

Your ref: media107  
Our ref: 11/2/3/1  
Date: 7 May 2018  
Who deals with this: Roxanne/Emma

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum  
1 Park Drive, Central, PE  
Tel: 041 506 2000  
artmuseum@mandelametro.gov.za  
www.artmuseum.co.za

## **PRESS RELEASE**

The public of Nelson Mandela Bay are invited to attend the opening of the exhibition *Fragile Histories* by Keith Dietrich on Thursday 17 May 2018 at 17:30 for 18:00 at the Nelson Mandela University Bird Street Gallery at 20 Bird Street, Central, Port Elizabeth

Dietrich's exhibition reflects on the realities of early colonial encounters through the records of trials and sentences that were recorded between 1692 to 1803. The exhibition comprises three bodies of work: four photomontage triptychs with the title *Fragile Histories, Fugitive Lives*; the artist's book (bookwork) entitled *Fragile Histories, Fugitive Lives | Justice and Injustice at the Cape, 1700 – 1800*; and the quadriptych with the title *Fifty-two Steps*.

The exhibition forms part of the Art Museum's ART/LAW series organized to commemorate Nelson Mandela's centenary and brings together the disciplines of art and law. The exhibition will be jointly opened by Executive Dean Faculty of Law at Nelson Mandela University, Prof Avinash Govindjee and the newly appointed Head of Department of the Visual Arts at Nelson Mandela University, Vulindlela Nyoni.

Refreshments will be served at the opening.

Keith Dietrich will be at the opening of his exhibition and on Saturday 19 May at 10am the public are invited to a walkabout of the exhibition conducted by the artist.

The exhibition is hosted conjunctly by the Nelson Mandela University and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum. This project brings value to the Central Cultural Hub and strengthens relationships between the University and the City.

## **FRAGILE HISTORIES – DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EXHIBITION**

*Fragile Histories, Fugitive Lives* (the triptych and bookwork) narrate the tensions and textures of early colonial encounters at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, and allude to the rich though unsettled histories of the people who inhabited this globalised space that was characterised by an astonishing cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. This population was made up of indigenous San, Khoi and Xhosa people; slaves from Africa and the Indian subcontinent; slaves, political exiles and convicts from the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia); free blacks; slaves born at the Cape; Chinese and European visitors and settlers; and the hybrid mixing of these groups. The only traces left behind by many of these people are in the form of court records of trials at the Cape. *Fragile Histories* is informed by 1 220 trials that took place between 1692 and 1802, and in particular by the atrocious sentences that were meted out for transgressions against a social order in which these people found themselves.

The 24-running-metre accordion-fold book is a collaboration between myself and the historian and genealogist Dr Hans Heese. The material for this book was researched by Dr Heese for the publication of his book *Reg en Onreg: Kaapse Regspraak in die Agtiende Eeu* published in 1994 by the University of the Western Cape. The book contains the 1 220 above-mentioned trials and sentences where the cases run chronologically from 1692 to 1803. The text provides the dates of the trials, and the names, ages and origins of the offenders, as well as summaries of both their crimes and sentences.

The four triptychs each comprise a central panel with a life-size photograph of a figure flanked by two side panels constituting a crucifix. Each panel comprises a rosette of pleated tracing paper that radiates outwards from vital organs, referencing the iconic image of the sacred heart. The rosettes are inscribed with the same information as in the book with regard to the previously mentioned court decisions.

Fifty-two Steps consists of a series of four paper montages that records the execution of 168 South African death row political prisoners in the second half of the twentieth century who had to climb 52 steps in the former Pretoria Central Prison (now the Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre) on their journey to the gallows. Similar to the triptychs in *Fragile Histories, Fugitive Lives* these pieces are constructed from layers of tracing paper where the names and details of the people radiate downwards from images of a noose.

Considering that the history of South Africa is one of fragile bodies being subjugated, Dietrich has used these bodies as metaphors for the pain and suffering that our country has endured. The artworks, which have been delicately constructed from photographs and folded transparent paper held together with pins, map and inscribe pain and suffering over the body, with agony and sorrow depicted as rays of energy radiating outwards from vital organs or rope nooses that serve as a reminder of our own fragility.

### **KEITH DIETRICH – ARTIST’S BIO**

Keith Dietrich studied graphic design at Stellenbosch University, where he graduated with a BA degree in Visual Arts in 1974. Between 1975 and 1977 he studied painting at the National Higher Institute for Fine Arts in Antwerp, Belgium. He obtained his MA in Fine Arts (cum laude) in 1983 and his D Litt et Phil in Art History in 1993, both at the University of South Africa (Unisa). He has lectured at the University of Pretoria, Unisa and Stellenbosch University, where he was Distinguished Professor, Chair of the Department of Visual Arts and Director of the Centre for Comic, Illustrative and Book Arts (CCIBA).

He has participated in over thirty community interaction projects in Southern Africa and received a number of awards in South Africa and abroad for both his creative and his academic work. Keith has participated in over 85 group exhibitions and biennials in Belgium, Botswana, Chile, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Namibia, the Netherlands, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the USA, and has held 28 solo/duo exhibitions in South Africa. His work is represented in 37 corporate and public collections in South Africa and abroad.

His bookwork's are represented in the Jack Ginsberg collection, Johannesburg; the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Collection, Washington DC; the Library of Congress, Washington DC; Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut; and the University of South Africa, Pretoria.

The last day of the exhibition is 8 June 2018. The Bird Street Gallery is open to the public between 9:30 to 15:00, Monday to Friday and entrance is free.

#### RSVP

Nelson Mandela University Bird Street Gallery contact details:  
Contact no: 041 504 3254/041 504 3426  
20 Bird Street, Central, Port Elizabeth

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum contact details:  
Opening times: Weekdays: 09h00 – 17h00  
Address: 1 Park Drive, Central Port Elizabeth 6001  
Telephone: 041 506 2000  
E-mail: [artmuseum@mandelametro.gov.za](mailto:artmuseum@mandelametro.gov.za)  
Website: [www.artmuseum.co.za](http://www.artmuseum.co.za)

ENDS