

[INTERVIEW]

The Great Homer in Small Sculpture: An Interview with South African Artist Charlayn von Solms, *thersites* 3 (2016) 17-36.

## The Great Homer in Small Sculpture: An Interview with South African Artist Charlayn von Solms

Charlayn von Solms was born in Pretoria, South Africa in 1973. She trained in fine art at the University of Cape Town and studied ancient cultures at the University of Stellenbosch. She has lectured in sculpture and drawing at various South African universities and currently lives in Cape Town where she works as a full time artist. Her most recent project, which is entitled “A Catalogue of Shapes”, is a portrait of Homer not as a person, but as the creative methodology that produced the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey”. This representation of an ‘oral-formulaic Homer’ takes the form of an installation of twelve sculptural assemblages.



Installation - SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, July 2015; Photograph: Isabelle Grobler

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

**thersites:** Could you please introduce yourself to our readers in a few sentences? How would you concisely describe yourself as an artist and your art?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I’m interested in iconography as the connection between an idea and its visual expression. In particular, I’m fascinated by how tenuous that connection can be, and what happens when the one is no longer an accurate reflection of the other.

**thersites:** Is there a specific tradition you follow? An artist who you try to emulate?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I’m a constructivist working predominantly in sculptural assemblage. There are various assemblage traditions in sculpture, ranging from ‘junk sculpture’ and ‘arte povera’ to Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ and the ‘accidental’ combinations of the Surrealists. These approaches differ in the type of objects and materials used, how and why they are selected, and the method employed in transforming them into artworks. ‘Junk sculpture’ and ‘arte povera’ reflect, respectively, a concern with how unwanted things and works of art are valued, while Duchampian, Dadaist, and Surrealist assemblage derived from a predominantly conceptual redefinition of what can constitute art-making. I trace my own approach to Picasso’s Cubist collages and later assemblages. This type of assemblage entails the construction of a cross-referential system of recognizable, suggested, and symbolic forms through the manipulation and composition of predominantly pre-existing elements. As far as emulating other artists is concerned: I would be very happy to achieve the balance of geometric form with fine detail and surface patterning (as suggested in reconstructions of its pigmentation) of the so-called “Peplous Kore” found on the Athenian Acropolis. In terms of using colour to full effect, I am most envious of Mark Rothko’s colour field paintings.

**thersites:** You have named your most recent project “A Catalogue of Shapes” after Homer. What in particular was it about Homer that stimulated and inspired you?

**Charlayn von Solms:** This may sound strange, but what initially attracted me to the topic of Homer was the nature and quality of scholarship on the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey.” For any artwork to evoke such an extraordinary range of interpretations, imitations, praise, critique, and sustained debate over millennia and across cultures is the artist’s equivalent of paradise. This vast corpus provides a rare record of the sheer variety of interpretive ap-

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

proaches that have been developed towards understanding these artworks. In addition, many contemporary Homerists premise interpretation on comprehension of the manner in which the epics were composed, and base their theories on very close readings of the integration of content with form in Homeric poetics. This emphasis on creative methodology is of particular interest to me as a creative practitioner. And then there is the exquisite artistry of the poems themselves. After all, any engineer who encounters a bridge that has withstood millennia of earthquakes, floods, and use, would not only appreciate such an accomplishment, but would be stupid to not attempt an understanding of those aspects of its design and construction which contributed to its success.

**thersites:** What was your relationship with Homer or with classics in general before you started your project?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I’ve incorporated classical ideas into my art for many years, but this was mainly restricted to themes drawn from mythology and philosophy. An early sculptural revision of the iconography of the classical muse, for example, included references to Hesiod’s “Theogony” and the philosophies of Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Plato. At that point my engagement with the classical was very much premised on a dissatisfaction with notions of innovation as necessarily antithetical to tradition. As an idea closely linked to how artistic production is described, the muse – and in particular the extent to which the modern idea of a muse as an artist’s source of inspiration differed from its ancient counterpart – offered a useful model for exploring an approach to creativity that is premised not on a blank slate (or ‘tabula rasa’), but a constructive engagement with what is already there.

**thersites:** Did your creative engagement with Homer change your views about this?

**Charlayn von Solms:** My approach to incorporating classics into art had up to this point followed the artistic convention of using a contemporary art-form to express themes and ideas from antiquity. My engagement with Homer, however, was premised on exploring what I believed to be core similarities between a modern creative methodology and an ancient one.

**thersites:** How did you ‘study’ Homer and the mythological tradition? Are there, apart from the poems, books and scholarship which particularly inspired you?

