

# Demystifying Art: Garth Erasmus interviewed by Mario Pissarra

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*by Mario Pissarra*

**Mario Pissarra:** As an artist what's important for you when you make a piece of art, what is it that you are looking for when you make art?

**Garth Erasmus:** Love. When I start a work now, when I want to do it, there is this inevitable drive in me that is unstoppable. I only happen to be painting, it's an accidental medium, but I think that the notion of what it does spiritually to me is the real thing that drives me to be creative. I like the fact that I feel better spiritually [and] emotionally after grappling with all the issues about making a work of art. It's almost like a fighter after the fight, there's that drainage of energy, something has happened. Now it's almost a similar kind of feeling that I approach things [with] nowadays although it never used to be like that.

**MP:** How has it changed?

**GE:** I think it's simply changed because of the political changes, and the transformation in our lives from apartheid to now. I don't mean to say that there's been great changes. Probably the fact that there's been so little change is the thing that has changed me, because I think during the apartheid times one was always guided by a certain kind of mindset, a certain aim to your work, because these aims and this way of thinking was attached to a broader political picture that was being painted. I think with the ensuing changes and the hopes that one put into the future changes, the hopes that there will be so much changes for the lives of artists and the destiny of artists, because that hasn't happened, I've changed to becoming more isolated as an individual, [and] as an artist. I find myself completely isolated now compared to those days and I find myself having to come more and more to terms with this isolation. I know people always say that you go into yourself but I feel this has happened to me because of the situation that has developed over the years. I've become more and more insular. I've become more and more interested in personal and private issues and these are the kinds of things that I grapple with in my work these days. Whereas in the political time, in the overtly political times, those private and personal [concerns were] very much put aside to another kind of agenda.

**MP:** What I find interesting is that you're stressing this degree of personal engagement in the process of making, but in a lot of your works an archetypal image comes out..,

**GE:** Right.

**MP:** There is a sense of some kind of pre-history that emerges that communicates more of a kind of collectiveness, a sense of collective history or collective identity...it seems to be about more than you.

**GE:** I would agree with that. I think I very much respond to myself as a person who finds himself in a big urban settlement like Cape Town, but I only find myself in Cape Town in my adult life. I come from the Eastern Cape. I come from a very rural background. I grew up on dusty roads in Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape. I've never really escaped being that rural kind of soul deep down. I think this is the thing that has always been in me even though I never probably wanted to be aware of it or wanted to make it a priority, but I think I've always been aware of that side of myself deep down. I felt I wanted to deal in artistic terms with social issues and big issues because of the times, but I think deep down there's always been that thing of a family history that has always been important in my own personal life. You probably have to first know a little bit about my family life to understand what I'm talking about, because I found that for a person like me coming to a big urban area, and that only happened to me in the mid 80s, I tended to be very aware of my otherness to urban beings. I was very much aware of myself as being an outsider to an urban environment, and the longer I stayed in the city the more I began to think about those issues of upbringing and family that I had thought I'd left behind. I'm not just talking on a simple personal level but I think about my family life and I become so much more aware of myself because my whole family life was lived during an apartheid time, was lived during a time of social engineering. So when I look at my family life I tend to look at how my family was destroyed. I always carry my heart on my sleeve about that because one way of dealing with political changes in South Africa now, and talking with people from overseas who want to know about these things I've always found myself in the past complaining about apartheid. But I find now that it's so much more of value to explain apartheid to people because then you actually see the transformation on their faces, and it's becoming quite clear to me that there's a lot of aspects of apartheid life that people are ignorant of. So when I think about my own personal family life I'm dealing with [it] in a certain kind of way. A certain kind of healing begins to happen because I have an understanding of how this social engineering worked on, and I can only use myself and my family as an example. [It's] almost like I have live examples around me of how South Africa works, how apartheid in South Africa worked, because I have my family members, the way they turned out, the way my uncles' lives turned out; my aunts, the extended family, how they were destroyed. Looking at these things gives me the kinds of material to work with now in this post-apartheid period and for me it makes so much sense because I believe that we still haven't really dealt with the issue of healing that was supposedly so important in the immediate post 1994 period and which the politicians were really feeding us a lot of. I think that ten years down the line seeing how so little has changed, I call into question the politicians use of that healing metaphor and symbol at that time. It's almost as if they used it to dope society, [it's] like [they] set an agenda but then they just leave everything and the society itself has to find out how this healing has to happen. We all know that serious healing must happen, but for me there's just no imaginative way of going about this healing. So all in all what I'm trying to say is I decided that healing is necessary and I've become sensitised in my own personal life to what that healing means, and what that healing is, and I've actually decided to put that in practice in my own way in my work. Basically because

I've become much more isolated as an artist I've had to deal with these changes in my own way.



