

Artistic conversation: Louisemarié Combrink in conversation with Jan van der Merwe

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ABSTRACT

This contribution presents a textual version of an artistic conversation between Louisemarié Combrink and the artist Jan van der Merwe, in which the latter gives an account of his five-phased approach to creative work. This is done with specific reference to his work *Speelgrond/Playground* of 2023, made for the Stairways and Ruins exhibition.¹ The significance of this approach is that Van der Merwe applies this mode of work to his oeuvre as well as to his teaching more generally. This approach comprises of considerations pertaining to (1) conceptualising; (2) processes, (3) materials, (4) techniques, and (5) presentation. As a focused approach to the mindful production of creative outputs, the insights gleaned from this conversation are presented as useful for professional artists, as well as teachers and students of creative disciplines.

Keywords: Artistic conversation, creative process, Jan van der Merwe, pedagogy of art, *Speelgrond/Playground*, *Stairways and Ruins*.

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Acronyms in transcript:

LC= Louisemarié Combrink

JvdM= Jan van der Merwe

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Stairways and Ruins

Introduction

This contribution to the special section of *Image & Text* that is dedicated to the project *Stairways and Ruins*² represents an artistic conversation held on 1 April 2025.³ Louisemarié Combrink approached Jan van der Merwe to discuss the creative process he followed for his contribution to this exhibition (the work titled *Speelgrond/Playground*) (Figure 1).



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Jan van der Merwe, *Speelgrond/Playground*, 2023. Discarded toys stitched onto canvas strips, burnt objects, 300 cm x 440 cm. Courtesy of VINCO.

Van der Merwe indicated in a previous conversation (held on 19 September 2024)⁴ that he follows five steps or focuses on five different overlapping phases when creating artworks. This is an approach he also shared with his students, both undergraduate and postgraduate,⁵ as a lecturer at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), where he taught Fine Arts for decades, and was also nominated for various prestigious teaching awards.⁶ The focus of the conversation was on the particular artwork under discussion, although this is a process that is broadly applicable to Van der Merwe's oeuvre, and also to the field of Fine Arts production (perhaps for other fields as well) – and thus transcends the

particularity of the production of this work. Van der Merwe also engaged with his processes and artistic output in his own MTech and DTech studies, where in-depth discussions on his creative work can be found.⁷ The present article therefore offers creative and pedagogical solutions to art educators as well as for students and scholars wishing to know more about the work of this prolific artist.

Van der Merwe is well known as a South African installation artist – his work is also represented in the Grade 12 curriculum for South African art learners.⁸ Scholarly publications on his work include many articles in accredited journals (see Van der Watt 2005; Swanepoel & Goosen 2006; Botha 2009; Kruger & Van der Merwe 2010; Scheffer & Van der Merwe 2014; Stevens & Van der Merwe 2016; Combrink & Allen 2019; Combrink 2020; Lewis & Van der Merwe 2020; Combrink 2021) and two articles by Van der Merwe himself (Van der Merwe 2000; Van der Merwe 2001), as well as conference presentations that deal with his work (Kruger 2008; Rathbone (now Combrink) 2015, 2016; Dry 2017; Combrink 2020, 2021; Lewis & Van der Merwe 2024). A catalogue with a preface and essays by the likes of Willem Boshoff and Robert Hodgins have also been published on Van der Merwe's work.⁹

Although practice-led research has been well established as a major methodological tenet in the arts, there seems to be a need for looking at artistic approaches to making that have value for practicing professional artists as well as for art students and teachers. This approach therefore has a pedagogic as well as broader creative value, as a guide for artmaking. This artistic conversation hopes to provide a glimpse into these creative phases that are both pedagogically useful, but can also be applicable to artists more broadly – this aim is also posited in light of Van der Merwe's very significant artistic output and stature,¹⁰ and the vast numbers of students who have worked with him during his lecturing years at TUT.

The five aspects of creative production that Van der Merwe describes are: (1) concept; (2) processes to be followed; (3) materials; (4) techniques, and (5) presentation. Van der Merwe notes in the conversation that these phases are not separate and should rather be seen as overlapping and mutually influencing each other. For artists or students, this can mean, practically speaking, having an idea box for each of these aspects or phases, resulting in a comprehensive set of possibilities for the artwork being made.

