



Kathryn Smith is an interdisciplinary artist and lecturer, and one of only two civilian artists trained to do facial reconstructions.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

face VALUE

You won't find many artists like Kathryn Smith. She brings together science and art to give a face to unidentified human remains. As one of just two formally trained civilian forensic artists, she hopes to change the way we treat our dead.

A child of the '80s, Kathryn Smith was brought up on episodes of *Police File* and *MacGyver*. 'I think the first time I knew facial reconstruction was possible was from an episode of *MacGyver*. I remember watching it – I think I was 12 – and I thought, "Okay, this is it." It obviously stuck with me.'

These days, Kathryn is an interdisciplinary visual artist, curator, and senior lecturer at Stellenbosch University's Department of Visual Arts, although it is her work around forensic facial identification and depiction that has grabbed our attention. With her expertise in both traditional and digital visual and artistic imaging, she plays a vital role in assisting with the identification of unknown people, both living and deceased. Kathryn specialises in giving a face to unidentified bodies – bringing an end to these people's stories or opening a new

chapter in uncovering what happened to them.

'For every unidentified body, there is a missing person. It's what I call a silent mass disaster in South Africa,' Kathryn says. Although the exact number is hard to pinpoint, she estimates there are probably 10 000 unidentified bodies arriving in morgues around the country every year. And in the case of unidentified murder victims, bringing the perpetrator to justice is almost impossible without a positive ID. She hopes, through her work, to bring some form of peace to families.

A LOVE OF TRUE CRIME

'When I think back, so much of what I do now is a full-circle moment from what I remember doing as a very young child,' Kathryn says. Regular visits to the museum in Durban with her grandfather sparked an early fascination with the preserved life and artefacts on display.



As a result, Kathryn developed an animistic world view and a deep appreciation for the visual and artistic presentation of the human body.

Insatiably curious, she loved delving into the realm of true-crime literature and forensic science, spending hours doing research on historical crimes, forensic techniques, and the cultural circumstances surrounding notorious killers like Jack the Ripper, as well as local cases like serial killers Gert van Rooyen and Joey Haarhoff. 'Growing up as a teenager in the 1980s, against the background of South Africa's own "satanic panic" and political turmoil, you can imagine the intersections my teenage brain was constructing and the sideways glances I would get in the library, given my literary interests and fashion orientations!'

FINDING HER WAY TO FORENSICS

Although the term 'forensic artist' didn't really exist yet, Kathryn knew you could be an artist in the police force. Her parents put a stop to that idea fairly quickly – and given the situation in South Africa at the time, it was a wise decision. 'I didn't argue. I think a part of me understood I would be working for the state, which at the time was the apartheid government. I also don't have a personality that thrives in an institution.'

Regardless, Kathryn says she knew art was 'promiscuous'. 'You could make art about anything. So I did art, always with the idea that I would find my way back to this world and make art about forensics.'

After completing her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in fine art with distinction at the University of the Witwatersrand, she embarked on a career as an artist, art writer, curator



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Before new technology transformed the way forensic facial reconstruction was done, artists would work with clay, plastic or wax on a replica of a skull.

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and organiser in Johannesburg. She achieved notable recognition, including winning the Sasol New Signatures award in 1999 and the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art in 2004. She started teaching at Stellenbosch University in 2006.

Around 2008, Kathryn discovered the MSc in Forensic Art and Facial Identification offered by the University of Dundee in Scotland. Recognising the opportunity it presented, she found a way to enrol in the programme – a task that required significant life rearrangements, sabbatical time and fundraising for fees and living costs. With support from

the UK government’s Chevening scholarship, the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust and Stellenbosch University, Kathryn made the life-changing move. Then, supported by a teaching scholarship from Liverpool John Moores University, she did her PhD and became a member of Face Lab, a research group focusing on facial depiction and representation, with which she continues to work.

THE PROCESS

Facial reconstruction uses the information from the skull to reconstruct the shape of the face by modelling the soft tissues.

It estimates the size and form of facial features by employing techniques that have been developed over a century of scientific and artistic cooperation.

Kathryn uses a 3D modelling programme equipped with a touch-sensitive interface. This method emulates a manual sculpting process without causing damage, allowing for the preservation of fragile or compromised bones. It involves virtually sculpting the soft facial tissues, using a virtual clay, while

maintaining transparency to observe the underlying skeletal structure at any stage for continuous evaluation.

‘Males tend to have heavier, more robust brow ridges, and female skulls are more gracile, but this isn’t always the case. I’ve seen female skulls with characteristics usually associated with male skulls – and vice versa. Our binary ideas about gender don’t hold up when it comes to anatomy.’

Adding ‘texture’ is a matter of interpretation. Eye and hair colour, skin tone, wrinkles, scars and other marks, and some aspects of the ear cannot be reliably predicted from the skull alone. ‘There is also no biological basis for race,’ Kathryn says. ‘We can tell you what type of face someone had, but that doesn’t necessarily show what skin colour they had.’

Making a rendering that is as accurate as possible is obviously the goal, but Kathryn emphasises that accuracy and recognisability are not synonymous in facial reconstruction. ‘Interestingly, in many cases of forensic art, the public may perceive the sculpture or image as poorly done, yet it can still be successful in identifying the person. The artist has the ability to capture something in the face that may not be entirely accurate, but there is still something that is recognisable.’

