

I to I

A solo exhibition by Johann van der Schijff
Johannesburg, November 2015 – January 2016



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This exhibition is dedicated to my family – Nicky, Sophia and Tom
– as well as my friend, Gary Marsden (1970 – 2013)

Studio photography by Vanessa Cowling

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Feed the Dogs, 2014, beech wood, weather-resistant steel, aluminium, enamel paint; two objects randomly positioned on the floor within a 50cm x 50cm wide square area, object a.) 30cm x 30cm wide x 7cm high, object b.) 25cm x 25cm wide x 5cm high

Artist statement

Johann van der Schijff

Ito I deals with ways in which we confront one another and ourselves. Partly autobiographical, this exhibition reflects on the dualities of growing up and living in South Africa. The underlying violence of a scarred society is set off against the simple routines of my daily life, interposed with childhood memories.

The bigger metal and bronze pieces speak about South African society at large and continue themes I have worked with since 2007 and the unveiling of the *Arm-Wrestling Podium*, a public sculpture in Cape Town's city centre. These works deal with power relationships and make reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the public foot washing phenomenon and the never-ending political jostling that is often accompanied by intimidation and violence. The look of these pieces, made in a combination of weather-resistant steel, stainless steel and bronze, was influenced by the ultra-utilitarian design of the military and police riot vehicles of my youth.

By contrast, the other works on the exhibition, made of a combination of European and African hard woods, reveal more about myself. As I go about my daily life performing the everyday simple routines that keep me going – feeding the dogs in the morning, having my first morning coffee,

driving to work, afternoon lunch – the line between these daily routines and flights of fancy influenced by my youth becomes blurred.

Thus, a concave security mirror made in European *linde bout* (lime wood), ringed by a halo of coloured pencils, might make reference to the rainbow nation. It could equally make an art historical reference to Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, or simply refer to the gorgeous German colour pencil sets in the window of Schweickerdt art supply store in the central Pretoria of my childhood.

This play on double meaning and ambiguity flows though the entire exhibition. I hope that it opens up an insight into my imagination and my own confrontation of the violence that is so much part of living here as I try to make sense of my own place in South Africa.





Arnhem Mirror, 2011, convex security mirror, linde hout (lime wood), 120 colour pencils, magnets, 75cm wide x 75cm high x 70cm deep, edition of 5





I to I, 2015, wooden folding chair and side table (object a), wooden baby chair (object b), enamel paint, beech wood, kiaat wood, stainless steel; objects facing each other with a 250cm gap between them, object a.) 110cm wide x 76cm high x 85cm deep, object b.) 57cm wide x 92cm high x 50cm deep





Confession Podium, 2015, bronze, weather-resistant steel, mild steel, stainless steel, wood, enamel paint, 76cm wide x 169cm high x 64.5cm deep



Security Camera (Kiaat), 2015, kiaat wood, stainless steel screws, aluminium bracket, enamel paint, 50cm wide x 50cm high x 40cm deep

Seen without seeing; see without being seen

Wilhelm van Rensburg

Nowadays the security camera has replaced, for all intents and purposes, the central watchtower of Jeremy Bentham's notorious 18th century panopticon. The panopticon, according to him, was the perfect way to discipline and punish prisoners, maximizing control with minimal staff. Prison cells would be arranged in a circular shape around a central watchtower, with windows facing outward, letting in natural light, and inward, facing the tower, but with solid partitions between cells so that prisoners would not be able to see one another. The watchtower would have one-way windows so that the prisoners would not know when they were being watched, if at all. Constant surveillance, the theory would have it, would result in a form of involuntary discipline, and would serve as irrefutable evidence when punishment had to be meted out. Or it could be used for interesting, if not surreptitious, social experimentation. A perfect set-up, according to French philosopher Michel Foucault, and good for patients, school children, the insane and workers, apart from the prisoners for whom it was originally intended. The watchtower, however, has been eclipsed by the ubiquitous security camera. And seeing Johann van der Schijff's security cameras, made out of wood, reinforces the point but also raises new conceptual possibilities.

Van der Schijff's sculptures are life-size, small, unobtrusive, but quite invasive and ever present: a constant eye that watches the viewer, seeing without necessarily being noticed, or 'seen'. But also, in turn, possibly and equally incidentally, being seen

(by the viewer) in its act of not actually seeing anything. After an initial unease about the authenticity of the camera, it quickly dawns on the viewer that it is, after all, just a sculpted piece of wood and not a real, functioning camera. Metaphorically, however, it constitutes a whole world of possible interpretations.

