

# Jessica Webster

## Biography

Jessica Webster (b. 1981) was raised on the mines of the Free State and in Benoni. From a young age her proliferate painting and drawing practice was recognised as provoking the stranger qualities of the everyday: at sixteen, she sold her first major painting to the MTN Gallery in 1997. Webster entered Michaelis School of Fine Art in 2002 where she studied painting under established painters Malcolm Payne and Virginia MacKenny, attaining the Judy Stein Prize for painting upon graduation in 2005, and coming first in her class for academia and practice. In 2006, Webster survived an act of extreme violence in a shooting which left her paralysed from the waist down. Within six months of the shooting, she was being wheeled from hospital into Master's supervision and mentorship with Penny Siopis at the University of the Witwatersrand, which resulted in her first solo show in 2009 at David Krut Projects in Johannesburg.

The show met with great acclaim: the Johannesburg Art Gallery acquiring the centrepiece painting of the exhibition and the bulk of the work being sold to experienced collectors. Art critic Michael Smith described her work in *Mail & Guardian* (2009) as 'light years ahead of the simply sensational'. At the same time, Webster embarked on an in-depth study of painting and philosophy for her Master's degree that has resulted in the expected fulfilment of her PhD in philosophy and painting in 2017. The relationship between writing and practice has been an intensive aspect of Webster's career thus far, which has gained her critical recognition in the form of awards from both the Oppenheimer and Mellon Foundations. In 2013, Webster was assigned as part of the Goodman Gallery's stable of artists, upon which they have published a number of her creative writings in 2013 and held her first solo show with the gallery in 2015. Referring to the intensity of the affect from the show, art critic Sylvia McKeown writes that 'Some objects are steeped in emotion that is so powerful that onlookers can sense the soul of the object's creator...in everyday life we call it great art.' This relationship between states of consciousness in painting and the power of life experience to affect form was continued in her show *Wisteria* at Goodman Gallery Cape Town in April 2017, a year which proved to be full of success for Webster, who also curated the 'Emerging Painter's exhibition at the Turbine art Fair, and was awarded her PhD in Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand with no corrections.

## Artist Statement

As an emerging painter in the South African art scene, I recently exhibited my first solo show at David Krut Projects (July 2009) to great success, with the Johannesburg Art Gallery acquiring a centrepiece of the show. Previously, I did my undergraduate degree at Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town, where I finished winning the Judy Stein Painting Prize (December 2005).

In between these auspicious events, I had the poor fortune of being shot in a household robbery, from which I emerged paralysed from the waist down. During my show at David Krut Projects, my injury generated a lot of interest in the extent to which my trauma has influenced my art-making.

It is a question that I ask myself too, and I have reached the conclusion that it is yes, and I perceive this horrific but invaluable life experience in the following way: I have come to see the stream of events that make up the routine and trajectory of life as full of holes.

Through these holes, one is subjected to a strange awakening of the impossibly intense nature of the moment; a moment in which conscious and subconscious realities seem to collide in devastating and wondrous simultaneity. I feel that my trauma has made me particularly alive to these holes; a hyper-awareness of the moments, both good and bad, that rupture the daily life-bubble. It is these moments which I aspire to recreate or project onto canvas.

Therefore, my injury does not affect or direct my subject-matter so much as it provides an empathic source for interpretation of my subject-matter. My interest in painting is therefore less on the subject of pleasure or suffering that life experience has to offer.

Rather, my concerns are based on what may lie between these subjective outcomes - the products of restless exchange between inner and outer worlds, fantasy and reality, private and public spaces. I see my paintings as functioning in this terrain for the manner in which the painted surface may evoke these relationships, as an embodied relationship between surface and materiality.

It is through this ever-evolving and performative process that I feel my paintings may visualize the delimiting, or as often the overwhelming vagaries that penetrate the more 'normal' sense of the everyday, and 'speak' about the underlying currents through which life revolves.

## Solo Exhibitions

2017 *Wisteria*, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

2015 *'Murderer'*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

2009 *I Knew You in this Dark*, David Krut Projects, Johannesburg, South Africa

## Group Exhibitions

2018 *Of Sovereignty and Safety*, curated by Daniel Rautenbach, Goodman Gallery Video Room, Cape Town, South Africa

2016 *New Revolutions: Goodman Gallery at 50* Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

2013 *[WORKING TITLE]*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

2010 *DKW Monotype Project*, David Krut Workshop Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa