

# Hermine Spies Coleman and the Art of Transition

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*by Louise Torr*

Hermine Spies Coleman's recent work reflects her intensely personal journey as an artist, from academic training to dealing courageously and compassionately with deeply personal and contemporary issues, demonstrating to viewers the complexities of gender transformation. In a recent exhibition, *The Power of Loss and Gain,*] Hermine explores how the hardship of change and loss is often positively rewarded by gain. [1]

Hermine Spies grew up in an academic environment. Her father was Professor of History at Pretoria University, where she graduated with a Degree in Fine Art. She subsequently obtained an Honours degree in Art History from the University of South Africa. She continued her art training for three years at the Art Academy in Ghent, Belgium. In 1982 she was awarded the French Union de Transports Aériens (UTA) travel scholarship, making it possible for her to reside in Paris for another spell of European art inspiration.

Hermine's passion is teaching art and she has been involved with this for more than forty years. Whilst in Johannesburg, she taught art at a school and ran adult and children's classes at home. She also held an exhibition at the then Rand Afrikaans University (RAU, now the University of Johannesburg). During the seventies and eighties Hermine held more than twenty solo exhibitions in South Africa and Europe.

In 2001, Hermine opened a creative centre – Giverny Country Studios – near Curry's Post in the scenic KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, where she lives. Most of what Hermine knows and teaches she learnt from practising art and working with other artists, including her students. She focuses her teaching on the development of intuitive expression and encourages creativity amongst aspiring artists through painting, drawing and ceramics classes. She organises workshops and provides space for other art specialists and teachers to share their creative expertise at Giverny. In 1988 Hermine married Nick Coleman, a geologist, who worked in the mining sector, and later moved to the financial sector in the corporate world. In 2010 Hermine accompanied her husband on a diplomatic mission to Abuja, Nigeria, for three years, absorbing local culture, including the vibrant fabrics and beads which thereafter inspired her art-making in terms of patterns, shapes and colour application, which she uses in her current paintings and drawings.

In 2014 Nick began a journey of gender transformation and is now Gillian, Hermine's transgender partner. Gillian recently completed a post graduate ceramics diploma in the Fine Art Department of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She currently runs the pottery section of Giverny Country Studios.

Hermine's art currently reflects her own journey, as she explores the human body in its physical forms, its gender variations and the associations between human skin surfaces and the crust of the earth.



*The Henge of Stone through Time*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 85 x 65 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist. "Calcified thoughts (ideas that we have held on to) are memorials to past states."

With *The Henge of Stone through Time*, like many of the other works on exhibit, the artist has drawn and painted over existing paintings, retaining some parts and obliterating segments, as a form of physical, emotional and intellectual realignment. In this process what was once held as precious is lost, but Hermine shows that one gains an image with newfound meaning. This discovery rests on the initial discomfort of losing and letting go. Sometimes life calls for some destruction in the process of continually shaping and re-inventing a new ensemble, a process symbolic of loss and gain. While this disorientation may eventually transform itself into empowerment, the process is not without vulnerability. The image shows the geologist in the rock, with strong sculpturing hands, working on and reshaping an emerging torso. The geologists' boots can be discerned in the painting, along with the hoof of a horse, and a stiletto heeled boot.

Hermine's paintings were accompanied by her short verses, such as the one below:

*In the shadow of the mountain  
she heard the song  
in pools and stones  
drawings and stories  
she heard of man's fear  
of the mountain as spirit  
that cannot be quenched. [2]*



*Share in Part*, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 58 x 41 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist. "Broken minds and bodies can inspire and reveal alternative possibilities."

Hermine's exploration of gender transformation within the world of art is mirrored in *The Danish Girl*, a biographical romantic drama film directed by Tom Hooper. Released in 2015 the love story is loosely inspired by the lives of Danish artists Einar / Lili Elbe and Gerda Wegener, played by actors Eddie Redmayne as Lilli with Alicia Vikander as Gerda. Their marriage and work evolve as they navigate Lilli's groundbreaking journey as a transgender pioneer, and one of the first known recipients of sex reassignment surgery. The story tells us of a woman in love with a man who's vanished, but whose presence is continuously with her. While she never wavers from being anything but the epitome of support, she acknowledges confusion and frustration. It's a tricky balance — Gerda loves her husband Einar and doesn't want to lose him, but loves him enough that she knows she has to. [3] Painting Lilli is Gerda's way of accepting their changed relationships, as Hermine has explored this transformation through her paintings and drawings of Gillian, and their separate senses of identity.