The notion of discipline presupposes docile bodies: do what is wanted and do it precisely as is wanted. As a result, physical space can be arranged for this purpose. This is why classrooms, barracks, hospital wards and factory floors are often arranged the way they are. The layout enables, or better still, enforces, discipline and order. They are structured or designed to transform the individual in some or other way and thus provide a hold on their conduct, effectively controlling their behaviour.

In terms of the security camera, control resides not so much in the act of surveillance itself, but in the possibility of observation. The subject, be it schoolchild, patient, prisoner, soldier or factory worker, is 'permanently visible', the camera exercising a form of automatic control. It also implies a form of normative judgement. Given the threat of constant surveillance, some schoolchildren, some patients, some prisoners, some soldiers, some factory workers will feel compelled to behave better than others, 'enabling' the camera to 'judge' their behaviour. As a result, the security camera is ideal for examination *and* experimentation because behaviour can be manipulated to a large extent.

What can be deduced is the fact that the all-seeing security camera is a powerful tool of the state and/or its apparatuses, such as the school and the prison; the school as an ideological state apparatus and the prison as a repressive state apparatus. These are not physical forms of intimidation, but are part of a discursive practice of control exercised by the state that constitutes the discourse of power. It means that the state can exert power by default, the citizens having internalised what is expected of them, knowing full well that their behaviour is being observed by the camera and that they had better 'behave' accordingly. They are virtually 'disempowered' by the presence of the camera.

What Van der Schijff is asking in his wooden sculptural camera pieces is, where does the security camera place the viewer? How does it affect the behaviour of the viewer? As was pointed out above, the camera can discipline, can control, can transform and, ultimately, can disempower the citizenry. Does a wooden security camera, displayed as an artwork, have the same power over the viewer, or is it merely a pastiche of the real security tool? Does it make a mockery of security or does it 'discipline' the viewer by subjecting the individual through training and disciplining in terms of the discourse of the art world? The camera subjects the viewer to another form of control: it 'watches' the viewer 'watching' the artworks. But does this imply that there is a correct way of looking at art, or even a limited period allowed to look at an art work on display? The camera has inadvertently added another dimension to what can often be perceived of as passive observation of disengaged viewers who *look* but do not *see* the art. Or what about the possibility of resisting the surveillance implicit in the security camera? Are there

ways of subverting the all-seeing eye of the camera? Effectively, the viewer has to destroy the camera in order to avoid its constant surveillance. Alternatively, the viewer has to find the scotoma, or blind spot, which obscures the visual field of the camera in order to escape its constant view.

Van der Schijff's camera does not 'see' as such. It often goes undetected because it is mounted above the eye level of the viewer, its exact position stipulated by the sculptor. It is therefore often 'not seen'. Yet, as a metaphorical art object it can see everything without being seen. Those viewers who notice the camera are often surprised and even amused by its presence when the camera is seen for the first time, but they are also quick to heave a sigh of relief knowing that the camera cannot actually 'see' them. Or is the viewer inadvertently subjected to its discipline as well? The camera sets up a unique relationship between the viewer, the viewed (art object) and being viewed (by the camera).

Wilhelm van Rensburg, Research Associate, Visual Identities in Art & Design research centre, Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture, University of Johannesburg

References

The text was informed by Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977).



Security Camera (Beech), 2015, beech wood, stainless steel screws, aluminium bracket, enamel paint, 50cm wide x 50cm high x 40cm deep





Foot-Washing Podium, 2015, bronze, weather-resistant steel, mild steel, stainless steel, wood, enamel paint, 79cm wide x 115cm high x 59cm deep



A Shrine to My Lunch, 2015, beech wood, kiaat wood, enamel paint,
35cm wide x 23cm high x 18cm deep

Playpen

John Higgins

‘We have long forgotten the ritual by which the house of our life was erected’, observed Walter Benjamin in *Cellar*, a fragment from his great montage text of 1928, *One-Way Street* (Benjamin 1979: 46). I cite this because one way of entering Johann van der Schijff’s fine new exhibition is to see it as devoted to remembering the fact of those childhood rituals that are usually long forgotten, but which nonetheless remain active in and structuring for the adult present, and are so often embodied in the most apparently commonplace and everyday objects.

With this idea of ritual, Benjamin was referring to a sharp obsession of his: the various ways in which the routines, play and disciplining of childhood lay the foundations for adult personality, for better *and* for worse. Precisely such a sense of ambivalence around these formative rituals pervades Van der Schijff’s new exhibition.

