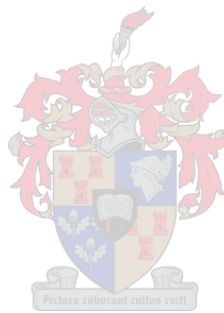


# **The Handbag as Social Idiom and Carrier of Meaning: Inner Self Projected as Outer Person**

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Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts  
in Visual Arts at Stellenbosch University

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November 2008

**Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that *The Handbag as Social Idiom and Carrier of Meaning: Inner Self Projected as Outer Person* is my own original work that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

.....  
Signature:

.....  
Date:

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## Abstract

The purpose of the thesis is to contextualise my art works in theoretical terms. As counterpart to my art practice and consistent with its subject matter, the thesis deals with the handbag as subject and investigates the formation of an idiomatic, metaphorical or symbolic visual language that emerges in my handbag Collections. The thesis traces how such language pertains to social, cultural and personal history as sources of its conception to also serve as foundation for the conception of my art works.

Its central questions are formulated around 'how', thus investigating the formative, the developmental and the process. Its thinking is relativist, embracing the belief that no option is absolute, but rather as susceptible to change as it is open to interpretation. As events of change and change inducing events, developmental processes are posed in a framework of generative structuralism that comprises the internalisation of externalities and the externalisation of internalities.

As such it structures an attempt to define the genesis of my aesthetic idiolect in and from a cultural context. The thesis therefore posits its secondary aims as investigative rather than determinist of *how* social and cultural context informs my art-making processes and *how* generation and development occur in my art-making processes in order to determine *how* these factors contribute to a personal voice becoming evident in my work.

My art practice and art works serve as primary sources of information and the thesis partially serves as a process of textual re-articulation of my own art-making practices to reveal the relationships between habitus as generative structure, enaction of identity and aesthetic idiolect.



## Opsomming

Die doel van die tesis is om my kunswerke in teoretiese terme te kontekstualiseer. As aanvullende komponent tot my kunspraktyk sit die tesis die onderwerp van handsakke voort en handel dit spesifiek met die vorming van 'n idiomatiese, metaforiese of simboliese visuele taal wat in my handsakversamelings tot stand kom. Die tesis ondersoek hoe sodanige taal verband hou met sosiale, kulturele en persoonlike geskiedenis as bronne vir die konsepsie van my kunswerke.

Die sentrale vrae is rondom die werking van hierdie prosesse geformuleer en gevolglik word formatiewe en ontwikkelingsproesse ondersoek. Die denke is relativisties en ondersteun die veronderstelling dat geen opsie absoluut is nie, maar eerder onderhewig is aan verandering en oop is vir interpretasie. Ontwikkelingsproesse, as voorvalle van verandering en as omwentelende voorvalle, word in 'n raamwerk van generatiewe strukturalisme beskryf. Hierdie generatiewe strukture behels die internalisering van eksternaliteite en die eksternalisering van internaliteite.

As sodanig struktureer dit 'n poging om die ontwikkeling van my estetiese idiolek vanuit en binne 'n kulturele konteks te definieer. Daarom word onderliggende doelwitte geformuleer as ondersoekend eerder as bepalend van *hóé* sosiale en kulturele konteks my kunsmaakproesse inlig en *hóé* generering en ontwikkeling in my kunsmaakproesse plaasvind om uiteindelik uit te vind *hóé* hierdie faktore bydra tot die totstandkoming van 'n persoonlike stem in my kuns.

My kunswerke en -praktyk dien as primêre inligting vir hierdie navorsing en die tesis dien as gedeeltelike proses van tekstuele herartikulering van my eie kunsmaakpraktyke om die verhouding tussen habitus as generatiewe struktuur, die uitvoering van identiteit en estetiese idiolek te onthul.

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# The Handbag as Social Idiom and Carrier of Meaning: Inner Self Projected as Outer Person

## Introduction

### 0.1 Topic

My interest in handbags might have started with my earliest awareness and experience of my mother. Remembering her from a child's perspective, I found one aspect of her life especially peculiar, compelling and strange, namely the inside of her handbag. Whenever I had to get money from her purse, remove her diary or her telephone book from her handbag, I was overcome with curiosity and fascination for this secret darkness, her very private and personal space. The interior of her bag represented a life of its own and symbolised something of her life that, even at a young age, I realised she did not want other people to know about.

As I became older and started to develop the need to carry my own personal belongings with me, I also started my own relationship with the handbag. As protective container of my own private belongings and as a comforting and constant presence, it provoked feelings of security and safety that gave rise to a love affair that developed between my bag and me.

A handbag contains those things<sup>1</sup> that are appropriate to one's daily needs and trajectory through life. The contents vary depending on the social space,<sup>2</sup> different times of the day, the year and different stages of life. It is an object that I revisit to update ritually on a daily basis according to my needs for any given time of day. Collecting all the items I may need and placing them inside the bag, together with all the things that are constant inhabitants of my bag, has become a ritualistic performance in my life. The reverse of the same performance occurs at the end of every day when I empty the bag again, only to repeat the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'things' for the objects in a handbag in the same way as Penny Siopis defines the term. She says that "I prefer 'things' to objects or trash because the associations are psychologically and semantically richer. I also like the way the notion of a 'thing' expresses feelings and thoughts we have no names for, like when we say 'the first thing that comes to mind'" (Smith, 2005:126).

<sup>2</sup> "Social space refers to the overall conception of the social world. This concept views social reality as a topology (space). In this way the social space may be conceived as comprising multiple fields which have some relationship to each other, and points of contact. The social space of the individual is connected through time (life trajectory) to a series of fields, within which people struggle for various forms of capital" (Harker *et al.*, 1990:9-10).

ritual in preparation for the next day or for going out in the evening. These processes of appropriate selection take place ritualistically and repetitively on a more or less daily basis.

This intimate relationship with my handbag served as original inspiration for my choice of subject matter in my practical art-making processes. The body of art works that I produced for this degree programme comprises a number of 'collections' of handbags. I consider the practical component of my work to be primary, while the theoretical component is secondary and serves to contextualise and explain the practical component. As topic for this thesis I therefore establish these collections of handbags and, in more general terms, the handbag as idiom, metaphor or symbol for social, cultural and psychological comment and growth as it pertains to my personal history as the foundation of its conception. The handbag as idiom indicates a number of central concepts that I investigate in my own art-making processes and that I articulate in this thesis.

Such concepts can be organised into two main thematic categories that appear consistently and regularly in my art. Firstly, the duality of privacy as concept versus the public as concept forms a central theme. Secondly, the relationship between the bag as object and the human body develops to become of essence to my work.

#### 0.1.1 **Private versus public**

I focus on the handbag because, to my mind, its physical form displays an interesting duality between that which we wish to keep private and that which we are willing to expose publicly. The inside of the bag represents privacy, while its outer surface and form represent that which we are willing to project to the public. This idea posits itself as parallel to the inner self, that which exists in a private sphere, and the projected self, or that of ourselves that we deem socially appropriate to publicise. In this sense, I position my handbags, or art objects, as metaphors or visual idioms for my own self and my theoretical inquiry will also aim at investigating this notion.

Ideas that relate to the concept of privacy, and that in a variety of ways and manifestations become important themes in my practical work, are those of safekeeping or protection, treasuring and wealth, hoarding, storing and hiding or keeping secret as metaphorical

parallels to the dimensions of the inner self and its dispositional personality. In my work I juxtapose these themes with their contradictory meanings, namely those of exposure in various applications, poverty, emptiness and publicity as parallel components of a 'published', projected or outer self. Such meanings represent the idea of the public as theme. Simultaneously, I position this idea as parallel to the idea of the handbag and self in an interactive relationship with their cultural and social contexts.

### 0.1.2 **Bag on body relationship**

Both in the practical and theoretical components of my inquiry, I establish the term 'handbag' as appropriate, because the word itself references the bag's relationship to the body, a second concept that is of importance in my visual research processes. The word immediately positions as centralities the presence of the human in relation to the object. Furthermore, the term introduces related ideas pertaining to safekeeping, security and comfort, which in turn relate to the duality of the private versus the public as explained above.

## 0.2 **Problem Statement**

In the above exposition I perceive a path that leads from the handbag as central object to the inner, private self; a path that also inevitably has to lead out to stand in a reciprocal relationship to the external world as cultural and social context and field of reference. I will investigate how this path is also reflected in the development of my practical art works and how my handbags serve as visual metaphors for the self in the form of a personal voice and a visual idiomatic language in relation to cultural context.

All the relevant components as identified above lead me to the following *research question*:

*How*, in my own work, the creative conception and manufacturing processes of my handbags as social and cultural idioms become formative of an aesthetic idiolect as visual translation of self.



Generally, my central *objective* is to investigate how my aesthetic idiolect developed. In more specific terms and to answer the above question, I therefore formulate my *research objectives* as follows:

- I aim to determine how *social and cultural context informs* my art-making processes.
- I also aim to determine *how generation and development* occur in my art-making processes.
- I aim to determine *how these factors contribute* to a personal voice becoming evident in my work.

In general terms, my *focus* resides in the contextualisation of my art in art theoretical terms. Furthermore, I *focus* on social and cultural context as reference in the consequent conception and manufacturing of my handbags as formative contributors to an aesthetic idiolect.

### **0.3 Theoretical Premise**

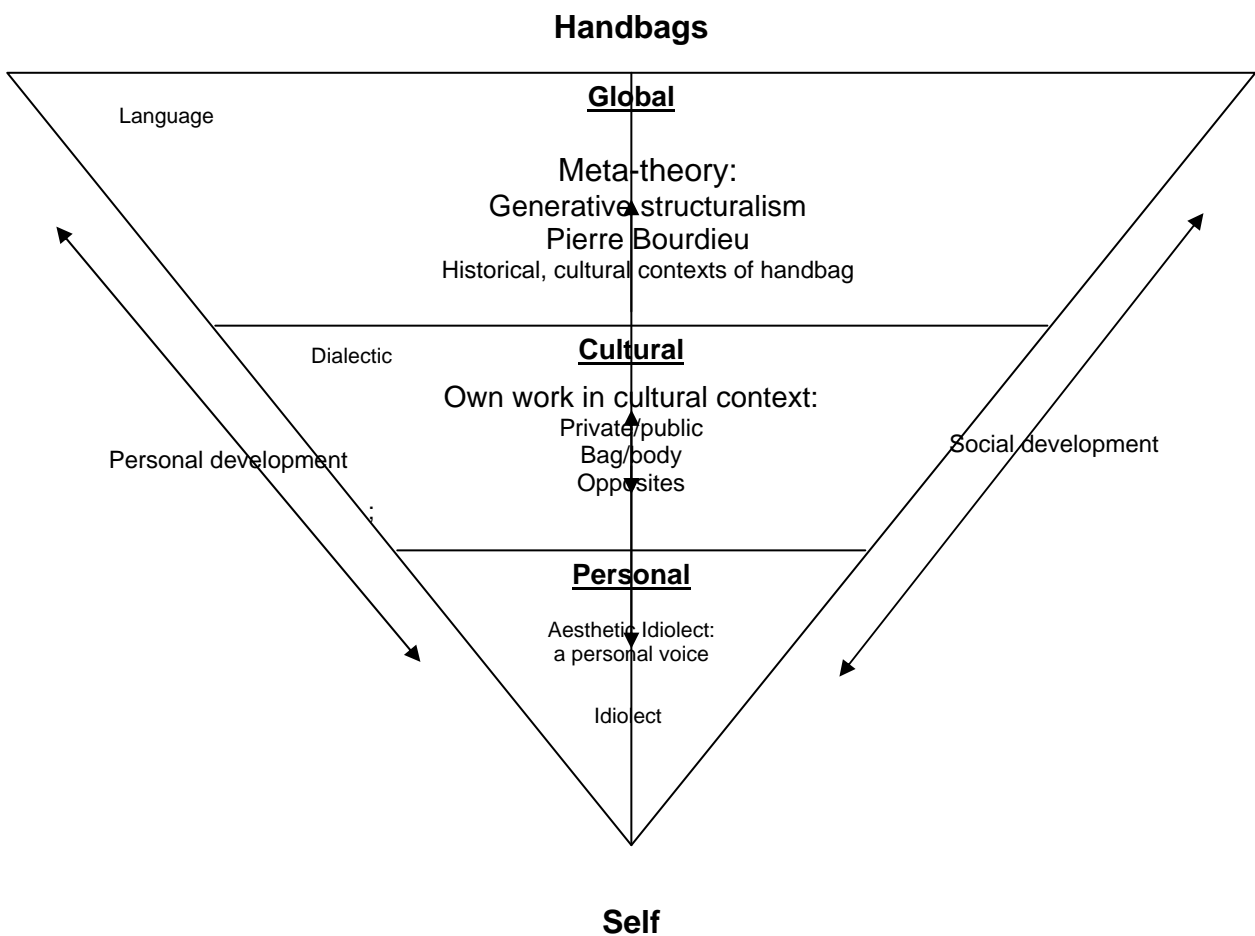
The interplay between individual and society, and the artist as one such individual who translates this reciprocal relationship into art form, suggests the notion of a generative structuralism<sup>3</sup> as premise. Therefore the theory, as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, describing a process in which people, in processes of social engagement, internalise externalities and externalise internalities forms the premise of this inquiry. This underpins the notion that, with specific application in my own art, I referenced environmental, educational, social and cultural contexts as externalities that became internalised to, in turn, become externalised in the form of idiomatic, metaphorical and symbolic conceptions in my handbags.

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<sup>3</sup> As defined and explained on page xi.

#### 0.4 Demarcating the Scope of the Study

The roles the private versus public duality, the inner self and outer self as this duality's symbolic parallel and the handbag as visual idiom or artistic manifestation of such parallel play in the formation of the idiomatic visual language of my handbags, direct the inquiry to culture studies as an appropriate framework. What interests me is how the handbag, like the person, has its history, formation and development in a cultural context. A diagrammatic representation that demarcates the scope and nature and defines the context of my study would look as follows:



This diagram serves as model for a general and encompassing schema within which to structure the study. It also explains the scope, nature and context of my inquiry. I divide the triangle as representative of the entire study and its components into three sections.

The broad section at the top of the triangle represents its meta-theoretical scope and reference. This entails the individual in relation to society and comprises the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, with specific reference to habitus, a theory that serves to explain the perceptually-based generation of dispositions. It also includes the historical development of handbags to establish the cultural, social and commercial contexts in relation to the handbag in general terms. I accumulate general information with reference to global brands and international artists' work (Figs. 0.1 & 0.2) as background information against which I frame the remaining sections of my study.

The middle section of the triangle represents the relationship between culture, society and self to investigate the formation of a cultural dialectic as they manifest in both my own work and that of international artists who work in this idiom and genre. I investigate how I form meaning in my work, where its thematic concerns originate from and the role my own personal history plays in my art-making processes and in the development of a cultural-specific visual language. I focus on those dialectics that manifest as oppositional concepts in my work. I describe and discuss how visual cultural references convey conceptual centralities and themes in my work, ultimately to contribute to meaning and an artistic identity that also relates to or involves self-identity. I validate such meaning with reference to the work of a number of international artists that is comparable to my own (Figs. 0.1 & 0.2).



Figure 0.1

Ted Noten, 2005. *Murdered Innocence*  
Suitcase, 24x68x6 cm (approx. 20 kg)  
Gun with a silencer, holy communion dress, pearl, diamond, bullet  
Internet Image (Noten, 2005).



Figure 0.2

Ted Noten, 2004. *Lady-K-Bag*  
Bag, 30x22x8 cm  
Engraved and heavily gold-plated gun and bullet, textile, chrome steel  
Internet Image (Noten, 2004).

The bottom section of the triangle represents the investigation's focus on 'self' as individual (pertaining to myself) and the development of those aspects in my work that reflect an aesthetic idiolect, a concept that I explain with reference to the corresponding theory framed by Umberto Eco.

The two vertical sides of the triangle represent social development and personal development respectively as the active and operational dynamics of reciprocal interaction and generative production. 'Social development' refers to both the handbag in relation to society and the individual in relation to society. 'Personal development' refers to me as creator of handbags, with specific reference to my own work and its idiolect.

As a whole, the triangle represents what I perceive to be the habitus and its formative role in the production of my art and in the formation of my 'self' as cultural participant, thus defining the scope and context of this inquiry.

## **0.5 Research Methodology**

My practical work is primary to this research and serves as primary source material. The art-making processes that I employ in the production of art are therefore of cardinal importance. I use my art practice as methodological framework with reference to the framework provided by Graeme Sullivan in his book, *Art Practice as Research* (2005). By carefully describing and re-articulating the initiation, the practical manufacturing and the conceptually developmental processes of my production in detail, I map, trace and document the conception and formation of new form. This process of re-articulation that is tantamount to re-translating visual processes into verbal terms functions to generate new insights in the same way that practical processes generate new form. I want to emphasise here that the act of describing (and transcribing) the primarily visual material into written, textual and verbal form, to almost replace visual imagery and form, is generative of insight, new knowledge, meaning and new form. This is also the foundation of and contributory to the formation of the habitus and its intrinsic dynamics of internalisation of the external and the externalisation of the internal.

I discuss my work by drawing from autobiographical experiences within social structures that were and still are formative of my personal history. This approach demands self-reflexivity and I therefore speak in the first person, since my own experiences are fundamental to insight.

As such, the methods I apply reflect a form of ‘revelatory’ research that I relate to theories of art production from a sociological and specifically cultural perspective.

I review relevant literature on the handbag in historical, commercial and social terms to determine its development and to compare and validate similar developmental processes in my own Collections.<sup>4</sup> This requires discussion, comparative analysis and relation of trends and their formative initiatives. I refer to a number of texts in order to come to a proper understanding of my own domain of practice. I also refer to these texts to inform on context.

## **0.6 Exposition of Remaining Contents**

In order to provide the appropriate structure that will ensure efficient progress in answering the research questions, I outline the chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 comprises a brief review of the relevant literature and it includes a historical overview in which I briefly recount the historical evolvement of the handbag to re-contextualise it in contemporary terms.

The historical overview also relates the evolvement of the handbag as feminised object. A brief recounting of the history of the division of the sexes provides insight as to how the handbag became significant to and mostly associated with women. This overview therefore also highlights the progression and socially-located developmental processes that resulted in the parallel evolvement of the handbag as it is known in contemporary times.

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<sup>4</sup> From here on, when referring to my own art works, I will spell the word ‘collection/s’ with a capital ‘C’ to distinguish my Collections from the general meaning of the word ‘collections’.

Chapter 2 deals with the relevance and importance of the exterior of the handbag. The Mielie Collection is central as subject. I discuss the relation between the handbag and construction of an identity in general terms, with reference to historical and popular media examples that established the handbag as a symbolic object that is relevant in a global context. A discussion of the concept of icons and symbols defines how handbags can generate multiple meanings and have symbolic value. Finally, this chapter describes, discusses and analyses the Mielie Collection.

