

This interview was conducted at the launch of Faith XLVII's new book, *Ex Animo* (Drago Publishing) as part of the Nuart X Moniker talks at Moniker International Art Fair, London. Faith XLVII is an internationally acclaimed visual artist from South Africa who is currently based in Los Angeles. She has spent close to two decades interacting with urban environments and is one of the world's most renowned and prolific contemporary muralists. *Ex Animo* surveys a seven year period of Faith's work.

# Ex Animo: The work of Faith XLVII

**Faith, you've worked with an impressive team in producing this book. What was it like working with people like Carlo McCormick and Roger Gastman?**

Faith XLVII: This book has been a massive labour of love. All the people involved are people that I admire. Carlo is a sage. He seems to know fascinating details about absolutely everything, and is a force to be reckoned with, so it was a great privilege to have him write the foreword. Roger is also a giant. He put together the *Beyond the Streets* exhibition recently and he's incredibly knowledgeable about the history of street art. Both Roger and Paulo von Vacano from Drago are acutely aware of the importance of archiving artistic history and narrative, and Kristin Farr from *Juxtapoz* magazine was instrumental in helping us with the text for the book.

**The literal translation of the title *Ex Animo*, means 'to give or bring light, or inspire'. We are curious about what *Ex Animo* means to you.**

The title *Ex Animo* is basically what you sign at the end of the letter, traditionally. It's like, 'Sincerely Yours'. The direct translation is 'from the heart'. The use of Latin is something that I have frequently embedded into the textual elements of my work. I thought it was quite an apt title, as the work comes from that space of communicating from the heart, to the heart.

***Ex Animo* surveys your work from 2010–2017 – does this book mark a chapter in your life?**

I've been working hard since the age of 16, and it's been a very long journey – it felt necessary to archive this chapter, at this moment in time.

My first book was with *On the Run* and it was a graffiti book – that was my early years. For me to see that book now feels nostalgic and even a lot of the works in *Ex Animo* now feel old to me, because I'm onto new things, but it's important that they are archived and solidified in time – they are chapters.

**The book begins with some of your earlier work from South Africa, with your series *The Long Wait*. Can you tell us about this work?**

Yes, the book starts locally, within a South African context, and then it moves into broader themes, and specific projects. *The Long Wait* was a poster series we installed on the streets all around Johannesburg. It was a reference to the men who wait for hours and hours and hours in line for work. So, there's this concept of waiting for jobs, waiting for government, waiting for things to change, politically

and economically. That was a whole street series, linked to my first exhibition, *Fragments of a Burned History*. This was a series inspired by the photographs of esteemed South African photographer Alexia Webster.

**You often engage with the marginalised, the dispossessed and the disenfranchised. Has this been a constant theme in your work?**

From the youngest age, I grew up catching trains. I was very much in the mix of things. South Africa is a hard country. You see suffering, you see economic and racial issues, you see a lot of complex problems and suffering on a daily level.

I've always felt a weight of empathy, and I've felt conflicted about my position within society – I've constantly analysed that. It all comes out in the work. It's been my way of processing the environment that I grew up in. So, in my graffiti work, even though I started off doing traditional graffiti, at the same time, I was doing it in townships and in areas that white people would not ordinarily go into – so that I could experience different environments within my country. So, the whole process has been quite experiential and explorative.

**This is the Warwick Triangle, another of your South Africa-based works. In the book, you discuss the market's troubled history. What was it like working in this kind of space? (Figure 1: The Warwick Triangle. Durban, South Africa. *Ex Animo*. ©Drago Publishing)**

This is one of my favorite projects. Because – well, Durban is pretty crazy. It's wild, the market is layered taxi ranks, and bridges – in the Muti market you can get crocodile parts, dead swans, and all kinds of things – it's surreal.

If you go to Durban and you stay in a hotel, they'll give you a map with some areas that are crossed out as 'don't go' zones. The Warwick Triangle is one of these areas. We saw vigilante justice more than once, right while we were painting. It can be hardcore. But it's also so vibrant and full of life and culture, and it's an everyday existence for everyday people, at the same time.

**The scale of these works seems monumental, but you describe the site specificity of this work as connecting with the market and the people who work at the market.**

The contentious issue is with the government trying to move out informal trading, so they can build a shopping centre, but this is a historical market. I was commissioned by the

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Faith XLVII. *Ex Animo* book launch, Moniker International Art Fair London, 2018. Photograph ©Susan Hansen

city to paint the bridges there, and I painted portraits of some of the traders. I wanted to celebrate their position, and to give an ode to the man on the street, the everyday person. It was a strong project, we wanted to represent the traders, and I felt like the murals helped to give ownership of the space. It also encouraged people to go to the space that wouldn't normally go there. A lot of people contact me even now, to say that they went to go and see the murals, and that they explored the market and were amazed with their experience there.

