



Gothic Contemporary

Text: Julie Graham
Images © Johan Conradie

Voices (2014)
Hand-stitched silk embroidery and Swarovski crystals on digital print on paper
103 x 144 cm



Mirrored (2014)
Digital print on Velvet paper
120 x 80 cm



Antinomy of falling/rising (2015)
Digital print on archival paper
120 x 80 cm

From a young age, Johan Conradie suspected that there was far more to life than meets the eye. To him, art has always been instructive; a way of making sense of the world around him. Raised on a farm in the North West Province, Conradie used to draw with a pencil on paper at any given opportunity as a child. Despite the fact that his family was not necessarily “art conscious”, he describes art as “the essence of my whole being.”

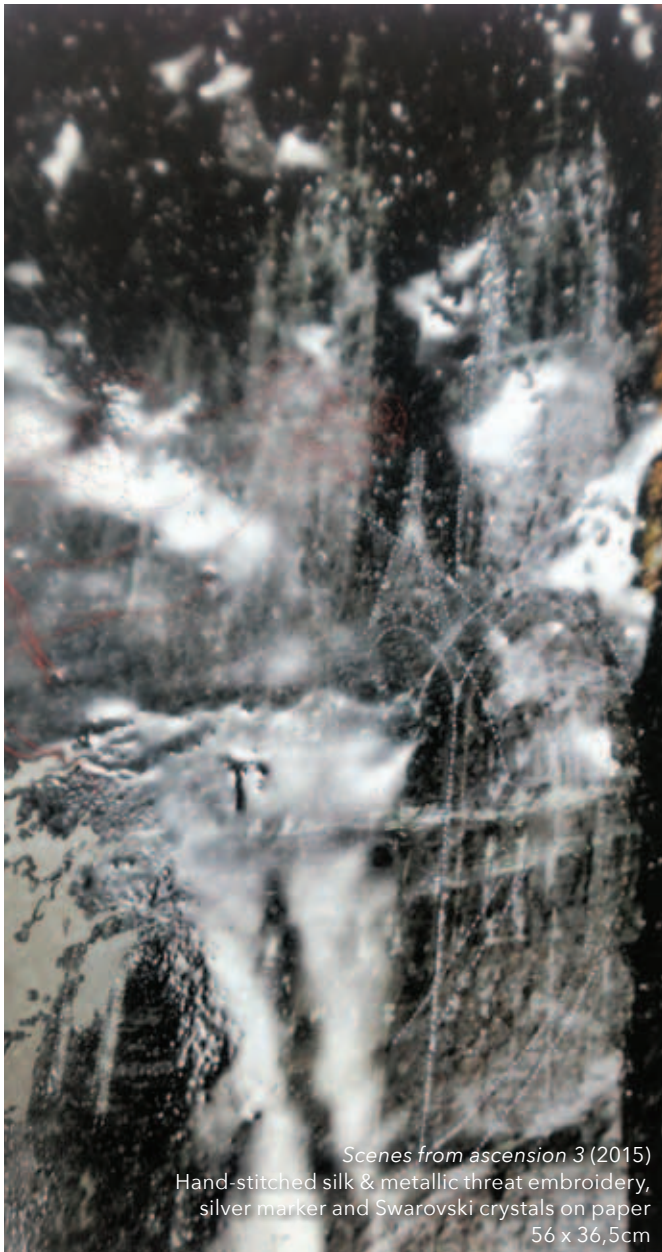
Inspired by the world around him, the ability to connect to people through creativity, Gothic architectural elements, and Baroque sensibilities, Conradie’s work challenges and defies easy categorisation. Using a variation of media – from digital photography and oil painting, to hand-stitched silk embroidery – he immerses himself in the Neo-baroque movement that originated in the early 21st century. Neo-baroque embraces dark subject matter, visual extravagance, beauty, and complex surfaces. “My art is

concerned with the simultaneity of beauty and horror, mortality and transcendence, life and death, all of which were essential to the Baroque tradition.” His passion for Gothic architecture stems from a fervent love for the medieval mysteries associated with the era. “I love the medieval mysteries, most of them involving the church and the clergy in some way. Gothic cathedrals are symbols of skill and inspiration, wonder, worship, a sense of another world, but also of much more sinister things, like power and religious wars. They involve all of our senses.”