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

**Charlayn von Solms:** As an outsider to the field of classics, I wanted to approach the subject as considerately as possible, therefore opting to undertake the project as research towards a post-graduate degree. This imposed certain demands on the type of conclusions that could be reached and methods to be used. I needed to be quite up to date on Homeric theory which meant reading the work of scholars such as Gregory Nagy, Leonard Muellner, Ahuvia Kahane, Egbert Bakker, Benjamin Sammons, and Laura Slatkin, to name a few examples. Works of fiction incorporating classics also inform a lot of my own work, such as John Fowles’ novel “Mantissa” (which is well paired with Joseph Brodsky’s poem “The Fly”) and Thomas Pynchon’s “The Crying of Lot 49.” I also look to reflexive works of fiction where the construction and/or power of fiction is explored within the narrative itself, such as Umberto Eco’s “Foucault’s Pendulum” and Mark Danielewski’s “House of Leaves.” I’m very fond of other irreverent interpretations of the classics such as singer/composer Nick Cave’s “The Lyre of Orpheus”.

**thersites:** Do you think that the classical tradition is a vital part of South African culture? Are there other forms of classical reception in South Africa we should know of?

**Charlayn von Solms:** South African culture is hugely complex. We have eleven official languages (and a number of unofficial ones), each representing one or more complex cultures with their own practices, beliefs, and world-views. Added to that, we have one of the largest refugee and economic migrant populations in the world, making cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town places of significant cross-cultural contact and tension. As a result, the majority of South Africans are multi-lingual and very much aware (if not always respectful) of different cultural norms. Locating the classical tradition within this mixture is difficult, as exposure to elements of everyday life that were derived from antiquity does not necessarily equate with knowledge of where those things came from. So, for example, the habit of eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave owners to name their slaves after characters from classical history and mythology such as Eusebius, Aphrodite, Apollo, and Telemachus, survives in the names and surnames of many people in the South-Western part of the country. Various architectural vestiges remain, often in strikingly incongruous settings. Many private and church-run schools long followed a British colonial curriculum, which meant that their graduates (like Nelson Mandela who attended missionary schools),

“A Catalogue of Shapes”

were often more familiar with classics than the graduates of most government-run schools. Other African countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Kenya also followed similar colonial inspired curricula, meaning that people from these places, who come to South Africa to work and study, bring their unique understanding of classical antiquity with them.

As far as reception is concerned, the vast majority of South African re-interpretations of the classics occurs in the performing arts.<sup>1</sup> Our actors, playwrights, singers, composers, dancers, choreographers, and performance poets are especially adept at finding themes and ideas in the classics that resonate with contemporary audiences. As an example, the famous Kirstenbosch Botanical gardens have, for a few years now, featured open air performances of “The Birds” of Aristophanes early in the morning during summer, complete with brightly painted masks and actual birdsong in the surrounding trees. There is less interest in the visual arts, possibly due on the one hand, with the notion of classical art as antithetical to modern artistic expression, and on the other, with the predominance of an idealised figurative style in propagandist works from the apartheid era (such as the frieze commemorating a crucial battle between Zulus and Afrikaners in the Voortrekker Monument). Nonetheless, there are examples of artists incorporating classical themes into their work, such as sculptor Bruce Arnott. The work of some artists also reflect an engagement with aspects of classical style, such as Mary Sibande’s retorts to classical – and by extension, social – conventions of female beauty. In the academic sphere, scholars such as Richard Whitaker have referred to some South African social conventions to generate a new understanding of the classics. By incorporating words from our local languages, his “Southern African Translation of the Iliad” reflects the multiple regional and historical dialects within the Homeric epics. In the context of this translation, the social hierarchies and ritualistic practices that terms such as ‘indaba’, ‘inkosi’, ‘kraal’ and ‘sangoma’ refer to, serve to invoke an Homeric world that is highly recognizable to a South African audience. The survival of tribal affiliations, each with their complex codes of conduct, kings, chiefs, headmen, healer/diviners, oral poets, and ritualistic sacrifice,

---

1 A case study on the dramatic reception of antiquity in South Africa is made by Eva Marie Noller, Wenn Medea aus der Rolle fällt. Formen der Rezeption in Guy Butlers *Demea*, in: Christine Walde/Christian Stoffel (Hrsgg.), *Caesar’s Salad: Antikerezeption im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert = thesites 1* (2015) 179–202.

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

may not be the everyday reality of all South Africans, but the vast majority of the population is familiar with some or all of it.

