

12th December 2011

Int This is an interview with Bongi Dhlomo, and it's December the 12th, 2011. Bongi, thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the Constitutional Court Oral History Project, we really appreciate it.

BD You're very welcome, thank you.

Int Bongi, I was wondering if you could talk about early childhood memories in terms of where and when you were born, your experiences of growing up in South Africa under apartheid, and what were the formative life influences that allowed you to pursue an artistic pathway?

BD It is quite a complex upbringing in a very complex education system, and very exciting possibilities and, I mean, just cross over things that happened. So it's not a very smooth history of childhood, say, my father was an artist therefore I inherited that. I didn't inherit it from anyone really. I grew up, I was born in KwaZulu-Natal, in Vryheid, where my father, as a minister of religion was working. Those first five years I lived in this place, in Vryheid, in the mission station where my father was a minister. Then we moved to Bergville when I was six, and Bergville, our home was very close to the Drakensberg range mountains. And that's where I maybe started appreciating the beauty of nature. But even at that time, at that age, I didn't know what...how to link it to art. We were given...as a family we were given an artwork that was in our lounge. It was a reproduction of the artist Pierneef, and even at that time, looking at that artwork, it was just a beautiful piece of art and it didn't link anything with me becoming an artist in the later life. And growing up around the Drakensberg range, once in a while you would see an artist painting...a white artist, because it was always white there, and they were all male, all the ones that I saw were male artists painting the Drakensberg range. Especially the Mont-Aux-Sources where the Tugela River source starts. And...so I, even though I was interested but I wouldn't go close. It's unlike now when you see a painter, you see kids around them looking at what the artist is doing. But with us being young kids, black kids, it was very difficult to have a connection with a white person. But all these little anecdotes of experiences and things that were just happenstance, that happened in my daily life, may have added a little bit onto my interest in art. And then there was a sales person who was selling...who was trying to get couples, married couples to pose for...or to take pictures of them and then go and do their airbrush portraits. And I remember that this person came to our house and I think I was seven, and it was a white guy who obviously saw that in our family, I mean, it was a bit of a middle class of the time, being a...my father was now a dean, not just a reverend but a dean of a circuit. And he tried to get them. They were

interested, my parents were interested, but he was too pushy, and I remember that when there was a big fallout I started wondering what did...because he brought the samples of what he had done with other people, and I wondered, I kept wondering how my parents would have looked in that frame, with that frame, because they...I think those pieces were always...the best thing about them was the frames (*laughs*) more than the artworks inside. So I just wondered how my parents would have looked. Because even now, in many black homes, you still find those airbrush portraits of couples, even though they had not taken the picture together but the artist were able to do that. Again, a little anecdote that I didn't realise was going to make me interested in art. Then in the sixties, I think '65/'66, we had...when we received Christmas cards, there were Christmas cards that came from all over and to my parents home. And I got interested in a black and white series of Christmas cards that came, and they had biblical stories. Growing up as a Christian and going to Sunday School, they made more sense, but I didn't...maybe in a way they were more interesting because they showed something that I understood. They were a narrative of stories that I knew. And at the back it was written there, because with the colourful ones with the Santa Claus and the Christmas tree, I was looking, but I couldn't link snow and Santa Claus with the biblical anything except Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ. But it was just...they're just too weird, these glossy, very nice pictures of...with glitter as well. Most of them had glitter, gold or white, silver glitter. And so the Christmas cards that came from the different ministers that were working with my father, were by this artist, Azaria Mbatha, and I got very much interested in them but again I'm now ten, eleven, I still don't have links with art. And then a whole lot of things that were more political that also started dropping in and when I was in standard four at that time, standard four, standard five, the Rivonia Trial, you just start to piece these things together but you park them. And so I parked all these things, until I finished matric and went to study...I wanted to go to university but at that time, universities didn't offer too much in terms of careers for black students, especially women. I could only be a nurse, social worker, or a teacher. And I didn't like to be a nurse at all. I mean, I didn't like teaching. And so I applied at Fort Hare University at the University of Zululand, as well as at Inanda Seminary where they were starting to teach. It was going to be the second year of teaching a secretarial course. And I had had a very close connection with my father in his office. I knew how to type on a Royal typewriter, and I knew how to cut stencil for many forms that he needed for the church. And got very close to the ink and the paper. And so when this course was offered I actually felt that it was going to be up my street, and then I went to art school and finished the...it was a one year course, very...it was, for us, because we had done matric, it was not like when you are starting from the junior certificate you'd have to do three years but for everyone who had done matric, we were doing a concentrated one year course. And I did this and passed and looked for work, which was very difficult at that time because most of the secretaries were either first white secretaries that were PAs, and Indians and Coloureds. And so when I got a job I actually got a job via a newspaper ad, a Zulu language newspaper ad, and got to this place in Tongaat and worked for a year, and second year I actually realised

that I didn't like to be a secretary. I was attracted to it because it was better than the other two. And so I, on my way back, I was going back to work after my leave, I was going back to work and my father is taking me back to my place of work in Tongaat, and we stopped at the church centre, and there was a handwritten poster advertising the Rorke's Drift Art School. And I took their address and I applied. And that's how, in a very roundabout way of all these mishaps and these anecdotes and these glimpses into what was possible, that's how I then went to Rorke's Drift Arts and Craft Centre. But to be admitted in this school you had to send through samples, five samples at least, of drawings you had done, or art that you had done. And I did not have anything. I didn't have a portfolio. So I made some drawings and then you had to also write an essay of motivating why you should be taken. And I still believe even today that I was taken because of my essay and not my art (*laughs*).

Int What did your essay contain, Bongzi?

BD My essay really was very descriptive because I had trained as a secretary and it was typewritten, to crown it. It covered...it was a one and a half page; they had just said you must send a very short, but mine was one and a half page of a typewritten. And it really covered areas of why I thought art would be a tool for communication. And being a church school, I also attached a bit on how God had created the world and how I thought God was an artist, because whenever he finished...each day when he finished whatever he was creating, he would say, I think this is beautiful. So I threw that in. I think that's why I got taken at the art school.