*Om die Omvang*, 2001. Zinc, canvas, sand and hinged boards.

**MP:** People who know your work, one of the first things they would say or talk about is how you use materials in very creative ways. You use a range of materials that are not always conservative traditional art materials. How does your choice of materials relate to what you've been talking about?

**GE:** Even though I was always a painter and draughtsman being an artist in the 70s and 80s in South Africa was really being part of a certain kind of time. I've always been interested in the educational value of art. I suppose the other thing, that archetypal thing that you're speaking of, I've always been aware that art is not just for you but it is for a wider community. So coming back to that point, I think I come from a tradition

where art is considered to be of an educational value, that it has to have an educational value, and in the political times of the 70s and 80s when I was really a formative [artist] the thing that always interested me was that I didn't consider myself to be somebody special as an artist. I thought of artists as being very ordinary people because I saw myself as an ordinary person, and I was always fascinated to relay this message to the general public out there that there's nothing fancy or great about art making really, it's ordinary people and ordinary issues, ordinary emotions. I've always been interested in the aspect of demystifying art, and the first thing and the most logical way of doing that has always been the choice of materials, working with materials in a certain way. Working with classic paint and I'm talking about oil paint and turpentine and so on is such a classic material, is such a European thing that it was always very clear from the very beginning that paint itself as a medium couldn't really do that in an African kind of environment. It had to go beyond that and find materials in an urban environment is such a logical way to go about that. I remember one of those first Thupelo workshops I went to way back in the 80s. I was very young and there were a lot of older people around me and I was very influenced by the conversations and dialogue that was happening around me and I was like a sponge. I remember this one artist saying that there's colour lying all around. The context was there was no more paint at the workshop and there was this dilemma now. We had to turn to something else [and] the colour lying in the environment was like ready made paint. I think the step of moving towards material that is in your immediate

environment was a natural step. There was phase in my life when I turned to using found materials and used it usually in collaboration with paint and so on but it comes from that kind of place, trying to demystify art. Basically that making artwork was accessible to anybody [to] pick up something from the rubbish dump, for example.

**MP:** Are any of your materials autobiographical? For instance when you're talking about your rural roots you made me think about the sand in your paintings in a different way. Are there materials that have a particular resonance for you?

**GE:** Well, the sand. I particularly enjoy the sand, not just because of my contemplation of my roots. It was a perfect metaphor for me to use, but also on a practical level. There was always something [more] that I wanted out of paint and one of those things was for paint to have a certain kind of body, a certain three dimensional quality. I was always striving to work with paint in that kind of way and so the discovery of acrylic paint and acrylic mediums in general was very important in my life because it was not as precious as oils. It was much more flexible and elastic and much more open to be corrupted with sand and things like that, and it was very logical to me to start mixing it into my paint, and that's where it actually began.



*Music maker & muralist*

**MP:** There's also Garth the musician. How does that interface with Garth the painter? Are they two separate activities or do they come together in your paintings? Is there an overlap or is music an accompaniment at an exhibition opening? What is the interface, what is the relationship?

**GE:** I'm actually very much still working on what it means in my life. My vision and aim is for all these activities to eventually merge. I'm working towards that. It is what I'm doing. The music is not a separate part from my interest in art in general because my interest in music came as a result of a purely art activity in the mid 80s. But also it's not just as simple as that. It was going together with investigating myself in a very