The text below is a slightly truncated version of the conversation between Combrink and Van der Merwe. The conversation was conducted in Afrikaans, the mother tongue of both participants. It was subsequently transcribed and translated into English, and both parties to the conversation checked the text for accuracy. Combrink truncated the text for the purpose of this article, which was also checked by Van der Merwe. An artistic conversation

is a discussion between artists who share ideas, with the aim of gaining insight into approaches, processes, and other matters related to artists' work.

Artistic conversation between Jan van der Merwe and Louisemarié Combrink: transcript¹¹

LC: It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to have a discussion with you again. This is actually a follow-up conversation to the previous one I had with you [on 19 September 2024], which broadly touched on your approaches. I am especially interested in the artwork you created for *Stairways and Ruins*; the artwork's name is *Speelgrond/Playground*. So, please discuss the approach you followed. You mentioned that you have five approaches or phases to your art creation process: there is a *concept*, there are *processes*, *materials* and then *techniques* – I think these are fairly intertwined. Then there is the last approach, that of *presentation*. I would like to discuss these aspects with you.

JvdM: Thank you. It is a pleasure to see the artwork again that I created for your exhibition [*Stairways and Ruins*]. This was in 2023, and it is very nice to discuss a project after it has lived its own life and, also what you touched on just now.

Yes, we can talk about the *concept* and the *process*, the *materials* and *technique*, and the *presentation*. I think most lecturers at universities follow this approach with their students intuitively. For me, these phases or aspects represent an opportunity to share my own approaches with students; it gives them the opportunity to develop their own visual language ... not necessarily a recipe, but a guideline that assists them in creating awareness around their own *concepts*, *processes* and *materials*. It also assists with their *techniques* and *presentation* because with every artwork, whether it is installation art, performance art, or just a painting, it is important to consider how to exhibit the artwork. Presentation is an important aspect of each artist's visual language. With my own artwork, I leaned more towards installation art, such as the artwork *Speelgrond/Playground* – you can move around the artwork.

Materials: labour, transforming the found, and the spiritual

I am deeply aware of the material, and in this sense, it is important because *the material also becomes the concept*. If you think of Tàpies,¹² whom I discovered later in my artistic career: he placed much emphasis on the *spirituality* of the material – the material develops

a history and spiritual quality that emphasise its importance. When you are working with a material, you have to pay attention to it because, in the process of creating, you are transforming, but you should also not lose the quality and the spirituality of the material.

Most of the time, I would become aware of a certain piece of rust or corroded metal, a mark against a wall, a piece of old cloth or something that has already undergone a certain natural process, because it tells a story. It becomes a *metaphor; the object's meaning that has changed* develops its own "life". I try to maintain the spirituality of the material (and the concepts). This is interesting because for my Master's studies, the title was *Transformation of the Found* (Van der Merwe 1999).

LC: It is interesting that you steer away from the rust that you have worked with for so long [in *Speelgrond/Playground*].

JvdM: Yes, at the beginning of my career, I created a painting at the University; the painting was a result of a lack of funds for paint [referring to the work *Story Board 1* – see Figure 2]. My grandmother used to say you should not think of an excuse, you should think of a solution. As I see it, I think of the corrosion – when I was walking to class, I was looking for something to create an association with. When you are young, a baby, you cling to your blanket or teddy bear because it brings comfort. Rusted metal comforted me, specifically because I was raised close to the railway tracks and the people I associate with in this environment. When you are aware of the material that you are working with, or know the person behind the material you are engaging with, you realise that it is not just intelligence, but wisdom.

I remembered how I covered my books [at school], the pictures I drew on them, the patterns inside my bookcase and the smell that I associated with this. I was not concerned with the content of the book, but rather how the book was constructed. Visual elements and objects fascinated me when I was in school, as well as spaces; when I reminisce about my childhood, I remember the playpen and the space inside the playpen.

[In terms of material], I have always been interested in ideas of *transformation*, you can see this in my earlier artworks. In my first year of study, I started using this method in my paintings, with mark-making, and burning marks on canvas with an iron. This is when I started to engage with rust, using pieces of rust in my artwork. I started using collages and incorporated them into my artwork. Two interesting things occurred: I was in the hospital with my mother for thirteen days, when she died, and when I arrived back home, there were corroded tins in my room, and all of a sudden, colour did not have significance for me. However, the corroded tins became a metaphor for me, although I have returned to incorporating colour together with the rust and the different processes that corrosion undergoes.