**thersites:** For European scholars, classical studies in the “other” parts of the world, especially in Africa, Asia and South America, are more or less invisible, which holds also true for the field of classical reception studies. What are the reasons for this in your opinion?

**Charlayn von Solms:** It is to be expected that members of any given community would prefer to focus on debates and topics of discussion that are of interest and concern to that group. In developing countries facing large numbers of serious challenges, it is not unusual for people to inform discussions by incorporating ideas and examples of solutions that can be adapted to their particular circumstances from abroad. In its extreme form, this results in what political analyst Dr. Somada Fikeni describes as “swallowing what other people have chewed for us,” resulting in a sometimes uneasy openness to outside influence. Our urban culture is awash with films, television programmes, music, clothing, religious practices, and other cultural artefacts from across the world. From this viewpoint, Europe seems different. With the exception of relatively small immigrant communities (by global standards), individual European countries have long-established national cultures with deep roots, shared social norms, and linguistic coherence. In such a context, foreign ideas may be treated with greater caution, or not be actively sought out at all.

**thersites:** Apartheid is gone for years now, but there might still be some repercussions or after-effects of it lingering on in the present. So, does your work within this ‘old’ and ‘white’ classical tradition raise issues of race?

**Charlayn von Solms:** Yes, the extent to which cultural artefacts of the white segment of the population should be retained or excised in public spheres is under fierce debate, and there is an understandably strong desire amongst many (such as the Rhodes Must Fall student movement) for a process of complete cultural cleansing. My own approach is of examining a basic misconception at the core of what South Africans of European descent were taught to think of ourselves in relation to everyone else: this is the idea that in the history of the world, Western civilizations were uniquely and superior to all others. When I was growing up for example, the ancient Greeks and Romans represented the epitome of whiteness in every way: not only were their civilizations described as the bedrock on which Western

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

culture was built, but everything about them was white – from their temples, their sculpture, and their long flowing robes, to the hair on their wise men’s heads. They were, we were told, virtuous, rational, mathematically ordered, supremely intelligent, and utterly dignified. If you took “Star Trek’s” Mr Spock, trimmed his ears, rolled him in bleach, and dressed him in a bedsheet you’d produce this version of an ancient Greco-Roman. This is a perversely powerful, yet intrinsically fragile idea. Powerful, because so much of the evidence for the supposed superiority of whites was derived from it. Fragile, because one cannot have any real engagement with modern research on classical antiquity without realising how completely ridiculous these perceptions were. Of course, very few South Africans are exposed to such scholarship. As a consequence, the majority are unaware that the supposedly superior people of classical antiquity were superstitious, painted their sculptures and buildings in ‘garish’ colours, drank, sang, danced, did good things, bad things, and stupid things, endured corrupt rulers, complained about injustice while invading their neighbours, were invaded in return, and attempted to comprehend their world in some ways that make sense to us, and other ways that don’t. The works of art, literature, and thought produced in classical antiquity are compelling because they were produced by people as complex, flawed, and interesting as the rest of the human race.

**thersites:** To come back to your recent project: What is the history behind the exhibition? How did you develop the idea? How long did it take?

**Charlayn von Solms:** While working on a sculptural revision of the iconography of the classical muse in the mid-nineties, I came across Gregory Nagy’s “Greek Mythology and Poetics” (1990). The ideas contained, and the manner in which they were explored greatly intrigued me. At the time, as a fine art graduate student, I was more familiar with the circuitous obfuscations of art theory. By contrast, Homeric theory was centred on a close analysis of specific artworks and consisted of carefully crafted arguments aimed at clarity. As my reading list expanded I found myself increasingly drawn to the notion of an oral-formulaic Homer. The creative methodology as described by scholars advancing this theory reminded me of core aspects of sculptural constructivist approaches such as assemblage. Of course, I also read arguments against the theory of an oral-formulaic Homer and was struck by one line of thought which held that the methodology described was intrinsically uncreative and unsuited to the production of genuine works of art, and another, which accepted the theory, but held that it rendered the



*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

literary critic’s tools ineffective. The first argument is familiar to assemblage artists, who are often accused of cheating, or not making real art by viewers unfamiliar with the technique. The conceptual, compositional, and logistical challenges of assembling a successful artwork from existing elements do differ from the moulding, carving, and construction of a work of similar quality from raw materials, but offers no less of a creative or technical challenge.