Int Wonderful. And tell me about your experiences at the art school and where it led to thereafter?

BD Maybe first is to really say, at that time a black girl going out on a tangent and going to art school was unheard of because there were very few art schools. Rorke's Drift also taught Home Economics, and my sister, my eldest sister had been there before the art school really started, because she had...she wasn't able to go very far at school because she had fits, and she stopped at standard six and then went to this school to do Home Economics. And so when I got there, there was a craft side and the Home Economics, even though that was towards an end, and then I was going there to do Fine Art, and I was very lucky that because it was the Lutheran Church and our church is the Lutheran Church, and my father knew about the school, there wasn't resistance, but even on top of that I was going to pay for myself and the school was quite reasonable. We got materials, we got school fees, boarding, all at a very low subsidised amount, subsidised by the church. So there wasn't resistance. It was a very strange thing because when I said it, I was expecting that they would resist and say, because you're now working, you've got a good job, why are you leaving work? Because my brother was still at school

and in our society, in our families the older person, older sibling, always helps the younger sibling. So I thought there was going to be resistance. But when I said I was going to pay for myself, and the fact that I was going to a church school, there wasn't a lot of resistance. There was a lot of support from my parents. And so when I got to art school there were three of us from KZN and every other person was from Johannesburg or from the then Transvaal. And so they had been exposed to art before. You could see and from the way they spoke about art and from the way they did their projects that these are people that had been exposed to art. So there was a little bit of not being sure of myself, but I had been brought up with the thing to believe in myself and to believe in what I do, and to be honest in what I was doing. My very first project was a printmaking, which I had not done, because as I say, the drawings that I'd sent through was just drawings, very casual. So this...I realised I think the balance of this image of Adam and Eve to show that we were getting projects that sometimes they were very linked to the biblical stories. Even though they were not forcing us to do...you'd be asked to interpret something and then it would end up being that. But this one piece, I actually when I did it, I was able to balance the image, and the lecturer commented on that and I got positive feedback from my very first project, which gave me a lot of encouragement because I had thought...I was feeling very unsure of what I was doing. And so the friendship that was created between us as students...it was a very small school, altogether the whole school with the second years, it was a two-year diploma, second years and first years, there were only twenty of us. Fewer women, there were only four women...no, there were five women, and two in the final class, and three of us in the...so there was also that, the whole thing of moving into, as a black girl, moving into the territory that was known, even though you had not done it but you knew all the artists that were spoken about were male. So it was both the gender issue and the fact that you were moving into a completely unheard of territory in terms of career paths. And so I was encouraged by the fact that the older students, the ones that were doing second year, were helpful, very helpful. We all came together for crits and...so it was because of the smallness of the group, there was a lot of support.

Int I'm also very curious, it sounds like you may have been the only person who was black in this group at Rorke's Drift art school?

BD No, everyone was black. It was a school that provided for black students only.

Int And was it predominantly male or was it mixed?

BD Predominantly male. In a school of twenty students, there were only five women and fifteen male students.

Int And tell me what happened after you finished at the school?

BD I was at Rorke's Drift for...in '78 and '79, and my father passed away in November 1979, just before I did my final project. So I went home for the funeral, and came back to school to finish my project. Because you had to do x number of projects in order to get a portfolio and to get your certificate, or your diploma. So I went home and...

(pause in recording)

Int Bongi, you were talking about the death of your father in 1979, and I was wondering what had happened subsequently?

BD My father died in November '79 and I had to go home, and quite a lot of the students, a number of students came to the funeral with the lecturers, some of the lecturers. Since he was also on the church council that governed the...well, governed the school remotely, not really that he was there all the time. And so I went back to finish my portfolio, and went now looking for work. And the reality of doing art those days, and I know even now it's still the same, you go into this thinking that it's a career path that is going to give a job, but the reality is that there are no jobs for artists. So I went back to Tongaat. Tongaat had a...has still that group of companies, one of them is a textile design factory. And so I went to...because I'd worked there, I had resigned so in my application was, I have been at school and I am now a qualified artist. And so I applied in this, and I went, I was accepted in the textile design, in the design area where you do colour separation and all these things that artists do. And so I worked there but it was not creative. I mean, you were looking at somebody else's design and separating the colours for the printing process. And I didn't stay long there. I went looking for a job and I worked at the African Art Centre. And I think that was the break that I had, not looking for but that was more suited to my qualification. Because now I was working as a secretary in the bursary department of the Institute of Race Relations. And the Institute of Race Relations had the African Art Centre as one of its projects, and the African Art Centre was promoting craft and art, fine art, and they had a huge number of Rorke's Drift graduates whose works were being shown there. But when I came in I now have both the qualifications of being a secretary as well as the fine art diploma, I was able to deal with the fine art section, and we started having exhibitions. That had not happened before. They just had a portfolio of art that people would page through and buy. But when I started I suggested to the director, Ms Jo Thorpe, I said maybe we should have small exhibitions. The space was very small but we were able to stage some kind of exhibition. But before that I had been invited in...because I started there in 1981 and during that time I started making quite a number of prints dealing with the situation, because within the African Art Centre, or the Institute of Race Relations, there was the research wing. And the research wing was dealing a lot with the social issues around Durban. And there was the forced removals, and people were being moved. It was the time of the removal of people from the white areas that were now called the black

