Exhibition Review

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Stories Worth Telling

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It is seldom a good thing to blow one's own horn, but since this accomplishment is mine only by association with my creative colleagues in the School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria, I think I am, so to speak, duty-bound to report on this: There is a vibrant new exhibition space in Pretoria. And the humble name of UP Student Gallery should not lower the expectations. In 2023 alone, UP Student Gallery not only hosted excellent exhibitions by the Fine Art students at the University of Pretoria, but also several others by professional artists which were truly world-class.

One of the highlights was the *Peter Magubane Retrospective* exhibition celebrating the honorary doctorate bestowed on the legendary photographer by the University of Pretoria in May 2023. At the time, we did not know that this exhibition, curated by David Meyer-Gollan, would be the last held in the artist's lifetime. Magubane passed away on 1 January 2024. The UP School of the Arts was grateful that we could fill our exhibition space with photographs ranging from Magubane's early career, through the struggle years, during his stint as Nelson Mandela's official photographer, right up to his Soweto sunsets. The University's Drama students made the exhibition even more unforgettable by engaging with the photographic content by performing a heart-wrenching radio drama in the gallery space. *Amahemhem* was written specially for the occasion by lecturers in this programme.

Another exhibition highlight was *Shifting Focus*, a collaboration with fellow artists initiated and curated by Carla Crafford, who has been teaching Fine Art and Information Design students at UP for many years. What makes this versatile artist's relationship with fellow artists remarkable is that she also practises the delicate art of photographing artists' work. The exhibition, which included photography, painting,

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sculpture, printmaking, and works in exceptional mixed media, was opened in the Student Gallery in March 2023. Later in the year, it was invited to UP's Future Africa Campus to form part of the university's Africa Week events. Recently, the exhibition was invited to travel again, but before this happens, Crafford is about to publish a beautiful book of her extraordinary photographs of the exhibition.

The topic of books brings me to another remarkable world-class exhibition held at the Student Gallery in 2023. Like Magubane's, it was also retrospective, and like Crafford's, it also led to further publications and prospects of travelling in the near future: *Stories worth telling*, which will be the topic of this review, was all about books, their luminous legacy and their beautiful future. Why beautiful? A decade or so ago, the phrase 'the future of the book is beautiful' was used by a niche publishing house in Germany just at the time when e-readers hit the market. The message was clear: if we were to continue making books, they had better aspire to the highest standards that book design can accomplish. They should showcase what paging through a book can be like: if books had a future, it lay within the medium's propensity to be beautiful.

The *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition, curated by the Information Design staff at the University of Pretoria, ran from 7 June to 7 July 2023. It showcased 218 book designs by final-year Information Design students, many of whom are well-established and even internationally renowned designers today. The projects were produced over the previous two decades as the outcome of an assignment aimed at teaching students about the storytelling proclivities of the book as medium. On the exhibition's opening day, Jacques Lange (2023), a designer who initiated and was involved in teaching the project from the start, explained the value of the book assignment:

> In the late 1990s, I realised that our students were taught strong copywriting skills, but I felt that they lacked training in more complex narrative skills related to editorial design, specifically layered storytelling – longer stories that relay non-commercial messaging that convey more journalistic/documentary approaches. Copywriting entails 'hard sell' messaging, while journalistic/documentary writing requires a more creative 'freestyle' approach. In 2003, I proposed the idea of introducing a book design project that focussed on storytelling and creative writing as part of the 4th year BA Information Design curriculum.

As long as the book design project had been running, hardly any adjustments to the brief to the students were necessary. According to Lange (2023), they had to 'develop a unique concept for a collectable, non-fictional, illustrated book about someone who they perceive to have a 'story worthy of telling' aimed at a bibliophile audience.' The aim has always been to 'teach students different skills and make them aware of different points of view and aspects of how stories unfold in words and in visual representation'(Lange 2023).

The 218 projects selected for the exhibition represented only a quarter of all the assignments submitted over 21 years. Included in the exhibition were 1 264 wall display boards, of which 35 panels featured extracts of original texts; more than 50 3D prototypes; around 15 page-trough and live reading videos; and 10 large thematic banners featuring selective imaging, including the work of the 2023 group that just completed the project. The layout of the exhibition, which spanned the complete floor space of the Student Gallery, was done thematically, with colour coding used to group projects on each of the following themes:

People, places and passions
Faith, fantasy and fulfilment
Quirky characters
Struggles and triumphs
Ethical conundrums
Music and sheets

An online Behance and digital PDF catalogue also accompanied the exhibition. The digital catalogue features all work on display and a collection of essays by lecturers who facilitated the project or those who executed it during their studies. While the concept books in the exhibition all included a complete set of illustrations, only an introductory section of text was required from the students for examination purposes. However, as Prof Sandy Africa (2023), Acting Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, observed in her speech on opening night: 'Some students also went on to complete and publish their books, while others were inspired to pursue postgraduate studies in illustration and careers as editorial and book designers.'

