35 cm



**Earthskin (second installation), 2000**  
charcoal, encaustic and oil on vilene with lights and  
artificial hair embroidery  
Unisa Art Collection



**Forest for my love. Bear kisses for Mercia**  
2020  
ink and watercolour on paper  
21 cm x 29 cm



**Dullstroom Dam, 2019**

oil on canvas  
60 cm x 152 cm

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