The process of *corrosion is a return to dust*, and I realised that tins *preserve* food. I am attempting to *preserve impermanence and vulnerability*. *Tins also allow me to displace time, contemporary time, in an archaeological time. I was able to shift time*, which was fascinating for me. I want to add a thought here: when I was a student, I was drawn to the work of Jackson Pollock. I am not sure why, but I was drawn to his work, and only later did I come to realise that he is doing something interesting – he froze speed and time, with the different layers of paint, almost like a music conductor; every drop and mark is loaded with meaning.

Concepts

All my *concepts have been centred around violence, abuse of power, and wars*.¹³ Most of my works are *monuments*, sometimes personal (for my mother and grandmother) but also a *monument to the unknown*, especially in the times we find ourselves. I believe that history always repeats itself – war is a repetition, abuse of power is also a repetition, and so also is violence against women and children.

The whole concept of abuse of power is important in my artwork, the conversation of someone who is abusing power or not. There are many examples in our current time, especially when you consider countries like America, Russia, Ukraine, Siria, Israel, Palestine and many others. The abuse of power is an important consideration for me, specifically regarding individuals and children. You can see this in my artwork *Speelgrond/Playground*; the small toys I incorporate in this artwork.

It is the same as children's dreams; they play with different toys, such as aeroplanes and hospital instruments, or they have a teddy bear, someone who plays with hair and dresses, or someone who plays with car toys. It is a playful world where you can think. When you grow up and have to face reality, then it becomes an ambiguous child's play, but it is dreams that get crushed, and this is terribly sad for me.

In [an earlier work called] *Story Board I* (Figure 2), I also used some of my children's toys, toys that they had discarded, and a small television that I created out of rust. (In the early 2000s, there was always a news broadcast on television at 18h00). I removed most of the inside of the television, along with a corroded television screen and on the inside I added a few items such as broken toys, which in a way is a continuation of this project [*Speelgrond/Playground*]. What I am trying to convey is that I have always used *found objects* in my artwork.



FIGURE N° 2



Jan van der Merwe, *Story Board 1*, 1997. Mixed media, 202 x 91 cm. Courtesy of Jan van der Merwe.

Processes and techniques: interwoven with materials

This artwork [*Speelgrond/Playground*] is a return to the previous art projects, which is interesting because as you age, your body cannot do all the work that it used to. My work with rust is [intensive]. The pulpit I created [for the work *Water and Rust* – Figure 3], the baptismal font, and the robe (which a reverend wears) were created out of corroded material, which was stark and stiff; I had to bend this stark and stiff material so that it would fit over the pulpit. I was wearing gloves while I was creating this project. I think if I recorded a video, it would have been like a performance artwork. It is almost like wrestling with angels, as it is mentioned in the Bible. Physically, there is a lot of bending and breaking down of the corroded material, which is an emotional endeavour. Thus, when I am engaging with corroded material, which is a rather masculine material, I try to soften it and add emotion to it with feminine qualities of softness.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Jan van der Merwe, *Water and Rust*, 2005. Found objects, rusted objects, TV monitor. 120 x 200 x 1260 cm). Courtesy of Jan van der Merwe.

I never truly planned these things, but when you engage with them, you realise the different layers of meaning in the artwork – the same with Tàpies. Similarly, when I think of Rembrandt and the emotion that he conveys through his artwork, I really admire him – he was engaged with his environment and approached it with sensitivity. ([Think of] the paintings of women who are sitting on their beds, who are middle-aged, disappointed, and their husbands may be having an affair or some other tension).

Rembrandt is painting this woman on her bed, sitting with emotion that he portrays through depicting sheets and curtains with draping. The emotion of the folded sheets end draping represents a gut feeling, and I realised that it is a manipulation or transformation of the cloth and the environment. The same as with Tàpies; the spirituality is captured in the materials he uses. Similarly, my own concepts engage with these ideas [of Rembrandt and Tàpies]. When I reflected on *Speelgrond/Playground*, I followed an interesting process, and it was a happy moment for me because this was the second time you [NWU/ViNCO]

invited me to participate in a project. In a previous project, the wonderful artist Ian Marley put together drawings of him and his son. He sent them to artists and invited artists to engage with these drawings.