As confirmed by lecturers who had supervised the projects over the years, the diversity of the stories and the uniqueness of every student's approach bear testimony to the inexhaustible depths of human experience and expression. Africa (2023) summarised it as follows:

> … the stories recall poignant moments in our timeline, of political action, of crime and corruption, illness and adversity, death and trauma. But the stories on display also highlight hardworking South Africans: farmers, engineers, architects, pilots and so on. They highlight our artists, designers and poets. They reveal our sense of compassion; our spiritual and cultural practices; our inquisitive nature and attempt to depict our unique sense of humour, and eccentricities. … The stories celebrate our diversity and the beauty of lived experiences that shape us as South Africans. Through their personal stories, they reveal pockets of our history and help weave a truly South African story.

I am not a designer, but having dabbled in book history over the past two decades, I was childishly excited when my colleague Kyle Rath (co-curator of the exhibition) indulged me to say a few words at the opening event. A few days later, I was indulged again when I could act as a gallery visitor in the promotion video the company Phlogiston generously produced as a courtesy for the Information Design programme. Now that my experience of the exhibition has fermented for a year or so and having taken another look at my favourite stories, I suppose that my insights may have shifted a little since the first encounter. I hope that my responses to Rath's questions at the time, might have become a little more reflective by now. Two decades of storytelling by hundreds of students brings a complexity that requires some time to process.

My list of favourite projects got somewhat reshuffled over the past year. Some stayed at the top, sometimes for very idiosyncratic reasons. Recently, I visited Westdene in Johannesburg for the first time in my life, and this rekindled my memory of Estée Liebenberg's 2015 project featuring the bus disaster of 1985: The book *Kop bo water* (Figure 1) gives voice to one woman's lifelong journey as a survivor surviving survival. Liebenberg's storytelling is impeccable, largely thanks to the trust invested in her by the main character. The book's visuals connect with the survivor's inner emotions, combining her blind contour drawings with nature photographs depicting growth – fungi, ferns, flowers, and seeds. This is a heart-wrenching artistic rendering of personal memory underneath the master narrative of a national disaster.



FIGURE **Nº 1a**

Estée Liebenberg, *Kop bo water*, 2015. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

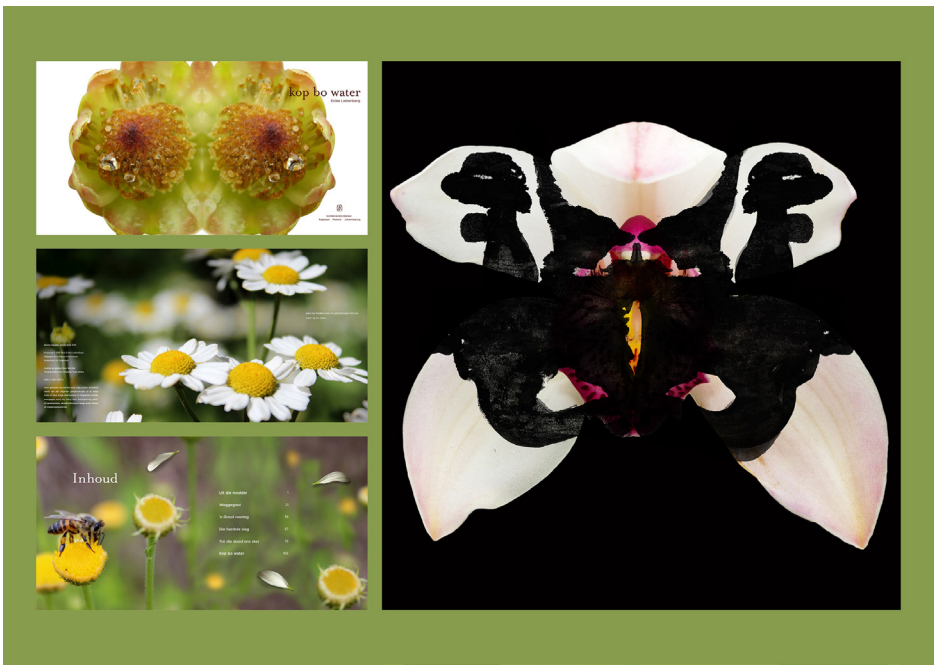

FIGURE **Nº 1b**

Estée Liebenberg, *Kop bo water*, 2015. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.