Here, habit appears as comforting and even nurturing, as, for instance, with *Sbrine to My Lunch*: a lovingly detailed soft drink and sandwich container in wood. But there are also – across the exhibition as a whole – clear pointers to the ways in which the casual habituations of a specifically apartheid childhood resulted in an identity that turns out not to be so comfortable after all, but both damaged and capable of damaging, as most dramatically in *Skerppunt Ammunisie* where .223 Remington rounds (used in the Marikana massacre) replace the expected crayons in a child’s colouring box.

Such feelings are captured in the two mobile podia, *Confession* and *Footwashing*. Here, the deliberate mobility of the artefacts (both on wheels, ready to be moved where needed) signals, perhaps, the ongoing and unfinished nature of South Africa’s ‘truth and reconciliation’ project, once so highly regarded, but now in danger of disintegrating.

The central exhibit – at least for me – is *I to I*. This captures such ambivalences well, and articulates the key dynamics of the entire exhibition, where the appealing surface simplicity of Van der Schijff’s artifacts work as a screen that masks yet somehow (and there is the artistry) also engages considerable complexity of response.

I to I: a child’s high chair is facing an adult’s chair, across a distance of about two metres.

On the tray-table of the high chair a cereal bowl. On the side table next to the adult’s chair, a coffee mug.

All the tension of the piece lies in the conflicting but intertwined implications of this parallelism across difference that animates this I to I exchange.

From one perspective this may represent a simple looking-back, an act of recollection: just how *this* infant I became *this* adult I. This remembering connects to the gathering of the material memory fragments that make up so much of the exhibition: the coloured pencils that frame the Arnhem mirror and the little paint pots that surround the Pretoria mirror; the Neil Diamond record cover

(*In a Different Time*); the toy racing cars of *Chicken Run*. All of these go some way to revealing – in a manner akin to Benjamin’s sense of memory as archaeological excavation – the often commonplace materials from which the house of adult personality was built.

But another more complex and potentially disturbing dimension is also invoked by this deliberate placing of the adult I facing the infant I.

This is the dimension of parental address: the adult facing the child, telling the child, ordering and bringing up the child.

In this perspective, the familiar high chair can be recognised for what it is: an apparatus of constraint, one that can stand in as an emblem of the entire disciplinary process of bringing up baby, and teaching it (as another piece has it) to ‘walk the line’.

Here, the child’s bowl points – ambivalently – both to the apparently simple, everyday routine of feeding and nourishment, but also hints at that oxymoronic combination of love and discipline encapsulated in the later injunction, ‘Eat your greens!’ This is ‘tough love’: the coercion involved in caring.

Such a loving coercion is of course part and parcel of the violence of all socialisation, a socialisation in which walking the line is all too close to toeing the line, with all the disastrous implications that had in apartheid South Africa.

And so it is (as both Benjamin and Van der Schijff’s works suggest) that childhood is not only the subjective domain of pleasure and play it first appears to be. Children (Benjamin reminds us) always ‘belong to the nation and class they come from’, and even their toys

present ‘a silent signifying dialogue between them and their nation’ (Benjamin 2005: 116). It is precisely this kind of dialogue that this exhibition – with its playful and warmly appealing objects – frames and stages.

Chicken Run presents us with one of the most enduring and popular toys for boys: the racing car. Here Van der Schijff gives us two lovingly sculpted toy racing cars, facing each other, and reminiscent in shape and style of the racing cars of those most popular of children’s books, the Tintin series.ⁱ

Surely nothing can be more innocent or purely enjoyable?

Yet there is still some ambivalence here, despite the warmth that wood gives to these supreme examples of modernist engineering and technology.

For it is notable that the two cars are (again, and echoing the dynamics of *I to I*) facing each other, perhaps seeing who will ‘chicken out’ first as they hurl towards each other for a head-on collision. The apparently innocent passion for speed, mastery and control has its darker, more dangerous side.ⁱⁱ

‘To be sure,’ wrote Benjamin, ‘play is always liberating’ (Benjamin 2005: 100); and there is a real yield of pleasure in the evident joy with which these artefacts have been designed and put together, and in the recollection of the childhood they celebrate. But at the same time, and lending a greater depth to the exhibition as a whole than the pleasures of recollection alone would allow, we also see at work something caught in Benjamin’s essay *Old Toys*.