The second argument made sense to me. If the formal and structural aspects of the Homeric epics reflected an oral formative stage, then the application of interpretive methods designed for analysis of texts composed by writing would be inappropriate. Again, comparison with assemblage proved useful, as the viewer’s recognition of the method of construction is a core feature of the particular interpretive process that this art-form elicits. I had started to wonder whether there was some way this theory of an oral-formulaic Homer – which is essentially a theory of practice – could actually be put into some form of practice. To meet the expectations of modern audiences, most literate translations of the epics emphasize the content of the poems far more than their form. Attempting to incorporate such distinctive formal aspects of the Homeric idiom such as parataxis, exact repetition, polysemy, archaisms, and the mingling of various dialects would confuse, frustrate, and alienate modern readers. However, as my own interest lay with the extent to which Homeric artistry, like sculptural assemblage, derives from the integration of its content with its form, it occurred to me that assemblage may provide a useful vehicle for exploring this understanding of the epics. Looking at the iconography of Homer, I noticed that there was, for the most part, one tradition for the figure of the poet, and another for the characters and events from the poems themselves. As I intended to visually represent a fusion of form and content, I opted to devise a means of representing Homer and the epics not as a person and two artworks, but as a unit, as a complex compositional system constructed and operated over generations by skilled ‘navigators.’ It therefore took the form of an abstract portrait of Homer as a creative methodology. This portrait was to be composed of twelve individual parts. Each of these parts is an abstract object, portrait of a character from the epics. The process of making the sculptures and compiling the contributing research into a document took about four years.

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

**thersites:** Could you please describe what you mean by naming it “Catalogue of Shapes”?

**Charlayn von Solms:** To me, the Homeric catalogue represents Homeric storytelling in its most distilled form, with many of the very distinctive aspects of the Homeric idiom (such as parataxis) being almost exaggerated. I was very pleased when Benjamin Sammons published his work on Homeric catalogues, as it confirmed many of my opinions on their complexity and function within the broader narrative. Of all the catalogues, the Iliadic “Catalogue of Ships” certainly ranks as the grandest and most complex. As I had conceived of my representation as interrelated sets of individual elements that are joined either physically, or visually and conceptually, to create an overall system, the metaphor of the catalogue was ideal. So “A Catalogue of Shapes” is a description of how the work functions via a pun on the title of Homer’s best example.

**thersites:** What was your idea behind the assemblage of sculptures?

**Charlayn von Solms:** The twelve individual sculptures were conceived as ‘composite object portraits.’ This form of portraiture is not aimed at producing a mimesis of a person’s physical appearance, but rather the construction of a collection of elements to symbolically reflect a set of personal, behavioural, and contextual characteristics specific to that individual. Sculptural assemblage is an ideal technique for the production of such portraits as it entails the combination of previously unconnected objects and forms. The creation of connections and establishment of relationships between seemingly incompatible things also echoes the Homeric simile. While the composition of a sculptural assemblage from separate elements, which remain individually identifiable, reflects the absence of syntactic subordination which allows for the inclusion and juxtaposition of unrelated and independent parts of Homeric parataxis. The ability of words such as ‘euchomai’ to assume different meanings based on the context in which they are used, is in assemblage reflected in the appropriation of an object’s shape so that it alternates between representing itself and something it may physically resemble (for example, Picasso’s “Bull’s Head” which in one reading, is a bicycle seat and handlebars, but in another the head and horns of a bull). In Homeric poetry, the composition undertaken by a performer, ‘rhapsode’, or a scholar compiling an edition of the “Iliad” or the “Odyssey” is a reiterative transmission of an existing form, making composition and interpretation concurrent in Homeric poetics. In sculptural assemblage, composition con-

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

sists of the selection and combination of previously unaffiliated parts to prompt a continuously shifting interpretive strategy. Structurally, the production of a sculptural assemblage resembles the accumulative development of the Homeric ‘Kunstsprache.’ The Homeric compositional system comprises an assemblage of often incompatible dialects, language usages, and vocabularies from various time periods and geographic locations, as well as narrative, characters, formulae, and lines of poetry. These elements are selected, altered and adapted according to context, resulting in a dialectically reciprocal semantic system. In the same vein, a sculptural assemblage is comprised of appropriated forms and prefabricated objects that are selected and altered specifically for the role they can play within the artwork as a whole. In both cases, the combination is ‘artificial’: although individual elements are drawn from everyday life, they derived from different settings. The result is the co-existence of seemingly incompatible and previously unaligned things within a single context. It is consequently my opinion that assemblage and the theory of an oral-formulaic Homer share the notion of interpretation as re-construction. This process places a significant creative demand on the interpreter. The artwork is not conceived of as a clear and coherent message to be transmitted whole, but as a dialectical process where the interpreter actively participated in the work’s unravelling or re-articulation.

