

# Transformative art practice: a conversation with Kim Berman

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by Simone Heymans [1]

**Simone Heymans:** Can you please share reflections on your personal art practice and what you are currently creating and addressing? [2]

**Kim Berman:** I did my masters in Boston, at the Museum School of Fine Arts at Tufts University. I was there from 1983 to 1990. So that was during the height of the State of Emergency in South Africa. The work that I was doing connected to the State of Emergency. Because I was politically involved in the anti-apartheid movement, with the African National Congress (ANC) in exile, we were smuggling out quite a lot of Afrapix photographs and video footage from Afravision. There was so much silence through the pervasive censorship and what was happening at the height of oppression. The documentary material we brought out was banned and illegal in South Africa, so it became imperative to try and put it out there from the relative safety of living in Boston. And my own work became very much about that; a way of documentation and bearing witness of what was happening in South Africa during that very repressive period. I used the Afrapix photos and video footage as source material to make very large black and white monoprints and drypoints as artists books. One of those works *Alex Under Siege* is now at the Constitutional Court which was a big screenprint I did for my masters thesis exhibition. [3] Then when I came back to South Africa, in 1990, I started to introduce a little bit of texture and colour in my work and made series of work, some of them small artists books that I called *Rediscovering the Ordinary*. They were about trying to find the ordinary in a South African landscape that was different to my experience of a land at war while I lived in Boston for 7 years.

**SH:** So the nineties you start putting a bit of colour into your prints?

**KB:** Yes, so when I came back in 1990, I worked for an exile organisation called Fund for a Free South Africa (FREESA) and I travelled across the country identifying projects that required support from FREESA. When I was outside the country, I worked only with black ink and black and white documentary images, so my new work was about working with found and accessible materials. At the time (in 1990) when I and Nhlanhla Xaba started Artist Proof Studio (APS), I was trying to experiment with alternative materials, using things we could find and that would be accessible. So I used the back of aluminium litho[graphy] plates sourced from litho printers and used drypoint with sand and glue, and other collograph type materials to create tones and textures. All my prints

at the time explored ways of non-traditional etching and finding cheap material equivalents such as using cardboard plates. So I experimented in my own work with local and recycled materials, to be able to transfer that teaching to APS artists and students. In the early years, APS became known for collographs, because printmaking for us at the time, was about recycling accessible materials. This became a metaphor for reversing the privilege and exploring democratic processes. Unlike the Universities and Technikons, we had no money for expensive printmaking material so we sourced used or discarded commercial printing inks that were donated. I continued to work on artist's books because I have always worked in series as a kind of narrative. My political and community work for FREESA focused on women in development projects and in women's projects fighting domestic violence. That job, which also helped me go back to Boston to teach Summer school every year, couldn't quite afford to keep the studio going. That's when I joined the WitsTechnikon (now University of Johannesburg) and first did some part-time teaching and then joined full-time in 1995. Artist Proof became a very creative space for exploring experimental materials. We started using linoleum from used floor tiles, and now, floor linoleum has become the standard for use by printmakers in South Africa. We also innovated the use of drypoints using the back of old aluminium plates we used to get from the printers, as well as from discarded plastic sheeting like polyprop. Those materials are still standard for us, and we are able to buy plastic and aluminium fairly cheaply. APS was a different kind of space compared to the university. We focused on the process of community-based printmaking which evolved a very different kind of aesthetic.

So how did my work change from then until now? Well my work has evolved and changed and depends on the various activities and engagements in my life. For example the last series I did with Mark Atwood at [The Artists' Press](#).



*The stones remember, Robben Island I, 2018. Courtesy: The Artists' Press*



*The quarry of memory, Robben Island I, 2018. Courtesy: The Artists' Press*

That work was made after an artist- residency in Ireland, and just before that a visit to Robben Island. I was interested in how the landscape holds memory of pain and trauma, and did some responsive prints about how the stones in both those landscapes hold memory.