For writing in the dying days of democracy in the Weimar republic, and before the hatred and horrors of the fascist regime to come,



Chicken Run, 2015, linde hout (lime wood), panga panga (partridge wood), enamel paint, stainless steel; objects facing each other with a 250cm gap between them, object a.) 48cm wide x 143cm high x 35cm deep, object b.) 48cm wide x 143cm high x 35cm deep

Benjamin observed that when the adult turns to play (and there is perhaps no better definition of the artist), it is to 'remove the sting' from the threatening world around. All art, he suggested, finally represents the 'desire to make light of an unbearable life' (Benjamin 2005: 100).

*John Higgins, Arderne Chair of Literature,
University of Cape Town*

Endnotes

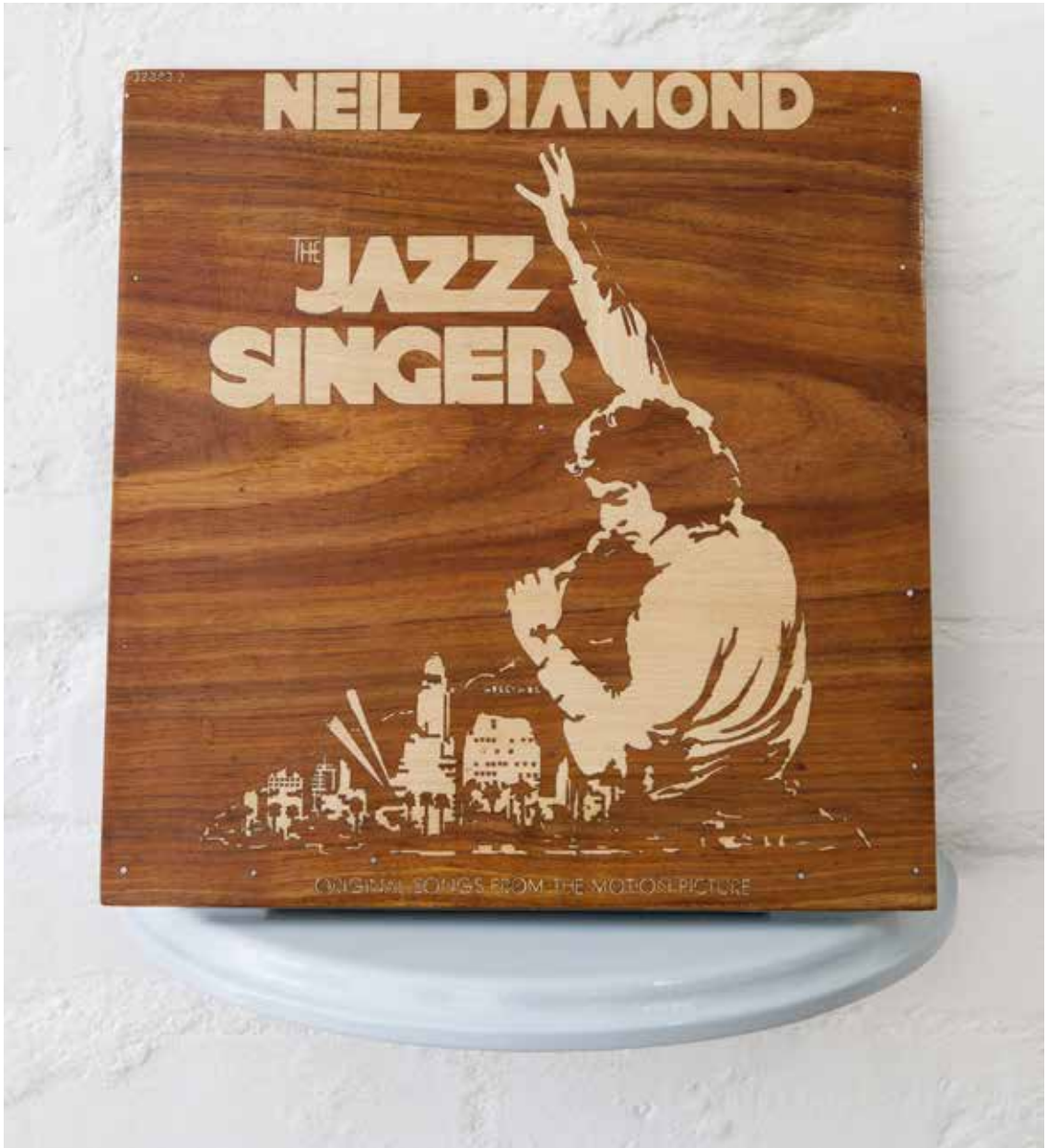
- i 'Lovingly sculpted' if this is the correct term for the computer-aided design and manufacturing techniques that van der Schijff deploys in such strikingly simple but innovatory ways in these works.
- ii As notoriously celebrated by F.T. Marinetti in his 'incendiary manifesto' of 1909, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*. Here the 'caffeine of Europe' (as Marinetti was known, trying to give a kick-start to the art of the new century) asserted that 'the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed'. For him, this was embodied above all in the racing car, its exhaust pipes spitting flame 'like serpents of explosive breath'. Such a car, he provoked, 'is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*', or was so at least for an aesthetic which claimed that 'Art can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice', and that went on to glorify war (in 1909) as 'the world's only hygiene' (Marinetti 1973: 21, 23, 22).