spots, that they were recycled and other spaces. And that's when I started getting interested in using my art, which I had not really thought about quite seriously, as a tool for the communication, even though at school we were talking about it. But this was the first time that I was confronted by the socio-political issues that other people could write poetry about and other people could write books about. But I thought, why not use this to document through art what I see because of the work that I was doing. Then I did a series...I started a series on forced removals. I did four in 1981 to '82. Then we got invited to the first festival...conference and festival that was in Botswana in 1982, called Culture and Resistance, and that's where we met for the first time. All the artists that had gone to exile from South Africa and South African artists that were practising in all spheres: art, drama, music, and we all met in Botswana for the first time. And I was invited as one of the artists, and the person that was the curator, the team that was curating the South African exhibition, took my work and the gentleman who is now the Deputy Minister of Public Enterprises, was working in a project in Pietermaritzburg, and he took some...the work that I had produced for, around the forced removals. And he told me when he came back that, when he showed, because they were now then showing the work to the larger committee to then agree that this work will be shown or this work was rejected or whatever, he told me when he came back, he was laughing and he told me, he said, the team, this committee said, oh, wow, who is this guy? And he said, I was very happy to say, no, it's not a guy this time, it's a woman (*laughs*). And so my work was shown and it was sold. I got told that the work was bought by a Kenyan national, which was very...because it was maybe my first serious public presentation, and it was not in South Africa, it was in another country. And I was very much encouraged, then I completed...I had done four in this forced removal, even though my narrative had concluded that it was going to be seven or eight pieces talking about the different stages of this whole thing of forced removals. And so I continued, I finished seven and the seven series is now in a number of public galleries, or public museums in Durban, in Pietermaritzburg, and at Wits. But I then continued because I'd realised that this was communicating. There was a very successful readership of the work that I had done and people were able to read what I was saying. Then I continued dealing with socio-political issues in my work. Because I just felt that if other people could write books and if I couldn't write books, I could write the history through my art. I met also during that time, the younger brother of Judge Langa. He was studying at the University of Natal doing law. He was killed in 1984, Ben Langa. He was a poet. So he was writing poetry, and we would share. He would look at work and I would read his poetry. Sometimes I would use his poetry to create art. I did...I think we did a series of...I think we did three pieces where I read his poem and interpreted it into my work, and I gave him the prints. And he worked like that. And unfortunately he was killed in 1984, just as we were starting to plan other projects that now I was already in Johannesburg and we were going to be working together. But it was a very...and the time, the mid eighties, was just a time that demanded some kind of social engagement by artists, whether you were a musician, whether you're in theatre, or you're a fine artist, it was at that time where there was a

lot of what was termed protest theatre. Even though we refused to use the term protest art with our art, we said it was the art of resistance. Because we were saying, if people know what is happening to them, through what I do, and they can read it, maybe they will be able to then resist. Because if you do not know what is being done to you, you don't arm yourself with knowledge or with other ways of going around that. So when in 1985 the State of Emergency was declared, we were not...I mean, we were obviously unfortunately had to be very careful about what you put out, because at that time the papers were censored, the newspaper stories were censored. So we tended to have self-censorship as well in terms of the work we were doing. But the censorship board of the time did not see fine art as a huge threat, not as much as the books, the poems, the music. So there wasn't...I don't remember, my work was never banned, and I don't remember any art that was banned. I just know that the art that was done by an artist in Cape Town, he was also a political activist and he had depicted Jesus Christ as a black man. And I think that work had been...he was harassed and that work had been banned. But on the whole there was very little understanding of how art could influence...because first the system of education had not provided for a black artist. So when the black artist starts working against the system, we were sort of under the radar of...and so we were really able to do quite a lot in terms of just conscientising people through art, through the printing of t-shirts and posters. And this is all the time during the State of Emergency, and earlier.

Int I'm very curious, Bonggi, you mentioned how your parents didn't in any way resist you joining art school, and I'm curious about your family and their concerns that they may have had for you during the 1980s when repression was so rife?

BD Both my mother and my father, and my siblings, were very supportive of what I was doing. And I think I was very lucky in that in the mid eighties, in '87...when I came up to Johannesburg in '84, I worked for the Fuba Gallery, which was administering and managing the Fuba collection, which had come about from donations by the British and American contemporary artists, contemporary of that time. And this collection was brought to South Africa and it travelled around the country showcasing these artworks. And the director of Fuba then invited me when he learnt that I was coming up because I was getting married to an artist in Johannesburg. So he then offered me a job to run this gallery. So there was always, because of my double qualifications, I was always able to get a job as an administrator while making art. And because of that I then was invited to run the Alexandra Arts Centre in 1986. And that offered me a number of trips overseas for fundraising but also to continue to work in the liberation struggle. And that's how I actually managed to...not necessarily to convince my family that this was a good thing that I was an artist but they were able to see where my career fitted in the liberation struggle, but also in my upkeep, financial upkeep and possibilities of bringing up my children and putting them through school. Because all the time I've

never worked anywhere else in kind of corporate, after my art training. I've always worked, even if it's an administrative job, it is always linked to an art something. Because even when I worked for the City Council of Johannesburg I was in the Arts and Culture Department.

Int I'm also very curious, in terms of the actual medium you use, for example, you mentioned these pieces that you did on the forced removals, I was curious if you could talk us through that process of it, the emotions that went into it, and then the medium and what it exemplifies, since we're not seeing the pieces?

BD Okay, the print medium...maybe taking a step back, is that when you do printmaking, you are able to duplicate, to make more pieces from one block, so you can print more. In the eighties this was...it wasn't hammered, but it was discussed in circles, in art circles, that in order for...it was almost like your pamphlets...in order for you to make more impact, let's use this democratic medium because you can reach more people with one print...with one block, you can print a hundred, or you can print fifty, depending on what the subject...how the subject sits with you as an artist. So we called it a democratic medium because it could reach so many people. and it was maybe in retrospect, when I thought about it, it was the first seeds of liking print medium was because of those Christmas cards that I saw of Azaria Mbatha, that had narratives, that were very expressive. So when you work with lino, you can actually be very graphic and be very narrative. Which you can do also when you are painting or when you are doing watercolour. But the reason I liked printmaking was that you could reach more people through it, and you can give it away as gifts. Whereas if it's just one painting, that's the only painting, and it becomes too precious, and I wasn't...I've never thought and never wanted my work to become precious, so precious that it is not affordable. So the print medium, very similar to photography, you can make x number of prints and maybe do a limited edition if you want to make more money from them. So it's been...it still is one of the mediums that I think is graphic and can tell a story as a narrative. And that's how the print that I did in 1989...I did a series during the State of Emergency, that's called The State of the Eighties. And the series that Judge Albie Sachs bought from me in Sweden, comes from that period, the State of the Eighties, which dealt with the roadblocks, the car bombings and the soldiers in townships, and it was just a whole series that I did in the mid to late eighties.