Occasionally I go away to spend a week with Mark and his family, who are close friends. My partner, Robyn and I are godparents to their children. I use that time to get some work done.

The later, more recent work I have done, is a collaboration with the book-artist and papermaker Robbin Silverberg in Brooklyn.

**SH:** Yes, what is “Kakistocracy”?

**KB:** Kakistocracy. A few years ago Derek Zeitsman curated an exhibition at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) called *Kakatopia*. It is derived from a Greek word, but sounds South African because of “kak” the South African expression. But in Greek “kak” means “bad”. The idea for the joint book with Robbin came from the definition of Kakistocracy, which means the least, most badly qualified person to run a country. We shared that dual reality in that the USA has Trump as president and South Africa had Zuma at the time. The prints I made for the Kakatopia exhibition, was based on the idea of rubbish dumps, symbolic of how the rot seeps into governance and environmental issues.

We took this idea further when we developed the artist book with Robbin Ami Silverberg which we called *Kakitocracy* at her Dobbin Mill Studio in Brooklyn, New York in 2018. In February and March of this year (2019) we completed a second collaboration called *The Walls of Kakatopia*, again looking at our dual [political] realities. We explored the theme of walls as a metaphor for migrants, divisions and barriers. It was also timely as Trump was obsessed with building the wall of Mexico to keep people out. Boundaries extend to the kinds of issues that divide people such as the Palestinian wall in Israel. Robbin

recently got a metal cover for the book fabricated, which we will etch into to reflect graffiti and emphasise resistance to barriers.

When I was in New York in February this year we had ten days to work together in her studio making the paper and the prototype of the book. Robbin taught me papermaking when we made our first book together over 20 years ago called TRACKS (in the collection of Jack Ginsberg and Wits Art Museum). We made all the paper for the book *Walls of Kakatopia* in her mill and included fragments of text and paper detritus, embedding and sandwiching the found materials within the layers of paper pulp. We also made papers with holes in it using a special technique with a water-pick that you spray onto the wet pulp sheets. When the papers dried, we printed over them with multiple layers of engraved images of barbed wire fences as well as real fragments of fencing material. [4] We had planned to complete the printing of the book in my home studio the following month when she came to South Africa for the launch of Jack Ginsbergs Centre for the Book Arts at WAM for which she is a Trustee. The edition of this book is nine. Robbin took all the prints and pages back with her to NY to sew the binding and finalise the metal casing. It was an interesting process to revisit the theme of walls again, as I did a series of books called *Women and Walls*, in the late 90s that explore different kinds of relationships to walls.

**SH:** I wanted to ask about your recent residency in Ireland?

**KB:** Our friend Doris Bloom invited a group of South African artists including artists she has worked with previously. Gordon Froud and Diane Victor were part of the residency which she called *Irish/South African Footprint* (She also included Beven de Wet, Derek Zeitzman, Stephen Hobbs and Mark Gevisser, the writer). Doris goes regularly to this very rural outcrop in Ireland called Cill Rialaig, which is at the Ballinskelligs. It is absolutely beautiful. It is on old famine land, and full of rocks, including the historic spiritual stones from ancient times. We also had access to a small printstudio where we each made a print that formed part of a group portfolio of the *Irish Footprint*.

I included two prints I did from the series in the APS exhibition at UJ, one of Robben Island and then one of Cill Rialaig which are both about ways the stones can hold memories. The series of six prints I made in Ireland, were monoprints using akua inks. This allowed me to paint the plates with the soy-based inks that did not dry, in my home studio and drive them to the workshop 10 kilometers away to print. The landscape was lush; wet greens all around us, and we stayed in ancient stone cottages that were quite idyllic. The prints attempted to juxtapose that setting with the traumatic history common to both Robben Island and the famine village in Ireland, through the stones.

It was a lovely time to spend two weeks in this country with a group of artist- friends and the luxury of time to make one's own work.