LC: Yes, it was *Creative Creatures*.¹⁴

JvdM: Yes, that was the first collaboration I did with you (NWU/VINCO). This project allowed me to work with other materials; this is where I did the eye test artwork,¹⁵ with the different glasses and different ways of seeing. I did not specifically use corroded objects for this project; I transformed objects playfully but with a serious political message – how politicians view things. When you invited me to create *Speelgrond/Playground*, it was a culmination of all these different projects/artworks.

I have since moved to Cape Town, where I have lived for seven months, but when I created *Speelgrond/Playground*, I was still living in Pretoria, where I started my artistic career. From around 1977, my studio was on my property. I had an old Wendy house in the yard, which was starting to collapse. I thought I had to break it open because there was going to be a storm one day, and then I was going to hear a big thumping noise, and the whole thing would have collapsed. I started tearing down the Wendy house bit by bit to get to the things that were inside. It contained many years of collected items. When I started to unpack it, I came across the most interesting things that I collected over the years. Amongst the collected items were black plastic bags filled with toys, which my wife, Olga, thought she had discarded, but I recycled these toys from my children.

When you look at the work I created [*Speelgrond/Playground*], it was created from long pieces of canvas. While I was lecturing at TUT, one day, one of the assistants in the sculpture department, Robert, who is also a good sculptor, was stripping pieces of canvas off these big tables that were used for ceramics (four meters in length). (I also took ceramics, as did Olga; many students created works on those tables. These tables were used for preparing and removing bubbles from the clay). They were busy tearing down the canvas from these tables because they were in the process of replacing the old covers with new ones. When I think of all the people who produced work on those tables, I was a bit emotional, but I kept quiet, and later that afternoon, when most people had left campus, I parked my car next to the dustbins, looked left and right, and collected these pieces of cloth and put them in my car. I stored them in the Wendy house, where they remained for a couple of years. [That is where the canvas backdrop for *Speelgrond/Playground* came from – see Figure 4.]



FIGURE **Nº 4**



Jan van der Merwe, “Back” view of *Speelgrond/Playground*, 2023. Discarded toys stitched onto canvas strips, burnt objects, 300 cm x 440 cm. Courtesy of Jan van der Merwe.

Obviously, the Wendy house got wet from the rain and nature also left some stains on these pieces of cloth. When I removed them, they contained a beauty that I did not want to remove or alter, and so I added wooden strips at the back of the cloth – I think they use these strips when they make curtains. It had a similar colour to those of a bandage, and I added them to the back of the artwork so that it would not tear further. I also added dowel sticks, similar to those on blinds that you can roll up and down, but I mainly used them to reinforce the material, and then the back of the artwork started to develop into something aesthetically pleasing (Figure 5).



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Jan van der Merwe, Process image of *Speelgrond/Playground*, 2023. Image showing dowel sticks being attached to the canvas strips. Courtesy of Jan van der Merwe.

LC: In a way, it is an intricate play between the material and where you are starting to consider the *display* of the artwork, that the back of the artwork should also be visible.

Thinking of presentation – the labour continues

JvdM: That was one aspect, where I physically constructed and reinforced the artwork, but then it turned out to be beautiful for me, and I decided to use both sides of the canvas. On the one side, I added all the toys, which were covered in oil; some of the toys were broken, and I also broke some of them. I stitched the toys to that one side with needle and thread (see Figure 3). It's like an act of desperation, like when people are at war, on the battlefield, or wherever they may find themselves. When you are on a battlefield, you cannot wait; you have to act quickly. A wound needs to heal; they have to quickly stitch a wound that is bleeding. In a way, I was working against time with different colours

of thread – which has an aesthetic aspect, but also an act of desperation. Most of the toys that were covered in oil also stained the canvas, which you can see on the back of the canvas.



FIGURE **Nº 6**



Jan van der Merwe, *Speelgrond/Playground*, 2023. Discarded toys stitched onto canvas strips, burnt objects (detail of toys), 300 cm x 440 cm. Courtesy of VINCO.