Int Right. I was wondering, Bongi, you met Albie (Sachs) in 1989, and I wondered whether you could talk about that meeting...it happened abroad...and what occurred and what transpired from that meeting, because it's been a long-standing relationship since then?

BD I was invited, through my work with the Alexandra Arts Centre, I was invited to Sweden in 1987, but I had to stop over in London and then go to Sweden. But because it was all linked to the work of the liberation struggle, the letter that

invited me, did not explain what I was going to do in Sweden, it just...it was a very short letter, you will leave on this day, and you will get off in Heathrow...and this was my first trip overseas...and you'll take your...you'll be staying at this hotel in the West End, and there'll be people picking you up. But you'll then come to Sweden later on this day. And that was it, and I had all the things, my ticket, my passport and everything. But when I got...then because I was working for the Alexandra Arts Centre and I was invited as an artist, as well as a director of the Alexandra Arts Centre, I wasn't sure what was required of me to showcase for the Centre, so I took some of the things that the students had done and I took some of my work, because now I wasn't sure whether I was invited as myself or as...so when I got to Sweden, I had this roll of prints, I had just put them in a scroll and I rolled them, and I showed the work that the students were doing, and I showed my work. And this place that had invited me, that had sent the invitation is called, Riksställningar, which is the Swedish Travelling Exhibitions. And they then saw the work, and they bought all the work that I'd brought with me, of my own work. And then in 1989, they had relationships with the SADC region...in 1989 they invited sixteen artists: four from South Africa, four from Angola, four from Zimbabwe, and four from Mozambique, to go to exhibit in Sweden. But then they said to me, no, you just come because we'll use the work of your work that is already here. And then we were going to be the sixteen artists, two Anglophone and two that spoke only Portuguese, and they had invited, unknown to us how we were going to communicate with these artists...they'd invited Judge Albie Sachs to be the interpreter between the two groups, and that's how we met. And I had also again brought some of my work. Then we were asked to bring samples of our work, and I brought the work that I was doing of the State of the Eighties. And Judge Albie Sachs saw this piece, and we were sitting in a hotel where we were staying, and he saw the piece and he looked at it and he was very interested. But I thought about it afterwards as we were looking at the work, and I thought about it, because he had just...he still had marks on his face after the car bomb that he had...that injured him in Mozambique. He had come from England, from London, to Sweden, to be the interpreter. So I think for him it was also just a healing process of meeting with artists and playing such an important role. And he looked at my work and he said...and it's only then that it struck me that the work was about a car bomb, even though the car bomb that I was referring to had happened in South Africa, it's something that had happened in South Africa, in Roodepoort, in a parking lot, where the interview...I heard an interview on 702 as we were driving...we were driving to some embassy in Pretoria, and it was a number of us in the car. And they were asking people how they felt about when they heard about the bomb. And this woman was...reacted almost spontaneously, and what she said is, when they asked, so when you heard that there was a bomb in the car park, what did you think? And she said, all I could think of was my car. And for me that became a fundamental reaction of a human being. It wasn't about people who may have died, it wasn't about anything, it was something that was very immediate to her. And being asked by a radio interviewer, what did you think? All I could think of was my car, became a title for the three series. And it was at that time when Boksburg was a no-go area for black

people, so I did this piece that had the 'Mum's taxi', 'I love Boksburg', and that type of thing, which was a car parked in a parking along the street in a parallel parking, and then that's the first image. The second image is the explosion. And the third image is an aftermath. And this is what Judge Sachs was looking at. And he said, I'm going to buy this. And he bought it. And then he then told the whole story of the bomb that maimed him in Mozambique, and how he loved that car that had been bombed, and how angry that he was that they'd really bombed his car, more than bombing him. It was his anger about the car that he loved so much. So he bought this...there was just a sentimental reason, which was very weird for me. And later, when he came back to the country, and in 1997, they'd already started with the court, and I knew...I had met him in a number of events. And when he came back and we needed somebody to open an exhibition, an international exhibition, I just thought...and it was during the time where he had said something about, now artists can use art to talk about love and to talk about flowers, they can paint flowers...and he was just at that time quite in the news, even though I knew him from Sweden, I then reconnected with him in '97, and he came and opened our exhibition in Newtown and I had come to his chambers. And when the court was now getting ready to be built and he looked at how art could be involved, he then asked me to come and work as a consultant for the artworks committee.

Int Before we go back to that, I just want to ask you about 1990. You'd been abroad in 1989, and then you came back in 1990 and changes started taking place. How did that influence your art?

BD When we...I think even just during the State of Emergency, as artists...I'm not saying that we predict things, but as artists we were seeing the starting of the cracks in...the fact that we were that much repressed was telling us that there was something that was going to give. But when, we were not sure. So in ninety eighty...the piece that I'm talking about I did in 1989, and the piece on roadblocks I did in 1988, so it was almost like telling the government that we can see how tough the resistance is. So you are saying to people, the people who view your work that, this is what is happening but there is the light at the end of the tunnel, even though you were not sure when it was going to happen. And so when the ANC met with the business people in Dakar in 1985 we wondered what was happening, we all talked about it. All of these things were...almost like the eighties was actually quite a dramatic decade because we had this event in Botswana, even though when we came back we were harassed quite a bit by the Security Police wanting to know how we resisted, how was the culture, and they were just ridiculing us and so...and then in 1987 we went to the culture in another South Africa in Amsterdam. Again, it was almost like all the time was...it was a reinforcement of the need for us to continue just fighting and to continue working and to continue conscientising through the art that we were doing. I remember the theatre that was coming out at that time was very vocal about what was happening. Some of the productions were stopped in places like the Market Theatre. Some