References

Walter Benjamin. 1979. *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London: New Left Books.

2005. *Selected Writings Volume 2:1, 1927-1930*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

F.T. Marinetti. [1909] 1973. 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism' in Umbro Apollonio (ed.) *Futurist Manifestos*, London: Thames and Hudson.

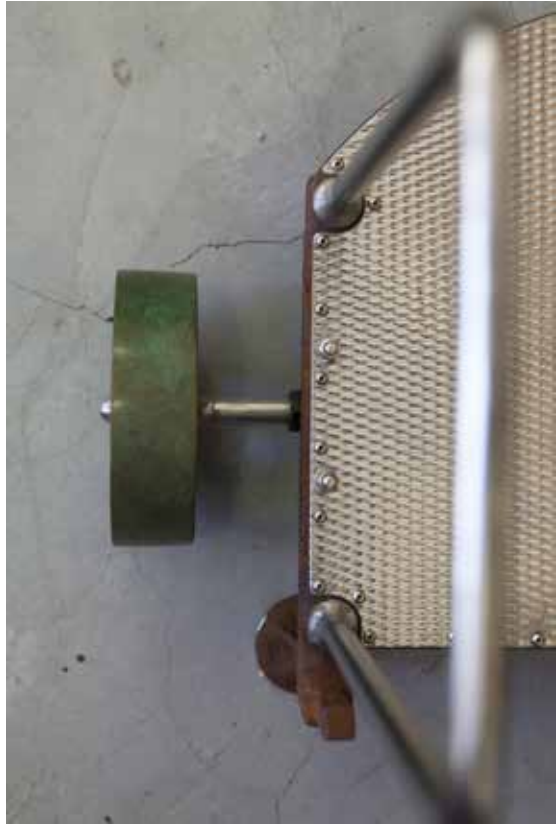


In a Different Time, 2015, beech wood, kiaat wood, enamel paint, 35cm wide x 37cm high x 18cm deep



Walk the Line, 2015, bronze, weather-resistant steel, mild steel, stainless steel, wood, enamel paint,
314.5cm wide x 41cm high x 53cm deep







Skerppunt Ammunisie (Sharp Point Ammunition), 2015, 34 x Remington .223 bullets (disarmed), beech wood, kiaat wood, enamel paint, 35cm wide x 23cm high x 18cm deep



17, 122 Days of Art (11 January 1969 to 28 November 2015), 2015, beech wood, kiaat wood, enamel paint, 35cm wide x 23cm high x 18cm deep