The *process* thus consisted of piecing together all these different objects – also adding the burned objects, like the chair, the old door on one side, and a toy car on the other side [standing on the ground in front of and behind the hanging pieces of canvas with toys stitched onto them]. The toys in the artworks were mostly those of my children that I burned myself and other objects that burned by themselves in a fire – this also became a metaphor for me. One side contains the toys, and the canvas here is reminiscent of the appearance of a building; the other side can represent the inside of a building, which looks like it has gunshots, those that penetrated, but it also has a profile, a silhouette. When you look at the buildings in Ukraine and Syria, you can see the gunshot marks on the buildings. It is somehow ambiguous: adults are lost, children are lost. During times of war, not all children get killed, but some lose their limbs or are injured, or they never

see their families again. It is something tragic that happens to people, and it is strange that people keep continuously inflicting pain on one another. It is terrible that you have war zones like Ukraine and Syria where children's playgrounds are specifically targeted, which in itself is against the rules of war, but no one follows them. This is also part of the *materials and techniques* I use, which somewhat explains how I *constructed* the artwork. Each individual artwork is interesting when you look at the *concept*, with regard to my artwork's concept of abuse of power, and then you look at the *process* of how I found the objects and pieced them together.

Back to the toys and the canvas. For years, it lay there in the Wendy house, and then suddenly, when an opportunity presented itself, it all came together – all the *materials* were added together, and then the *technique* started. Each artwork I create has its own technique. For this specific artwork [*Speelgrond/Playground*], I used sewing. I had to add twigs to construct the artwork, and this also influenced the *concept* of the artwork. From the *technique and objects, new concepts manifest*, which introduces new layers of meaning, unconsciously. Also, [it is important] how you *present* your artwork, especially my bigger artworks. With *Speelgrond/Playground*, although it is hanging, it also mirrors a type of memorial [text truncated: a concept I used in my work *Eclipse*],¹⁶ but when you look at the marks and the way it hangs, it is also interesting – almost like Jacob's Ladder that you have to ascend.



FIGURE **Nº 7**



Jan van der Merwe, *Eclipse*, 2002. Mixed media and rusted metal, 1065 cm x 380 cm x 240 cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.

That is why I mentioned the *presentation*, which is intriguing. I have always wanted to hoist (lift) an artwork – it was a dream of mine – with chains; here I got that feeling [that this would be a good idea]. It is difficult to explain the feeling I had when I lifted the artwork in that space.

LC: The gallery's ceiling is not that high; in that sense, you did the best you could in the space.

JvdM: It is interesting that you mention that, specifically when it comes to exhibiting the artwork. I always tell my students, young artists who ask me, you have to familiarise yourself with the space and then you have to do the best you can. With this artwork, I thought you would be able to lift it all the way to the ceiling, but because of technical difficulties, it could not be lifted all the way. As a result, some pieces of the artwork touched and folded onto the floor; I rather enjoyed this (see Figure 8). The pieces that were laying on the floor, the fold, made me think of Rembrandt's paintings, of the pieces he eloquently places on the floor. It is a tangible moment which worked out well for me. In the future, I will consider [this] because when I lift it, the meaning of the work changes, and now with that soft touch [between artwork and ground], it is interesting, and that is a difficult floor because it is tiled.

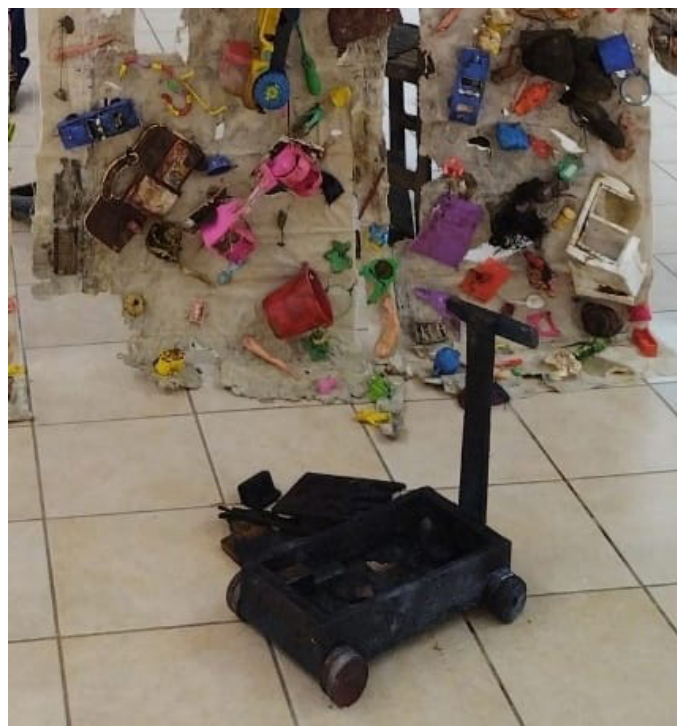


FIGURE **Nº 8**



Jan van der Merwe, *Speelgrond/Playground*, 2023. Discarded toys stitched onto canvas strips, burnt objects (detail of work showing the canvas resting on the floor), 300 cm x 440 cm. Curtesy of ViNCO.