**thersites:** In the Homeric epics, there are many crucial characters. How did you choose which of them to represent in your sculptures?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I approached the “Odyssey” as the epic of Odysseus and the “Iliad” as Achilles’ poem. These two characters and their respective themes of ‘nostos’ (homecoming) and ‘kleos’ (poetic immortality gained in battle) formed the basis on which the selection of other characters was determined. In this I followed the Homeric example of defining one thing in terms of another. So for example, Odysseus, whose story is partly told by the hero himself to his Phaeacian hosts, is described in terms of his son Telemachos who goes off in search of various people’s accounts of his father and grows to resemble him closely. Achilles who will die at Troy to secure his poetic immortality, is defined in terms of his opponent and victim, Hektor who famously describes how a hero’s ‘kleos’ is transmitted through the tomb of their victim. This approach means that highly significant characters one would expect to find in any survey of the epics, such as

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

Agamemnon, Paris/Alexandros, Zeus, Athena, Hera, Apollo, etc. are absent from my catalogue.

**thersites:** Sorry, but I have to ask this: Why did you leave out Thersites?

**Charlayn von Solms:** Thersites should not feel too bad at not making it past the doorman. My own favourite character (Thamyris) did not get to join the party either. But there’s always a next time.

**thersites:** What were the reactions to the exhibition? And did you envision these before?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I was very surprised by how viewers reacted. Since my engagement with Homer was predominantly an intellectual exercise, I expected some degree of curiosity as to what on earth these things could possibly be; some questions and comments from classicists on the nature of my interpretation and my understanding of the theory of an oral-formulaic Homer; and some critique from the fine arts community on the contextual appropriateness of my choice of subject. I did not expect that people would have visibly emotional responses to the work (one person even started to cry). Most seemed to enjoy the humour, almost everyone commented on the use of colour, and a large number noted that despite their modern materials, the sculptures looked like ancient artefacts. Most satisfactory however, was that the majority of viewers did what the exhibition had been designed to do, which was to momentarily become ‘rhapsodes’ of a sort, by continually moving around and between the sculptures, comparing the works to each other, finding repetitions of forms, objects, and colours, and essentially experiencing what it is to interpret and compose by means of a ‘Kunstsprache’.

**thersites:** Do you think that the connections to Homer are clear for any visitor, or only for a specialized public? And are you interested in making those connections visible to all, or do you think that it is not necessary to know in detail (your) classical inspiration to understand and appreciate the work of art?

**Charlayn von Solms:** Most people who viewed the work had no idea who Homer was and had never read the epics, which was as I had expected. For this reason, approaching the installation as a portrait was very useful. As an art-form, a portrait has two distinct audiences: a small audience which is highly familiar with the sitter, and another – much larger audience – which is not. The former judges a portrait by their own knowledge and experience of

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

the subject depicted. In this context, a portrait is first and foremost an interpretation that is compared to other existing interpretations and observations of that subject. To the second audience, a portrait is an introduction to an unknown subject. The more compelling the depiction, the more likely it is that the viewer’s curiosity will be stirred to the point where they will wish to know more. There are definitely elements that were put into the works purely for the specialist. One of the biggest surprises of this process for me was to discover that the interpretive willingness and skill of the average classicist was as true for the visual sphere as the textual one. Having realized that this was a very discerning audience, I did my best to both stir their curiosity and provide some reward for their efforts. Regarding the non-classicist, one of my main motivations for undertaking this project was to introduce others to the depth of enjoyment, imagination, fascination, and spectacle that I had come to associate with the Homer epics. I’m not fond of didactic art, and in keeping with the dictum that one should never underestimate one’s viewer, I do expect a lot from a viewer. As a result, there will be elements that may confound, references and allusions that are not apparent, and seemingly unidentifiable objects and borrowed forms. For this reason, the formal aspects of the sculptures needed to be sufficiently compelling and attractive to draw and hold a viewer’s attention while their mind processes what it is that they are seeing.

**thersites:** At first sight, I was surprised that the sculptures should represent Homeric characters. Was this your rationale, to surprise people, to bring together forms (the great Homer vs. the small abstract sculptures) that – at least at first sight – would not match at all?