The subject under discussion in Chapter 3 is the Protea Collection. I discuss the contrary concepts, luxury and necessity, in relation to class and symbolic capitalism, as Bourdieu defined the notions. I also discuss the similarities between jewellery and handbags in terms of luxurious materials and artisanship. These discussions include the subject and idea of the inside of the handbag as metaphor for abjection and security. I describe, discuss and analyse the Protea Collection in terms of its original conception, its visual development as new form, and the effect and influence materials had on its final realisation during its experimental and manufacturing processes.

Chapter 4, titled The Body-Bag Collection and Secrets Collection, deals with these Collections as subjects. This chapter recounts an important conceptual shift in meaning that occurred in my art. Indeed, the discourse of the thesis echoes this shift in meaning. It also includes a discussion on theoretical arguments relating to the role of the artist and the role of the viewer. Once again, I describe, discuss and analyse the development of these two Collections respectively. The discussion on the Body-Bag Collection deals with the relationship between the human body and handbag as object. The discussion on the Secrets Collection deals with the content of the handbag as subject. This Collection concludes the continuous theme of the private versus the public as ubiquitous concept in my work.

Chapter 5, titled Meaning Contained, is the concluding chapter. In this chapter I discuss the conceptual structure of this thesis and the meaning it generated as parallel to the generation of meaning in my art. In addition to this, I gauge the extent to which the research process answers the research questions.

## **0.7 Key Terms and Concepts Defined**

The contextual meaning of the following terms relates:

### **0.7.1 Genetic Structuralism and Habitus as Generative Structure**

Bourdieu explains the concept habitus as a *generative* system. He says that “[i]f one wants to give a name to what I am doing, you could call it genetic structuralism. One can use this term in two senses. First I am trying to describe and analyse the genesis of one’s person. That is, habitus or the notion of habitus. The interest is in understanding how what we call the ‘individual’ is moulded by social structure. That is a problem of the internalisation of social structures and the production of habitus as a generative structure. The concept of habitus is a generative structure” (Bourdieu, 1985a cited in Mahar, 1990:34).

### **0.7.2 Generative structuralism**

Here, I apply the term in its merged form as ‘generative structuralism’ and derive it from the above explanation as inclusive and explanatory of both the understandings that Bourdieu asserts (‘two senses’). This inclusion also links the habitus inextricably to the self and her genetic structuring, establishing the artist as possessing agency while engaged in social structures, both essential components in the formation of the habitus. The term ‘generative structuralism’ therefore links the formation and the generative functions of the habitus (mind and perception) with the genetic structuring of the individual as social participant. In such context, the self is constituted in social ideology and it is subject to societal structure and structuring.



### 0.7.3 **Habitus**

According to Bourdieu, “The habitus is a system of durable, transportable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices” (Bourdieu, 1979 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:10).

Roy Nash explains the habitus of Bourdieu as “a system of schemes of perception and discrimination embodied as dispositions reflecting the entire history of the group and acquired through the formative experiences of childhood. The structural code of culture is inscribed as the habitus and generates the production of social practice” (Nash, 1999). The word ‘habitus’ reminds of the word ‘habit’. Bourdieu says that he revived that word because “with the notion of habitus you can refer to something that is close to what is suggested by the idea of habit, while differing from it in one important respect. The habitus, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to essentialist modes of thought like the notion of competence, which is part of the Chomskian lexis. Moreover, by habitus the Scholastics also meant something like property, a capital. And indeed, the habitus is a capital, but one which, because it is embodied, appears innate (Bourdieu cited in Nash, 1999).

### 0.7.4 **Field**

The term ‘field’ identifies areas of struggles. Bourdieu defines a field as follows: “A field may be conceived of as a field of forces and struggles for position and legitimate authority, and the logic which orders such struggles is the logic of capital” (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:13).

### 0.7.5 **Capital**

For Bourdieu, “capital acts as a social relation within a system of exchange, and the term is extended ‘to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation”

(Bourdieu, 1977:178 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:13). The relationship between habitus, capital and field is direct and can be explained as follows: “Capital must exist within a field in order that the field may have meaning, but it can also be explained at another level through use of generative formula. Such an explanation is slightly artificial but useful. The connection between the field, habitus and capital is direct. The value given to capital(s) is related to the social and cultural characteristics of the habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984a cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:13).

#### 0.7.6 **Symbolic capital**

Symbolic capital includes material things that can have symbolic value and is “untouchable but culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status and authority” (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:13). According to Bourdieu, capital is ‘convertible’ and can be exchanged for other types of capital. But Bourdieu also recognises symbolic capital to be the most powerful form of capital, as it indicates that the person is seen as one with status and prestige, which means that the person is accepted as “legitimate and sometimes legitimate authority. Such a position carries with it the power to name (activities, groups), the power to represent commonsense, and above all the power to create the ‘official version of the social world’. Such a power to represent is rooted in symbolic capital” (Harker *et al.*, 1990:13).

#### 0.7.7 **Cultural capital**

Cultural capital is defined as “culturally-valued taste and consumption patterns” (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:13). Bourdieu explains that one should think of cultural capital in the same way that one would think of economic capital: “Just as our dominant economic institutions are structured to favour those who already possess economic capital, so our educational institutions are structured to favour those who already possess cultural capital, in the form of the habitus of the dominant cultural fraction. The schools, he argues, take the habitus of the dominant group as the natural and only proper sort of habitus and treat all children as if they had equal access to it” (Harker,1990:87). In this way the dominant habitus is transformed into cultural capital that the schools take for granted, and which acts as the most effective filter in the reproductive process of a hierarchical society” (Harker, 1990:87).

### 0.7.8 **Practice**

Bourdieu explains the term 'practice' as follows: "So far as the creation of the habitus through socialisation is concerned, then, we have a set of objective conditions in the material world which tend to have a structuring effect on family socialisation practices. These practices durably instil in individuals principles which govern the generation of practice (what people do and think they are doing). The practices thus generated tend to reproduce the regularities in the original objective conditions, while adjusting to the habitus-governed perceptions of the continuously changing external circumstances" (Bourdieu, 1977:78 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:12).

### 0.7.9 **Disposition**

Disposition can also be understood as perception. Bourdieu explains the contextual term 'disposition' as follows: "It expresses first the *result of an organising action*, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a *way of being, a habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular a *predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*" (Bourdieu, 1977:214 cited in Barnard, 1990:64; emphasis in original).

### 0.7.10 **Aesthetic disposition**

Codd refers to Bourdieu's explanation of this concept in his book *Distinction*, which deals with the sociology of taste, that "all judgements of taste, including the aesthetic, are governed by the habitus which is acquired in a class-specific way. By analysing artistic perception and knowledge as forms of cultural capital, Bourdieu illustrates precisely how judgements of aesthetic taste contribute to the consecration of the social order. Thus, the recognition of 'good form' or 'pure taste' which Bourdieu calls 'The Sense of Distinction' is nothing more than the realisation in a cultivated (and educated) habitus of the aesthetics which distinguish the lifestyles of the ruling classes" (Codd, 1990:142).

### 0.7.11 **Aesthetic idiolect**

Umberto Eco says that "[a]rt knows the world through its own formative structure" (Eco, 1989:xiv). To define the term 'aesthetic idiolect', a definition of 'idiolect' is necessary: "...the way a particular person uses language in comparison to dialect, which refers to the form of

a language that is spoken in one area by a group of people” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005 u.w. ‘idiolect’ and ‘dialect’). Eco explains the term ‘aesthetic idiolect’ as follows: “That is, a code is violated not just at one level of a work, but at all of its levels, and between these different violations there is a fundamental similarity of structure. This structural pattern constitutes the ‘aesthetic idiolect’: just as the term ‘idiolect’ is employed in linguistics to mean the *language habits peculiar to an individual*, so here it stands for *the overall pattern of deviation*, the ‘general deviational matrix’ (p. 271) peculiar to and characteristic of each work of art [my emphasis]” (Eco, 1989:xxv).

#### 0.7.12 **Symbol**

I apply the word ‘symbol’ as meaning “[a] person, an object, an event, etc. that represents a more general quality or situation: *White has always been a symbol of purity in Western cultures. Mandela became a symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle*” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005 u.w. ‘symbol’ and ‘symbolism’).

#### 0.7.13 **Icon**

I apply the word ‘icon’ as meaning “a famous person or thing that people admire and see as a symbol for a particular idea, way of life, etcetera: *Madonna and other pop icons of the 1980s*” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005 u.w. ‘icon’).

#### 0.7.14 **Metaphor**

In its applications in this thesis, the word ‘metaphor’ refers to a visual signification or object “... used to describe somebody/something else, in a way that is different from its normal use, in order to show that the two things have the same qualities...” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005 u.w. ‘metaphor’). I compare this to the word ‘simile’ to avoid confusion;

Simile: “...a word or phrase that compares something to something, using words *like* or *as*, for example ‘a face like a mask’ or ‘as white as snow’” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005 u.w. ‘simile’).

#### 0.7.15 **Idiom**

A group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words: *'Let the cat out of the bag'* is an idiom meaning to tell a secret by mistake. Another definition for idiom is the kind of grammar used by particular people at a particular time or place, and an idiom also refers to the style of writing, music, art, etc. that is typical of a particular person, group, period, or place (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005 u.w. 'idiom').

#### 0.7.16 **Collection**

Within the context of this inquiry, I use the term 'Collection' with a capital 'C' to indicate a group of art objects relating to each other in thematic development and that I created. Four such Collections are relevant: the *Mielie* Collection, the *Protea* Collection, the *Body-Bag* Collection and the *Secrets* Collection.

#### 0.7.17 **Cultural dialect**

The term 'dialect' refers to the form of language a group of people belonging to the same culture, who also inhabit a specific geographical area, speaks. Their particular use of grammar, words and pronunciation may be different from a norm. An explanation of the term 'culture' indicates that language is not the only seat of such distinctive practices, but that they also manifest in forms of visual art, popular culture and ideological beliefs (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005 u.w. 'dialect', and 'culture'). 'Cultural dialect' therefore refers to culture-specific manifestation of distinctive qualities in all forms of human expression.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Review of the Literature

Pierre Bourdieu's theory on habitus as generative structure forms the framework for my inquiry. The function and application of this theory is two-fold in my thesis. On the one hand it explains a dimension of the genesis of the self, and on the other hand it explains how external social structures contribute to the self (Bourdieu, 1985a cited in Mahar 1990:34). He suggests that humans, in social engagement with their environment, internalise objective social structures to process and assimilate these into what he calls the *habitus*, which functions generatively in various manifestations, of which art production would be one. These understandings are also crucial components in understanding and explaining the formation of an aesthetic idiolect. Bourdieu's theories therefore provide a convincing and formative theoretical framework for my thesis. Furthermore, considering Bourdieu's statement that habitus is 'a generating principle of individual thought and behaviour, I wanted to show that the individual exists not just as an individual but as a social product and that a generative principle was at work' (Bourdieu, 1985a, cited in Mahar, 1990:35). Both notions of the person (artist) as social product (participant) and the concept of a generative principle that is involved are relevant to the development of my discussions. This framework also functions to uncover "those categories of thought lying below the level of conscious thought which delimit what is thinkable, which predetermine thought, and which evoke the whole world of assumptions and presuppositions, the biases education makes us accept and the gaps it makes us ignore" (Duncan, 1990:182). This enables me to situate my methodology within a framework of sociologically interactive generation, a framework that also echoes my art making processes which I will explain to have their foundations in my social constructs.

In order to further clarify the principle of habitus as a generative structure and its relevance to the processes that I explore in both my practical and theoretical inquiries, I refer briefly to Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's theories on the role of the author. Both these writers worked in the structuralist paradigm, a paradigm that was rejected by Bourdieu. I also, in this discussion on the role of the author, refer to Betterton, a post-structuralist feminist, to elaborate on the role of gender in the development of my bags and to explore

the opposite argument, namely that of the artist as social participant who functions on an equal level as the viewer.

Umberto Eco's theory regarding aesthetic idiolect from his book, titled *The Open Work* (1989), forms the final component of the theoretical framework for my inquiry. I relate Eco's explanations on the aesthetic idiolect to Bourdieu's theory of habitus as generative structure and the perceptual operation of systems of dispositions that also comprise an aesthetic disposition, which is formative in the creative process of art production. The thesis investigates, firstly, whether such processes culminate and, secondly, how they culminate in an aesthetic idiolect as a possible outcome. This component of my discussion directs the study from the global and cultural to the personal, attempting to explain the presence of a personal voice in my work. Eco states that a personalised voice constitutes a code being "violated not just at one level of a work, but at all of its levels, and between these different violations there is a fundamental similarity of structure" (1989:xxv). This structural pattern constitutes what he calls the 'aesthetic idiolect': just as the term 'idiolect' is employed in linguistics to mean the language habits peculiar to an individual, so here it stands for the overall pattern of deviation, the "general deviational matrix" (Eco, 1989:271) peculiar to and characteristic of each work of art.

The literature that deals exclusively with the handbag as subject comprises the writings of Anna Johnson, Valerie Steele, Laird Borrelli, Femke van Eijk and Claire Wilcox.

Anna Johnson published her book *Handbags: the Power of the Purse* (2002), that functions as a richly illustrated, visually informative source of a range of handbags dating from the earliest times to contemporary times. This book is underpinned by a pivotal article by the same author, titled *Handbags and Purses* (2005). In this article she deals with all the different elements of handbags and discusses the most significant issues surrounding the topic. These issues also relate to the conceptual subject matter I deal with in my own art. I utilise information from these sources to draw a parallel between societal development and the development of handbags. In addition to Johnson's texts, I also employ Steele and Borelli's *Bags: a Lexicon of Style* (1999) and Van Eijk's *Bags* (2004) as sources for the contextual history of bags to validate central issues of concern. For example, such issues would constitute the functional transformation of the handbag into

becoming a message bag, secondly, the feminisation of the handbag and, thirdly, the influence of objective social structures on the bag, such as the emancipation of women and the improved accessibility of travel. I elaborate on this in the historical contextualisation later in this chapter.

## 1.2 Historical Overview

This overview relates the historical development of the handbag as based in a social context and serves to re-contextualise the research in contemporary terms.

At this point, it would be effective to define the term ‘handbag’ in order to also explain its appropriateness in the context of this research. The usual terms<sup>5</sup> for this object are purse, clutch, satchel, duffel, tote, messenger bag, sling bag, coin purse, and drawstring purse (EST). All these terms describe the specific function of the bag or the way the bag is carried. ‘Handbag’ is the overall term for all these containers.

Henrietta Timmons notes that “the term ‘handbag’ first came into use in the early 1900s and generally referred to hand-held luggage bags usually carried by men. These were an inspiration for developing new bags that became popularised for women, including complicated fasteners, internal compartments, and locks” (Timmons, 2003).

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<sup>5</sup> These terms are types of handbags and are defined as follows:

Purse: Small bags used as an alternative to putting small objects in the pockets of clothing

Clutch: A small, yet long (rectangular) evening bag without a handle designed to be carried or clutched in one’s hand.

Satchel: A large bag with small handle that is carried on the arm rather than the shoulder.

Duffel: A large bag usually used for sports or travel.

Tote: A medium to large bag with two straps.

Messenger bag: A bag with a long strap to be worn across the body.

Sling bag: A bag with a long strap that is similar to the messenger bag, yet smaller.

Coin purse: A very small bag, just large enough to hold paper money, cards and coins.

Pocketbook: A bag similar to a purse but allows the carrying of sheets of paper as well.

Drawstring purse: A tiny bag with a string that closes the opening of the bag.

(Wikipedia, 2008, u.w. ‘bag’ and ‘purse’).





Figure 1.1  
German almoner, fifteenth century  
(Johnson, 2001:xx).

Since the earliest times,<sup>6</sup> bags were used by both men and women (Fig. 1.1) to carry coins, papers, alms, bibles and holy relics. These bags were worn on straps or belts dangling from the waist (Fig. 1.2) (Van Eijk, 2004:34). In the seventeenth century, it became customary to sew pockets into men's clothes. By the eighteenth century, designers streamlined masculine fashion to incorporate tight breeches and cutaway coats. This fashion forced men to “compress their needs into custom-made wallets that contained everything from a compass to nail scissors and a snuff bottle” (Johnson, 2005).

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<sup>6</sup> In ancient times, bags were used to carry weapons, flint, tools, food and eventually money. Egyptian burial chambers of the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 B.C.E.) contain double handled leather bags designed to be suspended from sticks, as well as bags made from linen and papyrus. Ancient Greeks used leather bags called 'byrsa' as coin purses. Roman women used net purses. By the thirteenth century, the popular term for the handbag in Western Europe was almoner, which referred to an alms bag, which was a purse that held coins that were to be given to Christian charity. These almoners were richly decorated, and the richer the purse the more generous the social image of the lady who carried the bag. In the fifteenth century large elaborated bags with cast metal frames were commonly carried by the ruling class men (Johnson, 2005).



Figure 1.2  
Judge, Citizen and Farmer, from 'Geschichte der Costüme'  
Germany, 15<sup>th</sup> century.  
(Van Eijk, 2004:28).

As skirts grew voluminous in the sixteenth century, women wore their valuables in the folds of these skirts and even up their sleeves (Fig. 1.3), but by the seventeenth century, designers had found a better solution. They made pear-shaped pockets and women tied these pockets to their hips beneath their hoop petticoats. The introduction of the sheer empire-line dress fashion in Paris in 1790 (Figs. 1.4 & 1.5) also gave birth to the handbag as a feminine object. Women carried these bags as reticules separately from their clothes. Anna Johnson notes that “[t]he reticule was fashion’s first act of logic: to take the pocket, put it on a string, and carry it in the hand” (2001:xxii).





Figure 1.3  
John Collet: 'Tight Lacing, or fashion before Ease',  
England, 1770-1780.  
Collection: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, USA.  
(Van Eijk, 2004:29).



Figure 1.4  
Fashion plate from 'La Belle Assemblée'  
France, 1815  
(Van Eijk, 2004:28).



Figure 1.5  
Fashion plate from 'La Mode illustrée'  
France, 1882  
(Van Eijk, 2004:29).

In England people referred to the first externally worn pocket-bags as 'indispensables' because they contained crucial impedimenta such as visiting cards and fans (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:17). In France, these indispensables were called 'reticules' after the Latin 'reticulum', which referred back to women's small net bags dating from Roman times (Johnson, 2005). These small bags were associated with underwear such as 'knickers' and petticoats (Fig. 1.6), which in the social codas of the time were regarded as taboos and therefore mocked in the French press as 'ridicules'. "There was some social outcry at the notion of wearing such an intimate article in public (Fig. 1.7), but demand soon replaced dissent" (Johnson, 2001:xxii). By 1805 the furore over women wearing underwear as outerwear had settled down. Reticules had now become accessories strictly worn by women. Bags were lost to men, "who were stuck forever with their hands in their pockets" (Johnson, 2001:xxiii).



Silk working bag with gold stitchery, sequins, glass and gold braid  
France, late 18<sup>th</sup> century



Silk working bag embroidered with silk, wire and sequins  
England, late 18<sup>th</sup> century



Silk working bag with appliqué of felt, sequins and beads; needlework tools  
England, ca. 1830



Silk working bag embroidered with coloured silk  
Late 18<sup>th</sup> century

**Figure 1.6**  
Small bags associated with underwear such as 'knickers' and petticoats  
(Van Eijk, 2004:82).



The birth of this great divide provoked a great deal of humour. Someone quipped in the *British Imperial Weekly Gazette*: “While men have their hands in their pockets so grand, ladies have pockets to wear in their hand” (Johnson, 2001:xxii). The Parisian *Journal des Modes* quipped: “One may leave one’s husband but never one’s bag” (Johnson, 2005).