FIGURE **Nº 1c**

Estée Liebenberg, *Kop bo water*, 2015. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

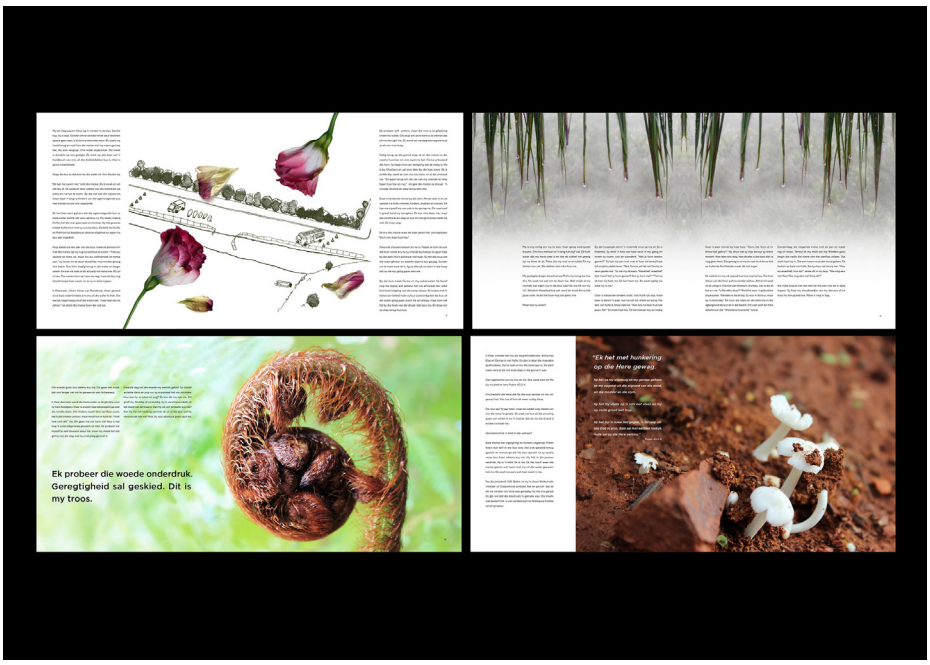

FIGURE **Nº 1d**

Estée Liebenberg, *Kop bo water*, 2015. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

The matter-of-factness of 2013 final year student Ntombi Mkhwanazi's book *Over-exposed* (Figure 2), about Henry Eksteen, at the time the owner of the iconic Radio Lens camera shop in Pretoria, is another project that touched me deeply upon my recent visit to the digital archive. The shop Radio Lens still exists. But is Eksteen still the owner? What has become of his collections so poignantly featured in the book? This project underscores the importance of *Stories Worth Telling* as an archive, holding material that can be extracted to add detail and dimension to many larger stories. *Over-exposed* offers content that could become puzzle pieces in many possible histories – on photography, Pretoria, and the practice of collecting.



FIGURE **Nº 2a**

Ntombi Mkhwanazi, *Over-exposed*, 2013. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.



FIGURE **Nº 2b**

Ntombi Mkhwanazi, *Over-exposed*, 2013. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.



FIGURE **Nº 2c**

Ntombi Mkhwanazi, *Over-exposed*, 2013. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

While the two projects mentioned above feature the stories of persons unrelated to the designers, some other students used the project as an opportunity to record family histories and, through design, to relate the strangeness of the past with the endearment of its memory. In 2004, Fatima Cassim, today a senior lecturer in Information Design, summarised her book, *Small servings of basmati* (Figure 3), as follows:

> According to Indian customs, the price of rice never determines the selection; it is the quality that is of utmost importance. Likewise, *Small servings of basmati* begins with the utmost care that went into hand-picking a husband for my paternal grandmother, Rabia Cassim. The book then traces her journey from India to South Africa, at the age of 19, with a wedding trousseau and not much else except a spirit of adventure. Told in a series of chapters, the book offers tender stories of how this Indian *dadima* cultivated her life and family on South African soil.



FIGURE **Nº 3**

Fatima Cassim, *Small servings of basmati*, 2004. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

On other occasions, students used their books to render the verbal fragments an unrelated person was willing to share with them about the life story of a loved one into artistic memory work. As such, the design-work facilitated the preservation of the significance and the meaning of that life story and its relatedness to the stories of families, communities, nations and societies. And often, thanks to the compassionate and ethical design, the books transcend the dead-end-one-dimensional categorisation of people as only one thing: perpetrator or perpetrated, victor or victim, success or failure. Through the contexts built into the design process, the characters are shown in their incomplete, malleable complexity, and the story of being human is preserved in its inevitable imperfection and its telling continuity.

Tessa Gough (2019) did this for Jill Battle's memories of her father, Daniel Earley (*Dana*) (Figure 4), a bomber pilot for the Allied forces in the Second World War. The

quirky use of patterns and text invokes bombings, military insignia, and sequences. Throughout the book, these serve as backdrops behind delicate objects like teapots and wedding cakes, graphically drawing the father's visceral, embodied memories of war into his children's memories of domestic life in a former British colony. This student's intuitive grasp of first-hand experiences mediated into successive generations' collective memories is remarkable.