**SH:** How has your use of visual metaphor evolved in specific ways, such as the use of symbolism of fire, water and smoke?

**KB:** I have worked with all the elements thematically. For example, I did a series of prints about skies, water, and land. But for the longest time, I worked with fire and smoke. In fact just before APS burnt down in 2003, I had just finished a print called *The Remains of the Fire*, so that kind of eerie symbolism is a metaphor for life. I've been fascinated by the metaphor of fire and then the APS fire, in which Nhlanhla died, changed our lives completely. I also find the burnt remains of fire beautiful and magical as well as devastating. We worked with the cathartic process of 'out of the fire' as a healing and rebuilding process for APS. That kind of beauty and resilience from devastation and the pain, as well as the aesthetics of pain, is very meaningful to me.



*Through the Wire: Lowveld Fire II, 2003. Courtesy: The Artists' Press*



*Mourning our Future*, 2006. Courtesy: Kim Berman

**SH:** Smoke is also a symbol?

**KB:** Yes

**SH:** But smoke, can be read as mist or fog if there is no flame...

**KB:** Well smoke is also about concealing.

**SH:** Yes, actually that's quite interesting from how your concepts have evolved, from the smoke to the mist.

**KB:** The Cill Rialaig pieces were very much about the mist as concealing, which is a very different energy to smoke. So those formal differences are quite interesting to work with and also the way one deals with that opaque white surface on the print is quite different.



*Morning mist, Cill Rialaig, 2017. Courtesy: Kim Berman*

**SH:** Just to touch on the waterlilies [*Red Ribbons on a Pond*], the symbolism of a waterlily is rebirth, or are they lotus flowers, those ribbons?

**KB:** Much of my work reflects issues in time. At the time I was very involved with the HIV awareness campaigns and dealing with death all the time, as the women in our Phumani Paper Projects (that we had set up around the country) were dying. When I saw the fallen red petals on the pond, they just looked like red ribbons, and became very evocative of the people in our projects who were dying from the silence and stigma around the HIV/Aids pandemic, and the idea of hope that the spread of HIV could be prevented. [5] And then the images of ponds moved into pollution and rot. So the lilies were both beautiful but they were also a covering of the rot and stench underneath. So my prints in the series explored this kind of stink of the polluted pond representing the failure of government and the health system. But there always is the potency of the red, or something beautiful that shines above despair. So what's underneath the pond, and what's on the surface becomes that metaphor.



*Red Ribbons on a Pond I, KZN, 2010. Courtesy: The Artists' Press*

**SH:** How have your printmaking methods evolved and how does the physical process of lithography and monoprinting echo that of your subject and themes? [6]

**KB:** I personally don't work with lithography except when I work at The Artists' Press, when Mark Attwood is the printer. [7] I work directly with other techniques, particularly monotypes, drypoints and etching. What frustrates me about litho is how flat it is. So one of the things Mark experimented with a couple of years ago when we were doing the smoke prints, we worked with my monotypes on plates and then we shot each layer onto litho plates. We then printed each mono-print layer as a litho. But it took nine layers to get the kind of surface I wanted. So we built up those monoprints of smoke with nine different plates which is a lot of work to try get that kind of surface that would otherwise be too flat. So now Mark works a lot with that technique of monoprinting, then shooting the plate and then printing from each layer. He did some fabulous prints with Robert Hodgins in that way as well.

**SH:** And time-wise to produce a nine plate print?

**KB:** Mark and his team at The Artists' Press do all the editioning over many months. When I am there I work in a big rush because my time is so tight. So we just spent a week or ten days and did proofs of those three smoke prints. And he processes and then editions the prints after I leave. We also offer basic lithography at Artist Proof Studio and over the years I have invited various specialists to come teach studio members, Many are my artist friends from the USA who volunteer their time to give

workshops at APS. Some of the studio's young artists take to litho and silkscreen at APS, and although I myself don't work in the medium of silkscreening, we have developed a strong unit for collaborating with visiting artists.