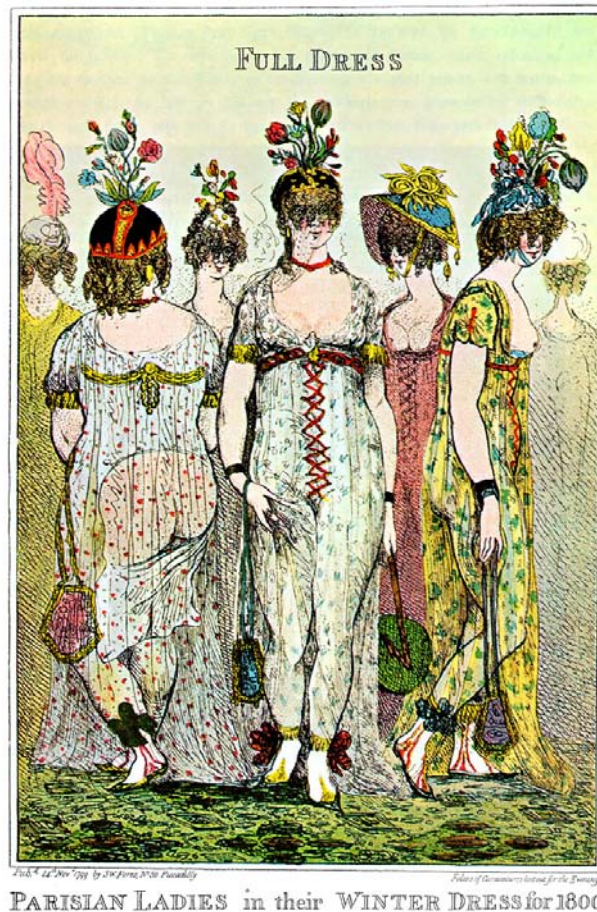


Figure 1.7

Isaac Cruikshank: ‘Parisian Ladies in their Full Winter Dress for 1800’. 24 November 1799  
 “An over-the-top exaggerated satirical caricature print on the excesses of the late-1790s Parisian high Greek look, and the too-diaphanous styles allegedly sometimes worn there. Internet Image (Cruikshank, 2008).

Fashion historian Claire Wilcox points out that changes in the role of women in society have affected the size, design, and function of bags. “Over the course of the twentieth century, the basic bag has grown from a tiny drawstring purse to a substantial tote” (cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:17). The cause for the variation in handbags, especially their size, was the emancipation of women and co-incidental increased awareness of their needs.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Mielie Collection**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I investigate enactment of identity in the manufacturing of the exterior of the handbag and its varied manifestations in my own work. I distinguish between this concept and appropriating identity. I refer to material in the international and popular media field in order to describe general connotations with the outside of a handbag. I explore and reflect on what the outside or public sphere of the handbag can signify. The reason I discuss the handbag within this universal arena is to establish the handbag's signification as a global symbolic object. I employ international icons to provide a general and 'global' frame of reference of the handbag as a universal phenomenon. I also discuss and reflect on the first collection I produced in my practical art-making processes to contextualise these practices in theoretical terms according to the requirements of the Master's degree programme. I employ Bourdieu's theory of the internalisation of externalities and the externalisation of internalities as theoretical premise and critical framework for analysing my Collections. I describe the linear development and materialisation of the Collection to address the problem statement of the thesis.

I will begin by investigating the exterior and its significations in handbags with exceptional iconic status from the past. The structural framework of this chapter comprises a discussion on the outside of the handbag, followed by an analysis of icons and symbols, my particular appropriation of such symbols and the signification it has for me as artist. Lastly, I discuss the first collection in this research project, the Mielie Collection. An in-depth discussion on the visual art-making processes involved in the making of the Collection follows.

#### **2.2 The Outside of the Bag**

##### **2.2.1 Introduction**

The outside of the bag is in fact the respectable exterior that is presented for public viewing. It exists in contrast with the private interior of the handbag. As unified whole,

these two spheres, their function, meaning and relationship represent the bag as a symbolic object.

### 2.2.2 Metaphorical and symbolic significations of the handbag

The relationship between owner and handbag is of such an intimate nature that it would not be farfetched to maintain that a handbag functions as an extension of its owner to become part of the owner's person. This phenomenon is enacted in the way the owner of a handbag carries it; the manner in which the bag is worn on the body; the way the person handles the bag by for example clasping it between the arm and the upper body. Whether the bag is dangling from the arm, draped over the shoulder or held in the hand, it becomes an extension of the body<sup>7</sup> and a prop that influences bodily posture to such an extent that it becomes tantamount to posturing an identity.

Apart from its conventional functions as container of personal objects, a handbag also becomes a multifunctional tool for its carrier, providing support, security and protection when necessary. It becomes a 'personal assistant'. Steven Connor notes in *Bags*, an expanded transcript of a talk broadcast on BBC Radio in a series dealing with 'philosophical adventures in the everyday', that "[w]e carry bags, but we also design them to be able to cling on to us, our shoulders, or the crooks of our arms, or even to hang on our waists. When we give bags handles we give them hands" (Connor, 2000). Bags become 'empowered' by their designs. People function and move through their daily routines, bearing these objects of assistance and support.

Similarly, the exterior of the handbag can signify a wide range of meanings such as political meaning, meaning that indicates a social class or status, or meaning that conveys a social message of any kind. Here, in this thesis, I focus on the role of the exterior of the handbag as symbolic and instrumental in the construction of a temporary identity.

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<sup>7</sup> This concept will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3, where a study of the body-object relationship is analysed.



### 2.2.3 Self-identity and the handbag

Here I briefly discuss the construction of identity in sociological terms. In the process of making art I enact self, a self that I perceive to be mainly informed and influenced by my interaction with others as well as by my socio-cultural background and personal history. It is so that, in general terms, the construction of identity is understood to be informed and influenced by interaction between the self in relationship to others. Anthony Elliott explains in his book *Concepts of the Self* that “[a]cross the entire spectrum of social life, we learn to view ourselves as other people see us, adjusting and transforming our self-understanding in the light of ongoing social interaction and dialogue” (Elliott, 2001:26). George Herbert Mead called the ongoing dialogue between the self and others “the conversation of gestures” (Elliott, 2001:26). According to Elliott, this involves “the exchange of symbols and the monitoring of interpretation and definition in all interaction” (2001:26). This conversational gesture is the centre around which social interaction is structured (Elliott, 2001:26).

Stuart Hall is a key figure in contemporary sociology and the founding father of the discipline known as culture studies (Barrett, 1998:266). Hall suggests that identities are constructed through difference, within discourse, and are produced in specific historical, institutional sites and within a specific discursive formation and practice (Hall & du Gay, 1996:4). He claims that identities “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). Above all, and directly in contrast to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference” (Hall & du Gay, 1996:4).

The construction of identity, as explained above, relates to handbags in terms of the role it plays in choosing a bag for personal use. As identity is neither fixed nor stable, but consists of an individual’s constructed perception derived from various influences, choice of handbag can signify something that the wearer wants to communicate in relation to identifying or projecting a specific perception of self. Claire Wilcox, a curator in the Victoria & Albert Museum’s Department of Textiles and Dress, states that “[e]ver since handbags

have become part of fashion they have helped to define our individuality and identity” (Wilcox, 1998:8).

The above explanations lead me to accept as given, rather than to hypothesise it, the concept that self-identity is a socially-based construct and that the handbag can serve as vehicle to communicate such identity. I will assert that this occurs in different ways and that it is true in both the projection of self-identity and the appropriation of a posed identity.

#### 2.2.4 Examples of personification in handbags

Identity as social construct manifests as personification in handbags in examples where people with iconic status become associated with a specific style of handbag to the extent that the bag personifies the person. Three such icons, Grace Kelly, Diana, Princess of Wales, and Jane Birkin, were personified in very famous and expensive handbags. This phenomenon goes further and also involves the brand name of the bag in personification. Such relationship existed between Grace Kelly and Hermès, the famous French luxury leather goods company (Figs. 2.3 to 2.7). The association of the specific bag with Kelly caused the handbag to become a personification of her. This relationship was also exploited by the Hermès marketers, who initiated deliberate marketing drives to connect a celebrity and an international brand to sell a product. Both Kelly and the Hermès handbag gained international iconic status in the process.



Figure 2.1  
Hermès *Kelly Bag*, 2001  
(Johnson, 2002:12).



Figure 2.2

The image of the icon Grace Kelly that was on the cover of LIFE magazine, holding her Hermès *Kelly Bag*, 1956. (Johnson, 2002:xvi).

Hermès is a world famous French company founded by Thierry Hermès, who originally started out working as a harness and saddle maker in 1837. As automobiles replaced horses, Hermès began to produce leather goods such as wallets and handbags (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:115). One of the bags that this company produced was called the Hermès Haut a Courroies (Johnson, 2002:12) or the “small tall bag with straps” (Fig. 2.1) (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:115). The first model of this design was refined for car and air travel in the early 1930s (Johnson, 2005:4). The household name of this bag became the Kelly Bag in 1956, when Grace Kelly, the princess of Monaco, was photographed getting out of a limousine holding her Hermes bag in a white-gloved hand (Fig. 2.2). She was using the bag to shield her pregnant belly from preying photographers. She wanted to ward off rumours of her first pregnancy to avoid its becoming front-page news all over the world. The image ran on the cover of Life magazine to make the Hermes Kelly Bag the most famous bag in the world (Johnson, 2002:xvi). By relating this bag to a specific person and giving it the name of Grace Kelly, the bag became loaded with what she signified, as well as with what her personal history or story signified



Figure 2.3  
Jennifer Lopez  
*Glow*  
Internet Image (Lopez, 2008).



Figure 2.4  
David and Victoria Beckham  
*Intimately Beckham*  
Internet Image (Beckham 2008).



Figure 2.5  
Sarah-Jessica Parker  
*Lovely*  
Internet Image (Parker, 2008).



Figure 2.6  
Elizabeth Taylor  
*White Diamonds*  
Internet Image (Taylor, 2008).



Figure 2.7  
Britney Spears  
*Curious*  
Internet Image (Spears, 2008).

Especially in contemporary times, the status of a celebrity and her public persona, if attached to or associated in any way with an object, creates a personality for that specific object<sup>8</sup> (Figs. 2.3 to 2.7), because in the public's mind the object becomes the

<sup>8</sup> I use the example of the product perfume, designed to be sold by using celebrities. Celebrity perfume sales have risen by over 2000% since 2004 (News on Fire, 2008). According to the list of Forbes' Top 5 Selling Celebrity Perfumes include *Glow* (Fig. 2.3) by Jennifer Lopez and *Curious* (Fig. 2.7) by Britney Spears, which made US\$55.4 million in sales by 2006 but was beaten by *Lovely* (Fig. 2.5) by Sarah Jessica Parker, with US\$57 million in sales in 2006. But one of the most famous fragrances is *White Diamonds* (Fig. 2.6) by

personification of that person. Anna Johnson states in her book, *Handbags: The Power of the Purse*, that “Grace Kelly’s demure gesture launched a collective fantasy: that a bag could make you a diplomat, a diva, and a survivor. That a bag could transform your existence from commoner to princess” (2002:xvi). As Grace Kelly was an American actress who married the prince of Monaco, and thus became European Royalty, this bag signified the possibility of such a personal transformation.

The Kelly Bag represents an example of how handbags can represent a ‘posed’ or appropriated identity and how such appropriation can be employed for marketing purposes. With the term ‘posed identity’ I firstly refer to an additional concept, namely the momentary performance of a borrowed identity when the wearer of the Kelly Bag would, for example, identify with Grace Kelly or project the desire to be identified with the princess for the period of time from which the bag dates. The bag becomes a symbol that signifies meaning (in this case the Kelly identity) that the viewer interprets or apprehends subjectively. Secondly, the term signifies the idea that identity can never be fixed, and symbolic objects like these (handbags) become props that create such temporary or momentary identities. Thirdly, the term signifies the idea that, by wearing the handbag, the wearer acts out the appropriated identity.

The Kelly Bag not only served as marketing tool, but also introduced the handbag as status symbol. The notion that dress or accessories like the handbag can transform and perform identity is described by Wilson. She argues that “[d]ress could play the part, for example, either to glue the false identity together on the surface, or to lend a theatrical and play-acting aspect to the hallucinatory experience of the contemporary world” (Wilson, 1992:8). The handbag therefore symbolises identity.

We dress ourselves to become actors and reinvent ourselves through wearing the appropriate costume for the appropriate role or for each public appearance. By doing so, we disguise “the recalcitrant body we can never entirely transform” (Wilson, 1992:8-9). In this way, clothing and accessories become ‘costume’ for ‘role-playing’, symbolising our

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Elizabeth Taylor, which was created in 1991 (News on Fire, 2008). The celebrity couple David and Victoria Beckham also has their own perfume, with suggestive sexual advertisements called *Intimately Beckham* (Fig. 2.4) (News on Fire, 2008).



collective construction of a cultural identity on a general level and multiple ego identities on a personal level. Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli support this assertion by stating that “[t]he bag has not only become an extension of our clothing; it is, literally, an extension of ourselves” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:11).



Figure 2.8  
Dior, 1995. *Lady Dior Bag*  
Internet Image (Dior, 1995).



Figure 2.9  
Princess Diana with her *Lady Dior Bag* on various occasions  
Internet Image (Dior, 2008).

I refer to more examples derived from popular media, since they establish the creation of a temporary or posed identity within international, popular media and public spheres. In 1995 Madame Chirac<sup>9</sup> presented Lady Diana with a small embossed leather bag, decorated with loose gold letters hanging from the handle like a charm bracelet (Figs. 2.8 & 2.9). It was called the 'Lady Dior' (Johnson, 2005). This example also represents a resurrection of the princess fantasy as previously discussed in the Kelly Bag and its connotations to Princess Grace.

The Birkin Bag (Fig. 2.10), from Hermès, is described as the contemporary Kelly Bag or "the Kelly of this generation" (Johnson, 2005). In the early 1980s, Jean-Louis Dumas, the director of Hermès, sat next to the actress Jane Birkin (Fig. 2.11) on an airplane. She had a straw carry-all bag with her. He asked her whether she would help him to develop a new tote for the company. This incidental meeting between Birkin and Dumas resulted in the launch of the Birkin Bag in 1984. It resembles the Kelly Bag, but is softer, bigger and bolder. According to Anna Johnson in *Handbags and Purses* in the *Encyclopaedia of Clothing and Fashion*, the moment the characters on the television series *Sex in the City*<sup>10</sup> "obsessed about having a red Birkin bag, the year long waiting list for the bag doubled and then tripled" (Johnson, 2005). Before this episode, "the average wait for a Birkin bag was 18 months" (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:143).

Vicki Woods writes in an article "Lust for Luxury" in *Vogue* that "Exclusivity. Limited distribution. Waiting lists. Drip-fed stock. These are the watchwords of modern luxury retailing" (Woods, 1997:223 cited in Steele & Borrelli 1999:143). Peter Cooper, a psychologist and commentator on consumer behaviour, identifies time and waiting as an

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<sup>9</sup> On the 25th of September 1995, Lady Diana, Princess of Wales, inaugurates the Cézanne exhibition at the Grand Palais, which is sponsored by LVMH [The company is the world leader in luxury goods, LVMH Moët Hennessy - Louis Vuitton] and Christian Dior. On this occasion, Madame Jacques Chirac (the First lady of France at the time) presents Lady Diana with the first Lady Dior bag, which was named after the princess (European Luxury Blog, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> In episode 59 of the TV series *Sex in the City* named "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda", Samantha, one of the main characters, has lunch with Lucy Liu, an actress, hoping to represent her. They hit it off and Lucy tells Samantha that she refuses to be lied to. Samantha also has her eye on the coveted Hermes red "Birkin" handbag. Unfortunately, there's an eternally long waiting list, so Samantha uses Lucy Liu's star power to score a bag. When Lucy shows up at their next lunch carrying the "free" bag, Samantha tells her it's actually for herself. Lucy is furious, fires Samantha and walks off with the bag (Home Box Office, 2008). In this episode, the character Samantha Jones exclaims "It's not a bag; it's a fucking Birkin!" when attempting to use Lucy Liu's name to get moved up the waiting list (Wikipedia, 2008, u.w. 'birkin bag').

important part of the appeal of luxury goods. According to Cooper, “[t]he relation of time to luxury goods extends beyond their fabrication to encompass their history and origins and their durability” (Cooper, 1998:7 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:143).



Figure 2.10  
Hermès *Birkin Bag*  
(Johnson, 2002:41).



Figure 2.11  
Jane Birkin with the Hermès *Birkin Bag*  
Internet Image (Birkin, 2008).



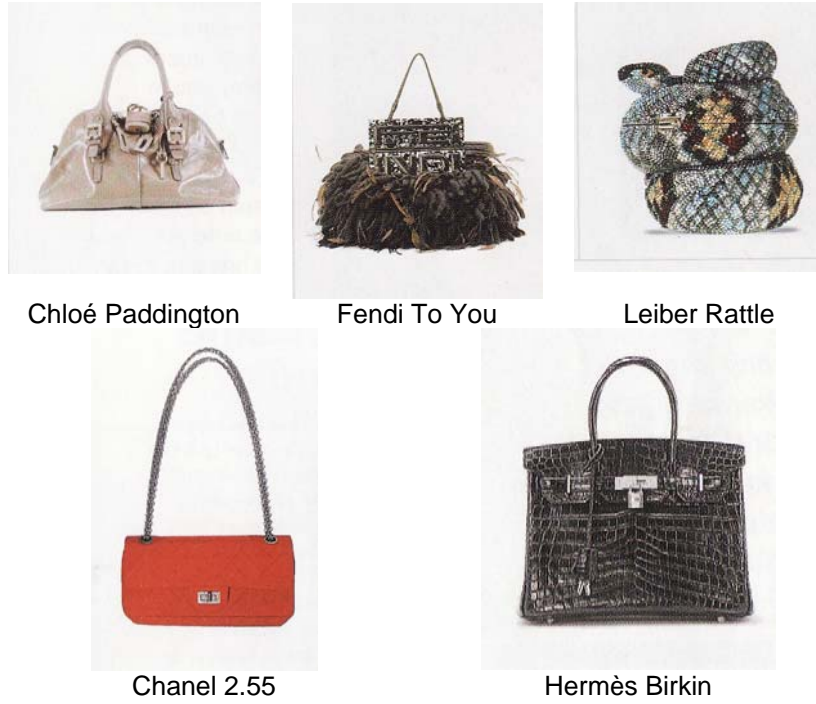


Figure 2.12  
 It-bags with high prices and a time-consuming manufacturing process  
 (Handbags by the Minute, 2007:20).



Figure 2.13  
 Roberta de Camerino *Bagonghi Bag* (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:146).

