


Images courtesy of the artists

# Domestic



| Gabriela Goleth, Bouquet III, 2007, Archival Print (tricolor), Edition of 5, 1300 x 260 cm



Cultural practitioners Jacki McInnes and Melissa Mboweni have come together to curate an exhibition that candidly presents work created through dialogues, literal and conceptual, between artists and victims of domestic violence. CLASSICFEEL's Lara Koseff spoke to McInnes about this powerful initiative.

**O**rganised to coincide with National Women's Day on 9 August this year, *Domestic* is an exhibition that aims to confront one of South Africa's most disgraceful and often misrepresented conditions – the terrifyingly high statistics of domestic violence. Presenting work by a range of emerging and established South African female artists – including Dineo Bopape, Reshma Chhibba, Hannelie Coetzee, Gabrielle Goliath, Nadine Hutton, Alison Kearney, Zanele Mhlobo and Diane Victor – the exhibition is curated with the distinct aim of stimulating dialogue and promoting understanding.

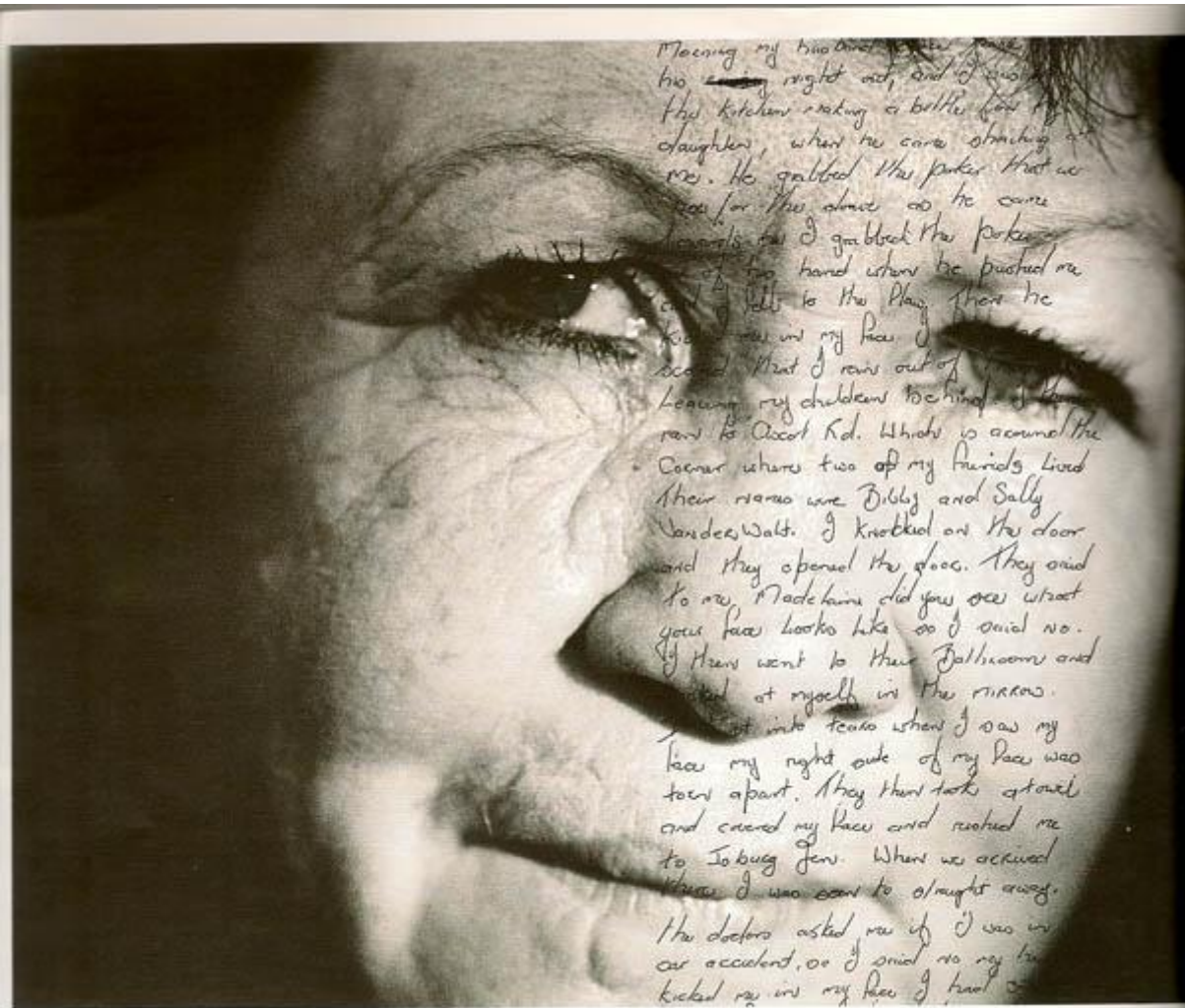
McInnes, who is an artist and writer as well as a curator, initially conceptualised the project around 16 Days of Activism, but was forced to put it on hold. She later met Mboweni, a well-respected contemporary art specialist, and recognised the valuable input she would be able to contribute. They put together a proposal for a Women's Month exhibition, working to identify artists of a high calibre with primary research-based and established modes of production that would facilitate a sensitive and personal engagement between artist and subject.

