

# 'Art Has Its Own Unique Abilities': An Interview With Prize-Winning Artist Gabrielle Goliath

On March 22nd, Johannesburg-based [artist Gabrielle Goliath](#) was a Special Prize recipient at the Future Generation Art Prize ceremony. We caught up with Gabrielle to talk about elegies, absences, and her ongoing projects commemorating the victims of violence.



[Gabrielle Goliath](#)

In Gabrielle Goliath's series of photographs, *Berenice 10-28*, 19 young women of color meet your eye. Some of them look defiant, others calm. Others look vulnerable. They are 'standing in' for the absent Berenice. Each photograph marks one year of the span of time which separates the work's conception in 2010 from Christmas Eve 1991, the night Gabrielle's childhood friend was shot and killed in a case of domestic violence.

"I saw her mother the following day," Gabrielle recalls, "and when she saw me she called out Berenice's name. And then she held me for what seemed like hours and hours. And of course this experience left a deep impression on me."

The series commemorates Berenice through her absence. It calls her memory forth through a collaborative and creative act of mourning. "It was a highly collaborative exercise," Gabrielle tells me, "working with these individuals asking them to give of themselves."

Gabrielle calls it "a portrait of absence", an important concept to her as an artist. Crucial to the acts of commemoration which Gabrielle wants to enact is an avoidance of committing any further violence. She's meticulously attuned to the risks inherent within representational art. "The subject matter that I deal with in my work - gendered and sexualized violence - is rather sensitive and fraught", she says, "so I try to maintain a very subject-centred approach, a highly ethical approach that is in service of the subject and of their account and their experience."



Gabrielle Goliath, *This Song is for...* (2019). Long-term performative project. Collaborating musicians: Dope Saint Jude & BŪJIN; Jacobi de Villiers & Erik Dippenaar; Msaki with Lebogang Ledwaba & Thembinkosi Mavimbela; Nonku Phiri & Dion Monti. Co-produced by PinchukArtCentre  
Special thanks: Goodman Gallery, Natalie Haarhof, The Magic Lightbox Company, 14 10th, and Dion Monti. Image courtesy of the artist and PinchukArtCentre © 2019. Photographed by Maksim Belousov

The frames and tropes of representational forms are, Gabrielle fears, themselves tools of politicized violence, silencing or beautifying the suffering subject, and type-casting certain social groups in certain roles. "Too often, we too readily turn to the pained and suffering black and brown body to talk about these things," she says. In her work, Gabrielle tries to "seek out alternative means of dealing with these issues without constantly trafficking in these images." The question she poses herself is, "how does one work in the wake of violence, as opposed to always returning to that primary site of violence, that pained body?"

Despite the inherently social and political nature of her work, Gabrielle is keen to identify the differences between 'art' and 'activism.' "I'm very careful not to conflate the two, because I think that the two roles are so different and demand such different kinds of work. I'm very careful to say that what I do is art, and I am still aware and mindful of the limits of this kind of work.

"We have to be very careful, particularly in the field of the arts, when we are dealing with aesthetics. Things can be too highly aestheticized, and that too can be a form of violence and obscure something." But, she says, "art has its own unique abilities to enact and affect real change in the world."



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Receiving two prestigious awards already this year has helped Gabrielle build the kind of platform she feels these conversations deserve.

Recognition by the Future Generation Art Prize in Kiev this month was preceded by the Standard Bank Artist of the Year 2019 award. When asked about the most recent award, Gabrielle is humble but also determined to take the opportunity and reach more people.

"Firstly it's hugely surprising. I wasn't going to Kiev thinking I would get a prize. With both prizes, I was firstly so mindful of my peers, so many other people who could have been given this prize. And then in turn, I was so grateful. It gives one an opportunity, particularly with the subject matter and the organisations that I collaborate with, to profile and to bring to the fore some of these issues.

"I'm mindful of the fact that it is happening within a particular context. Art is a rather rarefied and elite space. But it definitely does expand one's reach, absolutely it does. And it helps me speak to so many people. It's also about intimacy, not only reaching people en masse."

After such a successful start to 2019, what's next? An ongoing project is the long-form performance piece, *Elegy*. Initiated in 2015, it's a lived and continual act of real-time mourning. Every time the piece is performed, it commemorates an individual who has been raped and murdered in South Africa. "The work continues, sadly," says Gabrielle, but she believes it's necessary. "A particular collective act of mourning becomes this moment of according a social and political agency to these individuals who are so often not accorded that," she says.



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"For me it's very important to stage it outside of South Africa. The next place I'll be travelling to show and perform *Elegy* will be in Basel at a performance art festival called This is the Real Thing. in April. Then it's also been included in the programme for the AfroVibes festival in the Netherlands." Gabrielle has also been approached by curator Valentina Munski about performing the work at The Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati.

The other important current project is the new body of work entitled *This Song is For...*, a piece which revolves around the idea of a 'dedication



song'. It's a new type of commemoration, as the subjects are all still alive. The piece is made in collaboration with rape survivors. Gabrielle asks each of them to share significant songs, colors, and texts with her, and she compiles these into live performances. "I worked with a central cohort of women-led music ensembles to reperform and reproduce these songs. They're not straight 'covers'. I introduce a kind of sonic disruption within the song which then becomes a durational exercise and a loop that continues for quite a long time. The whole idea there is to use music to recall something of the traumatic-recall experienced by the survivor and how trauma can return in this cyclic way."

The pieces chosen by the participants needn't be directly associated with their experience of sexual violence. Some did elect to submit songs "strongly associated with that terrible moment of rapture." But Gabrielle is interested in a broad and complex zone of emotional experience, here.



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“What is key about *This Song is For...* is how very deeply entangled all these different experiences are. They have suffered so deeply and experienced such great pain... a death of sorts. This was what I was very focussed on, naturally. But in personal interactions and conversations, what I was very challenged by was that, yes, while there is this death, there is this pain, there is this suffering, there is also life. There is also this aspiration towards dignity, and there is faith, and there is even joy. These experiences are so entangled and often overlap. But that’s what’s so extraordinary about these individuals, and this is what this work also invokes. It’s not just about death. It’s about life, and fighting for this life.”

As her own profile grows, Gabrielle is beginning to celebrate and participate in this fight. And she wants us all to join her. She strongly believes that these issues of gendered and racialized violence are of universal concern. “This really does have a bearing upon us all,” she says, and realizing that “is key for something dramatic giving and shifting.”

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