productions were cancelled. But the artists continued. So if you knew that these words meant that government would close down your production, you changed them, you said the same thing but you used a different kind of language. So while this was happening, we knew that there was a...we heard...there was this kind of grapevine that Mandela was coming out and know he has met with this person and he's now not in...he's in Pollsmoor, he's left Robben Island. It was almost as he came into the country, into the mainland, it was just feeling like this is now the breaking. And so the art became quite buoyant, it became very excited. The posters were very promising and they were talking of the change that was imminent. So '89 the seven...from seven prisoners from Robben Island were released, and that was a kind of almost an imminent thing that Mandela is going to be released and the liberation movements were going to be unbanned. And so the 1990...I think with us as artists the excitement and not knowing how to deal with your production, or what stories are you telling now, became...it wasn't a problem but it was like a kind of, oh, now, what? What do I talk about? Because you are waiting where...it was almost a state of flux, what is the new state of affairs going to be because you've worked so hard to get rid of the old one, what is the new state of affairs going to be? What, as an artist, am I going to be talking about? And am I now ready to paint the landscape; am I ready to paint the roses, and that type of thing? But again, through that period of the nineties, we started seeing ourselves as part of the worldwide community, when the cultural boycott was lifted, we started working directly with other artists. Even though even through the eighties we started the different international workshops so we were already linking quite a bit with artists from other countries. In 1985 we started the Thupelo art workshop in South Africa, and a number of artists travelled to the States and Europe to the Triangle Workshop. So as they come back you can see that the work that they were doing that it had influences that indicated that they had been in touch with other people, with other artists, from other parts of the world. And even that, while it was a breakthrough and a liberation of your own production, the way that you did work, and it was an introduction to a lot of colour and abstract expressionism, and there was a lot of outcry from the art world here that we were being influenced by the Americans, we were getting American influences as black artists. And we then said, but what is wrong with that? Because it was an expression of things that we were feeling inside. So from 1990 onwards, artists were...have been very free to do social commentary work but to also do what they felt that they wanted to do.

Int Interesting. I wondered whether you could talk a bit about your relationship with Albie Sachs and how that has progressed since 1997 when you asked him to open *Biennale* and thereafter?

BD When Albie invited me to come to work as a co-ordinator for the...what we called it because we were working with a building, we called it the Integrated Architectural Artworks, and we just called it the Artworks Programme. It was from...right from the beginning because we...as there...there was an art

committee that was made of judges and the architects and then I came in. So I listened more than anything to what the architects wanted and how the building was going to develop. And my role was to identify the right artists for the different parts of the building that were going to be...that needed art intervention. And while we knew it was not going to be very easy to get funding because that was over and above the cost for the building, we needed to raise funds. But Albie was very effective in raising the funds and in talking to artists. I had to just identify the artists and tell them what we were doing. And on the 9th of August...I think it was 2002...or 2001, I'm not sure...we actually had a get-together with all the artists from the different parts of the country, and the most important thing that we had agreed on that it would not be the same artists that had done so many other public projects. It had to be emerging artists, artists that had not done anything like this before, and artists that came from rural areas as well as urban areas, but it would be artists that would not be your usual artists that have done these projects before. And that required a lot of talk of communication with artists. So when we had the indaba, lots of artists came, and they were addressed by Judge Sachs, by the JDA, and by Judge Mokgoro, and they were taken around the site. At that time the site had been...the old prison, the building, had been demolished, parts of it were still standing, and so people were taken around the site, our meeting was in the fort. And we then walked to the site, and the artists were asking questions and the architects also explained, and they also addressed the artists to show them what was going to happen where. And I'd say the relationship between the court judges and the architects was so healthy that it was so easy for artists to fit in. There was no ego from the judges maybe saying that we are the end users, or these ones saying, we are the constructors of what you are going to be seeing. There was a very mutual working relationship and a lot of respect for one another. So our process of bringing in the art was welcomed by both the judges and the architects. But I'd say, and I think a lot of judges will agree that it was really the brainchild of Judge Albie Sachs and he had so much passion in pushing it forward that it was so easy for me to come in and talk to artists and bring in artists and influence artists to be part of this.

Int I was wondering, Bonggi, when you started on this project, what did you think of the site that was selected? What were your thoughts given your very strong understanding of the socio-political background and the use of art to express socio-political imperative?

BD When I came in I...

(pause in recording)

Int Bonggi, I was going to ask about the choice of the site as an expression of the socio-political change in the country?

BD From the word go, when Albie (Sachs) invited me, he actually took me through the history of how they ended up here on this site. He told me that there had been a number of other sites or areas that wanted the court to be at their sites. It was Crown Mines at one point, and Midrand wanted the court there. The inner city, I think Rissik Street, the old Post Office in Rissik Street. And so I had an idea of how they had actually ended up here and the significance of this site that was now defunct. It wasn't used as a jail anymore. And the court judges deciding to bring the Constitutional Court onto the site. So the first thing that I did, after understanding the background, I actually came on my own a number of times to the site, and all the buildings were still up and in the solitary confinement cells there were all the graffiti that you see now in some of the books that have been done for the court. And I got...I think it was more a kind of...the site...let me put it this way, the site got to me, and I felt that I wasn't going to be able to work without understanding some of the fundamental things that had happened on the site. So I looked for material to read and I also started working with the elements. As an artist I started working with the elements of the site itself. I did a number of rubbings of the back of the doors in the solitary confinement, where there is graffiti, and I also used the colours...the colours of both the green, what we used to call the government green, and the maroon, and this off-white colour, in some of my work. So I did a series of artworks that allowed me to internalise the site, maybe I should put it...the site got to me but I needed to internalise it in order for even when I talk about it, I would have had something that I had expressed as an artist about the site. But the decision, I thought what was great about the decision to use the site is that, as I walked the site when I was coming in, I realised that it was a huge stretch of land that was lying unused because the prison had been moved to inaudible. And so it made a lot of sense to turn this into the Constitutional Court. And it also almost turned the whole thing of the apartheid period on its head, because some of the people that had been imprisoned here were political prisoners, especially in the Women's Jail, a lot of well-known figures had been jailed there. So it was almost you're turning this whole thing upside down and creating a very positive image of something that had been a very negative space during the apartheid period. So I was very encouraged and it made it easy for us to talk to artists, or would-be artists about it. It didn't matter where the artist was from. If you said, oh, the court is going to be in Number Four, they knew exactly where the place was and they knew the history of the place and what had happened here. I live in Alexandra and when you talk about Number Four, everyone in Alexandra would know what you are talking about, because they have had a lot of brushes with the law during the apartheid era, because of the influx control. A lot of people arrive in Johannesburg, or then arrived in Johannesburg, and went to Alex because it was a kind of semi-freehold and you could go there and disappear and be there until you were found. And if they were found then they would be brought to this prison. As well as the gangsterism. There were a lot of gangsters in Alex (Alexandra Township), and I understand, I don't think it's urban legend, but I understand that at one point the system put two opposing gangsters in the same holding cell...in the same cell, the communal cell, and