She says her first positive identification will always hold a special place, because the odds are so small. ‘For me, this was a case known as the Näsinge Man (or Näsingemannen, in Swedish), which I worked on while I was a member of Face Lab. His family recognised him from the reconstruction and his identity was confirmed via DNA. The police can now proceed with his murder investigation, and his family is no longer in limbo.’



Kathryn uses a digital 3D modelling system with touch feedback to virtually sculpt faces.

GIVING SOMEONE BACK THEIR STORY

Kathryn says her work is driven by three goals. Foremost, giving back someone’s personhood – be it historic or recent. What the world thinks are primary identifiers (fingerprints, dental records and DNA) don’t always work in the South African context. Kathryn explains that in SA we rely on secondary identifiers, the things that are found with the remains: a cellphone with a SIM card, clothing, personal effects. ‘I’m good at making faces, but what I want to accompany that face is a rich story of this person. We try to move from a specimen/case number to the most fully rounded version of a person we can reconstruct without their name.’

On the subject of giving closure to families, Kathryn is ambivalent. ‘Can anything really be closed?

I think what you can do is help with the knowing. I’ve had a number of people reach out to me about their missing family member; you can feel their agony in not knowing. It can tear families apart. Now that they know what happened, another part of the investigation can happen. It really does help to resolve that uncertainty, and then you can get on with the business of life afterwards.’

Her second goal is working towards building a centralised database for missing and unidentified persons in South Africa. ‘The Western Cape is the only province with a digitised forensic record system – every other province is working on paper. This means they cannot share data between provinces without physically sending docketts.’

Third, she wants to spark conversation about society’s

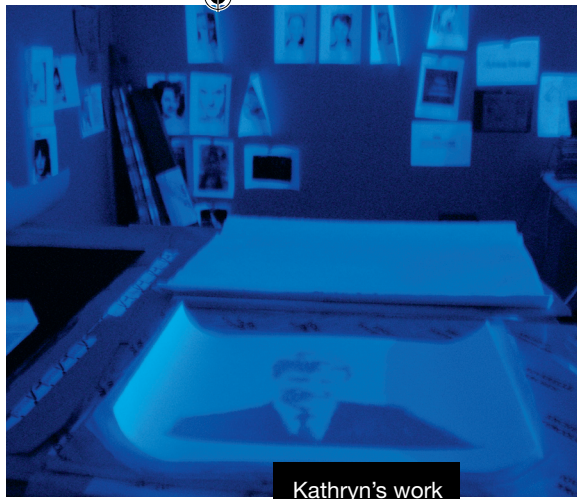
treatment of the dead, and emphasise the role of trained artists in forensic investigations, ultimately striving to re-humanise a dehumanising existence. 'There are two forensic artists who're trained in digital reconstruction in the South African Police Service, but they do it for the entire country.' Kathryn and Pearl, her PhD student, are the only two civilians who are qualified to do this type of work.

THE SUTHERLAND REBURIAL INITIATIVE

Kathryn's involvement in the Sutherland Reburial Initiative is a testament to the impact of her work on the families of the deceased. Following an audit of the University of Cape Town's Human Skeletal Collection in 2017, it was revealed that the university possessed 11 skeletons that had been acquired unethically during the 1920s. Nine of these were originally obtained from Sutherland in the Northern Cape. Collaborating with the local community, UCT worked to repatriate these nine sets of skeletal remains to their descendants.

Collaborating with a multi-disciplinary research team, Kathryn's reconstructions allowed families to connect with their ancestral stories. The reburial has been placed on hold, but Kathryn remains dedicated to getting closure for all involved, and completing the associated scholarly article and exhibition for the Sutherland community and visitors to the town.

'To do that work at the request of families, with their permission, and then to see the way the faces have enabled them to connect with their ancestral stories is like nothing I ever could have imagined.'



WHAT'S NEXT?

Kathryn is still working on the Sutherland Reburial Initiative, and bringing together the world of art and science

by collaborating with the science departments at SU.

But she is also concluding a pilot study as part of the W4C initiative and figuring out their next step.

The W4C (Western Cape Cold Case Consortium), which grew out of her PhD work and the Sutherland exhibition, focuses on resolving cold cases and addressing the issue of unidentified deceased individuals. The ultimate goal is to ease the burden of unidentified cases and promote social justice through the use of transdisciplinary research tools. 'We wish to solve the problems of the dead to improve the lives of the living; identify and address gaps in forensic identification of decomposed cases; and mitigate the massive burden of unidentified cases in public health and city services.'

Despite the good work she does, it's hard not to acknowledge the potential morbid perception of her work. Although Kathryn sees it as an opportunity for reparative action, she does have strategies to deal with the emotional toll it takes. 'You need to park any feelings that come up while on the job so you can do the job, and deal with them later.'

Kathryn's work includes The Sutherland Reburial Initiative (above right, showing family members reconstructed images), and the exhibition *Between Subject and Object* (right).



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FORENSIC ART

Over the years, Kathryn has seen first-hand the profound impact technology has had on this discipline. 'AI will undoubtedly change the game – it has already – and will hopefully render my skills redundant!'

Until then, Kathryn says the only way forward is through collaboration. 'In order to provide good forensic care, you need to give as much attention to the system a body passes through as the body itself. While I am producing forensic art, I am also producing an evidence-base for critical systems interventions. One hand holds the other. This is my primary commitment: African solutions for African problems. A key feature of African design and creativity is improvisation. There is no reason this cannot apply to forensic identification.'