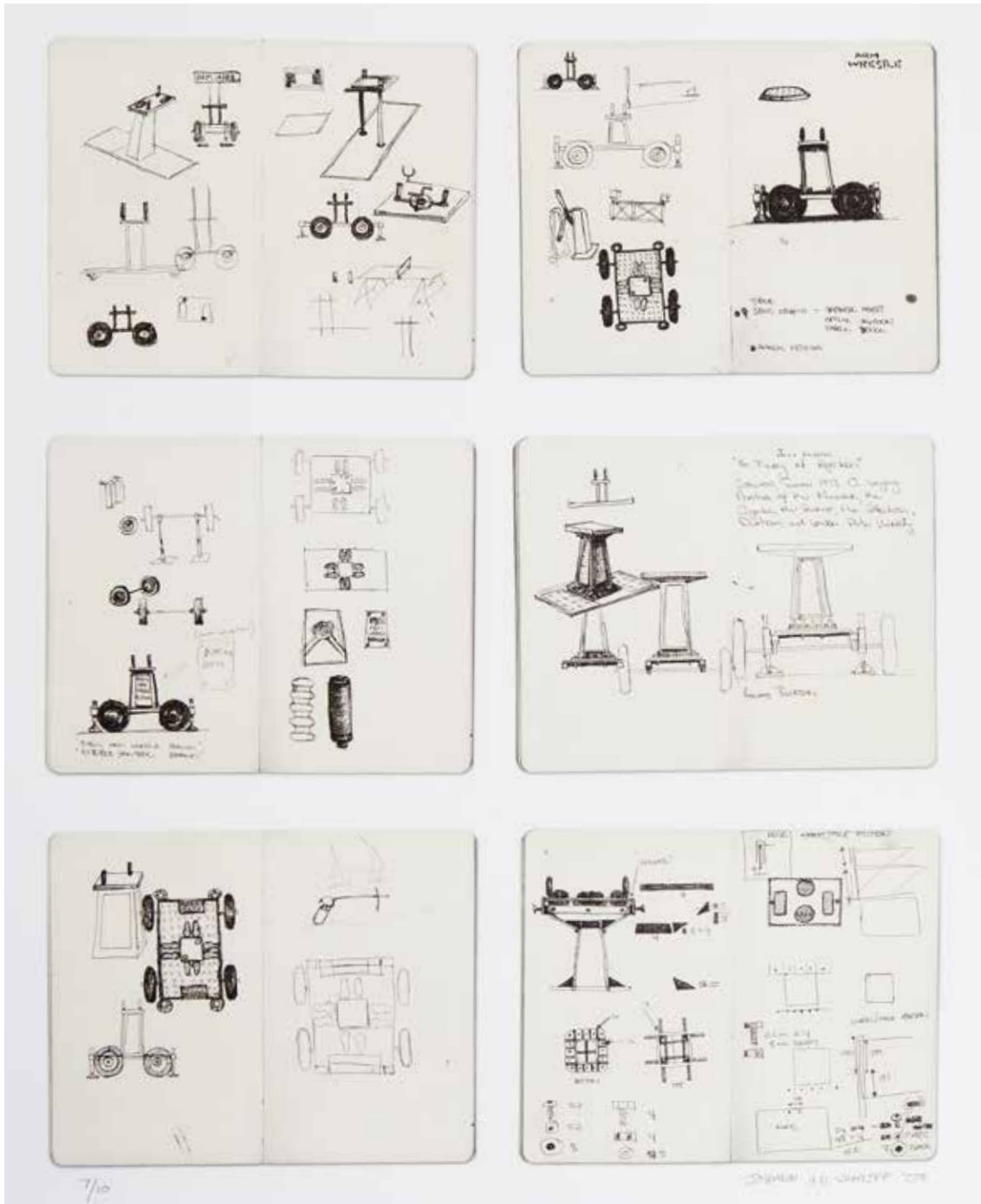






Pretoria Mirror, 2015, convex security mirror, panga panga (partridge wood), 27 model paint canisters, magnets, 63cm wide x 63cm high x 11cm deep, edition of 5

