

Art brings history of slave trade to life

Nicola Daniels



These T-shirts were dipped in mud and are hanging at the Castle of Good Hope. They bear the names of people from India who were brought to. Photo: Supplied

Conceptual artist Sue Williamson has launched an exhibition, *One Hundred and Nineteen Deeds of Sale*, which details the history of the slave trade in the Cape.

Williamson has written out deeds of sale from the slave trade, extracted from the Cape Town Deeds Office on linen shirts and lengths of cloth sent from India.

Her exhibition at the Castle of Good Hope is based on the records of transactions about each of the individuals brought here from India to be bought and sold. The exhibition is part of the ICA Live Art Festival.

“I think Capetonians are fairly familiar with the basic fact that the Dutch East India Company enslaved people and imported them to work at the Castle and in the Company’s Garden, but I do believe that a true

recognition of the trauma of history leads to a greater understanding of the present.”

At the opening event of the exhibition on Friday, Williamson read extracts from historical accounts, while a young woman who works at the Castle picked up each shirt from a shipping pallet, read out the name and information, then took it inside an old kitchen off the main lawn, and handed it over to be dipped in mud and hung on a washing line.

“Dipping the shirts and the wraps for women in muddy water at the Castle is symbolic of the hard labour and appalling conditions the enslaved people had to face when they arrived to work here.”

When Williamson travelled to Kochi last year she was immediately struck by its parallel history with Cape Town. The muddied clothes will go back to Kochi where there is a public laundry originally set up by the Dutch to wash officers uniforms.

“In an echo of the performance where I dipped the clothes in the mud, the clothes will be washed clean again and hung in an old colonial space at the Biennale, where the doors open out to the sea. An enactment of return.”