The handbags that fall into this international luxury brand category are often marketed and sold for the outstanding quality of their craftsmanship. In the *Fall 2007* supplement of *Time* magazine, a small column titled *Handbags by The Minutes* states that “if you think the prices are high on these ubiquitous It-bags,<sup>11</sup> take a look at the staggering amount of time it takes to stitch them together”. This is followed by five famous handbags and their statistics (Fig. 2.12). The Chanel 2.55 (\$1 795) takes 240 minutes, the Chloé Paddington (\$1 935) 240 minutes, The Fendi To You (\$3 860) takes 80 640 to 120 960 minutes to complete and the Leiber Rattle (\$4 995) is hand painted and hand beaded in 10 080 minutes. The Hermes Birkin Bag (from \$6 500 and higher) takes at least 4 320 minutes (*Handbags by the Minute*, 2007:20). In *Handbags: the Power of the Purse*, Anna Johnson dedicates a section in her book to ‘how a Kelly bag is made’. She states that all Hermès handbags are made by individual craftsmen, from the first stitch to the last. It takes a craftsman 18 hours to make a Kelly Bag (2002:58). Valerie Steele confirms this: “At Hermès, design is separated from production, but each bag is entirely made by one artisan. There is even a code for each individual bag, so that if it needs to be repaired, it can be returned to the same artisan” (1999:142).

In *Bags: A Lexicon of Style*, Steele and Borrelli refer to Roberta di Camerino’s Bagonghi bag (Fig. 2.13). The centre of the handbag consists of soparizzo velvet, which is manufactured by the same firm that produces velvet for the Vatican. It is made in the dark to prevent the colour fading as a result of exposure to light. No more than ten meters can be produced in one month (1999:146). The extent of luxury imminent in such international goods is beyond the understanding of a South African, who is also familiar with the extent of poverty in this country.

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<sup>11</sup> *It Bag* is a colloquial term from the fashion industry used in the 1990s and 2000s to describe a brand or type of high-priced designer handbag by makers such as Hermès or Fendi that becomes a popular bestseller (Wikipedia, 2008, u.w. ‘it –bag’).



Figure 2.14  
 French Souvenir Reticule, 1855  
 (Johnson, 2001:278).



Figure 2.15  
 Beaded reticule 'Souvenir De Venice'  
 Italy, 1825-1850  
 (Van Eijk, 2004:101).



Figure 2.16  
 Beaded coin purse showing the arrival of the first  
 giraffe in France  
 France 1827  
 (Van Eijk, 2004:101).

Those phenomena I describe above that demonstrate how the handbag can serve as vehicle to communicate identity, whether by projecting self-identity or appropriating posed identity, also inspired me to utilise all such manifestations of socially constructed identity and personification in similar ways in my art practice. My icons constitute not a Kelly, Diana or Birkin, but the corn cob and the protea flower. By re-interpreting and re-representing these objects as symbols (the mielie and protea), derived from my own cultural background, in their new forms as handbags, I may reiterate their elevated status as icons, but I simultaneously question and alter their meaning in delivering social commentary by means of a personalised visual and aesthetic idiolect, whether in humorous or serious terms. I also reposition them in a new context, namely that of an art object in the visual arts domain, thereby also generating and connoting new meaning and different value to these objects as art objects.

The above discussions also justify the subject matter of my study, the handbag as symbolic object, as relevant within the wider Western cultural, social and market-related contexts. The handbag as symbolic object can influence the economy of a country (as the Hermès bags did in France), it definitely influences trends in fashion, and also the manufacturing and sales of luxury goods. The fashion industry and the industry of luxury goods form substantial parts of economic wealth in Western countries and directly influence social development in such countries. All such forces have one thing in common: they are active in the social sphere.

### **2.2.5 The historical development of the handbag as social symbol**

The aspects I describe above clarify the idea that the exterior of the bag represents or symbolises certain concepts and phenomena in society. To clarify the origin of this notion, I will briefly relate its historical development. Firstly I will refer to the development of the handbag as a consequence of improved methods of travelling, and secondly as a result of the emancipation of women, both role players in the social domain.

The development of handbags was in many cases dependent on social transformation. Firstly, the expanded affordability and accessibility of travel that came with economic and technological development made it possible for people from all walks of life, all levels of

society and most levels of financial means to travel. Secondly, the genesis of the phenomenon known as the emancipation of women, for example, contributed enormously to the development of changes in the outer and inner appearance of the handbag. Both these socially-located phenomena had a huge influence on the form of handbags and, in both cases, changing needs dictated adjustments in designs of handbags. I will discuss a brief contextual history about the development of travel and its role in the development of the handbag. Secondly, I will briefly discuss a contextual history of the handbag and the emancipation of women. This will further create a framework for describing and reflecting on the handbag as a symbolic object for society.

Travelling in Europe during the Victorian era was taken to an extreme by the wealthy because it was common practice to have yearlong honeymoons. Opulently illustrated souvenir bags were created as memorabilia for purchase on completion of these journeys (Fig. 2.14). The illustrations on these bags represented the different cities in which the couple stayed for their honeymoon (Johnson, 2002:278). As travelling increased, so did the demand for souvenirs and bags or reticules were a good choice for purchasing. In France, small purses and bags were manufactured showing images or text representing the well-known buildings or monuments from whichever city that was visited (Van Eijk, 2004:96). Beaded reticules (Fig. 2.15) displaying the words 'Souvenir De Venice' were sold in Italy from 1825 to 1850. The beaded coin purse showing the arrival of the first giraffe was also sold in France in 1827 (Fig. 2.16). These souvenir purses became crucial objects. They played the same role as historical art in explaining and unfolding the history of (specifically) the West.





**Figure 2.17**  
Louis Vuitton *Steamer*, 1901  
(Johnson, 2002:26).



**Figure 2.18**  
Louis Vuitton *Steamer*, 2000  
(Johnson, 2002:27).



**Figure 2.19**  
Louis Vuitton *Noe* bag, 2001  
(Johnson, 2002:5).



**Figure 2.20**  
Louis Vuitton *Noe* bag, 1932  
(Johnson, 2002:14).



Figure 2.21  
Hermès *Bolide* 1923  
(Johnson, 2002:14).



Figure 2.22  
Hermès *Plume* 1933  
(Johnson, 2002:15).



Figure 2.23  
Hermès *Le Trim* 1958  
(Johnson, 2002:15).

In the twentieth century, the development and expansion of travel influenced the handbag to an extreme extent. To illustrate this statement, I assert the Hermès and Louis Vuitton brands as examples, as both these luxury brands were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These two houses are responsible for the most basic or classical designs in the development of handbags. “The success of these houses depended on their adaptability to the modern age and ingenious inventions brought on by necessity” (Johnson, 2002:2). Their innovative design can be traced as being parallel to the developments in travel. As Anna Johnson notes, “The classic bag began with the horse and the steamship” (2002:2).

Louis Vuitton was the first to apply the monogram logo to handbags by hand painting them onto his trunks in 1896. He was also the first to use or design “sturdy travel canvas” (Johnson, 2002:6). He designed the *Steamer* bag (Figs. 2.17 & 2.18), which was designed to hang on the hook of a steamship cabin door. According to Anna Johnson, this bag is the precursor to the modern backpack. (2002:26). Vuitton designed the *Noe* bag in 1932 (Figs. 2.19 & 2.20). This bag is based on a bucket shape and was designed to hold five bottles of champagne.

Like Thierry Hermès, Emile-Maurice Hermès was a harness and saddle maker. He started making handbags and transformed feed bags and saddlebags into handbags. He also “turned the Canadian army zipper into the first truly modern fashion fastening” (Johnson,

2002:3) in 1923 with the Hermès Bollide (Fig. 2.21), the first bag with a zipper. He designed the Hermès Plume (Fig. 2.22) in 1930, which was originally designed to carry a horse blanket, and the Hermès Le Trim<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 2.23) in 1958, based on a bucket-shaped feed bag (Johnson, 2002:2-15).

In a brief historical review of the emancipation of women, I refer to Wilcox, where she writes in *A Century of Bags: Icons of Style in the twentieth Century* that “[s]houlder bags liberated the hands [and] were capacious enough for the needs of the working woman” (Wilcox, 1997:64 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:21). The style of the shoulder bag caught on during World War II, when Paris was occupied by the Nazis, who commandeered all motorised vehicles for themselves. French women had to bicycle around the city and the shoulder bag functioned to provide obvious practical benefits. After the war ended, more ladylike styles of fashionable dress wear were created to emphasise femininity. As corroboration, I refer to Christian Dior’s *Little Dictionary of Fashion*, dating from 1954, where he writes that “[y]ou can wear the same suit from morning to dinner – but to be really perfectly dressed you can not keep the same bag. For the morning it must be very simple and for the evening it must be smaller, and if you wish, a little more fancy” (Dior 1954:38-39 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:25). He also concludes this section with the following conceited statement: “Don’t forget, a bag is not a wastepaper basket! You can’t fill it with a lot of unnecessary things and expect it to look nice and last a long time” (Dior, 1954:38-39 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:25).

Genevieve Antoine Dariaux writes in *Elegance* in 1964 that a well-dressed woman needed a minimum of four handbags, all of good quality, “and quality, alas, is very often synonymous with expensive!” (Dariaux, 1964 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:25). The essential four bags were identified as follows:

1. A large bag for travel and casual wear. The height of luxury would be an alligator bag signed ‘Hermès’, but equally chic are the brass-trimmed Italian sports designs, as well as the American creations inspired by them.
2. An afternoon bag to wear with city ensembles and slightly dressy outfits. The most practical choice is undoubtedly a medium sized bag of fine black calfskin with an

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<sup>12</sup> Which Jacqueline Onassis wore around the Capri in the late 1960s, making it a resort standard (Johnson, 2002:15).



attractive clasp. Suede is much more fragile and patent leather is never really elegant...

3. An evening purse of pure silk, satin or velvet.
4. For the summer, a beige straw bag (Dariaux, 1964 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:25).

Dariaux states that under no circumstances should a woman “carry an alligator handbag with a dressy ensemble merely because she has paid an enormous sum of money for it. Alligator is strictly for sports and travel...and this respected reptile should be permitted to retire every evening at 5 pm” (Dariaux, 1964:2 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:28).

As seen above, social dynamics and change lead and directly influence the development and design of handbags. According to Steele and Borrelli, the rules governing “appropriate” dress relaxed considerably after the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, and “led to an irreversible decline in formality. In addition to this, as more women began to have careers, they focused more on issues of practicality. Less practical bags were designed for pleasure – not to conform to the rules of propriety” (1999:28).

### 2.2.6 Conclusion

Socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural events, dynamics and developments changed and transformed the handbag. Society and its structures are thus directly responsible for the development of the handbag as object.

The outside or exterior of the handbag translates into more than decorative value to acquire extended and new form, thus generating meaning that can be explained in socio-cultural terms. This is the centrally most important aspect that relates to my own art-making processes and that also fulfils my aim to determine how social and cultural context informs art-making processes.

## 2.3 Why Icons and Symbols?

### 2.3.1 Introduction

The practice of using the exterior of the handbag to signify symbolic or iconic meaning has a rich history. In this section I will look at the development of handbags as symbolic and iconic<sup>13</sup> objects and their consequent functioning as message bags. I will investigate the concepts of handbags as symbolic objects in comparison to handbags as iconic objects and relate these two concepts to the concept of a message bag.

Symbolic bags are handbags which signify symbolic meaning and thus symbolise something else, namely meaning, while iconic bags represent handbags which are iconic in their own right or handbags that reference existing icons. Message bags is a term I apply to indicate a combination of a symbolic bag and an iconic bag, carrying a very distinct message and addressing a specific issue, as in the case of silk reticules that were sold to fund the abolishment of slavery in 1827 (Fig. 2.24). Another case in point is Anya Hindmarch's *I'm Not a Plastic Bag* tote (Fig. 2.25) which carries a message promoting eco-friendly awareness campaigns.

I apply the terms 'symbol', 'symbolic object' and 'icon' in the text and it is necessary to unpack their distinctive meanings and explain their usage in the context of this research. I will use various examples of my own work to explain these terms. The word 'symbol' refers to the meaning that is carried by the *Mielie* art work (the handbag). The term 'symbolic object' signifies the *Mielie* handbag as object. The term 'icon' has two applications in this context, namely as signifying the real corn cob as cultural icon before it was transformed into new form to become the *Mielie* art work. The second application signifies the transformed mielie as art work, which contributes in new ways to the iconic status of the corn cob, the icon and symbolic object. A parallel example is represented in Marilyn Monroe as a cultural icon, and the silk-screened images of her face by Andy Warhol, which gained iconic status in their own right while simultaneously affirming Marilyn as an icon.

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<sup>13</sup> Icon: a famous person or thing that people admire and see as a symbol of a particular idea, way of life etc. (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 2005, u.w. 'icon').

The evolution of handbags as symbolic and iconic signifiers into message bags mirrors the developmental processes that occurred in my own visual art practice. Here, I will therefore relate the symbolic signification as elevated meaning in handbags that over time has become a visual text recounting the history of social development to also trace and understand similar processes in my own work. I refer to examples of handbags that represented or gave a very specific message in their time, relating to the issues of that time period.

### 2.3.2 Historical and contemporary examples of message bags

In 1827 in England a specific silk reticule functioned as a message bag (Fig. 2.24). It was created to carry pamphlets on emancipation of slaves. One of the pamphlets with the heading *British Slavery* read, “An invitation: to the people to put a speedy end to it” (Johnson, 2002:273). Many of these bags were sold to raise funds for the Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves<sup>14</sup> (Johnson, 2002:273). This small bag was a political statement of the time, containing a political message that was handed out. This was a message from the women, worn by the women. It served the same purpose of message t-shirts in our society today.



Figure 2.24

This silk reticule was sold to raise funds for the ‘Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves’; England 1827 (Johnson, 2001:273).

<sup>14</sup> This society was founded in England in 1725.



Figure 2.25  
 Anya Hindmarch *I'm Not a Plastic Bag*  
 Internet Image (*My Fashion Life*, 2008).



Figure 2.26  
 Celebrities wearing the *I'm not a plastic bag* tote  
 Internet Image (*My Fashion Life*, 2008).

A contemporary example of a message bag is Anya Hindmarch's canvas tote bag inscribed with its title *I am not a plastic bag* (Fig. 1.25). This bag sold out in one hour in Whole Foods store in New York and in Sainsbury's, London (Hindmarch, 2008). This bag was designed in collaboration with the global social change movement *We Are What We Do*. According to the designer, she wanted to use her influence in a positive way to make it fashionable not to use plastic bags. The canvas bags were launched in four limited edition colours around the world and were sold for £5, the equivalent of R80.00. Because celebrities (Fig. 1.26) and actresses, such as Reese Witherspoon, Jessica Biel and Keira Knightley, wore the *I am not a plastic bag* bag,<sup>15</sup> the bag became an "It bag"<sup>16</sup> overnight (Hindmarch, 2008).

To understand this message bag one has to be aware of the global 'green movement', which is at the centre of the globally prominent issue of environmental awareness and preservation. 'Global warming', 'recycling', 'biodegradable' and 'organic' are words expressing the dire concerns around the destruction of the environment that have also become catch phrases on a worldwide level. The word 'green' has attained new and momentous meaning. Designers especially are constantly challenged to design for green lifestyles. In the magazine *House and Leisure* of August 2008 a campaign promoting environmental awareness, titled *Going for Green*, was announced in the form of a competition that will be hosted by House and Leisure and Woolworths. The aim of the competition is to promote "an emerging generation of South African eco-design stars" (2008:53). This project is significant and valuable because of the principles it upholds and stands for, but also because of the potential economic value it might generate. Woolworths has been named the *Responsible Retailer of the Year* at the 2008 World Retail Award. Simon Susman, the CEO of Woolworths in South Africa, says that "[i]t is becoming obvious that sustainable growth can only be achieved through greater attention to the world around us" (*Going for Green*, 2008:52).

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<sup>15</sup> These bags were selected by Graydon Carter to be included in the Oscar goodie bags. Thousands of customers queued to try to get their hands on this cult bag and it sold out in hours when it launched at Anya Hindmarch stores and leading boutiques, including Colette in Paris, Dover Street Market in London, Corso Como in Milan, Isetan in Japan and Ron Herman in LA (Hindmarch, 2008). As a result of the celebrity endorsement, the bags were going for £200 on ebay.

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 11 page 21.



Figure 2.27  
Nat Thakur: *100% Reusable* collection, leather  
Internet Image (Thakur, 2008).

I understand one of the aims of the Green Movement to be that of promoting the fashionableness of eco-friendliness, in order for people to get involved in 'saving the planet'. Al Gore's<sup>17</sup> documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*<sup>18</sup> was for many people the beginning of the consciousness that revolved around the Green movements. This documentary focuses on the concept of global warming and won Academy Awards for the Best Documentary Feature and for the Best Original Song. This indicates that it is a commercial documentary that is and was watched by many people. The *I am Not a Plastic Bag* tote bag was created to form a part of this awareness campaign. This bag's success provoked a great deal of responses and reactions and ignited lively public debates in the media on an international level. One example of such response that I highlight here is that of the London designer Nat Thakur's *100% Reusable* collection (Fig. 2.27). He reproduces plastic and paper bags in durable leather as comment on the culture of disposability. His creations are simple yet relevant in the messages they portray. These bags become message bags for a contemporary generation, referring to current events that also occur on a global level.

The above discussion explains the evolvement of the message bag from socially located sources. It also explains how handbags project social meaning in their functioning as symbolic signifiers, thus explaining how social and cultural context informs the designing of handbags. Such explanations serve as corroborative framework for similar manifestations in my own work, which I explore in meta-theoretical terms below.

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<sup>17</sup> Al Gore is the former Vice-President of the USA who was defeated by President George W Bush in the 2000 election. He reset the course of his life to focus on an all-out effort to help save the planet from irrevocable change (Climate Crisis, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> *An Inconvenient Truth* is an American documentary film about global warming, presented by former United States Vice-President Al Gore and directed by Davis Guggenheim. The film premiered at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival and opened in New York and Los Angeles on May 24, 2006. The film was released on DVD by Paramount Home Entertainment on November 21, 2006. A companion book by Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*, reached #1 on the paperback nonfiction New York Times bestseller list on July 2, 2006. The documentary won Academy Awards for Best Documentary Feature and for Best Original Song. Earning \$49 million at the box office worldwide, *An Inconvenient Truth* is the fourth-highest-grossing documentary film to date in the United States (in nominal dollars, from 1982 to the present), after *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *March of the Penguins* and *Sicko* (Wikipedia, 2008, u.w. 'inconvenient truth').

### 2.3.3. Applications of icons and symbols

The examples above demonstrate how contemporary handbags can generate multiple meanings and have symbolic value. Examples such as these have been an influence in my visual art-making processes. In this verbal articulation of my own processes of art making, I consciously retrace, analyse, consider and reconsider pivotal points of decision making in those processes. This reveals that I can track such points to socially-formed origins, as is demonstrated in the examples I discuss in the previous section. Drawing from my own socio-cultural background as field of reference, I conceive and make visible an idiom and form particular to both myself and my personal history. This generates content in my work that inquires into and represents those social issues that are of particular concern to me. I research and reflect on various such issues as well as things, trying to discover what I like or what my preferences are, considering the reasons for my attraction to certain things, while I find other things unattractive. The growing perception that the relevant decisions were also generated by my own sets of tendencies, directed my research to the concept of *habitus* as theoretical framework for critical reflection on my work.

