

**Excerpts from John Botha's opening address at Quin Retrospective NWU  
Potchefstroom 8 May 2014**

Maureen, is not only no stranger to Potchefstroom, but holds the very special distinction of having been one of the first sculptors and foundation members from whose works the Permanent Collection was launched.

Allow me to share one of the most profound moments of my life with you, when 40 years ago, I as a young first year sculpture student, walked into the gallery, at that stage housed in what is today the Transnet Lokaal in the Frans du Toit building. On entering the gallery, I found myself face to face with a piece of sculpture that not only etched itself into my being as a young-in-training, but elicited in my mind the very essence of what I believe to be great art. This work of art, burdened with the title, *The Victims*, and made by Maureen Quin in 1971/3 (with all due apologies, Maureen, for the impromptu inclusion of this work in tonight's exhibition) was to me a baffling and eye-opening revelation. This was not realism (which I could comprehend)! It was for me a summary of all that is tragic yet at the same time moving, filled with human empathy, above all, to me, a sublime work of great art. The mother and child motif, with the anguished protective arms of the mother embracing the child, whose mouth is distended in a silent cry, conjured up in my mind all the suffering caused by man's inhumanity towards man from ancient times through the *Guernica* to Auschwitz,

What then is great art? For me an infinitely valuable definition of what art is, and what art should be, is embedded in the very short simple statement: Great Art, I believe, is that rare item that has the ability to live on in my memory. Art is that precious commodity that has the ability to enrich our lives simply because it exists. It really need not have any other reason for being. For me it is therefore quite obvious; great art needs to have great artists.

Maureen Quin, I believe is such a great artist, and this incredible body of works that you see enveloping your minds in this gallery tonight, attests to that fact.

Robert Hughes (once described as the most famous art critic of all times, a man who wrote for more than thirty years in the time magazine) summarized an essential part of what I need to say tonight when he voiced his concerns about contemporary art in the series *The New Shock of the New* in 2004: "*in the 45 years that I have been writing about art, there has been a tragic depreciation of the traditional skills of painting and drawing; the nuts and bolts of the profession.*" We should extend this to embrace sculpture as well, which has its own discipline regarding form and medium.) He calls the "new" art "a different truth, but not necessarily a truer one".

For me, however art-historically blasphemous this may sound, the conceptual-art trend that started with Marcelle Duchamp, and which paved the way for other emperors of the style, exemplified the idea of smoke-and-mirrors. Maureen Quin, in the sheer physicality of her works, does not subscribe to this type of art. She is simply too much in tune with the human condition to want to do that.

Underlying all this, however, is the thorough grounding and implicit understanding of her craft, her art. Maureen Quin knows art history, and therefore understands with impeccable intuition and grounded knowledge how important structure, form, time and space can be for a sculptor.

Was or is Maureen Quin a modernist? In some ways I would like to think so. Her work speaks of sculpture in much the same way as Cezanne did after participating in two exhibitions of the French impressionists. He questioned the lack of structure that seemed to be the primary characteristic of impressionistic works, and remarked “ I want to make of impressionism something solid and lasting like the art in the museums”, and after this started experimenting with subjects with a geometric structure with a focus on the representation of spatial relationships and forms, thereby becoming one of the major contributors to the dawn of modern art, Cezanne, therefore, in actual fact remained true to a more traditional approach to art. Maureen Quin’s work shows essentially such a more traditional approach.

The traditional arts, says Robert Hughes, brings us into a fuller, a deeper, a truer relationship with the object. He concludes “*what we need more of is slow art; art that holds time as a vase holds water.*”

To my mind Maureen Quin’s work exemplifies such slow art. Thought provoking, slowly percolating, and monumental sculpture that passes the test of time because it has had enough time to mature, and because it does not, like much contemporary art, cause in us the need or the desire to excise anything. With her works I do not have to wonder what I should retain; it is not necessary to “cleanse the doors of my perception”, because all her works are worth looking at, worth remembering.

Does this mean her works are overly simplistic? Considering a great series such as “The Hunt” one is rather tempted to agree with Simon Schama who wrote the thought provoking book *The Power of Art* in 2009. In this he says (quote);

“Great art has dreadful manners. The hushed reverence of the art galleries can fool you into believing masterpieces are polite things, visions that soothe, charm and beguile, but actually they are thugs. Merciless and wily, the greatest paintings grab you in a headlock, rough up your composure and then proceed in short order to rearrange your sense of reality...”

In many of her works Maureen does just that, but this does not imply art made to justify psycho-analysis, or for shock value, and definitely not for smoke-and-mirrors. Her art is not the Emperor’s new clothes. This is profound, dynamic and meaningful art; art that succeeds eminently to live on in your memory; this is art of substance, passion and a human connectedness with our origins. Sometimes raw, sometimes pagan but always powerful. In a way I think I for one have moved full circle, because one of these very powerful images in the collection tonight, is the Culprit Maquette, in which again, as with *The Victims*, a child, a baby is held in close embrace by the larger figure, with the mouth a chasm of agony crying out for redemption. Is this to be our answer to the plight of the rhino?

With that disconcerting thought in mind, I must thank Maureen for this wonderful exhibition, congratulate her on the maturity of age and six decades of productivity, reminisce with her and her lovely new book dedicated to Etienne, her husband who passed away in 2008, and look forward to at least another two decades of work.