**Charlayn von Solms:** The shock is an unavoidable side-effect. On the one hand, my rationale was to introduce Homer to a new audience in a manner that could convey the artistry of the poems within a contemporary context. On the other, it was to re-introduce something that has become so familiar that it is almost impossible to scrutinize it in the manner reserved for that which is completely foreign. Stephen Jay Gould has observed how the shock of seeing non-standard imagery can reveal how constraining a canonical icon had been, even where its limitations had not been noticed before. Frequent exposure to an image or an idea creates a mental shortcut to a cluster of meanings and associations that bypasses the interpretive processes usually engaged in making sense of something new. While such shortcuts are essential for everyday survival, they can make it difficult to recognize the extent to

“A Catalogue of Shapes”

which familiar images, objects, and ideas – particularly inherited ones – can escape examination. This is the power of iconography that something as simple as the manner in which something is visually expressed can either make us habituated to it or fundamentally change how it is understood.

**thersites:** What did the ‘transfer’ process look like? I mean, how did you get from the Homeric text to the respective sculpture?

**Charlayn von Solms:** It is comparable to a simile or a metaphor in that I define one thing in terms of what it has in common with another. So, when representing an individual character, I will first compile a list of their epithets, the etymology of their name, how they are described by the poet and other characters, and their actions and interactions with other characters. Of these, I will make a selection of physical, personal, and behavioural attributes that will best contribute to the formal and thematic aims of the series of sculptures as a whole. The translation of attributes then takes the form of comparing an abstract idea with an object in terms of its form and function. So, for example, my description of Telemachos was premised on an understanding of this character as a hero in the making and a reflection of



Odysseus. On a visual level, the composition of the sculpture of Telemachos had to echo that of Odysseus in some way, while also suggesting his development into a hero.

Since I had depicted Odysseus surmounted by a C-clamp to signal that he is under extreme duress, Telemachos required an object in a similar vein. I opted to use a pair of ‘outside callipers’ (an instrument used to measure the outer dimensions of a three-dimensional form) that would both create an arc and – like the clamp – contracts and expands by means of a threaded screw. Unlike the C-clamp, the callipers do not suggest pressure, but assessment and judgement of growth and substance.

*Telemachos Ophello.* 2011. Mixed Media. 57.5x34.5x24.5cm.  
Photograph: Isabelle Grobler

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

**thersites:** Had there been – unforeseen – difficulties and problems? To cite Vergil: Was it in fact as difficult to ‘steal’/‘lend’ from Homer as to wrench his club from Hercules?

**Charlayn von Solms:** At the outset, I did have doubts as to whether this project was entirely feasible. The epics are massive, complex, multi-layered and extremely well-structured. The most I could hope to do was to reflect a small sliver of it, which would hopefully be enough to convey some sense of Homeric artistry. A significant motivating factor however, was the understanding fostered by the theory of an oral-formulaic Homer of this art-form, that this method of composition was premised on its transferability. So, Homer is not a single individual, but a relay-team, who instead of club, has one of those batons that relay-runners pass to one another. The most difficult part of the process was to find a way to achieve what Robert Fagles described as “the strongest weapon in Homer’s arsenal” which is “variety within a metrical norm.” Establishing a ‘metrical norm’ when working in assemblage can be difficult. The sculptures needed to all be more or less the same size and incorporate elements that would visually echo one another, meaning that selection of the objects used to construct the works was now based on their potential to express a particular function, their scale, and their overall design. This often meant rejecting an item that would have perfectly symbolized an important aspect of a character, for not visually conforming to the overall standard.

**thersites:** What impact did the formal aspects of Homer’s works have on that?

**Charlayn von Solms:** Looking so closely at the complexity of Homeric form definitely changed my approach to assemblage. While I’ve been using this technique for years now, I had never before had to take such care in the selection of elements, the manipulation of their formal characteristics, or needed to pay such close attention to the minutiae of composition. I now fully appreciate how much of an impetus for creativity the rigid framework of the Homeric hexameter actually provides.

**thersites:** How did you handle the famous Homeric epithets? I have seen that you have chosen a motto for each sculpture.

**Charlayn von Solms:** The Homeric epithets had a significant influence in the design of the sculptures. To give a few examples, the wheels in “Achilleus” refer to him as “swift,” “fast-running” or “fleet-footed.” The

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

whistle in “Menelaos” reflects his epithet of “master of the war-cry,” The C-clamp in “Odysseus” refers to him as “much-suffering/enduring,” while “Nestor” (famous as “The Gerenian horseman”) incorporates the bit from a horse’s reigns. The combination of a name and epithet is of course an important feature of Homeric style, and reflects a broader tendency for ‘doubling.’ I wanted to include this aspect, but as the epithets were already suggested in the design of the sculptures, instead of repeating them, I opted to provide each sculpture with a word that best reflects the interpretation of the character that informed its production and inclusion in the series. So for example, Odysseus and Achilles were assigned the words ‘metis’ and ‘metis’ respectively. The similarity of these words reflect that as the primary heroes of the two epics they function as a pair within the overall series, but the stark difference in the meanings of these words indicates that they form an oppositional pair.