By studying the work of Pierre Bourdieu and employing his theory of *habitus* also as a basis for validating my inquiry, I can contextualise my practical work in theoretical terms. The *habitus* concept is based on the process of “the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality” (Bourdieu, 1977:72 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:15). I use this concept as a theoretical basis for critical analysis of my work. If the theory is applied to my own art-making practices, I can explain it as follows: Over time, continuously and on either a conscious or subconscious level, I internalise those inputs, specific parts or fragments of my culture, surroundings, influences and relationships that I experience and come into contact with and which impact on my mind. I subjectively process, adapt and adjust them in my mind to externalise them through creating my handbags as art works. Through the continuous practice of my art and my constant involvement in my particular society, culture and environment, I develop certain dispositions, propensities or tendencies for working in a certain manner, making certain decisions or making specific choices while rejecting others in my art practice. These processes of accepting or rejecting propositions and counter-propositions culminate to become behavioural dispositions, which in turn can be



understood to become assimilated properties enabling and ensuring perceptual processing, conceptual understanding and psychomotoric ability, essential processes in the practice and production of my art. Such dispositions, according to Bourdieu, form the habitus. In the introductory section of the book, *An introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu: the practice of theory*, the authors Cheleen Mahar, Richard Harker and Chris Wilkes (1990:10) write that:

Habitus refers to a set of dispositions, created and reformulated through the conjuncture of objective structures and personal history. Dispositions are acquired in social positions within a field and imply a subjective adjustment to that position. For instance, in the behaviour of a person, such an adjustment is often implied through that person's sense of social distance or even in their body postures.

The habitus therefore consists of schemes of dispositions and is accountable for perceptual processing, as explained above and confirmed by the quotation. In this process of theoretical research I recounted the development of handbags. The handbags that I selected for study do not represent a chronological or linear order. Even the selections I made were influenced by my habitus. I, as the subjective I, select material that relates to issues that are also central in my art practice.

When I started with this research project I selected subject matter, ideas and things<sup>19</sup> that I found to be of interest on a subjective level; things that were close to me, things that I easily related to and things that I thought I understood. All these 'things' can be traced to what I now understand as my habitus and they can all be explained as having been consciously or subconsciously recovered, studied and questioned at some point during the course of my personal history. As this research evolved I came to realise that, although I did not understand these things in any consciously articulate way, I had all along been aware of them on another level that realised itself in my art. This strange realisation or growing awareness I now understand as being indicative of my habitus as the product of my cultural, environmental and societal experience as role players in my personal history.

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<sup>19</sup> See footnote 1 page i

I demonstrated this concept quite early in this research process by starting to focus on iconic and symbolic objects originating from and known in my culture. As my research progressed, I realised that I was employing my habitus and that, as a result, my work displayed and translated a defined and characteristic visual idiom, form of visual metaphor or symbolic configuration that also articulated into an aesthetic idiolect. My aesthetic disposition is an ever-evolving product of my habitus, materialising in my art-making practice to be seen as my own, unique aesthetic idiolect that also accounts for the range of specific choices I make in practicing art.

When relating the above to the creation and development of my collections of handbags, I realise that the selection process was exactly that, a process of making dispositionally influenced choices.

I started off with various thematic objects that related to and symbolised certain aspects in my cultural heritage. Originally these themes were divided into two groups. The first group was, as I see it, a cultural iconic theme, and the second a more personal, gendered feminine theme. In the first group, icons such as *protea*, *mielie*,<sup>20</sup> *springbok*,<sup>21</sup> *doringboom*<sup>22</sup> and *horings*<sup>23</sup> were explored. In the second group, themes like weddings, underwear and classical music were researched. The first group I found more interesting in the beginning and I worked more easily with these themes as a starting point. From this group my Mielie and Protea Collection developed. I thought about the second group as distant and felt a certain degree of alienation in relation to those items representing the themes. It led to the Rökkie and Secret collections that will be discussed in Chapter 4. Of the approximately five symbolic or iconic themes that I derived from my cultural heritage, only two withstood the tests of sustainability and these two remained to be assimilated as symbolic objects in my art. The two icons that remained were the mielie and the protea and I transformed them into new form<sup>24</sup> to become parts of collections or series. I discovered that I was subconsciously referencing my cultural and social background that was the rationale behind my art-making process.

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<sup>20</sup> Corn or maize

<sup>21</sup> Springbuck

<sup>22</sup> Thorn-tree

<sup>23</sup> Horns

<sup>24</sup> See page xv

The relationship between language, the self and the symbol, the symbolic object or icon became an arena of conflict for me, since I aimed to understand the exact dynamics and processes that create meaning and understanding through communication, whether visual communication or verbal communication. According to George Herbert Mead,<sup>25</sup> a social psychologist, the constitution of the self depends on language. He says that human beings “communicate through symbols – hence the subsequent use of the term ‘symbolic interaction’” (cited in Elliott, 2001:25). “Symbols represent objects in our minds and in the minds of others” (cited in Elliott, 2001:25). With the use of the icons the mielie and protea, as well as the Afrikaans titles, I fix these Collections within a specific social and cultural group.

Mead further argues that when one, as a child, learns to think of an object as a symbol (such as parent symbolising security), one also independently creates the ability to do so. The association of parent (as object) with security, warmth, food or love (as symbolic meaning), for example, is enabled by reflective thinking, an enablement and ability to associate meaning with object that are created in independent agency. “Language is pivotal in this connection. Without access to language there is no access to the symbol necessary for thinking and acting as a self in a structured world of symbolic meaning” (cited in Elliott, 2001:25). Mead says that symbols

Have a universal quality for the social groups in which they are meaningful; symbols are a common currency through which individuals forge a sense of self and interact with other people. There is thus a certain commonality to being a self, which means that, by looking at our own thoughts, feelings and attitudes; we can interpret the actions of others (cited in Elliott, 2001:25).

Bourdieu says “with my evolving idea of habitus as a generating principle of individual thought and behaviour, I wanted to show that the individual existed not just as an individual but as a social product and that a generative principle was at work. (Bourdieu, 1985a cited in Mahar, 1990:35). This statement explains one of the principal concepts of this thesis. I was focusing on my thought and behaviour to create an aesthetic idiolect, a concept that is based on the individual voice of a person/artist. But the individual that has

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<sup>25</sup> He did not refer to himself as a symbolic interactionist but thought of himself as a philosopher or social psychologist (Elliott, 2001:24).

and communicates an idiolect exists as a social product, because of engagement with all the externally and socially located structures that influence and shape the person during the course of her evolving personal history. The development and progress that occurs within the individual is a direct representation of ever-changing and evolving internal dispositions shaped by her environment, culture and society. This process of development represents a generative principle which, in my work, can be seen in the linear developmental progress that occurred to produce first the mielie and protea series and, after those, the last two Collections. The mielie and protea, two icons directly derived from my social and cultural heritage and background, are also clear evidence of the fact that “the individual existed not just as an individual but as a social product” (Bourdieu, 1985a cited in Mahar, 1990:35).

In the next section of this thesis, I will focus in more depth on the genesis and developmental processes that were involved in conceptualising, designing and creating the mielie and protea series. These two series represent the first two Collections that were produced during this research project. I will discuss them separately, because although many parallels and similarities exist between the respective developmental processes, the decision-making processes and approaches in resolving specific problems varied and differed in many ways to result in symbolic objects of diverse meaning.

## **2.4 The Mielie Collection**

### **2.4.1 Introduction**

To describe and discuss my Mielie Collection I will firstly discuss the origin of the Collection. As explained in the previous section, I perceive my work to have its genesis in social structures. My discussions will therefore be framed around the idea that I ‘internalised externalities and externalised internalities’, employing those schemas of dispositions acquired during the course of interactive engagement with environment, culture and society. Discussions on the origin of the thematic ideas of my work will be followed by discussions on the visual art-making process and development, which will be framed in the same way. The notion of an aesthetic disposition and its relationship with an aesthetic idiolect will be discussed. Following this and in relation to it, I will shift my focus towards the creation of meaning. Once again, discussions will be framed within the notion of the circular dynamics created by processes of internalisation of externalities and the externalisation of internalities, this time also involving the viewer and her experience and interpretation of the artwork as symbolic object.

### **2.4.2. The origin of the Collection (internalisation of the external)**

#### **2.4.2.1 Memories of experiences on the farm**

I will discuss aspects of the social and cultural environment that contributed to my specific schemas of dispositions and also account for the aesthetic idiolect I communicate in my art. Through interactive engagement with my environment, an awareness regarding the world and its socio-cultural, economic and political orders emerged. I also developed an understanding of the interrelatedness of these concepts or orders. I will therefore also articulate how I translated all these aspects in my handbag collections to inculcate them with symbolic and metaphorical meaning and value.



Figure 2.28  
 Craig Native, Spring/Summer 2005-2006  
 Internet Image (*I Fashion*, 2008).

I deliberately chose an Afrikaans title for the first collection of handbags, namely *Mielie*,<sup>26</sup> This locates the collection within a specific culture, namely that of an Afrikaans-speaking sector in South African culture. The corn cob as icon derives from that culture and evokes rural and agricultural associations. My choice of icon was preceded by the same icon that appears in the work of a South African fashion designer, Craig Native (Fig. 2.28). Native affirms the iconic status of the corn cob and uses it to symbolise typicalities in South African lifestyles and culture, thereby enhancing and emphasising its iconic status in the South African cultural identity. Yet, the application of this icon in the unconventional form of clothes, as well as the style and manner of his designs, position the clothes as attractive and appropriate wear for a new and 'alternative' Afrikaans culture. His work in this way is structural and formative in the creation of a new identity for the Afrikaans sector. Such new identity constitutes a radical break from the historic past to challenge current biases against Afrikaners. It also breaks with the conservatism and negative connotations associated with Afrikaners in South Africa's moral, religious and political past. In this way, the corn cob as icon attains not only new symbolic form, but also new meaning and value.

<sup>26</sup> Mielie is the Afrikaans word for maize, mealie or corn.

In my own work, the mielie symbol evolved from a series of notes and drawings that I made in order to identify specific symbolic objects of meaning and value to me and not necessarily deriving from my culture, but with a strong personal relation to me. My original reason for choosing the mielie was the strong role the object played during my youth. I associate the mielie with 'survival', and in my family structure (on the farm) it represented the centrally most important income-generating product. I wanted to explore and broaden this concept into a more encompassing study of the mielie's role as symbol of survival in the diverse range of socio-economic groups in rural and urban South Africa. I also wanted to discover what it symbolised beyond my own culture, on a national and multicultural level. Even though I aimed to study the object within the context of such objective structures and in a critical manner, I found that my personal relationship and subjective opinion of the object played the most significant role in its final realisation.

Some of my earliest memories and experiences happened on the farm Olyfenbult in the Zeerust district in North West. As a child this was my grandparent's farm and my family's holiday destination. This land is my mother's inheritance<sup>27</sup> where she farms today. The farm became a big part of my cultural inheritance and part of my heritage,<sup>28</sup> both in national and cultural terms. During the time I grew up, the farm consisted of diversified farming of which the corn or maize plantation made up the biggest part of the crops. Here my siblings and I were educated about the 'circle of life'. The corn was cultivated as in a commercial farm to produce for the country, but also to produce food for the people working and living on the land, as well as for food for the cattle. Already at a young age I became aware of the hardships and struggles of farming, of the human dependency on the produce and the significant influence of the uncontrollable forces of nature on agricultural production. During this period I also became aware that the 'mielie pap'<sup>29</sup> made from the corn was the staple food<sup>30</sup> of the farm workers and their families. Only at a later stage did I

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<sup>27</sup> Inheritance: the money, property, etcetera that you receive from someone when they die or something from the past or from your family that effects the way you behave, look etc. (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005, u.w. 'inheritance').

<sup>28</sup> Heritage: the history, traditions and qualities that a country or society has had for many years and that are considered as an important part of its character (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005, u.w. 'heritage').

<sup>29</sup> Mealie (-meal) porridge /maize porridge (Bosman *et al.*, 1984:322).

<sup>30</sup> According to Aya Takada in an article, *South Africa won't curb corn exports to cap prices*, on moneyweb, the price of white corn, used as a staple food in South Africa, tripled over the past three years (Takada, 2008).

realise that it was indeed the staple food produce in South Africa (and indeed for the poorest of the poor). The experience of being involved in the production of this product through 'heritage' exposed me at a young age to the harsh realities of the growing division between the poor and the rich in South Africa.

This exposure to the division between the poor and the rich impacted indelibly on my mind. I understand that I internalised this to the extent that it became an inextricable part of my mind and my habitus. I do realise that my habitus comprises a complex and extensive framework that recounts more inputs from life on the farm, in school, in my family structure and community. The important factor is that I am the agent for all these elements that constitute 'my background' and I employ such internalised elements in my practical work. As dispositional schemas, they contribute to my development and growth as artist and account for the choices I make in the creative process – hence the presence of the iconic 'mielie' with its symbolic value as meaningful and transformed element in my work.

#### 2.4.2.2 **The interlinked concepts**

Socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economical circumstances are interlinked aspects of life that contribute to habitus and its formation. I will discuss the political situation in South Africa during the time I grew up as contributor to a personal history. It certainly played a significant role in my experience of life. The end of Apartheid, the transformation into the New South Africa and the political situation that currently exists in South Africa are inevitably influencing my understanding of life and me in relation to current society. All these elements are, as phenomena, formative contributors to my schemes of dispositions and subsequently my habitus. North West province has a very difficult political situation, which also makes it difficult to go there at times. The inhabitants of this South African region are largely uneducated (both white and black). Racism and its related issues are prevalent and problematic. When I was a child living in this area, fear of a political war reigned. It was a terrible experience to live in such fear. Such fearful existence prevailed before I was born, as the farm is on the border of Bophuthatswana. Under the previous regime this border was also the main infiltration area for the ANC<sup>31</sup>. As a result, the farm was vulnerable to possible farm attacks and the fear that landmines would be planted

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<sup>31</sup> African National Congress.



always existed, creating an atmosphere of being under constant threat. As such, my family lived in unremitting fear of being attacked. Precaution involved the installation of burglar bars that were designed to keep RPG 7 missile launchers away from the house and to prevent the house from setting alight from the inside. These burglar bars formed cages around the windows of the farmhouse. As a child these cages served as my siblings and my playground. The farm was never attacked and landmines were never planted on the farm. Now my family believes that the reason for this was the good relationship my grandfather maintained between himself and the workers, especially because most of the neighbouring farms were attacked. I refer to this because of the obvious impact and influence it had on my day-to-day living experience of the farm, and not because of the political impact and ramifications on a wider level. I recount these events because they account for my awareness of political, economic and socio-cultural circumstances. My experience of it, all my emotions and mental processing involved in experiencing fearful rural living and daily confrontation with the vast division that existed, and still exists, between the relatively rich (my family and I) and the poor (the farm labourers and their families) are fundamentally present in the metaphorical meaning of the mielie as icon in my handbag collections.

#### **2.4.2.3 Symbolic meaning and metamorphosis**

During the time I was working on the Mielie Collection I was trying to create a platform from which I could transfer or translate the previously discussed issues within a 'collection' of work that represented my sense of self and the way I work, or would like to work. I found the mielie to be a symbol for the specific issues that I wanted to portray about my cultural and dispositional frame of reference, which in fact also to a large extent constitutes my habitus.

For me, the mielie became the symbol of opposites: it symbolised the contrasts between the rich and the poor, between the hungry and the well fed. It also signified the nostalgia that is so prevalent in current Afrikaner voices for the sense of solidity, love and security that existed in the relationship between farmer, the land and nature.



Figure 2.29  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development  
The mould-making process.



Figure 2.30  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development  
Resin.

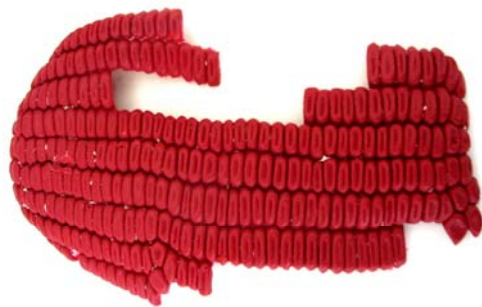


Figure 2.31  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development  
Plastic.

The metamorphosis of the corn cob into a mielie made of a precious metal that serves as a clasp for a handbag, an instrument for locking private things safely away, relates new symbolic meaning. I literally extracted the feelings of attachment, belonging, fear and alienation that were part of my heritage and that I associated with or experienced in connection with the corn cob and subjectively re-translated them into the mielie handbag as art object. This is what my art-making process strives to convey. Those opposites I refer to also exist from and for me; they come from my memory and are inculcated in my habitus to function on an unconscious but cognitive level. As such, they informed, formed and reformed the Mielie Collection.

### **2.4.3 A description of the visual art-making process of the Mielie Collection**

#### **2.4.3.1 Introduction**

In the following paragraphs I will give a detailed description of the sequential development of those processes involved in making the Mielie Collection in an effort to track my thinking behind the creation of the series.

#### **2.4.3.2 The transformative role of materials**

I started the visual research process for creating the Mielie Collection by revisiting the farm in order to collect corn cobs. I collected small black-pitted cobs that were planted in my grandmother's garden. At this point, the only certainty in my mind was that I was going to create handbags. I started by making a mould of a cob (Fig. 2.29) that was to become the handle of the mielie handbag. During this step in the process I was still feeling my way through technical difficulties and possible solutions, studying existing clasps and hardware related to handbags. I tried working with different materials such as resin, plastic and wax (Figs. 2.30 to 2.32) to get the desired weight and to see the different textures created by the materials. I consequently decided to work in metal (Fig. 2.33), thinking that metal represented those qualities I wanted to convey as symbolic of my intended message. It would give weight and substance to the piece, conveying the idea of strength and solidity. The bronze mielie, *Boervrou*, was created.

The material, bronze, therefore was important in the formation and development of this piece and in the whole Collection. The sense of physicality and strength that is conveyed

by bronze serve as visual metaphor for the culture of the rural farmer and his relationship with the soil, the cultivation of corn and taming nature to provoke the general associations related to life on the corn farm.



Figure 2.32  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development. Wax.



Figure 2.33  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Mielie Material Development. Clay, silver paint.