*Survival*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 51 x 51 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist.

Hermine's oil painting of Gillian's emergence from a deep blue sea reveals a search for a metaphor. Gillian describes the decision and process of gender transformation as being on a ship at night, falling overboard, and treading water all night long. Eventually, with daylight, there's sand beneath your feet and the desperate struggle is over. Stand on your own two feet and walk out.

This process is described in Hermine's poem:

*"... and can survive despite man  
she heard and knew  
to be afraid no more."*



*Makeup, not as a mask, but revealing the true self.* Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist

Hermine believes that a rigid mindset leads to stagnation and a loss of mobility and that “holding on to historical ‘facts’ can confuse our observations, our judgement, and can limit our movement towards the future.” Her personal journey around the concept of gender transformation, and what it really entails, became a central question for her, a journey neither linear nor cognitive, but one about identity. Through her art she explores her own metamorphosis, which at times is incomprehensible. For Hermine it is not about the loss of male and the acceptance of female. [4] It is about love in the face of loss, and their gained journey together, albeit in separate transformations.



*Balance*, 2019. Collage and mixed media on paper, 66 x 50 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist. "Balance can seem impossible to achieve when the ground under our feet seems to be spinning."

In her practice as an artist Hermine has drawn the human figure repeatedly, sometimes experiencing discomfort and frustration. She reverts to tearing the paper up and reassembling it to draw over again, turning the drawing upside down and drawing a new pose over the previous one, playing with dramatic contrasts of tone, crumpling and folding the paper to get mismatched body parts, or looking for lines which indicate movement in the figure. The process of going into the unknown is always uncomfortable, but often the discomfort disappears with the destruction or loss of a drawing. A transfigured image emerges from the breakthroughs she has made, with expressiveness and renewed energy. [5] Carl Jung describes how the unconscious manifests itself in one's conscious life, in a highly personal and tortuous experience. "There is no birth of consciousness without pain," he wrote. But with it, the individual can become more whole.[6]

Hermine sees shapes materialising from visual stimuli, past drawings, as well as from memory, often intertwining, not cognitively planned, and metamorphosing into something novel. In this way she re-authorises her deeply spiritual understanding and insights. She enjoys working in a variety of media, as they all embody metaphors and provide different means of expression in her search for meaning. Her recent exhibition *The Power of Loss and Gain* was a conclusion of years of working on, re-inventing and transfiguring her own art.

Hermine's artwork travels a trailblazing path with other women artists who are courageous enough to address and portray personal and political issues which some might find uncomfortable and even controversial. Her treatment of taboo themes relating to gender and sexuality bears comparison with artists as diverse as Marlene Dumas, Jenny Saville, Diane Victor Penny Siopis and Louise Bourgeois.



*The Art of Transition*, 2019. Mixed media, 90 x 150 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist.

Like Marlene Dumas, Hermine deals with subjects many find controversial, draws inspiration from personal experiences, and features representation and figuration in her work. Both demonstrate their purpose to create an image that can translate ideas about painting and the position of the artist.[7]

Hermine reinvents contemporary figure painting to reveal a non-permanent, changeable state of being. Her imaging of vulnerability through viscous, textural paintings of overlapping figurative forms recalls the work of British artist Jenny Saville, who uses abstraction to create direct and flawed images of the human form. Her often damaged, dimpled, or altered body images tackle contemporary and taboo issues, such as plastic surgery. Like Hermine, Saville makes visible “the precarious states of the human body ... expressed as a dynamic tangle of superimposed limbs and frenetic postures rather than a static composition of iconographic order.” [8]