*Odysseus Metis*. 2010. Mixed Media. 51x30x20cm. Photograph: Isabelle Grobler



*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

**thersites:** To focus on one sculpture in particular: What was your idea behind the sculpture of Odysseus?

**Charlayn von Solms:** The assemblage based on the character Odysseus reflects on the hero as an experienced and weather-worn seafarer under extreme duress. The sculpture is composed of objects and shapes selected to symbolize specific aspects of this character’s role in the poem, his physical attributes, and events from the narrative. An orange fishing buoy/float served as starting point. Having compiled a list of Odysseus’ characteristics most appropriate to this project, I was walking around a local flea-market just looking at things while to figure out which types of objects would best represent the hero when I came across this buoy. It showed patterns of wear which suggested that it had spent many years in the ocean. Its design and construction indicated that it was meant to form part of a group of floats strung to a trawler-net like beads, but having somehow broken loose, it would have floated alone until it eventually reached shore. In addition, its colour resembled the deep leathery tan of a southern European’s skin that has been continuously exposed to the sun. These attributes suited my interpretation of Odysseus very well. And in terms of providing a template for the sculptures to follow, the use of buoys in a response to the “Catalogue of Ships” seemed highly appropriate. To give the spherical buoy a sense of isolation and vulnerability, I suspended it in space atop a very thin neck to which I attached a rudder. An old outdoor umbrella slider at the base provides a visual and physical counterweight to the buoy above. Its narrow base and material qualities echo the sense of precariousness, wear, and durability established in the upper section. Elements such as a horizontal concertina, rudder, propeller, and umbrella slider refer to aspects of Odysseus’ voyage, while an arrow emerging from a funnel alludes to the bow of Eurytos and the archery contest set by Penelope, but also suggests a tongue within a mouth for Odysseus as teller of stories and lies. The blue C-clamp that grips the buoy suggests both the sky and the gods exerting pressure on our hero.

**thersites:** It seems to me that materiality is of great importance for you. Could you please give your reasons for choosing the material?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I like to employ utilitarian objects in my sculptures, because humans are both prolific makers and users of tools. This means that we are highly adept at ‘reading’ a manufactured object and determining its probable use and expected context based on its design, finish, and material. While the incorporation of this interpretive process into the hermeneutics of

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

fine art is a distinctive feature of Cubist collage and its subsequent variants, to a certain extent, artists have long exploited this relationship between people and the objects they make in the creation of symbols. While analysing the iconography of the classical muse for an earlier project, it occurred to me that the primary signifiers of identity and function within the chorus of muses were not the largely generic female figures, but instead, the object each figure was depicted with. It struck me that one could discard with the figure, yet still represent the core idea behind the image using an object alone. Of course, an object devoid of a context can potentially be interpreted to mean an inordinately large number of things. But when additional objects are added, their respective attributes – such as form, material, texture, scale, etc. – create a nexus of interrelated ideas. An assemblage artist therefore does not devise new means of expressing form or describing action, but establishes a network of reciprocal allusions where each element individually retains its original/most familiar meaning (to varying degrees) while concurrently taking on new meanings through incorporation into a new context. By exploiting viewers’ awareness of the provenance of objects and their normative use, I can draw from a well-established reservoir of social, cultural, and personal associations to create artworks that might initially appear obscure, but through their incorporation of familiar things, are in fact sufficiently open to interpretation to allow several multi-layered readings.

**thersites:** Recycling material – Reworking Homer and the oral tradition: Was this your general approach?

**Charlayn von Solms:** Yes and no. Recycling is premised on a realization that things do not simply vanish into thin air when they cease to be in active use, and that in a consumption-driven economy the decision to discard something is often based less on its usability than its condition and/or loss of novelty. The recycler’s objective is to find an alternative value or a purpose within something that may not at that moment be regarded as possessing these qualities, and then to either transform that object, or provide it with a new context. I would not say that the Homeric epic has vanished, been discarded, or is no longer valued. It is more comparable to an artefact in a museum that the casual visitor may marvel at, but only the expert will scrutinize, than an object on a dumpsite. No-one in their right mind would go and recycle a Minoan vase. However, the manner in which a recycler learns to look at a thing without allowing conventional perceptions of it to cloud their judgement of what it could become, is central to the production

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

of an assemblage, and did underpin this project. So this was less a reworking of Homer than an attempt to see – and show – Homer through a different lens.