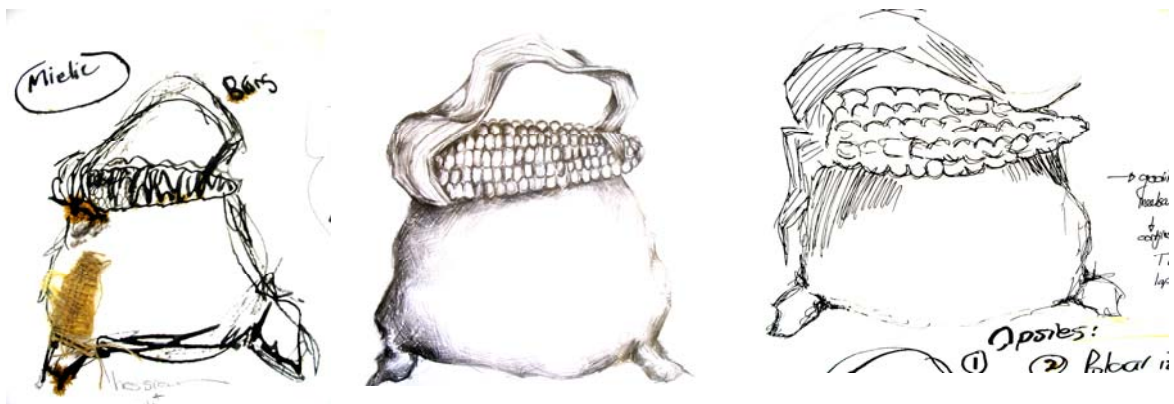


Figure 2.34  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Design Drawing. Mielie handbag.



Figure 2.35  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Boervrou*. Bronze, hessian.



Figure 2.36  
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: *Boervrou*. Afrikaans words on inside of mielie. Bronze, hessian.



### 2.4.3.3 The Bronze Mielie: *Boervrou*

#### 2.4.3.3.1 The visual process

An extended development in the *Boervrou*<sup>32</sup> bag (Fig. 2.35) was to regard it as a sculpture, rather than a functional clasp (Figs. 2.33 & 2.34). I created a handle of the mielie element that became a sculpture in itself and turned the 'sculpture' into a handbag. The bronze casting of the handle has text written on the inside of the cob, various words relating to the mielie as symbol of strength, survival, durability and the rural. The text is so close together that it seems as if the cob was attacked by a typing machine or eaten by insects such as locusts, a common predator of the cob harvest. The text on the inside also creates a texture or 'image' which resembles the pips on the outside of the corn. The density of the text can be seen as a metaphor for the multiple meanings that the icon, a mielie, can generate. The text consists of words, idioms and references to mielies that exist in Afrikaans. The fact that there are so many idiomatic expressions in Afrikaans relating to the mielie as metaphor, positions the mielie as a symbolic icon in the Afrikaans language, identity and culture. These humoristic and playful Afrikaans words (Fig. 2.36) and 'sayings' recount a range of idiomatic applications derived from corn, such as 'pittig', 'pitkos' and 'hardkoppig'. These three words reference the pips of the corn, but are also personifications in Afrikaans, referring respectively to verbal wit and mental sharpness, food for thought and a stubborn person. I also refer to different ways of preparing maize into a variety of typical dishes: porridge, which in Afrikaans is called '*mieliepap*'; the words '*growwe pap*', '*stywe pap*', '*slap pap*' and '*krummel pap*' are also present inside the mielie. All these words describe both dishes and extended metaphorical meaning that would be meaningful in the Afrikaans culture. The Afrikaans idiomatic expression '*dit is maar 'n oes affêre*' is written on the inside of the leaf that forms the handle for the bag. This idiomatic expression means that "it is a rather poor mess", but the word 'oes' also means harvest or to harvest. In this way, the expression refers to both the culture of the farmer and farming and to the enormous divisions that exist between the poor and the rich and the hungry and the well fed. Both these concepts are crucial to the conceptual content and extended meaning of the piece.

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<sup>32</sup> Boervrou is the Afrikaans word for farmer's wife.

The bronze handle is combined with the body of the bag, which is made of an old hessian bag that in the past was used for the storage of corn. In my experiments with manufacturing the hessian body of the bag, I immersed the hessian in resin (Fig. 2.37) in order to make the bag strong and solid enough for it to hold the weight of the bronze. The decision to do this was a practical choice and was, as far as I am concerned, not visually successful. I made another bag with slight variations in shape and proportion, without resin, with more success and the result was closer to what I had in mind (Fig. 2.38).



Figure 2.37

Nanette Nel, 2007. *Hessian bag and detail*. Hessian, cotton, resin.



Figure 2.38

Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Hessian bag of *Boervrou*. Hessian, bronze.

#### 2.4.3.3.2 **Decision making**

Any realisation that something is not satisfactory or successful originates from my specific aesthetic disposition. Critical consideration of my work and decision-making processes that occur during the course of its execution serve a generative purpose; the urge to make something look better, more beautiful, more successful or functional, creates a constant flow of progress until I accomplish a product that is pleasing within the framework of my aesthetic disposition. The work becomes and represents quality that also becomes associated with me, thus constituting an aesthetic identity that is unique to me.

On the hessian the word '*LAND*' is printed as a part of the original text of the 'found material'. The hessian is employed as found material, and the word '*LAND*' is hardly recognisable, as it sits next to the seam of the bag where it folds in on itself under the weight of the bronze handle (Fig. 2.38). This weight (three kilograms) posed a problem in terms of functionality. I accepted this, realising that the bag did not need to be functional to communicate visually and being well aware that this decision would challenge conventional notions of functionality in handbags. It was as if the piece acquired a life of its own and started to acquire meaning beyond its reference to land and its connotations to agriculture, territory and settlement. For example, I realised the work carried a strong visual reference to Afrikaner bronze monuments created during the Apartheid era (Fig. 2.39). Due to the colour, weight and the visual characteristics of the material, the combined bronze mielie and hessian fabric, as well as the obvious reference to an Afrikaner iconic symbol, enhance the resemblance. It was indeed not my aim to convey this, but I decided to resign myself to it, since it worked in the sense that the piece acquired an additional layer of meaning.





Figure 2.39  
Alfonso Smuts, 1977: *Kaalvoetvrou*. Harrismith  
(Swart, 1989:257).

In terms of the habitus and its operation, the decision-making and thinking processes that I describe in the previous paragraph are best explained and validated in Codd's words:

The habitus of a group or class exists in the dispositions (capacities, tendencies, abilities to recognise and to act) of individuals such that these dispositions are an embodiment within each individual of objective regularities, relations and structures that pre-exist the individual and have been socially constituted within the material conditions of existence pertaining to the group or class. Thus, individuals are disposed to recognise and to act in particular ways, which is also to act with meaningful intentions, and therefore to *choose* what each will do. Dispositions are neither mechanistic causes nor voluntarist impulses. They enable us to recognise the possibilities for action and at the same time prevent us from recognising other possibilities. Taken together, they constitute the habitus which is 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations'. Thus, the habitus both generates practice and limits their possibilities. In Bourdieu's words, it "produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus" (1990:139).

When critically analysing my visual process, I realised that this 'realisation' of the development of meaning beyond functionality marked the fact that I entered an improved level of understanding and that I could perceive new meaning in the piece. The work enabled progression from conforming to functionality to discovering the acceptability of non-functionality, which generated new meaning and new possibilities in my creative work. The moment I realised this, the piece revealed itself as something else, something almost beyond my making. Simultaneously it expanded and enriched my aesthetic disposition and also directed my work into new and different possibilities of expression. The whole experience demonstrated Bourdieu's theory of the habitus as a generative process.



#### 2.4.3.4 Crochet mielie series

##### 2.4.3.4.1 Design process: changes

As the visual process of the bronze mielie, the *Boervrou* bag, progressed, I deconstructed the main elements of the bronze mielie with a view to exploring the new possibilities it had opened up. As such, the simplified elements of the bronze mielie became the starting point for the Collection of Crocheted Mielies (Fig. 2.42).

The design process of the final Mielie Collection went various ways before finalisation. One of the design ‘problems’ posed by the *Boervrou* bag (the bronze mielie) was the matter of functionality. As previously explained, a shift occurred in my mind that materialised in the realisation that, despite the progression or transition from functionality to non-functionality, the work would still communicate and work visually. This incident of progress, which I experienced as a point of struggle, in reality meant my work advanced with regard to conceptual content. As a result, I decided to simplify the designs for the new series.

I wanted these pieces to communicate what I had to say, but I also wanted the work to be both physically and visually lighter than *Boervrou*. At the beginning of the process I investigated traditional handbag hardware (Fig. 2.43), such as rivets, hinges and fastenings. I found, however, that these would change the ‘feel’ of the series by creating inappropriate qualities of perfection. They posed technical manufacturing applications that would be unnecessarily complicated. My feeling, probably guided by a previously assimilated aesthetic sense, was to rather opt for simplicity and effectiveness in terms of technical solutions. This also represented a shift in insight and aesthetic sensibility.



Figure 2.42

Nanette Nel, 2007-2008. *The Crocheted Mielie Collection*

In the design process of this Collection, several experiments were made in order to find the right combination of materials. Especially the crocheted steel wire body part of the bag went through some experimentation, resulting in combining rope and string with wire. The decision to use the steel wire on its own won, because of the simplicity of the combination of the silver and the steel. The way I approached the series was to use the characteristics of the two different metals in order to communicate what I wanted to say with this series, for example using the steel wire with a magnet as the functioning aspect of the bag, and using the silver with different finishings, giving the pieces different 'looks', for example polished, oxidised and matte.

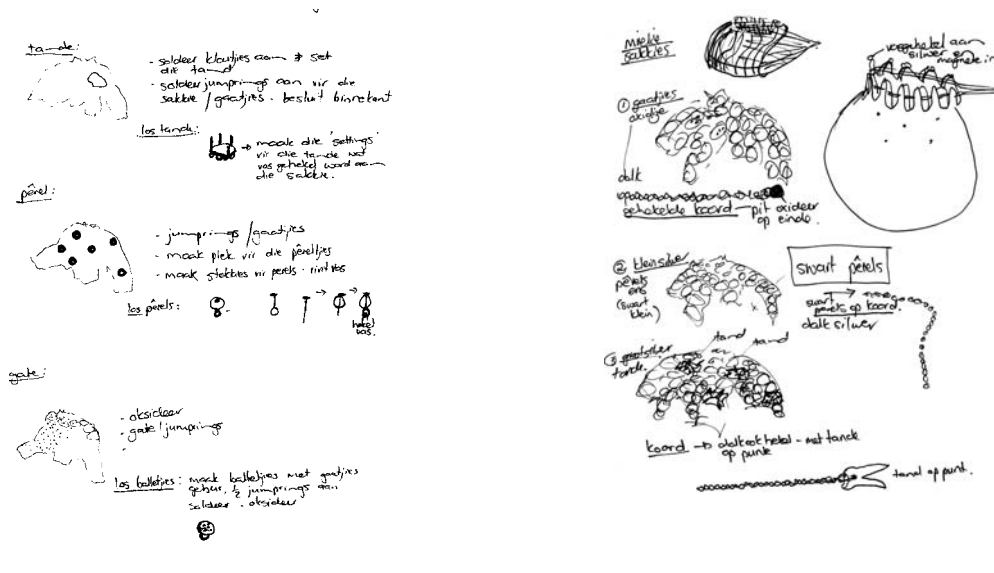


Figure 2.43

Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design drawings*

Design drawings and technical planning of the mielie coin purse series.

#### 2.4.3.1.2 **Material progress and development**

As a result of this shift, I regarded using steel wire for constructing the body of the bag as more appropriate and effective. This progression regarding the material in the process of developing the Mielie Collection was important. The material in itself and the fact that it is crocheted, carries metaphorical meaning in terms of message, feeling, and social reference. The technique crochet references Afrikaner culture. It is a continuous knot – this symbolises continuity, which cannot be. As container it is not effective because it is full of holes – therefore the continuation of safety and safekeeping becomes impossible. While it can carry the weight of the clasp, it symbolises contradictory notions.

The functionality was resolved by setting a magnet with claws on the clasp. The magnet sticks to the steel wire and functions as the clasp. The technical solution is thus simple and efficient, using the characteristics of the involved metals to the optimum.

I used the original mould of the bronze piece to cast fragments of the mielies. These fragments became clasps for the Mielie collection. I chose to cast the mielies in silver to create an element of preciousness. The reason for this was to emphasise the object's sentimental value. Silver is worth more than bronze and therefore regarded as more precious. From a conventional jewellery design perspective, the option of working in a precious metal was also more traditional and supportive of the values of the past. The bronze mielie's research process also directed me towards working in silver. Silver positioned itself as an opposite to bronze in terms of monetary value. In addition to this factor, I also knew that, by making the bags smaller and using a precious metal, the differences in the aesthetic qualities between bronze and silver would enhance the concept of poverty and wealth as opposites.

The body of the bag is crocheted in steel wire. The steel wire creates a stiff, hollow form which supports the weight of the metal clasp. Each crocheted bag is formed and crocheted according to the size and shape of the clasp and design of the bag. Even though the bags are crocheted with the same steel wire and needle, they vary tremendously in shape. The texture in this collection also focuses on the contrast between these materials. The

crocheted texture of the body of the bag highlights the evenness and structured solidity of the mielie pips.

Certain unwanted visual elements made their appearance, just to be altered in the final stages of production. The tooth detail in the coin purse *Gruwel*<sup>33</sup> (Figs. 2.59 to 2.61), for example, was originally included in the design (Fig. 2.44a) as dangling objects attached to the exterior of the bag. I made it this way, but upon viewing the bag I rejected the teeth as feature. I did not like the reference to the African sangoma curio culture. I changed the original design. In changing it, I got the idea to cover the teeth in crocheted wire. This worked, because it resembled a bag. The effect was far more subtle and suggestive, adding to the mere decorativeness of the original uncovered teeth. I do believe that it was the right decision. I describe this because I feel that all the steps in the process are equally important: the rejection of some elements often leads to better solutions, as it did in this case. The entire manufacturing of this piece also demonstrated the generative nature of dispositional decision-making processes.

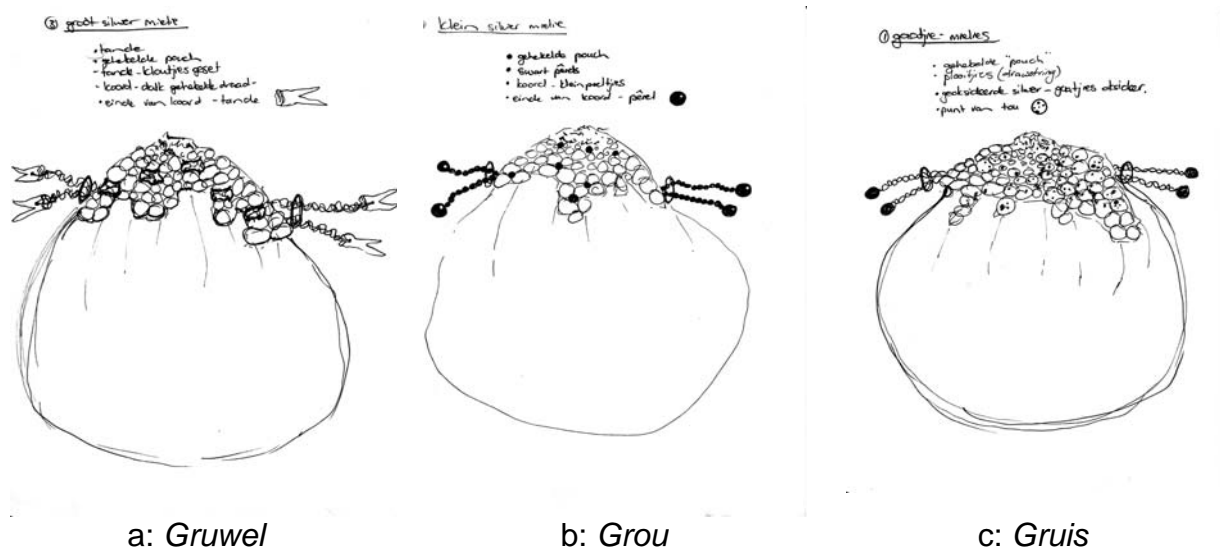


Figure 2.44

Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design drawings*. Design drawings and technical planning of the mielie coin purse series.

<sup>33</sup> See pages 71 to 72

#### 2.4.3.1.3 **General symbolic and metaphorical meaning**

In my designs I separated the clasp and the body of the bag and treated them as separate entities symbolising opposites or contrary concepts (Fig. 2.43). This delving into the concept of opposites also generated progress in the visual research process. While separate, or despite it, the two parts also started to inform each other. In final form, the size and shape of the silver clasp 'lead' or introduce and emphasise the contrasting shape and size of the crocheted bag. In further designs (Fig. 2.44) it is evident that all the bags have more or less the same shape. Even though I drew them alike, the idea from the beginning was for them to differ. I realised that planning or designing on paper could only extend so far, while the actual manufacturing process often generated new ideas.

The colour of the two materials has significance in terms of meaning. I deliberately used a range of different shades of 'black' and 'white'. The reason and concept behind these choices were not to deliberately reference race, although, having grown up in South Africa, I hesitate to deny the notion's subconscious presence. I remember that race or white and black issues were definitely in my mind during the original conceptualisation of the piece. However, the issue that was indeed foremost in my mind during the process of deciding on these two materials was the social contrast between wealth and poverty. It is so that the wealthy sector in this country is predominantly white, while the poorest of the poor are predominantly black. The work has a morbid quality to it that also conveys my own feelings regarding this issue.

The technique of this Collection is also significant. The action of crocheting is a painstaking and time-consuming craft, traditionally practiced by women. In Western, first world countries, crochet emerged from lace making as a copy and cheaper version and "as an alternative that was more profitable as a business and more enjoyable and less tedious as a leisure activity" (Industry and Consumerism, 2008). Rich upper-class women from 1850 and onwards began practicing the craft as a way of whiling away the hours, which they had in abundance since they did not have formal careers. Here, in South Africa, it was less so. Women also crocheted out of need. They crocheted mainly children's clothes because they could not afford to buy them. The 'doilies' were also a popular item for making in this craft, because the women could generate a small income



from selling them. Women from my grandmother's generation made crocheted bedspreads and tea cosies, either for personal use or for selling. The quality of their handiwork signified their standard of housekeeping. The craft of crochet as translated form in my work is therefore consistent with the theme of wealth versus poverty that I carry through my work.

#### 2.4.3.1.4 **Individual pieces in the crocheted Collection**

I will refer to each piece separately. Firstly, I will discuss the design process and material progress and development. Secondly, I will refer to the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of these pieces.

##### *Brand Suid-Afrika (Figs. 2.45 to 2.49)*

In the piece, *Brand Suid-Afrika* (Fig. 2.45), I used a real small black pitted mielie that I collected from my grandmother's 'seed-collection' to cast in silver. In the casting process, the mielie did not burn out completely and residue formed charcoal (Fig. 2.46) that remained on the inside of the silver mielie. I came to regard the charcoal element as the most significant part of the silver mielie and I therefore took care not to damage or clean it. Traces of the material casting investment are visible on the outside of the mielie, but eventually these investment traces will rub off and the silver mielie will become polished through handling. In this way, the piece retains traces of the manufacturing and transformative processes that were involved in creating it. The cast object therefore is not purely a precise replica of the original, but becomes more meaningful with its reference to the manual work that was involved in its manufacturing. The contrast between those traces of the original corn remaining as charcoal and the silver metal imply the tensions between opposites. The preciousness of the silver stands in direct contrast to the remaining 'dirt' or charcoal, to once again symbolise poverty and wealth as opposites.