**The book is divided thematically. One of the themes that you speak to is 'Beasts.' What's the significance of beasts and nature and animals in your work?**

I have quite deep pagan roots, our connection to nature is of vital importance, and seeing ourselves as part of nature is important. One of the biggest issues that humanity faces right now is the fact that we are not living sustainably on the planet. It is connected to understanding our place in the whole ecosystem. I have a great love for nature, and I work in cities, where people are disconnected from this, so I enjoy the process of bringing archetypal creatures into urban space, reconnecting us in a sense. This piece is about migration – it's in Harlem, New York (Figure 2: Faith XLVII. *Estamos Todos Los Que Cabemos. Harlem, NY. Ex Animo.* ©Drago Publishing). It's exploring the idea that animals are constantly migrating, and that humans too have a natural flow of movement. Thinking that people should stick to one area of the world, despite whatever political or environmental things are happening there, is unrealistic and inhumane. This work makes that connection between ourselves and migrating birds and other creatures.

**One of the other key thematics within the book is 'Femme'. How does this theme inform your work?**

Here, I'm not talking about male and female, but about the masculine energy and feminine energy that's in each one of us. We are totally out of sync at the moment. Women should be allowed to be more masculine and to explore that part of themselves, and men should be able to be way more in contact with their femininity. Because we are both wholes made from these two different things.

The feminine perspective has not been as revered or explored as it should be, and I think it has a lot to offer the world. Intuition and the kind of insight that women naturally have – the feminine scope – is part of the thinking that gave rise to these murals.

**Your mural based work is monumental in scale, but some of your work has a more human scale. What informs your decision to work big or small on the streets?**

I've always loved working with textures and environments. And I do actually in some ways really prefer working with abandoned spaces, and smaller works.

It's not about size. Obviously, there's something incredibly wonderful about creating a big mural, but some of my favorite works are some of the more hidden, smaller, textural pieces. This work is called *Le Petite Morte* (Figure 3: Faith XLVII. *Le Petite Morte. Goa, India. Ex Animo.* ©Drago Publishing).

It means 'the little death'. The story behind it is that I was invited to India – it was just after Miami Basel and I was so exhausted! They wanted me to paint a huge mural. I love painting big walls, but actually sometimes I just really want to paint street pieces that are part of the environment.

So, when I got there, I thought, 'I am not painting a mural'. I did a series of smaller street level lotus flowers, which are a symbol of enlightenment. These works refer to the deep symbolism of the lotus flower, its ability to rise as clear perfection out of the mud of existence.

**You have an installation here at Moniker. What's the difference in terms of process between your street-based work and your more recent studio work with other media?**

Well, I started painting on the streets very organically, just through my life trajectory. I definitely feel a great need to express myself in other ways. And I wasn't formally trained, so it's all been happening just in its own time. So, more recently I've really allowed myself a lot of freedom to explore new mediums. This installation is part of that journey.

With *The Disintegration of Self* (Figure 4: Faith XLVII. *The Disintegration of Self. Installation. Moniker London. Photograph* ©Susan Hansen) the beauty for me is in the fabric. It's all about that worn curtain material. I was travelling in Vietnam, and I was inspired by seeing these threadbare curtains, used outdoors for shade, but they would be there for 10 years or more, and were beautifully tattered. The installation focuses on the idea of war-torn found objects and the beauty of explosions. I'm interested in our ability to make these ultimately destructive yet incredibly beautiful atom bombs, and in the contrast of our humanness – our capacity for beauty and for destruction.

I'm interested in works in gallery and museum environments when you can go into a space and be immersed in a work. I think that comes from painting on the street. The problem with galleries is that, when you're looking at paintings, but everyone is drinking wine and chatting, then no one is really looking at the work anymore. I think the ability of immersive works is that they force you to sit down and be in a space. Because you want people to be able to contemplate – and to feel something. That's why video interests me.

**Do you feel your book marks the end of a chapter, and do you have plans to change your practice – has it triggered something new?**

Yes, it feels very much like the end of a chapter. There's been so much happening in my life that feels like a new beginning of sorts. I will always have a mural and gallery practice with painting, but I am exploring new fields of work. My favourite one so far is a collaboration with Lyall Sprong. It's a hologram of the moon in the forests of Sweden. We took small groups of people into the forest at night time, with very little light. They're in the deep forest and out of nowhere appears this levitating moon mystically and silently rotating for three minutes. It was very experiential.

I've had a few different video explorations. One that's been shown a few times is *Upper Atmospheric Lightning*, a montage of short black and white video art house pieces, in a grid of screens, all playing at the same time. *AURUM* is a performance piece that we created for the Urban Nation Museum launch, in Berlin, and which we recently performed at the Artscape Theatre during Design Indaba Conference in South Africa. It's thematically political, based on immigration issues, linking to the migration of animals. It's quite a beautiful, powerful piece.

*Ex Animo: The work of Faith XLVII* is published by Drago ([dragopublisher.com](http://dragopublisher.com))