Related Work



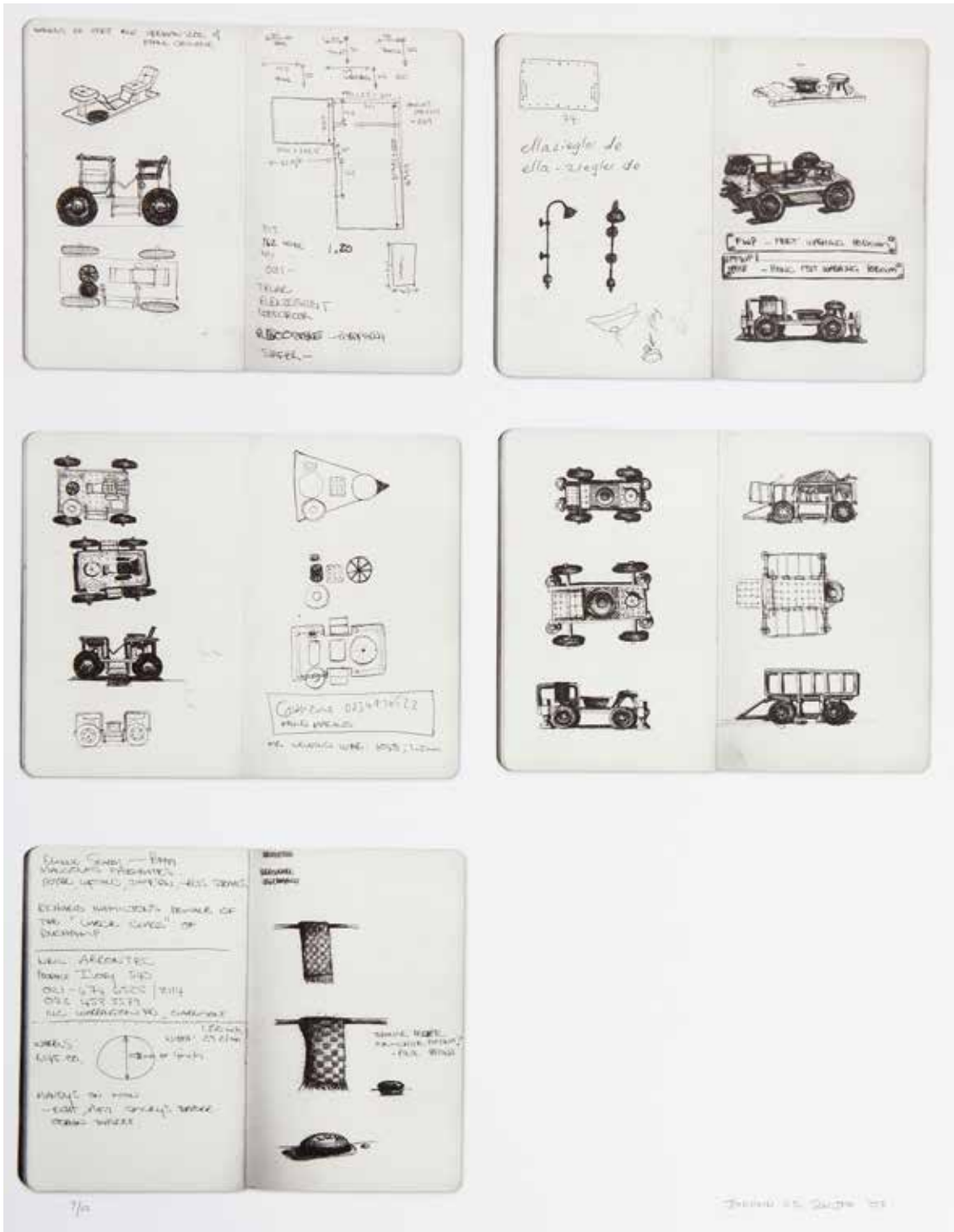
Arm-Wrestling Podium (AWP), 2007, photolithograph, 50cm wide x 70.5cm high, edition of 10



Arm-Wrestling Podium (AWP), 2007, bronze, stainless steel, 16cm wide x 14.5cm high x 14cm deep, edition of 10



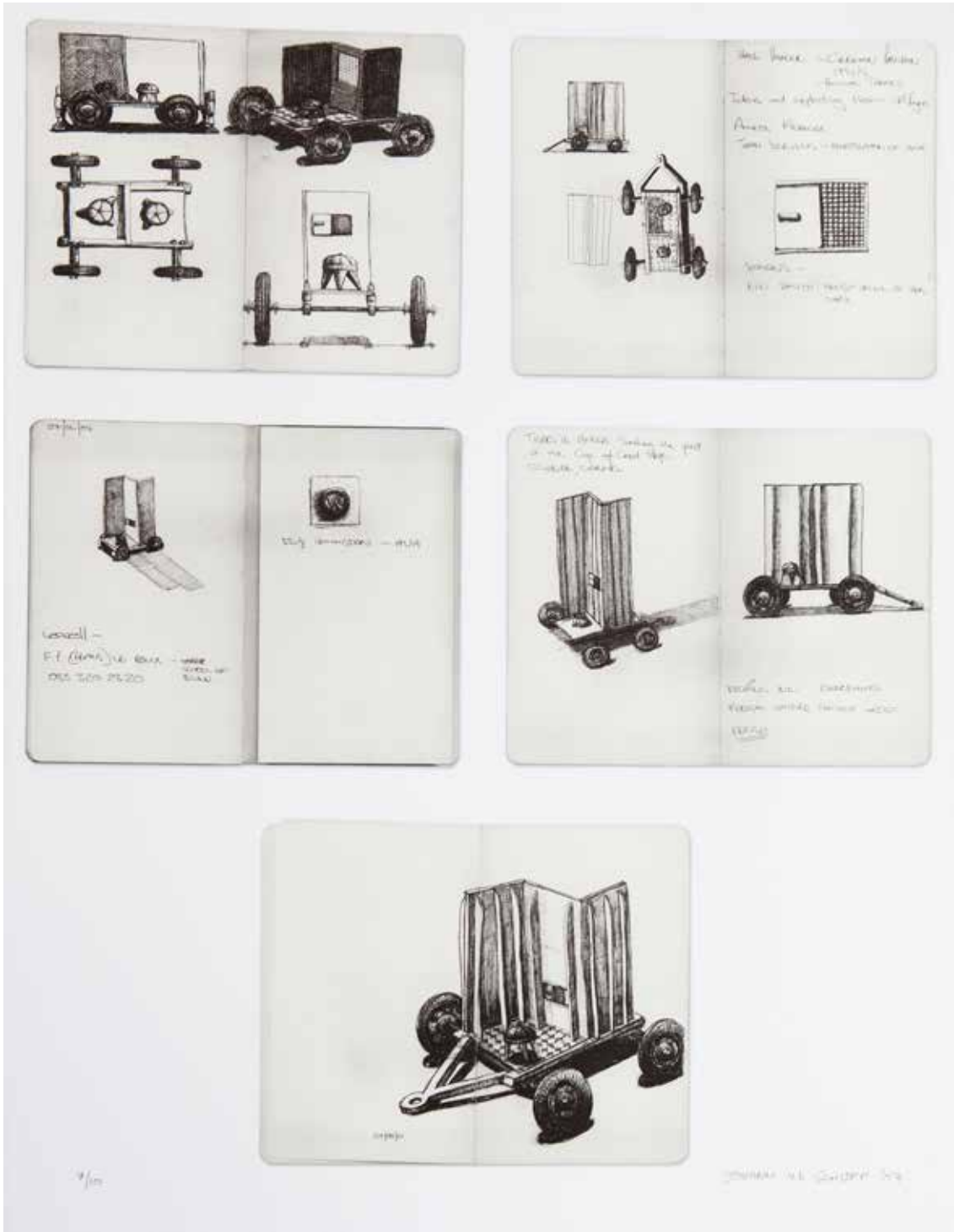
Arm-Wrestling Podium (AWP), 2007, bronze, weather-resistant steel, mild steel, stainless steel, aluminium, brass, enamel paint, 165cm wide x 145.5cm high x 140cm deep. Johann van der Schijff and Kirsty Cockerill having an arm-wrestle on the AWP