'We looked specifically at artists who have a tendency to go out into the field,' McInnes explains. 'What we decided to do is set up a dialogue between the artist and a person who is in some way affected by domestic violence,' she continues. 'And the focus of the show is the dialogue... We don't want to be too prescriptive... but it was very important to us

that they actually go into the field and interact with someone who is affected.'

*Domestic* follows on from another one of McInnes's curatorial projects, *A Legacy of Men*, which took place at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2007. It was on the strength of this project that she received sponsorship from the National Arts Council – providing funding on behalf of the Department of Arts and Culture – as well as The Goethe Institute, The US Consulate of Johannesburg and Wiphold. *Legacy* looked at domestic violence from a male perspective featuring work by the likes of Nicholas Hlobo and Mikhael Subotzky. 'The whole brief of that show was that it was a male perspective,' McInnes explains. 'So it was always going to be documentary or an outsider looking in commenting on something that they didn't have intimate knowledge of. But having said that, there was the inevitable criticism that it was a... commentary by parties that weren't directly affected. So the brief for the new show was specifically to counter that – to get the dialogue.'

Beyond that, the idea of a dialogue was important for McInnes and Mboweni in order to investigate why so many women stay in abusive situations. They recognise that there is an unfair judgment directed at these women, many claiming that 'if the situation was so bad they would get out'. McInnes elaborates: 'there's no empathy for why women stay in those situations... so again the dialogue is to dispel the myth that "there's



Nadine Hutton. *Written on her face*, 2009, video installation

something wrong with her" and also to try and encourage a different view. So instead of looking at the abused woman, it's trying to force people to engage with her environment and to try and get an... insight into why she stays in that rotten situation.'

In keeping with the spirit of Women's Day, the artists are all female, as are the subjects, merely pointing to statistics that reveal women to be the primary victims of domestic violence. The curators have chosen artists such as Zanele Muholi and Alison Kearney, who both produce work that is unequivocally research-based. 'Kearney is... a fairly obvious choice in terms of how she researches her work,' McInnes says. 'She's very on the ground, speaking to people, getting their direct stories, doing work that engages with them and also highlights aspects of their struggles, lifestyles.' McInnes and Mboweni furthermore selected artists capable of engagement on varying levels, from the literal to the conceptual.

Reshma Chhibba, who Mboweni cites as one of her favorite contemporary artists at the moment, is on the show and,

according to McInnes 'she's been really proactive. She seems to... have really engaged.' McInnes continues to say that 'she's doing work that seems to be quite conceptual... a very literal dialogue, but the way she is representing it is certainly not literal.' In her artist statement Chhibba elaborates on her subject: 'I learnt that a very good friend of mine has been in an abusive relationship for two years now. The shocking and most horrific part for me is that she is only a girl of 17. While it is understandable that many women who are in abusive relationships feel very trapped and have an extremely low self-esteem, its even more shocking when one realises that this is happening to a younger girl, who is still discovering who she is and what she believes in.'

Nadine Hutton has dealt the most literally with the curators' brief, presenting a video installation titled *Written on her face*, based on her mother's ongoing battle with abuse. 'The project is an oral and visual history of the life of one woman who kept going back and how this affected her family; her daughters, son

Reshma Chhibe, *Linga-Yoni*, 2009,  
steel frame, sari, cotton, nylon and  
cornflour, 130 x 47 x 37 cm

and their children. How it affected the way they grew up to think about relationships between the sexes. And, ultimately, of how she broke the cycle... This is not only one family's oral history, but a testimony to one of the country's biggest social problems,' Hutton explains.

Photographer Hannelie Coetzee is expounding the most interpretative approach. Her source material involves letters from the archives at Bloemfontein University, which she discovered while researching women and children in the concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer war. These letters reveal startling evidence that women were raped, which, McInnes emphasises, 'of course got completely swept under the carpet'. Coetzee's resulting work is a discourse with history. 'It's admitting to something that was hidden, which again is about the way that the topic gets shrouded, people just don't talk about it,' McInnes says.

Other participating artists include Diane Victor, who McInnes describes as being 'incredibly astute at picking up on the social ills of our country', and will undoubtedly present work that is both disquieting and powerful. 'The way she manifests her art becomes a dialogue,' McInnes says. 'Even though it's quite often allegorical, it's easily readable.' Gabrielle Goliath is renowned for her portrayals of how the victims of violent abuse are, what she calls, 'canonised'. 'I say, "canonised",' the artist explains, 'in that any victim of abuse is in the moment of that abuse imbued with a certain innocence.' Dineo Bopape has a penchant for exploring that which is hidden and revealed. The artist has asserted that her work 'is an attempt to conceal and mask, whilst simultaneously attempting to peel away the husk and layers that crust over secretive stories embedded in objects and in people.'

*Domestic* is presented at The Goethe Institute's project space at the new multi-use contemporary arts centre, Arts on Main in inner



city Johannesburg. The curators specifically wanted an inner city venue in order to attract a diverse audience. At exhibitions based in the northern suburbs, McInnes feels that 'your audience are educated people who come from the art world, so you are preaching to the converted at the best of times.' The aim of *Domestic* is to allow a visual art dialogue that will ultimately stimulate a further conversation confronting the conditions and motivations surrounding one of the darkest elements of this country.

*Domestic is on at GoetheonMain from 6 to 28 August 2009. An educational event/artists walkabout is planned for Saturday 15 August 2009 at 12h00. ☐*