personal way and trying to come to terms with what my own voice is. I think that that eternal dilemma that artists are looking for in their lives is something that happened to me. This whole aspect of thinking about my roots and my family life is closely wound up with the meaning of life lived in an apartheid situation. [For] me as a young person in the 80s, when I had these thoughts I had to put it into practice in some way. One of those ways was to look at what 'indigenous' means in my life. At the time there was no talk about these kinds of things, but it was because of my particular upbringing again that this came up, and I used this as a way of navigating these heavy political issues about social engineering, where we come from etc, because I grew up in a family where there was a lot of storytelling and stories particularly about ancestors, [my] great, great, great grandmother for example, stories about who she was, aspects of her life, where she came from, as an example. So I always [was] fascinated by this in my life because as I was maturing I realised that this was not a common experience for a lot of people and so I took it very serious from that point of view. I realised that there was something special in my life that I could actually build all my work on. I took this aspect of indigenous and what it means seriously in the mid 80s and started looking and reading and researching indigenous culture, particularly San culture, Khoi culture, looking at words like "Hottentot", the one word that I grew up with. I was able now in my mature years to start looking at these things from an intelligent kind of point of view, reading researching and so on and it was within this research that I came across very accidentally, very spontaneously, examples of the music of indigenous cultures. It struck me when I came across this that I was not aware that our indigenous cultures were so rich in music. When I turned to further research and actually went to look at what these instruments of music, what they looked like as physical objects they were very influential and inspirational for me. I thrived on simply their three dimensionality, and because the way I received them at that stage was in a museum kind of context, in a context where I was still separated from this, I used this separation as a metaphor of doing something about them in my work. So I did a very simple thing. I had no idea what these musical instruments sounded like, but I had a clear idea of what they looked like. So I simply had to use my initiative and build something similar and find out what the music was. The music basically came as a secondary thing after the construction of these objects because when I think back now I was wanting to create these as three dimensional objects, as sculptures basically, and I was intending to use them as sculptures in my work. That was the original intention except when I made them the sound became much more interesting for me and it kind of took over to the point where I don't see them as objects now, I see them as music making instruments where by actually creating the music that is within me... This is the fascinating thing for me because the music that I make is the same as the paintings that I make. I take it as the same... they're coming from the same source, the same spiritual and emotional place. This is why I say all of these aspects are equal in my life which is why I want to work towards bringing all of them together. I just haven't had that opportunity yet.

**MP:** I also wondered whether for you there were analogies between say the line in one of your paintings and a particular sound, whether you intuitively... as I understand it, correct me if I'm wrong, I don't think you've got a classical background in music?

**GE:** No [Laughs]

**MP:** Do you on an intuitive level associate certain lines, certain colours with certain sounds in music, certain tones?

**GE:** No, not really but I'll tell you an interesting thing. Immediately after I began playing instruments and these instruments range from string instruments to percussion instruments to wind instruments, I realised shortly afterwards when I started playing them, that I had to create a certain kind of language for these instruments because I intended to play them in certain situations. I realised that I had to have a language that I could call on. What I did was I created my own way of notation. I don't think I would be able to explain it to you, because it's very intuitive. It's simple things like on the string instruments... I would be drawing the string on paper and it would almost be like a visual image of how that played rather than a mind or intellectual image like a mathematical image, which is what musical notation looks like in the classical sense. So these were almost pictograms or pictures. For me this was how the language was working, and so this did influence me because I was playing and writing and notating my own music so often that it was becoming my own personal language and I felt free to use this in the other mediums that I was working on, my painting and my drawing I found myself actually calling upon this reservoir of icons that were developing as musical notation, so from that point of view there is a link but not from the associative angle with colours meaning certain sounds or anything like that, not at all.

**MP:** When you say that in the 80s you started exploring this notion of indigenous culture and how you related to that, wasn't that a very dangerous thing to be doing within the politics of the time? Apartheid tribalised people, it politicised ethnicity so when you started doing this, were there people you could share these ideas with or was this a very solitary thing? Was this something you had to keep quiet in case somebody was going to accuse you of being neo-tribalist? Did any of those politics come into it at all?

**GE:** I think so, but not in such a clearly defined way that you're describing now. I think that I was living two kinds of lives as an artist. I think there was the public and the exhibition me, but I think at the same time this [personal and private] thing was happening to me. It was pretty much a solitary thing that I could only sense the importance of back then, and what I was trying to do is nurture it quietly by my own and on my own in a solitary way. But also as the 80s were going on I very early on through the political networks of the time started hearing rumours, stories, basically inside information that things were going to change, that Nelson Mandela was being spoken to surreptitiously on Robben Island. I heard these stories way back almost in the beginning, and it already set me on "hey we have to look forward, the next three or four years might be different" because in general nobody knew about anything that was going on. That gave me a little bit of a drive because I realised that very soon the artmaking in South Africa was going to change from a very overtly political [one] to something else. Now this something else was a big question mark, a big issue, because what is it going to be? So I was working from that kind of perspective as well, and that was encouraging this personal delving.

**MP:** I was going to ask you something else, and against my better judgement I will ask you... it's what I call the The 'Peter Clarke syndrome' the better recognised abroad than at home syndrome... how do you personally feel about that? When I

look at your CV I don't see your work in corporate collections, I don't see your work in the public institutions in South Africa and yet you're well represented in the Smithsonian. It's not that nobody knows about you, but it seems to me that the recognition largely comes from outside the country, rather than inside.