**thersites:** The colours you used for the sculptures seem to refer not only to ancient polychromy, but also to African traditions. Is that right?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I had long been an admirer of polychromic sculpture from all over the world, but the realization somewhere during my undergraduate training that European and classical sculptural traditions also included colour came as a surprise to me. For some reason, our school curricula seemed to associate monochrome sculpture with a ‘sophisticated Western rationality’ and polychrome sculpture with a kind of ‘wild primitiveness’. Evidence to the contrary, such the painted terracotta busts of Renaissance Italy or the multi-figured polychrome wood crucifixion and nativity scenes from German churches were either completely omitted or relegated to ‘folk art’. So, on some level, embracing colour could be seen as a form of gleeful rebellion. However, I incorporate colour primarily for its exceptional usefulness. In naturalistic art, colour is by



*Kirke Phaino. 2012. Mixed Media.  
50.5x24.4x18cm.*

Photograph: Isabelle Grobler

necessity largely descriptive. In abstraction, colour can serve a large number of formal and conceptual functions. I’m very fond of changing the colour of an object for compositional reasons, since different colours can completely change how the same three-dimensional form appears to the human eye. In addition, by painting two previously unrelated objects the same colour, both forms can be fused into a single visual element. The opposite is also possible: a single overly dominant form can be reduced to segments through the application of different colours. Based on their design, patterns of colour can either flatten or

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

enhance form, while combining certain colours of a similar intensity can evoke a sense of movement, since the eye struggles to see both at the same time. It is also very effective for establishing rhythm through repetitive use. On a conceptual level, the variety of emotional – and even physiological – responses elicited by different colours (the colour red not only alerts the viewer to danger, but can even prompt a rise in blood-pressure) allows for the creation of an effective system of symbolic associations.

**thersites:** Did you use any ancient iconography or shapes, for example of ancient vases?

**Charlayn von Solms:** Yes, I’ve included quite a few references to ancient artworks and artefacts in the series. Some, like the amphora in “Penelope” and the Cycladic vase and acanthus leaf in “Nestor” are quite overt. There



*Nestor* Noos. 2013. Mixed Media.  
44.2x32.1x21cm.  
Photograph: Isabelle Grobler

are also identifiable allusions to weapons, shields and armour, with some combinations of objects evoking helmets and chariots. The majority of patterns used were derived from ancient sources, as were many of the colours. In some instances, objects were selected because they reminded me of some aspect of an ancient artwork. For example, I chose the three-legged camping stoves used in “Kalypso” and “Kirke” because the form reminded me of a seated sphinx (two separate legs in front and the hindquarters as a single shape at the rear).

**thersites:** Your sculptures somehow resemble cute little characters of animation movies. Would you confirm

such an association?

**Charlayn von Solms:** There’s a closer association with comics and cartoons than animation. I read a lot of humour comics, political cartoons and caricatures (as opposed to superhero comics or graphic novels), and am fascinated

*“A Catalogue of Shapes”*

by the extent to which a skilled cartoonist can convey a wide array of expressions, emotions, and actions with the bare minimum of marks. Such expressive economy is something I aim for in my own artwork, along with the cartoonist’s combination of humour, pathos, and critique.

**thersites:** In general, the sculptures appear rather timeless and archetypal in a way, yet also ironical. Did you intend them to create such an ambivalent impression?

**Charlayn von Solms:** I did set out to create something that could appear iconic in one viewing and iconoclastic in another. On the one hand, this contradiction reflects the sculptures as contemporary renderings of something ancient, and on the other, it echoes the extent to which intentional ambiguity is a core attribute of both sculptural assemblage and Homeric poetics. On a formal level, this effect was largely achieved by means of symmetry, geometry, and compositional restraint. When combined, these attributes create an impression of stillness, permanence, and remoteness. Applying them to an accumulative art-form which draws on the life-cycle of everyday objects, is sufficiently counter-intuitive to create a juxtaposition.

**thersites:** What will your next project be like?

**Charlayn von Solms:** For my new series, I’m exploring what I believe to be thematic links underlying some of the structural patterns that Barry Powell identified in the “Catalogue of Ships”. The first set of eight sculptures are based on entries 2, 11, 20, and 25, with only one of the characters depicted being a leader of a contingent.

**thersites:** Thank you very much for your time! We hope to see even more of your works in the future which deal with the classical past.

**Charlayn von Solms:** And thank you for your interest.