**SH:** The next question was about sustainability and Ubuntu. It's a three-fold question. How do you define sustainability in relation to the arts? How do you define Ubuntu? How can academic platforms and independent community art organisations work together to further the philosophy and grounded practice of Ubuntu in sustainable ways?

**KB:** I wrote a concept paper for the Arts and Culture Trust's (ACT) Creative Uprising Conference titled *Blue Skies: Activism for systemic change in arts education*. [8] It is obviously something I think about a lot and have written about. I have experience in community development and understand the importance of self-sustainability and nurturing agency among students. My book, *Finding Voice: A Visual Arts Approach to Engaging Social Change* (2017) certainly explores those themes.

**SH:** Would I be able to read your book online?

**KB:** Yes it's free online. It's called *Finding Voice* and you can download it as its published by the University of Michigan Press.

**SH:** You say only a limited number has been printed?

**KB:** It's printed in Michigan, it's just not available here because they don't have a distributor in South Africa, so I have some copies available and have tried to place them in University libraries. The same is possible with our second jointly authored book edited by M LeBaron and J Sarra called *Changing Worlds: Arts as Transformative Practice*, which is printed by Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS), and about transformative art practices. That's also downloadable on Google Books for free.

**SH:** In terms of your definition of Ubuntu though, has it evolved since that article with [Janis] Sarra?

**KB:** I think the concept of Ubuntu can be used as a strategy in a range of ways. The philosophy of ubuntu is a key contribution of a deep humanness that Africa can teach the world. It has become such a cliché in South Africa and has been appropriated. When we talk about it at APS, and when we think about our vision and mission as an organisation, it does constantly evolve. But everyone that comes to APS is orientated to embrace the studio as an ubuntu space. And that means respecting each other and the space. That forms a core of the ethos and philosophy.

I think it's also about thinking about the collective and how we are interconnected. The idea about reciprocity and care is important. So those that embrace the ethos and the principles of printmaking feel very much in line with this philosophy, which I think is a core philosophy of the studio. It's a very different energy to how an academic space

works. I have been told that when people who are strangers walk into the space, what they experience is a feeling of ubuntu.

**SH:** What is your current perspective on contemporary collaborative printmaking in South Africa?

**KB:** We are very fortunate to have such a vibrant and active printmaking community and market in SA. It is extremely well supported and so many young printmakers are able to make a living from their printmaking practice. I think much has been written on the value of collaboration and co-creation. In my experience, this approach provides a possible solution to the education and economic crisis South Africa is facing at present. [9]

**SH:** Do you believe the Artist Proof Studio model can be replicated throughout disenfranchised communities?

**KB:** Yes and various forms have evolved from our graduates who have started printmaking projects. For example Motsamai Thabane at [August House](#), [Stompie Selibe](#), [\[Khehla\] Chepape \[Makgato\]](#), [Assemblage](#), Chocklate Ink, and others. [10] There are many print studios established by graduates of APS. [11]

Claudia Hartwig who established Chocolate Ink screen print studio was my masters student, and she did her masters on how silkscreening can enhance democracy. [12] She compared the role of silkscreening through protest images in the anti-apartheid movement and implemented a study group of five student volunteers at APS where she taught screenprinting. Three of her graduates started a collective at the Assemblage studios called Alphabet Zoo. More recently, [Roxy \[Kaczmarek\]](#), who works at David Krut Projects has just completed her masters study on emerging collectives, in printmaking. [13] And she picked up from Claudia looking at the notion of collectives and how the born-free generation think about printmaking today. [Alphabet Zoo](#) was one of her case studies as was Danger Gevaar Ingosi (DGI). While these studios and the one at August House are not following the APS model, I think the bigger idea is that APS helps people to see the possibility of supporting themselves.