*Riemvasmaak*, 1999. Acrylic and sand on canvas, 79 x 76 cm

**GE:** Yes, I would agree with that but this is precisely the point that I'm talking about, this post 1994 syndrome that we are in as artists. I think it's the equivalent for me of floating around in a very strange kind of void because what I see when I look back at my experiences with overseas situations I'm always interested in where does this come from? What is the motivation for these curators, these gallery people? I'm interested because strangely enough in South Africa we have a tradition where our gallery people tend to model themselves on a European or an American way of doing things, and yet because of my experience of this I realise that they don't know what they're doing. They seem to be modeling themselves on something that I don't understand actually, because I've always been fascinated by the fact that overseas curators, when they come here they don't want to see a European thing. Constantly when speaking to foreigners they go to places like the national gallery [and] they say that it's like walking in some gallery or some cultural space in Europe. I believe that we are not doing something right in this country and finding out what that is is so interesting for me. So I suppose people have seen something of a local character in [my] work... these overseas people they see something of an Africa, something of a here in the work [that is] of interest to them because that's really ultimately what on all levels what overseas people have been interested in. The thing that makes the

work talk about a certain kind of environment, so I feel that the fact that local galleries haven't had that inquisitive nature about my work is something that I can't really delve too long on...I don't understand it.

**MP:** What's interesting for me is that I'm usually very critical of the South African art world in the sense that I feel very often it's when an artist is recognised abroad that they get on the front cover here, but you've proven an exception to that. Peter [Clarke] proves an exception to that, so it shows it doesn't always work like that. One wonders about whether it's because the Smithsonian is regarded as being ethnographic or anthropological as opposed to being your traditional fine arts museum, is that the difference, I don't know? The other thing I find odd is that there was a lot of interest in the country from certain quarters around the notion of black people painting abstract works...

**GE:** Right.

**MP:**...and I wonder there whether because of the race politics in South Africa perhaps in some of those peoples' minds you weren't black enough for that. I mean Dumisane Mabaso, for instance I know Dumi from the early 80s and I remember little etchings he used to make and I remember seeing the most horrible abstract painting I ever saw in my life hanging in the Johannesburg Art Gallery and being totally shocked that it was his. That work has appeared in I don't know how many books, that same work,

**GE:** Okay...

**MP:** I've never seen any of his other images in any books...

**GE:** Right...

**MP:** So there was a particular interest in the fact that black people were doing this, but I wonder if the people who were advocating that position... whether you fell outside of that? What is it because definitely there was an interest in Thupelo and you are one of the people who is most prominently associated with Thupelo. Lionel [Davis] is a similar case. Lionel is in the Botswana National Gallery, the Zimbabwe National Gallery... he's not in the South African National Gallery!

**GE:** [Laughs]

**MP:** He's blacker than black!

**GE:** [Laughs]

**MP:** But he's also not in terms of a particular apartheid way of thinking.

**GE:** Okay...

**MP:** So I don't know... these are difficult things for me to be clear about, these perceptions... because I think it's right what you're saying. I do think that people do recognise something African in your work when they're coming from outside.

**GE:** Yes.

**MP:** It's interesting that you've worked for the National Gallery, for instance, and usually you'd think that well in that case you had your foot in the door. But I still don't see your work there.

**GE:** [Laughs] I don't know how these things work to tell you the truth, I really don't know. I just haven't been in that situation where I wanted to compromise being in these institutions or on these front pages. I've never considered it to be an important thing, so I never really sought these things. I think as I grow older and realise the way the systems work that there is a way of doing this. There is a way of achieving these things if you want them in your life. But I like to think that not compromising and not being easy to box has also been interesting for me. When I'm in a musical situation I find people are surprised when they know I do some paintings, similarly on the other side. So I've found this thing about reinventing myself to be a thing that worked for me in a very positive way because I don't fit into things quite easily. When I look at how different people are interested in different aspects of my work, I can appreciate this and then I become aware that actually I enjoy this... the fact that people can't put me into a box. This is actually the thing that makes [my art] powerful and the thing that actually works in my favour. [This] is a metaphor for us for the problems that we [have] in this country. We don't even know enough about each other because this is where I see that problem of the Peter Clarke syndrome that you're talking about, and I agree with you, I know that I fit into that. I can see things happening along that way but it says a lot about our own society and how we have been engineered, and for me it speaks about what it is we must do that is not happening. That is interesting for me because people are reading the South African situation differently to me and I'm an artist, I'm completely in the middle of things. Yet I see everybody surrounding the world of the artists in South Africa is not doing the work properly as far as I'm concerned.

[This is a mildly edited version of an interview that took place in Garth Erasmus' studio at his home in North Pine, outside Cape Town on 21st of September 2005. *Excerpts of this interview were used for the short profile on Garth Erasmus commissioned by Art South Africa*]