

Annotation for *Transgressing power*

Transgressing Power was a cohesive body of work, presented as a solo exhibition at SMAC Gallery, Johannesburg, 8 June to 13 July 2019.

The artworks comprised sculptural pieces made from household objects: brooms, clothing irons, and pegs. The exhibition received much attention through audience attendance as well as on social media. Two formal reviews were published: one by Ngkopoleng Moloi (“Banal and Celestial: Usha Seejarim’s ‘Transgressing Power’”, *ArtThrob*, 26 June 2019) and another by Robyn Sassen (“The elegance of the humble peg”, *Artsvark*, 3 July 2019). Two further, recent, academic studies by acclaimed theoretical writers have been conducted on this body of work, but they are not yet published and are currently in the editing phase.

The title *Transgressing Power* was stimulated by an article published in *The Guardian* on 7 April 2018, in which Madeline Miller described how women who transgress sexuality are being labelled as whores and those who transgress power, as witches. Subsequently, I wove the image of the witch symbolically into various pieces in the exhibition. She is presented not in the traditional sense of a witch, but rather, through the concept of power – and particularly the embodiment of power is explored. In *Magic Stick* several wooden broomsticks are severed, sliced and dismembered, and re-constructed into a new form; a simple stick, re-membered; made singular through the collective.

The simplicity of transforming ordinary objects into artworks speak further to notions of alchemy in the process of artmaking. The technique of segmenting wooden broomsticks and using the materiality, almost like large beads, would be explored further and this led to subsequent individual pieces as well as bodies of work. A few months after this solo exhibition, I would investigate the limitations of this material in depth during a residency at SCAC Marestaing in France.

Numerous of my works explore ideas of the collective through configurations of multitudes of wooden pegs, grass broom heads and broomsticks. The materiality of these objects become elemental items in the design and construction of the sculptural forms. Inherent to their meaning is the innate function and association with the domestic role of women. The labour intensive process of making is a further reference to women’s labour, women’s positions of servitude, the labour of giving birth and labour in the workplace – which for many South African women, as housewives and also as domestic workers, is the domestic space.

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Grass broom heads were used to make three pieces, titled *nests* in this exhibition. In their assemblage into nest-like forms, they explore concepts of home, nurturing, comfort and belonging. They also exude bodily references to orifice, mouth, or nipple. While the forms may be repulsive for the tryphobic eye, their collective structure alludes further, to collective power. Later in 2019, when offered an opportunity to present a solo installation for Season 6 at the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Maboneng, Johannesburg, I expanded on these individual pieces to create a considerable installation of “nests” called *nesting*, where an excess of sixty nests would create a sensorial, experiential installation of broom heads.

Wooden pegs, like the broom heads and segmented broom handles, were used in multitude to form several pieces on the show. Stripped of their function to hold, join or clasp, they are attached only to each other to create conceptual pieces that speak to the female body in the domestic sphere.