

Creative Thinking

Review of the exhibition 'Interventions in Practice', held at the FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg (10 August – 20 October 2021)

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There's a line from the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman* that people love bandying about to belittle their teachers: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach."

The title of the exhibition that ran at the FADA Gallery at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) from early August until mid-October 2021 – 'Interventions in Practice' – might have a jargony academic ring to it, but it does a wonderful job of refuting that claim.

The exhibition shows work by the academic staff at UJ's Faculty of Art Design and Architecture (FADA) and is curated by gallery director Eugene Hön, who is himself among the artists exhibiting. The exhibition is a smart inversion of the usual distinction made between the idea of art as practice and research as something separate that might take art as its subject. As Deirdre Pretorius, one of the artist/academics exhibiting on the show puts it in her written statement, this exhibition is predicated on the idea that "creative work can result from scholarly research".

Hön explains that the roots of the exhibition go back some years and are associated with a lobby of sorts to have creative works considered as academically accredited "research outputs", as a peer-reviewed research paper or academic publication might be.

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, a beautifully produced and substantial documentation of the exhibition, independent curator and artist Chloë Reid explains: "In 2017, the Department of Higher Education (DHET) published its policy on the evaluation of creative research outputs, to be implemented from 2019. This has enabled the work of creative practitioners in South African institutions to be formally accredited and acknowledged as research...".

Hön explains that the idea is not that researchers/teachers can simply submit art or design products they've been working on in lieu of research, but instead that they can be formally recognised when included on an exhibition like this together with catalogue essays and a proper academic write-up in which they reflect on their own work.

On one level, the idea is that it makes for better teachers, rooted in artistic or design practice themselves (particularly in a faculty like FADA). As Reid also points out, it is a mode of measuring and documenting the innovative and sometimes provisional way of teaching in a dynamic and shifting – she calls it "mercurial" – field "that is constantly in flux and necessitates its own, regular overhaul".

“What does it mean to practice and study something that absorbs and reflects its environment and is hinged on current social, political, economic and cultural movements as well as those predating its creation and to come?” she asks. It’s terrain that shifts too quickly and outpaces the usual academic research practices, not to mention methods of testing or evaluating.

Among the results (perhaps to be expected in the context of a university) is that there’s a kind of disciplined thought underpinning these works that is quite different from the ramblings you come across too commonly in the artists’ statements in the catalogues you might find at commercial galleries.

At its best, the works on the exhibition make the case that sustained thinking and reading and researching can be good for art (certainly better than clever post-rationalisation!). It’s a refreshing riposte to the hackneyed notion that rationalism constrains creativity.

While artists like academic attention and publications about their work, which does wonders for its value and helps cement its place in the pantheon of ‘serious’ art, their own art doesn’t necessarily involve the kind of deep thought that this way of working requires, and it shows.

Sure, some of the time the works on ‘Interventions in Practice’ can seem a little obtuse or tiny details might seem over-freighted with significance, but there’s a kind of lean efficiency about them, too. It’s also a fantastic showcase of the kind of skill that exists in the realm of the university campus but seldom breaks out into the public eye.

Hön is a ceramicist who has been working at the cutting edge of what you call transferware, which, at the risk of oversimplifying, is a way of printing on China. He does intricately detailed (and beautiful) pen-and-ink drawings, which are digitally scanned and transferred onto ceramics. Volumes of sketchbooks and reference material were displayed alongside the final works.

For something that combines ancient tradition and modern technology, it makes a nice, zeitgeisty retort to the modernist legacy that conflates ornament with crime. With some historical delving and tons of symbolism, he also manages to make a strong case for something as seemingly apolitical as a vase to include some acute political commentary.

Pretorius offers a cabinet of curiosities filled with domestic and personal objects, relating in many ways to a typical Afrikaans upbringing. Such cabinets filled with collections predate the more rationalist approach to collecting objects typical of museums, instead suggesting a kind of magical access to faraway worlds. By using a cabinet to explore common and personal collections of domestic keepsakes, she makes elements of her own heritage and culture seem strange and otherworldly, as if her own personal past were a remote land.

Alexander Opper, an architect and academic turned artist – recently a recipient of the prestigious Ampersand Fellowship – typically works at the crossovers of art, architecture and urbanism. He often uses his artworks as a way of unsettling the spatial conventions inherent in various types of architecture – the way buildings and landscapes and urban design define how we see, understand and behave in space. He calls it “undoing

architecture". His piece *Figure/Ground* is composed of a series of photographs he's taken of social distancing markers on the ground – the lines and crosses and spots and so on that dictate so much of our behaviour under pandemic conditions. His work considers the way our very bodily behaviour has been so radically altered and social norms have suddenly changed in response to the pandemic. Another work, *20 Seconds*, concentrates on the anxious, protracted meditative moments we spend washing our hands, introducing a funny, unfamiliar sense of time into our consciousness as well.

But there is more: the jewellery designs (wearable sculptures) of Thato Radebe and 3D printing design by Khanya Mthethwa, multimedia artworks by Marc Edwards, industrial design by Martin Bolton and the probing photographs – or “act[s] of reading space” as he calls them – of Bongani Khosa.

The exhibition had a strange (perhaps to the general gallery-going public) non-commercial quality to it. While some of the works on exhibition were available for sale and might have fed into other commercial practices, they were primarily presented, as Reid put it, to “offer moments of reflection and in some cases, theses, on practices that are accompanied and augmented by commitments to teaching, learning and the development of new knowledge”.

These works are part of the artists' careers in a different way from the usual exhibitions and fairs, such as Art Joburg and the Turbine Art Fair among others, that take place in Johannesburg in the spring, and it made for quite a different viewing experience.

But perhaps the abiding impression this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue leave you with is a sense not only of how important creative production is in an academic institution (and in the fields like ceramics, jewellery design, architecture and industrial design) but also of how good a bit of intellectual rigour is for artists.