FIGURE **Nº 4a**

Tessa Gough, *Dana*, 2019. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.



FIGURE **Nº 4b**

Tessa Gough, *Dana*, 2019. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.



FIGURE **Nº 4c**

Tessa Gough, *Dana*, 2019. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

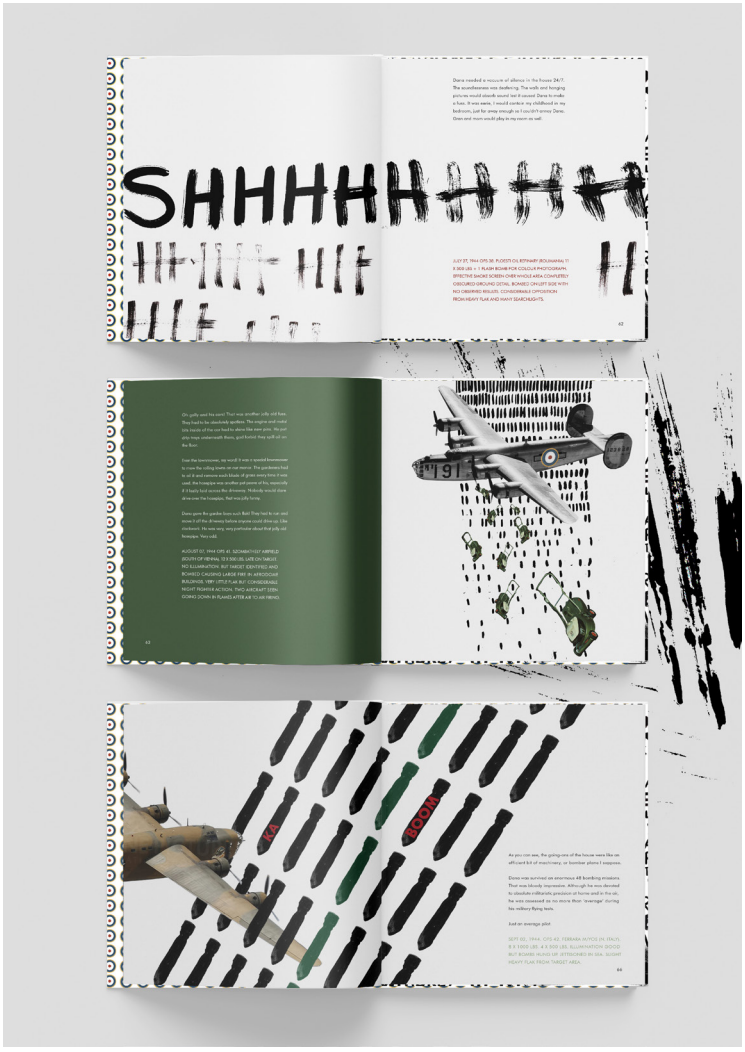

FIGURE **Nº 4d**

Tessa Gough, *Dana*, 2019. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

Finally, when assessing all the projects collectively, as a repository, what has been archived over these past twenty-odd years? What are the stories representative of? How do they relate to capital-H History? As micro-histories, they sometimes follow, sometimes deviate from, sometimes begin by following and, towards the end, veer away from the master narratives shaped by school curricula, the news media, political powers, and popular opinion. Like a good story should, they do not end with the same 'knowing' as they have set out on the narrative journey. The field of production in which these stories contribute to, challenge, or reshape master narratives is complex. At the very least, every story worth telling touches the audience/reader every time it is being reenacted – that is, every time the book is being taken in hand, looked at, opened, read.

Once available in book form, especially in an appropriately designed book where the layout, type, colours, and images set a fine stage, every new reader can reenact the narrative performance every time they engage with the images and the text. Because such books preserve the situatedness of the stories in their rightful place and time, they account for the cultural context appropriate for the story without holding future readers hostage in the ways of thinking and doing of a time gone by. As such, they have the capacity to facilitate more nuanced modes of understanding, and for readers opening themselves to this, a greater possibility for empathy and, hopefully, even forgiveness.

I would like to believe that the cathartic propensity of the storytelling in these books, their expression of experiences of overcoming, of becoming, of reconciling, might be their most profound contribution to a South African collective memory. As cultural historian Peter Burke, who prefers to speak of social memory, explains, people remember as individuals. Still, it is within groups that we agree upon what is worth remembering and how we will give meaning to it. If we are to believe novelist Ben Okri's prophesy that nations are destined to live by the stories they tell themselves, our university community, our city, our country, and wherever in the world these stories travel to, is better off thanks to the social memory-making promoted through this design project.

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