they killed each other, and a number of people were killed during the night. So they were from Alexandra as well. So the history of the site, it doesn't matter where you are in the country, it's known because somewhere, somehow, somebody you know has been in this prison. So if this same site now becomes a Constitutional Court it then...the same people that were affected get...the healing process starts. And I think the fact that we just celebrated the fifteen years since the signing of the Constitution, is a confirmation of why this space was the right place for the court to be.

Int Thank you so much for that, Bongzi. I'm just curious, in terms of your relationship with artists and some of the stories you can tell us about how the works were chosen, and the processes involved in that, we'd really appreciate that?

BD Okay, first as I said, Albie's (Sachs)...or the whole programme had to be geared at established artists because you need them, but they had to work with...if you are chosen for a site, you had to work with apprentice artists. And the door, the main doors of the court were done by a number of established artists: Andrew Verster from Durban, being one of them. And he worked with eight other artists that were good carvers but were not established. And so the names of the artists on the door are not only the very well established artists but they worked on it under the guidance of an established artist. That's the main doors coming in, the carved the universal human rights. And then the doors to the chamber, they was the lead artist, Andrew Lindsay, who worked with a hundred artists to create the copper plates that look like the Kente cloth. But again, that was the show of how this Constitution had been arrived at and how the country's democracy had been arrived at. Always it had been group work, and it had been leaders and the communities, the forerunners and the followers. And so it was always like that and this was one of the very strong elements of the architectural artworks programme. And the gates to all the chambers, were done by artisans and not by artists as such. So there would be a touch of art but there would be artisans, people who know how to weld and to do design and they created those. And most of the artworks, the loose artworks that are in the court, were received while the court was still in Braampark, received from donations by artists that were approached by Judge Albie Sachs, at different times. And now with the court...after the court had been set up, there are artworks that are on long-term loan and other art that has been donated to the court now. But some of the things that we looked at was how you would animate the carpets, because carpets, industrial carpets are just always so dull. So in some cases we'd look at an artwork of an artist and choose a section. I remember that this was a section, a small section of a painting by an artist from KwaZulu-Natal, and then it went to the manufacturers to be manufactured to specifications by that artwork that the piece was selected from. So all of it was very...let me say, all of it was group work and it was always collaboration between the artists and the architects and between the architects and the judges. Because I don't think we would have gone out on a tangent and say we are artists therefore you have to

accept this. It was always a give and take, and obviously the final say was with the architects because they were...with the works that were attached to the site, to the building itself, they had the final say. Because things had to work with the building, had to work with the line. If you see in the foyer the mosaics that are there, they work well because the architect understood what the artist was proposing, and had a discussion with her and we ended up with the pillars in the foyer, looking as they do, with examples of different seeds from around the country...seeds and leaves from the different indigenous vegetation from the country.

Int Bongi, it sounds all so smooth, but a project this size and this complex must have had some challenges. I'm wondering what were some of the challenges for creating the artwork in the Court?

BD There were...I think the main challenge with all art projects is finances. And we had decided to do the first...it was almost phases. The first phase was open to everybody, and we then, we were going to create a phase that was now going to be invited artists. We had invited artists, this is now the established artists, who would compete on a site, maybe five artists per site. And so we invited them separately. We had everyone in an open meeting, and then we then selected the artists that were now going to do some of the major projects. But some of those major projects never happened because the funding never...there was never funding for that. So instead of having these major big projects like a sculpture at the bottom of the steps, we ended up with the provinces that were done by Andrew Verster, of the neon lights. But there we had actually been looking for a huge 3D sculpture, which would have cost quite a huge amount. I'm not sure right now whether that is still in the boil somewhere, I'm not sure. And the sculpture outside, at the end of the African Steps, was also supposed to be something much larger than the sculpture that is down there now. And so the challenges...the challenges were, strange enough, were not so much about the artists wanting to be paid amounts that were market related. No, it wasn't. I think everyone understood that it was...they were contributing to a much bigger cause. And they would always get projects from Corporates. So I don't remember at any time with any artists complaining that they didn't get their monies worth or their artwork's worth. Because they came in knowing that there wouldn't be a lot of money for it. But the other challenges were obviously reaching as many artists. It's never easy. It's a national...it's a site of national importance. We were supposed to get as many artists at national level as possible. But we were not very successful in reaching out, because again that required travelling to the different provinces. And with fundraising we were able to...I mean, Albie was mainly able to reach out to the people in the US and other funders from other countries, and within the country we also got quite a lot of support. But art is not supported hugely by anybody, I think, in any country when there are difficulties the art budgets are the first to be cut. But I think there was a lot of good will with this project. And there are some thing that happened after I had left the project, that were done now as the project was growing. Some of the panels for soundproofing

panels were done as artworks, we had discussed them but that was after I had left. My role really ended with the integrated artworks and some of the furnishings that we had decided.

Int At what point did you leave? What year was it, and how long were you working at the Court?