Hermine consciously deals with the sense of discomfort and exposure in her artistic practice. People in general avoid discomfort, but Hermine believes that confronting discomfort can lead to spiritual, creative, compassionate and life-giving benefits, which eventually create peace of mind. In the same way Diane Victor's recent works of people infected with the HIV virus, murder victims, those awaiting trial in prisons and those listed as missing persons, [9] are often despairing and painful images to viewers.[10]

Hermine uses her work to examine transitional existences and, like Penny Siopis, investigates issues seldom discussed, such as race and gender, estrangement, grief and shame. Siopis' work entails “the crafting of an unstable relation between form

and formlessness, in the understanding that the process of becoming proceeds in ways that are almost always unpredictable and at times accidental.” [11]



*Transition to Another Mindset*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 80 x 110 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist. “As we move through time towards an unpredictable future, the space available within our minds alters.”

Hermine boldly deals with personal issues and lays them bare. With *The Power of Loss and Gain* exhibition, she took an intuitive and unknown direction, and constantly questioned what she understood about the evolving process. She up-ended everything in her search and delighted in upside-down figures. Elements of destruction and rebirth permeate her work. Her mixed media approach and use of non-durable papers, partially burnt images and recycled works of art runs contrary to conventional curatorial practice. It speaks of changeability, and reinforces her notions of impermanence and transition.

Gender identity is a sensitive subject, and in painting portraits of Gillian, Hermine’s aim was not to record the process of gender transformation, but rather to give expression to deep emotions and identity. Gender transformation is not easily discussed, and those involved usually remain in the closet for a long time, often out of fear of hurting or even destroying others close to them. [12]

During the 1990s French American artist Louise Bourgeois used her art to speak up for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) equality. She said “Everyone should have the right to marry. To make a commitment to love someone forever is a beautiful thing.” [13] Hermine’s paintings of Gillian’s transgender journey reflect Bourgeois’ ideas of “the fear of falling”, transfiguration, transcendent love and commitment.

Hermine holds up a mirror and shows that Gillian’s transition is a private and personal journey, and has nothing to do with others’ acceptance or rejection. Her

paintings evoke a personal involvement in viewers, and invites them into a zone they might find uncomfortable and maybe lead them to confront parts of themselves that they don't want to see. But for Hermine, it is an expression of a quiet, transparent and deeply spiritual conviction. The upside-down, inside-out nature of her paintings, reveal the persona inside the body, sometimes breaking through a mass of solid rock, and giving expression to Hermine's deeply spiritual introspection, and the process of trying to discover yourself for yourself. [14]



*Release*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 102 x 127 cm. Collection: Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg. Photo: courtesy the artist. "Letting go of attachments can result in escaping the force of gravity over time. The resulting motion of release is much like that in the womb, or in outer space."

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Notes.

[1] *The Power of Loss and Gain* exhibition was held at the Tatham Gallery in Pietermaritzburg from 21 July to 15 September 2019.

[2] All quotes appearing in captions are from poems by the artist, displayed alongside exhibited works.[3] <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0810819/>

[4] Interview with Hermine Spies Coleman, Giverny Country Studios, Curry's Post, Sat. 7 Dec. 2019.

[5] *The Witness*, Feature article "Discomfort is the key to discovery", 18 July 2019.

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/jun/13/carl-jung-red-book-unconscious>

[7] Leontine Coelewijn, Helen Sainsbury and Theodora Vischer (eds), *Marlene Dumas: The Image as Burden* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014).

[8] <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2010/jenny-saville/>

[9] [https://eprints.utas.edu.au/17119/2/Whole-\\_Rees-Pagh-thesis-2013.pdf](https://eprints.utas.edu.au/17119/2/Whole-_Rees-Pagh-thesis-2013.pdf), pp.75 & 78.

[10] <https://www.artprintsa.com/diane-victor.html>;

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane\\_Victor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Victor);

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/diane-victor/>

[11] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penny\\_Siopsis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penny_Siopsis)

[12] Interview with Gillian Coleman, Giverny Country Studios, Curry's Post, Sat. 7 Dec. 2019.

[13] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise\\_Bourgeois](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Bourgeois)

[14] Interview with Hermine Spies Coleman, Giverny Country Studios, Curry's Post, Sat. 7 Dec. 2019