**SH:** How do you overcome daily challenges in a community-based space?

**KB:** I have a management team whom I meet with regularly, and an engaged Board of Directors that ensure good governance. My bigger mission has been to hand over the responsibility of management so that APS is not dependent on its founder. There are three managers who are APS alumni and three that are graduates of UJ. The organisational ethos is evolving continually and is very different to when I was holding that space. But the team very competently manages the activities of APS now. We have a very interesting Board of Directors with a range of competencies in risk management, marketing, arts education, business, legal, finance and HR people.

People coming from the corporate world do not always understand us as artists and as educators. So while my interest is education, their interest is sustainable business practice which is a very necessary component of our longevity and financial stability.

**SH:** So it's where the two meet?

**KB:** Yes. We do clash as well, but we recognise that it has to be a multi-pronged strategy. So I think part of the sustainability is to reduce the dependency of APS on me as an individual.

**SH:** What are your long term sustainability goals for APS and how does the movement of safer and sustainable, non toxic art practices fit into a community based studio?

**KB:** This is an important direction. [14] I think bringing Liz Chalfin and inviting a representative from a range of the print studios to attend her workshop was great. I think in general the print studios become quite competitive, so the opportunity to create a communal workshop to learn non-toxic [15] processes was productive and collegial. The workshop was able to bring together Jill Ross from DKW, Sharon Sampson and Mandy Conidaris, from the Print Association and others who came to learn, with a bigger idea to start stocking non toxic supplies (e.g. Herbert Evans who opened up at Maboneng [Precinct] who could be a distributor for all of us. To change the culture of printmaking to non-toxic can't just happen in pockets, we have to think about it holistically and really change the paradigm. So this idea that we are starting a green revolution was spoken of in jest, but it's not really in jest because we literally have to collectively pull people on board and sustain it. So these initiatives have to be picked up by other people, you can't have one or two champions.

I think this idea started with Liz Chalfin's workshop from Zea Mays that connected us to others working in this research field like Eloff Pretorius (UKZN). I also took Liz to William Kentridge's studio to have her show him her techniques, and we did a print with coffee-lift and her acrylic Baldwin Intaglio Ground (BIG). Through making the plate and using these processes, he is converted! So we are now working with all of his new etchings in that medium which has convinced the team at the APS Professional Printmaking Studio to shift to these new materials and techniques. To make change like this sustainable, you have to plant the seed and then find ways to embed it, bit by bit and collectively. So there is that starting point, but it does require buy-in to sustain it as well.

**SH:** How can the philosophy of ubuntu in printmaking be used to further social change and art activism in South Africa and on a global scale?

**KB:** On the third of June I gave my professorial inaugural lecture. It was a very daunting occasion for me. In that lecture, I made the point of the significant value of transformative arts practices in creating pathways for sustainable change and the agency to make a difference in the world.

**SH:** Are you working on any other special projects at the moment?

**KB:** I am working on a very interesting project proposal to be submitted to STIAS. It emerged out of our jointly authored book, called *Changing our Worlds* edited by two law colleagues from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and co-authored with a South African and Kenyan scholar. We all were research fellows at STIAS for a month at a time, over four years which was an amazing opportunity. A land artist called Anni Snyman contacted me after she read our book and invited us to be involved in a very large project in Cape Town that addresses the water crisis. There is an underground aquifer for ground water in the Cape flats that could be a very viable source of water and for Cape Town, but it's so poorly managed and polluted. The organisation that is investigating ground water wants to look at how art can play a role in social cohesion in the very fragmented and conflicted area of the Cape Flats. The proposal to STIAS is to host a think tank that brings stakeholders together to consider how land art, public art, murals, puppets, storybooks, and arts based workshops can help promote greater social cohesion for ways to regenerate the aquifer and also look at greening the area.

I argue that the link to bring the water scientists, city planners and community members is through transformative art practices. How do you get community buy in? And the way is through the arts and to come together and imagine creative possible solutions that are holistic. City developers can't just go into a community and just draw water out or pump water in. The whole community and the schools need to be involved in finding ways to protect the land and protect the aquifer. So this is a very exciting project I have started thinking about and the role of art in making real sustainable, environmental change.