Public Foot-Washing Podium (PFP), 2007, photolithograph, 50cm wide x 70.5cm high, edition of 10



Public Foot-Washing Podium (PPF), 2007, bronze, stainless steel, 18cm wide x 9.5cm high x 14.5cm deep, edition of 10



Truth and Confession Podium (TCP), 2007, photolithograph, 50cm wide x 70.5cm high, edition of 10



Truth and Confession Podium (TCP), 2007, bronze, stainless steel,
18cm wide x 17cm high x 156cm deep, edition of 10



Monument Podium (MP), 2007, bronze,
wide x 26.5cm high x 14.5cm deep, edition of 10



Walk the Line, 2015, bronze, stainless steel,
113cm wide x 13cm high x 18cm deep, edition of 10



Yellow & Ivory Pear Ball, 2008, aluminium, stainless steel, plywood, tanned leather, stuffing,
90cm wide x 66cm high x 38cm deep



Ebony & Ivory Pear Ball, 2008, aluminium, stainless steel, plywood, tanned leather, stuffing, 90cm wide x 66cm high x 38cm deep

Acknowledgements

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Finally, a VERY SPECIAL word of thanks to my family – Nicky, Sophia and Tom – for their love, support and understanding. Only a woman as remarkable as Nicky would have endured eight years of my working towards this show. In that time: our children became *mense*; I spent three months away on a

residency in The Netherlands (while her mum was gravely ill); I completed the *Community Punching Bags (CPBs)* project in Cape Town and started another in Durban; I travelled three times to Senegal, once to Benin, twice to Algeria in North Africa (the last time for more than a month); I also travelled to the Netherlands (again), Sweden and America; I cut and nearly lost my hand using a power tool in my studio; we moved house and she bought a new car; recently I dealt with the trauma of unprecedented student protests and intimidation on campus. All through this time Nicky cared for and looked after our children, and me, whilst she held a very demanding job and moved to an even more demanding job. Thank you for being there for me and believing in me. I love you.

Endnotes

- i Adobe Illustrator:
<http://www.adobe.com>
- ii Autodesk 3D software:
<http://www.autodesk.com>
- iii Trotec JobControl:
<http://www.troteclaser.com>
- iv MecSoft VisualMill:
<http://mecsoft.com>
- v MultiCam EZ G-Code:
<http://www.multicam.com>
- vi EnRoute:
<http://www.enroutesoftware.com>
- vii CNC – Computer Numerical Control