BD I was at the Court for four years. Yes, four years, as a consultant. I didn't come in every day, but it was four years on and off. It was depending on where we were at with a project. And when the Court was opened, I was also, I was involved but as a...well, not consultant as such but as a person who had worked at the Court. And I was working with a brass band in Alexandra...with a number of brass bands in Alexandra as part of the community work that I do there. And the band was invited to play at the opening of the Court, so I was here with them as well. And they had played...I had just brought them just to animate the first meeting I had brought them and they enjoyed it and they wanted to come, and I had not told Albie (Sachs) that the band would be coming and he was so impressed that he then invited them of the opening of the court.

Int When you came to the opening of the Court, did it meet your vision?

BD More than I can say. Because I'd been even when the building was going up, because as the things were being installed I would come. But when the final day came when they opened the big doors it felt so good to have contributed a little in the making of the Court. It felt very, very, very good. And when the book, *Art and Justice*, came out, and I went around to the judges to sign, when Judge Langa said, you were the beginning of it all, I just felt...it felt so, so good that, it doesn't matter how small the contribution was, for it to be acknowledged, and just to know that it's not so much a matter of the CV, but to know that you really became part of the history, making such history in the country was just amazing.

Int How does it feel to come back to the Court every so often?

BD As I said when I met you for the first time, I walked in because I'd been at the Johannesburg Art Gallery doing something and I'd come...we had hoped to hear Judge Cameron speak on AIDS day, and when I arrived he had already finished. Then I said, oh, let me step into the court, and everyone was so excited, they were asking, where I'm staying now? I said, but I still live here. I drive past here either on Hospital Street or on the other side. And there's never been anything that brings me to the court, so whenever I come here I just find that the same people that I worked with, that were here when I worked here, are still as warm as they were. And it's an amazing institution that, you actually don't feel the kind of law coning down on you, even though

you know that some of the decisions that are taken at this court affect so many things and are so important. They are decisions that are taken not lightly. But you don't feel that, you don't feel this as much as...in the same way that you felt when you walk into a court, especially during apartheid days where you didn't know whether your...a person you know would end up in prison or end up hanging because of their beliefs in the liberation of our country. So this is very uplifting. And I think the art...the building itself is very uplifting, but I think the art just makes it so much more an environment that is friendly, an environment that is permeable. You can come in and, you don't even think it's important for security to be there at the gate, but you don't feel it as an oppressive system, because as you are waiting for your bag to be checked in, you're already looking at the pillars that are very bright and right now there is this wonderful exhibition of the fifteen years of the Constitution. You walk in, you are looking forward, you are not looking...you are not having doubts about what's going to happen when you go in, because you know this is your home kind of thing, even if you didn't work here, I think we have that feeling of arriving at a space that is very friendly and a space that is accepting of whoever you are.

Int Bongi, is your association with the Court continuing in any form?

BD No, currently...except just coming in there is no formal relationship that I have with the Court at the moment. Except that it is a home for all of us here.

Int And what about your continued relationship with Albie (Sachs)? Are you in touch?

BD Each time I'm in Cape Town, there is something that will bring Albie (Sachs). I've been in the same conference with him after the opening of the exhibition that I was talking about, of the Nobel Peace laureate, as well as the opening of the hundred years of the art collection of the South African National Gallery in Iziko, he spoke on one panel, I spoke on another panel. And we meet in most of the art related events in Cape Town and in Johannesburg. So I see him...I think the last time I saw him in Cape Town we were seeing the opera at the Baxter Theatre, yes...and I've seen him in Johannesburg as well.

Int Bongi, I'm just wondering whether you could say a few words about Albie (Sachs), given how closely you worked with him? How do you understand him?

BD It would be very difficult to put Albie (Sachs) in any category as a person, because he straddles so many things, so many aspects of his own life and of other people's lives. He's...the first time I saw him, even though it was in a foreign land, we immediately, we spoke about people we both knew, even though I didn't know that he knew those people. We spoke about artists that I

knew, that he knew. And I felt very close to him at that first meeting. So that when we needed somebody here to open the exhibition, I didn't...even though I knew we're not friends, but there was something that I'd read about him, from meeting here, that he would not...if he was able to he would do it. If he was not able to, he would say, I would have loved to do it but I can't. And so that kind of understanding of his personality, of his openness and his willingness to be a part of anything that is forward looking, has made me very close to him. And so when I worked with him we were always in agreement, especially on the artists, especially on the...and also on the process of what...Bongi, what do you think? How do you think we should approach this? And I would say, Judge, I think if we put these artists together and if we approach it this way it would make sense. And almost with all the artists it did. The only...I'd say the only part of him that I do not know very well is the law side. I mean, he would talk about what they are doing, but I'm not sure, maybe it goes over my head, but I have listened to some of his decisions, especially around the Rastafarian Prince (*Prince v President of the Law Society of the Cape of Good Hope and Others*), because I was still at the court at that time. And it was so nice to know that we had arrived at a point in our country where things like this were not taboo to talk about, that there are people who have these religious beliefs but they are accepted, and they are part of the fabric of what South Africa is all about. And also, I mean, his home here, and his home in Cape Town, is a home like the Constitutional Court. You come in, you are at home. And I've had...been invited, my husband and I have been invited to his house when he was still living in Rosebank quite a number of times, as well as in Cape Town. When I'm in Cape Town he would say, okay, come to the house, and I would go to the house. But he's just an amazing human being, and I think the Court has been very lucky to have the group of the judges that started. Those eleven judges were just amazing. They were coming into something that was completely new, but they were just so open. And you could talk to them. You meet them in the passages, you'd talk to them, all of them, from Judge President to everyone who was there. And they knew people by name. They were not up there, high flying, they were just so...they made this a home, even in Braampark you felt that you were at home.

Int Bongi, I wondered whether, besides Albie (Sachs), were there other judges in particular, in that first Bench whom you got to know quite closely?

BD I knew Judge Langa, when was still an advocate in Durban. So when he came up here, I actually came to the court in Braampark first, before reconnecting with Albie because of Judge Langa. He wanted to buy some artists work and I had to organise to find the work and bring it to him. So I brought quite a number of pieces to him to select, and eventually he selected the work. So I knew him quite well and I knew his late brother and I also know his younger brother, Mandla Langa, quite well. And I also...I got along quite well with Judge Madala, and Judge Mokgoro, and Judge Kate. She was on the art committee and she also, I got to go to her chambers quite a lot as well.