The concept of combining digital photography and embroidery is fascinating and the idea behind it came from Conradie’s recent participation in a South African group exhibition in Paris at the esteemed Orangerie exhibition Centre of the French Senate in the beginning of 2013. “I realised that for a special occasion like this, I could not do something that was ‘safe’. I decided to merge two photographic images over

each other with Photoshop. The first photograph was of the famous Gothic spire of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, and the second of a gold-coloured embroidered voile curtain that I photographed in Bruges. The result was then printed onto paper. Afterwards, I started working with gold leaf onto the image, but could not quite get the effect that I wanted. That is when I realised I needed to somehow incorporate stitching through the actual paper to recreate the effect of the original embroidered curtain. This was nerve wracking to say the least, since I had never embroidered before, and had a looming deadline with lots at stake. Paper is a very fragile medium to embroider on. There is always a sense of pending disaster! This is where it all started.”

Conradie has a deep reverence and respect for artists who undergo similar time-consuming processes such as his (some of his works take between four to six months to complete). For the artist, art-



Scenes from ascension 3 (2015)
Hand-stitched silk & metallic thread embroidery,
silver marker and Swarovski crystals on paper
56 x 36,5cm



Echo chamber (2015)
Hand-stitched silk & metallic thread embroidery and
Swarovski crystals on digital print on archival paper
104 x 70cm

making is a meditative act that requires immense amounts of time and patience, which is reflected in his favourite artwork, Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*. "[It is] the most transcendently, beautiful work of art ever created. In real life the painted panels glow with a jewel-like perfection. It is something a camera simply cannot capture. Rarely in life does one get to see something so beautiful and perfect that speech 'abandons' the body when standing in front of it," says Conradie. His respect for this type of craftsmanship is evident in his work, *Echo chamber*, which includes imagery inspired by his recent two month residency in Paris.

When he is not teaching (he is a part-time lecturer and founder of the Johan Conradie Art Academy in Pretoria) or exhibiting his work, he is working on an initiative that he started in 2007 called Johan Conradie International Art Tours. After falling madly in love with Venice and making a promise

to himself to return every second year, he realised that there was a need among like-minded people, passionate about art, to travel internationally and draw inspiration from the world around them. "These art tours provide me with the opportunity to live out my fantasies, discover hidden gems that are 'off the beaten track', and share them with like-minded people, and help me stay on top of my game." The art tours initiative has grown exponentially since its inception, and Conradie is taking two separate groups, consisting of 33 people in total, to Italy for the Venice Biennale - considered to be the Olympics of the contemporary art world - this month.

Italy is a country that has always held a special place in Conradie's heart. His attachment to the idea of melancholy as inspiration draws him to the city of Rome, known most famously for its painters, sculptors, and architects. "I have a poetical identification with Rome. I love Rome for its

art, the vibrancy of the people, and for its ruins. The writer, Ahmet Rasim, once wrote that 'the beauty of a landscape resides in its melancholy.' I have made Rome's melancholy my own."

It is not commonplace for one to come across an artist quite like Conradie. His work articulates juxtaposition in a way that makes it romantic. A sense of beauty and ruin, loss and the desire to guard against loss, masculine and feminine themes, and the beauty of the traditional, coupled with that of the modern world. His idea that "dialogues between seemingly opposite things creating unexpected tensions, but also new meaning" is an inspiring view of the world we live in, and certainly one that adds even more visual splendour to his already dynamic artwork.

For more information on the artist, visit www.art.co.za/johanconradie. ■