The coldness of the floor adds to the memorial feeling, which I enjoyed. What also happened, when I placed the chair and the other burnt objects [in front of and behind the hanging canvas strips], some of the residue of the burnt black dust fell on the floor (see Figure 9). I left it there: the transition from dust is the same as when you are drawing. The way the floor and the artwork touched, together with the dust that is left on the floor, the dirty object and the oil stains [worked together]. So, the ashes are a physical trace. You can almost smell the smoke. Not really, but it is interesting how your brain creates associations. If there is a fire, you can smell the objects that have burned.



FIGURE **Nº 9**



Jan van der Merwe, *Speelgrond/Playground*, 2023. Discarded toys stitched onto canvas strips, burnt objects (detail of burnt chair in front of the hanging canvas pieces), 300 cm x 440 cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.

LC: Yes, and smell is one of the strongest senses of memory. When you smell something, you are immediately transported to that place.

JvdM: It is interesting that you should mention that. If you look at my installations like *Sunday Suit* (Figure 10), you see a suit hanging on a stand together with a chair and dish [washbasin] while someone is busy shaving. There is also a screen with hanging clothes, with a tie and shirt. It represents someone who is preparing himself to go somewhere important – a wedding or a funeral. It becomes a moment of contemplation. What I added in that artwork, and most of my other artworks as well, I hid some moth balls inside the

jacket. When people engage with the artwork, they can pick up this smell. With *The Red Carpet*, I emptied a whole bottle of baby powder underneath the carpet, which you cannot see. A lot of women started crying when they engaged with *The Red Carpet* because you could associate it with a baby or a child.



FIGURE **Nº 10**



Figure 10: Jan van der Merwe, *Sunday Suit*, 2003. Found material, rusted metal, TV monitor, video machine, dimensions variable. MAPSA collection. Photograph courtesy Jan van der Merwe.

JvdM: So, I play around with different scent as well. In the artwork, *Cleaning Instructions* (2003), which was more conceptual (in the Bloemfontein Museum [Oliewenhuis]), I used a hospital cupboard.¹⁷ When you open the drawers, there is a kit showing how to clean weapons and how to clean wounds. On top [of the cupboard] is an antique military first aid kit with a television screen that is built in [to the cupboard] – and there is a long video running, showing someone who sits and cleans a gun, slowly. The message I am trying to convey is that it seems, for some, more important to clean a gun than a wound. Underneath the bowl, I added a light, and underneath that, I placed a medical dish, which contains shreds of cloth that look like they should be used to clean wounds, but actually, they are two by four cloths used to clean a gun – the cloths have oil stains, but actually they are soaked in Dettol – to convey the hospital smell.

Bringing everything together

My installations are like a film set without actors, but it is the tangibility and the smell and the corroded metal when you speak of my artworks with rust. That is why I do not put my work through preservation processes that would make the rust shine, and I don't use varnish. I also do not cast my work in bronze. It is direct contact with the viewer, the rust (corrosion) or the shards of cloth in *Speelgrond/Playground* – the *transformation of found* [objects] is charged with *spirituality* and are transformed to convey a different meaning.

LC: Jan, it is also noteworthy that your installations do not have people in them; they are placeholders. Clothes are placeholders, but in this work [*Speelgrond/Playground*], these are just some of your processes. Toys are also placeholders, and they can be a metaphor for people, broken people, and wounded people. They become more emotional because they are children's toys.

JvdM: Yes. I think it has created a whole culture. In times gone by, parents crafted toys for their children, which was wonderful. It is also a way of transferring knowledge or to guide people in the world. I saw this with my own grandchildren, how they play with toy cars, cook food, and pick flowers – it is a world of imagination, but also a preparation for becoming an adult.