Int Bongi, I'm wondering what you continue to do now and how a post apartheid transitional society has impacted or influenced your work?

BD I have been working both as an administrator...art administrator as well as continuing with my art. Because of my experience at the court I got invited...I'm not sure whether I got invited because of that, but that also helped. I got invited by the Spier group in Stellenbosch to sit on their reference group. We were looking at the making of...or the establishment of the Africa Centre. And it was a diverse group of practitioners from the rest of Africa, people from Nigeria, from Cameroon, and others in the Diaspora. And so the work that I'd done here made it possible for me to get involved quite seriously with this project. And we...at the court they ended up with a building. But at this place we actually suggested that they shouldn't build, because if you are doing something as big as an institution for the whole continent, maybe if it's creative, let it continue being creative rather than build something that is going to put it around...put walls around it. And so the Africa Centre continues with projects rather than with a building. Maybe there will be a building once this has been consolidated. And so these are contributions that I've been able to make because of my experience with the court. Where I've been able to read plans and be able to know about elevation, some things that were very, very foreign to me. And currently I am working as...I'm consulting with the Steve Biko Centre, again working with architects, and the foundation to decide on the content for the centre, as well as the artistic input on the structure. And so, while there is the continuing of myself as an artist, I also get quite involved with the creation of our cultural institutions.

Int I'm just curious, Bongi, and perhaps I'm ...mistaken...I wondered whether the transition politically was a difficult transition for you and other artists in South Africa to make, from doing resistance work to incorporating other mediums and other forms of expression into your work?

BD I would say it wasn't difficult but there was a challenge, because we had a vocabulary and we had a readership, and we had the same readership but we needed new vocabulary to communicate the state of things as they are now. So it's been slow. It's not difficult, it's never difficult to make art, but if you make art with meaning, especially with me, because I've always felt much more drawn to socio-political messages. I then in 1990, I think it was around early nineties, because I had an exhibition in 1995, I started looking at...I think a lot of artists started looking at, who am I, what is my identity, what makes me tick, what makes people around me make sense? So I did a series on trying to realign my social environment or my social beliefs with things that had gone wrong. We get a lot of art done by...well, art or craft that sits quite easily with fine art...high art, fine art, in museums around the world, that were done in Africa and in South Africa in particular, that gets to these places and cannot be properly labelled. And it's always where there's a name, because

on the label you have the artist, and it's always the artist is unknown because no one really bothered to find out who the maker of that piece was. All the pieces were taken unlawfully away from the owners. So I then started dealing with that and almost like giving a face and a name to the maker. So I did a series of looking...I mean, copying three-dimensional pieces onto canvas. As a social political statement of saying, everyone has got a name and these pieces have got people that made them, so we can't say they're unknown. So in my work where it says artist, I continue with artist unknown, because I don't know the artist who made the piece that I'm interpreting. Then in brackets I give my name almost as if I am giving the maker my name and myself their name. That type of thing. It's almost like paying allegiance to people that have not been given the respect that they deserve of the work that they have done. And outside of that then I'm also looking at new projects that I'm doing as an artist, looking at what I was telling you about but I'm trying to write a personal history through art, of my now fifty-six years of life. But I haven't finalised what the project is looking like. But it is also about identity and about a lived history and experience.

Int Bongji, I wondered whether there was something I've neglected to ask you which you'd like to include in your oral history?

BD I'm actually not sure how the education programme of the Court is going. I have not followed that through. Because I haven't contributed to that, and I was just thinking that it really would have...would be great to get some...as many of the artists that participated here to add on to the education element of the court. Not just their art but the reason they participated. Like the reason I participated in this was because of...I mean, I was actually honoured to be asked and I felt...I was very happy and humbled to work on this project. And I don't know how other artists have...what their take is in coming, in having been part of this. So it would be interesting to know whether the education element of...because I know that the school kids come to the court, if it's not only about what the institution is doing but about its making as well, and how the artists came on board. Because it could help a number of young people like I was helped by seeing the poster, to know that these were done by artists and it's a career, so that the Court is not just about...the education in the Court is not just about what the Court does but it's about how it came about that it is such a beautiful and colourful institution.

Int How do you feel about being someone who has contributed to the Constitutional Court through the art project?

BD How do I feel about that?

Int Given that you've been involved in so many different projects, I wonder where you rate this contribution and your work that you've done at the Court?

BD Can you say that...?

Int I was wondering where you would place in your life history...your experience of being part of this project?

BD Okay. In the work that I'm doing there are things that I do personally, that's where I'm an artist, and that's where I'm working in the community. And then there is work that I do because somebody knows that the skills that I have can contribute and add value to what they are doing. And so, in a sense, coming here...coming to work at the court, and being invited by Albie (Sachs), to be specific...because I didn't know that there was going to be an art programme, there was no application, I didn't have to apply, there was no job advertised. So it's almost...this is why I said earlier that I feel very humbled that I was invited, because in the little time that I had seen Albie and in whatever he had read about me, he felt that it would be...I would add value. And for me that still humbles me, and I...when people ask me about the...like you are asking about my work at the Constitutional Court, it wasn't a job. I feel that it wasn't a job, it was almost like a...not mission, but it was like a very worthwhile contribution to a much bigger cause and it just feels, and it felt at that time, and it still feels very good, it sits very well with me that I was part of this project. And got to speak to...I'm not saying the judges are unapproachable, but because of the work that I did, when I meet Judge President Chaskalson, and Judge Langa, and meet Judge Sachs, it's...they are people, they are sort of everyday people because I've spoken to them and I've seen them and they relate...we relate quite well. So, it wasn't a job, it was just a...what do you call it...another step in my walk...in my walk of life.

Int Bongji, thank you so much, what a wonderful interview, thank you so much.

BD I thank you too for inviting me.

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