Figure 2.45  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika*  
Steel, silver, charcoal.



Figure 2.46  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika*  
Detail of the charcoal inside the silver.  
Steel, silver, charcoal.



Figure 2.47  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika*  
Detail of the attachment of the silver and the steel  
wire. Steel, silver, charcoal.



Figure 2.48  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika*  
Detail of the silver buttons and the crochet. Steel, silver, charcoal.



Figure 2.49  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Brand Suid-Afrika*  
Detail in relation to the body. Steel, silver, charcoal.

The charcoal is covered by the silver and protected by the metal, and the steel wire body of the bag flows from the mielie (Fig. 2.47) and creates a bubble resembling a 'thought bubble', suggestive of contained information, thoughts or knowledge. It is intended to refer to the message that the bag portrays and represents. The functionality of the bag is represented by the small buttons (Fig. 2.48) that resemble corn pips. These 'pips' create the illusion that they fell off the mielie and landed on the bag. Upon opening these pip buttons, the charcoal inside their silver shells is revealed. These buttons are fastened through loops, which is a traditional fastening method used in the craft of crochet. Unhooking the pip buttons from their loops also provides access to the inside of the bag, where private or precious things can be stored. The crocheted part of the bag is semi-transparent and, when viewed from up close, will reveal the contents of the bag. The bag must be carried directly in the hand, since it has no handle or strap. It can be carried either by gripping the body of the bag or by gripping the mielie clasp. These ways of carrying the bag serve to demonstrate the idea of enclosing something in one's hand for purposes of either protecting or hiding it. This highlights the intimacy of the relationship between the person and the bag, or between the human body and the handbag as object (Fig. 2.49).

#### *Gryp* (Figs. 2.50 & 2.51)

Originally I based the design for *Gryp* on the corn cob (Figs. 2.40 & 2.41).<sup>34</sup> The crocheted body of this bag was crocheted in looser stitches and therefore appears more transparent and not as strong and solid as the closely knitted bodies of the previously described bags. This bag references traditional or conventional bags once it is opened, as it has little pleats and a clasp. My aim was to deliberately reference conventionality and conservatism, both characteristics that are usually associated with Afrikaners. I also attached a silver chain handle and a black pearl to the bag (Fig. 2.50), but this variation proved to be too conventional for the rest of the series. I realised that this bag needed to develop into a different direction. By handling and playing with the bag it got a new shape and also indicated different ways in which to present it. In final form it rolls into a long, sausage-like shape. As soon as an object is placed inside the bag, it adopts the shape of the object (Fig. 2.51). The crocheted steel wire enables it to adopt a variety of shapes. It is very strong and can handle a lot of moulding, shaping and reshaping. In this way the owner of

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<sup>34</sup> See page 54



the bag also becomes the designer of its shape. Furthermore, this shape is endlessly adaptable, enhancing the owner's role as co-creator.



Figure 2.50  
Nanette Nel, 2007. The original version of *Gryp*. Steel, silver, black pearl.



Handbag, silver, steel wire

Figure 2.51  
Nanette Nel, 2008. *Gryp*. Steel, silver, black pearl.

In the coin purse series (Fig. 2.52), I wanted to create smaller pieces. Three pieces make up the series, which would make it appear more precious due to a jewel-like quality. In this small series consisting of three pieces only, I emphasised the idea of preciousness in this manner and to be consistent with the general theme dealing with the contrast between poverty and wealth.



Figure 2.52

Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection/*Grou, Gruis, Gruwel*.  
Steel, silver, black pearls, teeth.

*Grou* (Figs. 2.53 to 2.55)

In this bag I crocheted the pearls into the body of the bag to become an integral part of the bag. A single pearl forms a highlight on the clasp. The pearls are bad quality and flake at the holes, but I deliberately decided on these pearls since they challenge the general connotation of pearls with preciousness. As such, this collection also deals with poverty and wealth. The 'bad', valueless pearls contradict suggestions of preciousness that are conveyed by the small jewel-like quality of the object. These bad pearls are also ambivalent in terms of being fake or genuine. Using very good quality pearls would have indicated elevated value. By conveying two contradictory messages, namely one of preciousness as represented by its small size and the presence of a precious metal, and one of being worthless, represented by bad quality pearls, I want to promote awareness of social contrasts between wealthy and poverty-stricken sectors in our society.



Figure 2.53  
Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection/Grou.  
Steel, silver, black pearls.





Figure 2.54  
Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Detail: *Grou*  
Steel, silver, black pearls.



Figure 2.55  
Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Detail: *Grou*  
Steel, silver, black pearls.

*Gruis* (Figs. 2.56 to 2.58)

The clasp of this purse is oxidised to create a brown colour. Opening the bag reveals small oxidised silver balls hanging from the inside of the purse (Fig. 2.55), a deliberate surprise element. In its opened form, the bag resembles the mouth of a person with bad teeth. A trace of flux on the metal is visible. Rust can be seen where chemical reactions occurred between the oxidisation of the silver balls and the steel wire on the inside of the bag. These deliberately-damaged areas in the body of the bag can indeed possibly break. This fragility forms the central concept in the piece, forcing the viewer to focus on the perishable nature of these purses in contrast to the durability of precious metals. The sensation of surprise upon opening the bag, revealing a revolting interior reminiscent of rotting teeth, also emphasises the privacy of the bag's interior as a hiding place. In the same way, the interior of the human body is regarded as private, containing organs that are not to be exposed. In addition to this aspect, it is also a reference to the relationship between corn as affordable food for the poor and hungry. In such context, corn is precious, indeed as precious as silver. The brown colour hides the silver, implying that, although ugly and dirty on the outside, its value is hidden and deep. Despite the corn seed's humble nature and origin, it is invaluable in terms of providing food for the poor. I regard this as of great importance. Many well-fed and relatively rich or middle class people are often unaware of the humble corn's true value as a very basic substance for survival of the South African poorest of the poor.



Figure 2.56  
Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection *Gruis*  
Steel, silver.



Figure 2.57  
Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Detail: *Gruis*  
Steel, silver.



Figure 2.58  
Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection *Gruis*  
Steel, silver.



*Gruwel* (Figs. 2.59 to 2.61)

By using human teeth in this *mielie* I leave no doubt whatsoever that I want to elicit associations with eating and food, thus emphasising the concept explained in the previous paragraph. I got the teeth from a state hospital and the teeth are from a number of people of different races. The state hospital as source immediately evokes its connotations to poverty, servicing the anonymous poor, as opposed to wealthy people who conventionally do not attend government hospitals, but go to dentists as identifiable patients. Although this is not pertinently visible in the work, I, as artist, find teeth, as symbolic of anonymity, malnutrition or hunger and poverty, a fascinating and powerful, if grim, reference. The teeth in this bag are attached on the outside of the bag's body, but are hidden by what seems like an extra bag. The teeth can dangle freely, but are only visible from an angle. A tooth on the silver clasp either lures the viewer in, or prohibits the viewer from opening it, suggestion both inclusion and exclusion. The bag has a hole at its top under the clasp that is the bag's opening, but the separate bag, which covers the teeth, also hides this hole from the viewer. In this way, a constant dialogue between the exposed and the hidden lends an interesting dimension to the bag.



Figure 2.59

Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection *Gruwel*. Steel, silver, teeth.



Figure 2.60

Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection *Gruwel*. Steel, silver, teeth.



Figure 2.61

Nanette Nel, 2008. The coin purse collection. Detail: *Gruwel*. Steel, silver, teeth.

### *Bemin*

In this final bag, which is bigger in size than the coin purses, ideas of value and opposites are developed further in the use of colour and material. The bag contains fragments of silver mielie pips set with black diamonds. Black diamonds have the least value of all the diamonds and are often used as industrial diamonds. They have no transparency, the quality that creates the reflective and 'brilliant shimmer' of a white diamond. This bag is a seemingly useless object as the opening of the bag is tiny, and some of the silver mielie pips with diamonds are attached on the inside of the bag, completely losing their decorative value. The viewer might not even discover their existence. As is the case in *Gruwel*, *Bemin* also plays with contradictory concepts of preciousness versus worthlessness, functionality versus non-functionality, beauty versus ugliness, concealing versus revealing and poverty versus wealth.

## **2.5 Summary**

The outside of the handbag functions as symbolic and instrumental in the construction of a posed identity and of subjective meaning. The popular global examples confirm personification and identity formation as socially located contributors to the development of handbags. In addition to this, these examples are also demonstrative of the role of the handbag as symbolic object that functions in a wider, specifically Western, cultural context.

The contextually historical discussions emanating from these notions explain how the handbag developed as a result of social developments, with specific reference to improved access to travel and the emancipation of women. All the examples called upon in this chapter confirm that the handbag developed parallel to such phenomena in society and their relevant social consequences.

The idea of the message bag indicates the handbag as carrier of multiple meanings of symbolic value. A discussion on icons and symbols defines these concepts in relation to the handbags that I produce. This discussion enables me to confirm that my handbags relate to the cultural icons which have symbolic value in my culture. Hereby I establish that I, as artist, function as part of a self-structuring process that relates to culture, society and

environment and that meaning, as I re-create it by means of the processes I describe here, is generated in this way.

As such and in terms of my critical framework, socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economical structures exist as externalities which are internalised by means of intricate interactions between society and me to be externalised in the form of handbags as art objects. My own art-making practices indicate the presence of an ever-evolving and ever-changing aesthetic disposition in decision-making processes.

The Mielie Collection represents a theme of opposites that materialise in the form of contrary concepts, such as poverty versus wealth and hunger versus health. A theme of opposites is also central to the Collections that I describe in the following chapters.

All these factors contribute to the Mielie Collection as representational of my experience as participant in and member of the South African community and culture, a culture that poses specific issues for reconstruction in my art works.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Protea Collection**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 3 I will discuss the opposing concepts of luxury versus necessity. I discuss these opposites to clarify how luxury creates desire. I relate the concepts of luxury and preciousness to jewellery and discuss the relationship between jewellery and handbags.

The inside of the bag is described as symbolic of privacy as one element in the contrary concepts of privacy versus the public. I refer briefly to the content of the bag and discuss it as symbolic of security. I explain the inside of the handbag as metaphor for abjection, poverty and privacy.

I subjectively describe and discuss the genesis of the Protea Collection from my own cultural perspective. I include a description of the visual art-making processes that were involved in its manufacture and explain the influences materials had on its evolution. I also describe and explain subjectively-formulated symbolic and metaphorical meaning and associations relating to this Collection as subject matter.

#### **3.2 Luxury and Necessity**

##### **3.2.1 Introduction**

I established in Chapter 1 that the handbag as symbolic object is relevant in a global context and that it relates to the performance and construction of identity, thereby reaching beyond its conventional attributes to enter the fine art arena of non-functionality. In this chapter I continue to examine my own handbag manufacturing in an effort to understand its origin and meaning and to contextualise it in art theoretical terms. Continuing the previous chapter's theme of opposites, I position luxury<sup>35</sup> versus necessity<sup>36</sup> as contradictory phenomena.

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<sup>35</sup> The definition of luxury is: (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005, u.w. 'luxury').

- the enjoyment of special and expensive things, particularly food and drink, clothes and surroundings
- a thing that is expensive and enjoyable but not essential
- a pleasure or advantage that you do not often have

<sup>36</sup> The definition of necessity is: (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005, u.w. 'necessity').



I explore the rationale behind luxury as subject matter and theme in my art. I explore the elicitation of desire and social aspiration by means of luxury. Lastly, I briefly discuss the relationship between jewellery and handbags, with luxury as a point of conceptual conjuncture.

### 3.2.2 Why I study luxury

In Western culture, luxury symbolises wealth and wealth brings social acceptance or higher social status. To quote Bourdieu in this regard: “To be seen as a person of class or status and prestige, is to be accepted as legitimate and sometimes as a legitimate authority” (cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:13). Such are the norms of Western capitalist society. Bourdieu equates cultural possessions with ‘capital’, of which ‘symbolic capital’ is one type of capital. Works of art are symbolic capital. They are perceived as such when and if that which they symbolise, or their symbolic value, becomes accepted in society. If, for example, the typical qualities of a handbag symbolise luxury, it becomes accepted because luxury symbolises status and prestige. The handbag as object becomes capital. Bourdieu also indicates the power implicit in such processes of acceptance:

To be seen as a person or class of status and prestige, is to be accepted as legitimate and sometimes as a legitimate authority. Such positions carry with it the power to name (activities, groups), the power to represent commonsense and above all the power to create the ‘official version of the social world’. Such power to represent is rooted in symbolic capital (Harker *et al.*, 1990:13).

In the Western world and its cultures, luxury represents the ultimate ‘official version of the social world’, especially in material terms. It can therefore be said to be all powerful, the determinant that dominates the legitimisation of someone or something. It is this relation between luxury and power or dominance that interests me because it also immediately evokes its own opposite: the powerless poor. It is this idea that is also a central concern in my work and in particular in the Protea Collection.

- 
- a thing that you must have and cannot manage without
  - a situation that must happen and that cannot be avoided

A second aspect or effect of luxury fascinates me. I have come across a great number of handbags that I desired either to possess or to recreate. I felt envious of their makers and designers. What all these handbags had in common is the fact that none of them were available in South Africa. I could only observe them in the printed media and learn about them through reading glossy European or American magazines. Many of the fashion houses that I refer to in this thesis do not make their goods available in this country because the market for luxury goods here is not nearly as viable in terms of profits compared to those in developed, first-world countries. In the first world, such handbags are mass produced and readily affordable and available. Here, they are luxury items, unavailable and therefore also proportionally desirable. I desire handbags that I have never seen in reality. Their 'unrealness', unavailability and unattainability also elicit fantasising about them, not only in terms of imagined ownership. Their perceived magnificence attains mythical proportions in my mind and I regard them with the same awe and respect I, for example, have for Art History. The experience resembles studying and learning everything possible about, for example, the impressionist Monet, because one admires, respects and adores his work, despite the probability of never gaining access to his work for direct observation, let alone purchasing one of his works. These luxury bags carry that same significance for me and, most importantly, provoke the desire in me to create such bags.

To examine this experience further, I draw on Joanne Finkelstein where she uses the term fashion as suggestive of a "space between the desired and the performed" (1996:6). In her book *Fashion: An Introduction*, she explains that the term 'fashion' is commonly linked to clothes and appearances, but this constitutes a simplified version of the definition. She explains the term 'fashion' as follows:

Striving after a fashion for instance is to pursue an ideal often with the understanding that it is unattainable. To act or behave after fashion implies a slight deviation or imperfection, as if something were not quite fulfilled, as if and achievement were not of sufficient standard (1996:6).

I mentioned above that I studied these international handbags with the same awe as I study art. This is in fact necessary, because to understand the field<sup>37</sup> in which I actively participate as completely as possible, I need knowledge about new developments and the history of those items as much as I do about art, because such knowledge and understanding would advance my creative work to eventually enhance my standing and regard in the field. In handbags, luxury is often synonymous with good quality and design, which can be seen as a definitive issue of concern in my work. The word 'luxury' once meant 'lust' or 'lasciviousness' (Steel & Borrelli, 1999:136), but it also signifies more than the expensive and the sumptuous; it also refers to an indulgence in pleasure that goes beyond necessity, a concept that immediately revokes its opposite: the very need and necessity beyond which it extends. To create something because a need for it exists, as opposed to creating something that is pure indulgence, represents the flip sides of the same coin. This insight I recount or translate into my art, thus adding meaning that is conceptually consistent with my themes of opposites.

Coco Chanel says that "[l]uxury is a necessity that begins where necessity ends" (Johnson, 2002:21). Even though this may seem like a frivolous and condescending remark, there is a grain of sense in this quotation. What is described as necessity for one person is luxury for another. The socio-economic chasm that exists between the poor and the rich in South Africa, mentioned in Chapter 2<sup>38</sup> in relation to the Mielie Collection, comes to mind. The farmer cultivates corn, ensuring his own wealth and prosperity by providing food for the poor, while the poor need corn to sustain life. The farmer grows rich feeding the poor and the poor remain poor. Wealth becomes possible because poverty exists. In extreme terms, luxury feeds off necessity. The play between luxury and necessity is a difficult and interesting subject, as its conception differs from individual to individual and it exists in materialistic value. I make objects, materialistic objects. I can describe my pieces as items of luxury, because they enter a non-functional domain and are made of precious, expensive materials. At the same time, they could be described as a necessity, because they must be produced in the context of an educational programme

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<sup>37</sup> "Fields are at all times defined by a system of objective relations of power between social positions which correspond to a system of objective relations, and so on" (Harker *et al.*, 1990:8).

"Fields thus identify areas of struggle" (Harker *et al.*, 1990:9).

<sup>38</sup> See page 40

which I must complete successfully. I would fail without them; with them I will be successful in the course and enjoy the luxury of a good education that is necessary to sustain a successful career and life in South Africa. Luxury is generally associated with expensiveness, but this is also a relative concept. The idea of expensiveness varies with different levels of financial status and means and the class attached to such status.

Opposites or dualisms such as luxury and necessity play crucial thematic roles in my work. This is evident in the Mielie Collection, which I discuss in the previous chapter. The Protea Collection also deals with thematic dualisms, as well as with material and technical aspects that refer to dualism. In both the Mielie and Protea Collections, I combine materials that cause points of tension between two types of materials. In the crocheted pieces of the Mielie Collection, I combine silver and steel. Their points of connection<sup>39</sup> seem fragile, evoking the fragility of dualisms. The same is true in the handbags and brooches of the Protea Collection, which I discuss at a later stage in this chapter. The silicone and the silver are connected to one another by means of piercing the silicone with the silver and clamping the silicone. This technique of joining two materials symbolises the fragility of their connectedness and in fact emphasises their separateness.

### 3.2.3 The creation of desire by means of luxury

Before the eighteenth century, ideologies were negatively critical about the idea of luxury: “luxury was pernicious to the state and a dangerous self-indulgence for the individual” and a life of luxury was thought to “erode moral values” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:136). These ideologies and theories were rejected by economists after the eighteenth century, as they began to think that luxury could play a positive role in society. The economists argued that luxury provoked desire to possess and this would promote economic wealth, which could eventually filter through to everyone and all levels of society (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:136). From then on, desire was promoted and encouraged to evolve into a culture of extreme extravagance and a consumerist society filled with abundant yearning for more and more possessions. By referring to a quotation of Anna Johnson in her book, *Handbags: The Power of The Purse*, I validate how this consumer desire is exploited and created:

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<sup>39</sup> See pages 61 to 70 (Figs. 2.47; 2.49; 2.55; 2.57)

The ideal handbag, like a beautiful shoe, has never really been about necessity. It is the stuff of dreams, desire, and deliverance from the banal. It is that house we can't afford embodied in Italian straw; it is a first kiss in cherry-red velvet, a movie star flash of rhinestone or a crush of glossy patent leather from Paris, France. A portable fashion object unperturbed by the change of the body or the heavy hand of age, the bag is infinitely optimistic. We carry it, and it transports us into the lives we wish we were living (2002:xvii).



Figure 3.1

Louis Vuitton, *Vernis Collection* advertisement  
(Steele & Borrelli, 1999:133).