LC: A doll is a mini-me; in a way, it is already a “human”, so yes, in between the other things, more meaning is created.

JvdM: A bit more meaning is added, and I think you are spot on. The toys could have belonged to anyone; it does not matter which nationality you are or where in the world you hail from. In this sense, toys are a metaphor for both the children and the adults who teach them a value system that becomes part of the ego, because the abuse of power is related to the ego

LC: Somehow, this relates to the concept of your artwork; because a playground can be a “real” playground, but it can also be a “playground” in the aftermath of a bomb attack. It is also a playground of the elite who orchestrate wars behind their desks and who themselves are not part of the war or who suffer. They are not the victims.

JvdM: It is interesting that you should mention that because I created an artwork, *Killing Time* (2007) (Figure 10), which is part of the UNISA collection. In this work, I used a normal office desk, in which I added a television screen with someone who is busy folding paper planes, another play toy, but I use it as a metaphor. On the table, you can see four corroded metal sheets with a massive wall that I created; a couple of meters away from

the installation, where you can see a big pile of paper planes, which I folded out of corroded metal, which is thrown at the board.



FIGURE **Nº 11**



Jan van der Merwe, *Killing Time*, 2007. Found objects, wooden panel, rusted metal and digital screen. Dimensions variable. UNISA Collection. Courtesy of Carla Crafford.

Multiple gunshots are on the wall. It resembles people who plan things and play games behind desks and the effect this has on other people. The pile of paper planes also resembles a pile of flies, where someone has died. It is exactly what you just mentioned. I also created another artwork; it was my first artwork in which I incorporated digital media. I used an old computer, which had a preloaded game on it; the idea [behind this artwork] is war because people sit behind screens and plan wars.

Think of the drones [now] used in Russia and Ukraine, but also the events leading to the many wars that America waged. You can sit and watch how the war unfolded on your television screen; it has the sense of a virtual reality. Someone sends in an unmanned

machine, or in the future, robots will replace real soldiers and be sent into spaces that someone controls. So, *Speelgrond/Playground* also comments on the mass production and commercialisation of other types of war and its influence on people.

Notes

1. Exhibition details available at: <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/stairways-and-ruins-exhibition>
2. More information of this three-year project is available at <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/stairways-and-ruins-exhibition>
3. The video can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/sYC0vVKP2Bw>
4. The video can be viewed at https://youtu.be/A3FIAMi_wOE
5. Apart from sharing his creative approach with students, a number of Master's dissertations and a PhD study have also been conducted on Van der Merwe's work (including Master's dissertations by Beyers 2006; Du Toit 2012; Rademeyer 2014; Dry 2017/8; Robberts 2017/8; Roets 2017/8, and a PhD thesis by Rathbone (now Combrink) 2015).
6. Van der Merwe was nominated for Newsmaker of the Year at TUT in 2000 and received a nomination by TUT for the national Excellence in Teaching and Learning Award in 2009. His Curriculum Vitae contains extensive information about these and other awards: <https://www.art.co.za/janvandermerwe/about.php>
7. Van der Merwe (1999).
8. See Louw, Beukes and Van Wyk (2013).
9. See Hundt ([sa]).
10. Van der Merwe's exhibitions, work in collections and awards are too numerous to list in a footnote; please refer to these in his Curriculum Vitae (available at <https://www.art.co.za/janvandermerwe/about.php>).
11. Emphasis is added to highlight important points.
12. Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012) was a Catalan painter, sculptor and theorist, known for his approach called Tachisme (Pace [sa]).
13. Van der Merwe's artist's statement on *Speelgrond/Playground* as it appears on the ViNCO webpage reads thus: 'The installation *Speelgrond/Playground* incorporates found objects, images and junk materials that have been discarded. The work suggests loss and power abuse during times of upheaval – wars and disasters. I work with artefacts of our time and try to transform them into archaeological relics revealing human pathos and weakness. I try to create a poetic moment – an opportunity for reflection' (Van der Merwe 2023).
14. *Creative Creatures* was the first of ViNCO's three-year collaborative projects. See <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/tracking-creative-creatures-2007%25E2%2580%25932009>
15. See Botha (2009).
16. For a discussion on *Eclipse*, see Combrink (2020).
17. The artwork can be viewed here: https://www.art.co.za/janvandermerwe/jan_van_der_merwe_time_and_space.pdf

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