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### Notes

[1] This conversation took place at the University of Johannesburg, 23 May 2019.

[2] A recent article sharing reflections from Professor Berman's presentation at Brandeis University: Art as a Revolutionary Force.

[3] One of the smaller books are in Jack Ginsberg's collection at the Centre for Book Arts at WAM.

[4] I have also established a paper mill at the University of Johannesburg in 2012 called the Phumani Paper Mill which is jointly managed though my UJ Department and Artist Proof Studio.

[5] An article sharing further insights from the Paper Prayers campaign.

[6] The distinction between a monoprint and monotype is the former's matrix can be reproduced for an edition whereas the latter is a unique painterly print. See: <https://www.warreneditions.com/explanationtechniqueterms/>

[7] For a distinction of different printmakers and printmaking studio models, see: <https://www.artprintsa.com/south-african-printmakers.html>

[8] The Arts & Culture Trust (ACT) and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) Arts & Culture (a division of FADA) in partnership with The SAMRO Foundation, see: <http://www.creativeconference.co.za/presenters-2/>

[9] The press release for *Artist Proof Studio: A Journey in Co-creation. 28 years of exploring democracy through printmaking* exhibition reads:  
“The idea of ‘co-creation’ disrupts traditionally western ideas around artmaking as a purely individual and independent creative exercise. Put forward in this alternative approach is an emphasis on process, on relationality, and in general a more democratic creative economy. This ethos of co-creation has been central to the growth and remarkable creative output of Artist Proof Studio (APS), which was founded in Johannesburg twenty-eight years ago by the late Nhlanhla Xaba and Kim Berman. Celebrating this collaborative impulse, this exhibition brings together a range of exceptional print-projects produced by artists who have, sometimes over many years, engaged in the collectively empowering space that is APS.

Collaboration comes about when people seek to create value together – a process exemplified in the social dynamic of the printmaking studio, in which artists and printmakers collectively produce or ‘co-create’ printed works of art. In the APS ‘Pro Shop’, this involves a creative dialogue, or dance, in which the professional printmaker brings skills and support to an artist’s vision. The dynamic collaboration reflected in this studio environment is extended through the expanded reach of the print multiple (or edition), which allows for a greater distribution of, and so access to, original works of art.

APS is also space of creative learning and empowerment, in which students are taught a range of printmaking techniques as well as professional life skills, enabling many of them to support themselves as professional artists and to impact communities as critically engaged, creative citizens. As such, a section of this exhibition tracks over twenty-five years of collaborative projects from APS, some of them between students and the University of Johannesburg. These collaborative initiatives, in dialogue with works by APS alumni such as Sizwe Khoza and Mongezi Ncaphayi, as well as more established artists like Colbert Mashile and William Kentridge, speak to the ways in which co-creation figures in printmaking processes, and so to a conception of art enlivened by the possibilities of reciprocation, process and multiple modes of knowing and engagement.”

A conversation between Kentridge and Berman will share further insights. See: <https://artistproofstudio.co.za/blogs/news/william-kentridge-in-conversation-with-kim-berman>

[10] Such as Warren Editions <https://www.warreneditions.com/>

[11] See <https://artafricamagazine.org/art-music-and-creating-democracy-daniel-stompie-selibe-candice-berman-gallery-turbine-art-fair-2018/>

[12] Claudia Hartwig's (2011) masters thesis is titled "The role of screen-print projects in enhancing awareness of active citizenship: A case study at Artist Proof Studio". See *Students as Change Agents* <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/y8PxWFlxgzcNSQFuhyeC/full>

[13] Her thesis is titled 'The role of selected emerging Johannesburg printmaking collectives in reframing the traditional model of printmaking through concept and scope of practice.'

[14] The sustainability also includes the transition of APS not being dependent on Berman.

[15] See Liz's journey to South Africa <https://printmakinginjohannesburg.home.blog/>

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