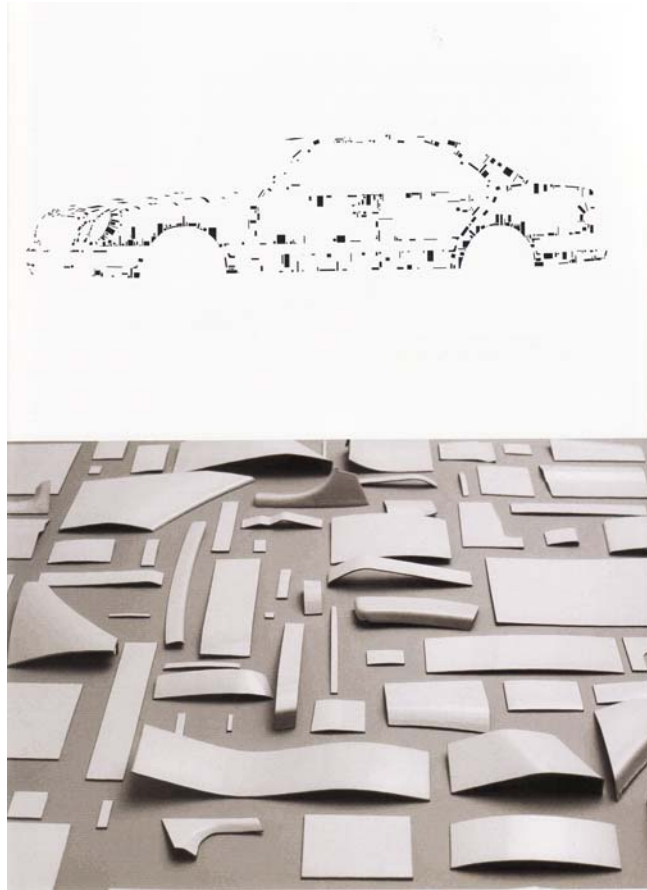


Figure 3.2

Louis Vuitton, *Vernis Collection* advertisement  
(Steele & Borrelli, 1999:38-39).

In Europe, luxury accessories like handbags caught the public's imagination in the mid-twentieth century. This was due to the perception that an expensive handbag could be expected to last a lifetime. In France it has long been a bourgeois ritual to present a Hermès Kelly bag to a young woman on her twenty-first birthday. Brand names, in association with social status, began to play a pivotal role in the twentieth century. Brands that grew to be internationally famous for their exclusive handbags and leather goods include Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Fendi and Prada. In contrast to the previous centuries, in which the models of the handbags could remain the same for decades, the bag has now become a fad that changes every season (Van Eijk, 2004:15). The aspiration to possess one or more of these branded bags is fed by advertisements that blatantly exploit such desire to possess these objects. This is illustrated in these advertisements of Louis Vuitton handbags (Fig. 3.1). In the campaign for the Louis Vuitton Monogram Vernis collection, the bags are portrayed as objects of envy. The owners of the bags are portrayed as “obsessive when it comes to these particular products, appealing very clearly to the moneyed ‘Me’ generation” (Steele & Borrelli 1999:133). Another image in this campaign (Fig. 3.2) is where a game of “blind man’s bluff is played for high stakes as the ‘prize’ is a Louis Vuitton Monogram Vernis bag” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:39). These advertisements connect emotive connotations of desire and envy to their handbags, encouraging good moral behaviour and consequent social acceptability.

Branded bags like Louis Vuitton handbags became known as status bags, which function as status symbols, positioning people in different classes in society. Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli explain that “[s]tatus symbols, like the Mercedes automobile and the Louis Vuitton bag, are objects to which a set of unspoken but powerful associations is attached. The logo is like a license plate that announces: “We’re from the same tribe” or at least we have the same credit limit” (Ryan, 1995 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:104). A contemporary artist that used the status of the Mercedes-Benz is Ted Noten and his work *Mercedes-Benz Brooches* (Fig. 3.3).



**Figure 3.3**

Ted Noten, 2001. *Mercedes-Benz Brooches*

Top: *Mercedes-Benz E-class 210*, 2001. Photograph on aluminium covered with acrylic sheet

Bottom: *The Smith Collection*, 2001. Brooches of Mercedes-Benz E-class 210  
(Staal, 2006:57).



**Figure 3.4**

Fake Louis Vuitton trash bag

Internet Image (Social Graph, 2008).

Noten said: “Is there any greater icon in the industrial world than the Mercedes-Benz? I don’t think so. CEOs, real estate agents, small-time hustlers in the building trade, politicians, Mongolian drug dealers and Birmingham greengrocers: all around the globe they share the love for a Merc. More than any other ornament it symbolises success and social status” (Staal, 2006:56). He produced this collection, the *Mercedes-Benz Brooches*, by cutting pieces out of a new Mercedes car and transforming them into brooches. One of the objectives was to give the ‘general public’ a chance to say that they owned an ‘original Mercedes-Benz’ at a fraction of the price. The same concept is relevant to the fake Louis Vuitton trash bag, which gives the owner the opportunity to own a Louis Vuitton bag, but the idea that it is in the form of a trash bag can indicate either the ridiculousness of luxury or serve as an ‘anti-luxury’ statement.

### 3.2.4 Luxury as conjuncture between jewellery and handbags

This section will look at the relationship between handbags and jewellery in terms of concepts like luxury and preciousness.

In *Bags: A Lexicon of Style*, Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli divide handbags into five different categories (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:5). I found this to be one of the best definitions of handbags in terms of a general, commercial, international, up-to-date understanding of the handbag. Firstly they refer to practical bags. Carrie Donovan writes in the article, *Brown Bagging It*, in The New York Times that “[f]or many women the tote bag is an office away from the desk, a portable dressing table, a locker room, lunch-pail, shopping cart, travel bag, or an amalgam of all of these” (Donovan, 1987:65 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:14). These bags are everyday bags in which the focus is on functionality. Secondly, they refer to utility bags, bags that are “buckled around the waist, strapped on the hip, or worn on the back” (1999:11). Thirdly, they discuss status<sup>40</sup> bags. These bags are very expensive bags from famous designer houses, like the Louis Vuitton and Hermès bags that I discussed

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<sup>40</sup> The status bag is a branded bag; it belongs to the biggest fashion houses globally. These bags are some of the most expensive bags (for example a Hermès Birkin bag costs around R64 000). As Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli define it: “The significance of the status bag centres on its name or logo” (1999:10). These status bags form a significant part of the study of handbags. The distinction between the status and luxury bag is described as follows: “There is obviously considerable overlap between the status bag and the luxury bag, since almost all status bags are made of luxurious materials that are artfully handcrafted. But whereas the significance of the status bag centres on its name or logo, a luxury bag is usually valued ‘because of what it is made of, for its intrinsic value’” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:136-139).



previously. Fourthly, they refer to luxury<sup>41</sup> bags, which focus on design, material and craftsmanship, and do not necessarily carry a famous label, “certainly at some level, the luxury bag aspires to be a work of art” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:139). Lastly, they refer to the precious<sup>42</sup> bags.

If I had to categorise my Mielie and Protea Collections according to these definitions, I would say that they are precious bags. The precious bag is the tiniest bag in all the categories. These bags are “certainly not practical, but make a visual statement. Like jewelry, they tend to be characterised by precious materials, artistic workmanship, and feminine iconography” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:10). Blaine Trump makes an observation about evening bags which I find relevant to my own work: “You just want evening bags to disappear and be objects of amusement” (cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:63-65). I find this of relevance, because my bags are works of art. They function like little sculptures to be carried on one’s body and they rather serve as objects of amusement.

Evening bags, according to the previous classification and definitions, are made of “precious materials and feature unique details. Although most ordinary bags are made of leather, precious bags are usually crafted from silk, taffeta, organza, satin, moiré, brocade, faille, muslin, or velvet. Not only are the basic materials luxurious, precious bags also featuring jewel-like embellishments. Indeed, these bags are not unlike jewels” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:60). The Mielie and Protea Collections are contemporary in terms of design and material and, in contrast to conventional handbags, formally defined as evening bags in terms of concept, functionality, design and material. Furthermore, Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli say that precious bags are defined by their size, as a very small bag implies that “the woman is being taken care of, like the queen of England (who famously never carries any money). There is snob appeal in smallness” (1999:60). “Precious bags are the antithesis of the practical, everyday survival kit. They are “anti-schlep” bags” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:63-65).

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<sup>41</sup> Luxury bags are “primarily distinguished by the quality of their materials and craftsmanship” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:11) and they “aspire to be like couture accessories, and couture is the type of fashion that most closely approaches art. Couture emphasises individuality, creativity, and quality of craftsmanship” (1999:142).

<sup>42</sup> The precious bag is the tiniest bag of all the categories. Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli says that these bags are “certainly not practical, but makes a visual statement. Like jewelry, they tend to be characterised by precious materials, artistic workmanship, and feminine iconography” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:10). Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli state in their book, *Bags: A Lexicon of Style*, that “[a]s tiny toys, precious bags are often characterised by delicate, overtly ‘feminine’ iconography” (1999:68).



**Figure 3.5**  
Hermès Birkin Bag; Black Crocodile with Diamonds  
Internet Image (Purseblog, 2008).



**Figure 3.6**  
Judith Leiber, Polar Bear minaudière, hand-covered rhinestones set by hand.  
(Steele & Borrelli, 1999:72-73).

The concept of luxury objects shifted during the past few decades as the notion of globalisation developed.<sup>43</sup> Designer houses became global brands that grew into economic giants. These designer brands retail in enormous numbers of products in shops. As a result, their products are not 'individualistic' anymore and too accessible. The future of luxury is described as 'one-of-a-kind experiences' and singular products. This concept of "uniqueness is something along with quality, that luxury consumers desire universally" (Betts, 2007:6).

Over the past few decades, this has become evident as a radical part of the development of the handbag as a luxurious object in the form of status. Handbags of similar value as that of high-priced jewellery are designed and manufactured with the same precious materials, such as the Hermès Birkin Bag, in which the hardware consists of diamond settings (Fig. 3.5). Judith Leiber (Figs. 3.6 to 3.8), a famous American designer of evening bags, creates small minaudières.<sup>44</sup> She is very famous for her small luxurious evening bags that are hand painted and covered in crystals. She believes that "a lady need only carry a lipstick, a handkerchief, and a hundred-dollar bill" (cited in Johnson, 2002:103). Her diminutive, jewel-like bags serve as "an antidote to the schlep, an abnegation of responsibility at its most glamorous" (cited in Johnson 2002:103). These bags are jewellery pieces. Luxurious materials and exquisite craftsmanship are essential in these bags, as well as the perfect execution of technical processes and practices involved in their manufacturing.

### 3.2.5 Conclusion

The fact that both are labelled as items of luxury defines the connection between handbags and jewellery. The role luxury plays in the creation of desire, as discussed in

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<sup>43</sup> In the Style and Design supplement of *Time* Magazine, Fall 2007, a Global Luxury Survey was published to indicate how consumers define luxury in different markets around the world. They say that analysts and experts have a clear definition of luxury as it pertains to established markets like the US, Europe and Japan. But for many affluent consumers in emerging markets like China, India and Russia, the concept of luxury is still new (Betts 2007:6).

<sup>44</sup> Minaudières are small cases that combine the functions of purse and compact. "Charles Arpel designed the first minaudière after observing the socialite Florence Jay Gould carry her makeup and lighter in a metal Lucky Strike cigarette case" (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:71 from Lender, 1995:120) Claire Wilcox reports that Alfred van Kleef patented the name as "a tribute to his wife Estelle, who had a tendency to *minauder*, meaning to simper or charm" (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:71 from Wilcox, 1997:64).

this section, is essential to understanding how and why luxury features as conceptual subject matter in my own work.



**Figure 3.7**  
Judith Leiber and her Minaudières  
(Johnson, 2002:99).



**Figure 3.8**  
Judith Leiber and a patriotic American Minaudière  
(Johnson, 2002:367).



**Figure 3.9**  
Louis Vuitton advertisement  
“A peek of red lingerie hints at the intimate world contained within the bag”  
(Steele & Borrelli, 1999:53).

### 3.3 The Inside of the Handbag

#### 3.3.1 Introduction

Anna Johnson writes in the introduction of her book, *Handbags: The Power of the Purse*, that:

The cleft between respectable exterior and intensely private interior is what gives the handbag such erotic and transgressive charge. It is perhaps a woman's last secret place. The language that surrounds it is possessive and territorial: clutch, clasp, grasp, strap and snap shut (2002:xii).

The inside of the handbag is what gives this object a reason for existence and also reveals its complexity. Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli note in *Bags: A Lexicon of Style* that “[b]ags are not only functional survival kits, precious objects, and expensive status symbols, they are also intensely personal receptacles” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:11) (Fig. 3.9). The interior of the handbag contains belongings that a person carries with her daily. Such belongings can be seen as a private collection of ‘things’.<sup>45</sup> These collections often include objects that are essential necessities for the owner of the bag, while they might be perceived as meaningless or irrelevant by others. A list of examples would be endless, but the contents of handbags would for example include photographs of loved ones, even photographs of the owners themselves; books, whether diary, writing, telephone or drawing books. I will discuss the contents of handbags in more detail in the following chapter, since it ties in with a consistent theme in my work, namely that of the private versus public as concept of opposites. I will briefly refer to the handbag as an object that is associated with security and how it is relevant within a South African context. Then I will look at the inside of the bag in relation to abjection to conduct a general discussion about this concept.

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<sup>45</sup> See footnote 1 page i





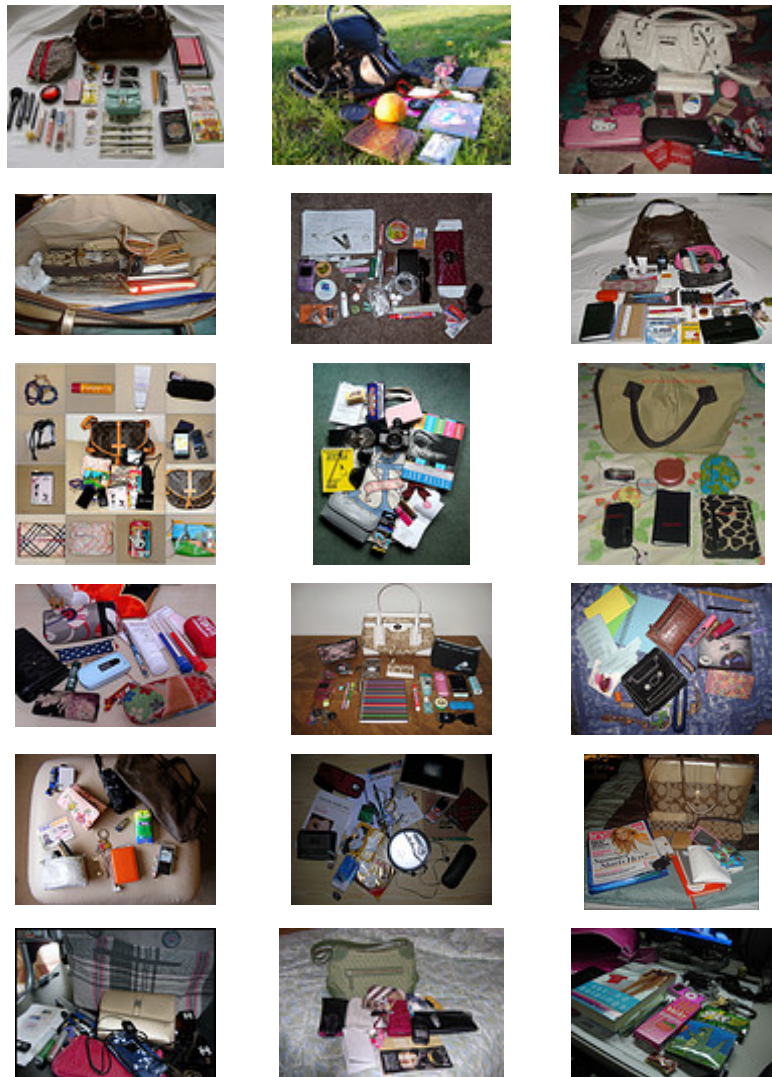


Figure 3.12  
Members of the group What Is In Your Bag?  
Internet Image (Flicker.Com, 2008a).

### 3.3.2 Security

The inside of a handbag offers information about the owner of the handbag. A webpage titled Flickr.com is a site where anybody can upload any photographs, which are organised into designated groups according to subject. In this site there are more or less eleven groups referring to the content of a handbag (Figs. 3.10 & 3.11) and thousands of images of people who unpack their bags to photograph their contents for posting on this site (Fig. 3.12). Detailed inscriptions on each item are visible. These images form a large database for research about the content of a handbag.

Generally, the contents of a woman's handbag include forms of identification, such as a driver's license, identity document or passport. Objects representing some form of mobility or a form of transport, whether it is the keys for a car or a public transport ticket, are also usually to be found in her handbag. A form of currency, like a credit card, debit card or cheque book, is always present. A form of technology for communication, like a mobile phone, and house keys are always to be found in her bag. All these objects are very common inhabitants of handbags. Essentially, such items can only be used by the owner of the handbag and they are inevitably only identifiable in relation to the owner for reasons of security. Cornel West states that a profound desire for protection, security, safety and surety exists and "in talking about identity we have to begin to look at the various ways in which human beings have constructed their desire for recognition, association, and protection over time and in space and always under circumstances not of their own choosing" (cited in Beckett, 2004:156).

These objects therefore become symbols of safety and security. South African handbag owners, as I have become aware through observing people around me, tend to possess numerous safety-related objects. If I study my own personal safety objects in my handbag, I find numerous keys, because every door in my house has a safety gate with a separate lock, remote controls for the gate to enter the safety complex, pepper spray and a flashlight. Owing to the high crime rate in South Africa, the inhabitants of this country see security as an essential necessity. Issues relating to safety, security and crime have become part of a collective South African consciousness that even could constitute identity. Constant awareness of my own safety has also become an inextricable part of my conscious mind, to the extent that I have internalised it to be part of how I perceive myself in relation to my immediate environment. In *The Times* newspaper, Bongani Mthethwa reports that during 2005-2006, 302 000 girls under the age of eighteen were raped (Mthethwa, 2008). These statistics explain the demand for security systems in South Africa. Small weapons or instruments of security are therefore understandably present in the handbags of South Africans. One of the most controversial security objects that exists in South Africa is a female condom designed to trap men that rape women. The product, known as RapeX, was "developed to empower women to defend themselves against



rapists” (Rapestop, 2008). This product was launched in South Africa in August 2005 and is a shocking indicator of the need for protection and security in South Africa.

### 3.3.3 Abjection

Anna Johnson writes in her book, *Handbags: The Power of the Purse*, that a handbag is an archive for future generations when she proclaims that “The contents of a vintage handbag form the most reliable time capsule and definitely the most honest. Opening a 1930s Cartier bag that once belonged to a showgirl, the couture collector Mark Walsh found a bottle of scent, a booklet of powdered leaves, and a pair of pink satin knickers (perfectly clean)” (2002:xii).

The extreme privacy associated with the inside of a woman’s handbag is epitomised by the knickers in the example mentioned above. For the owner of the handbag, this private space symbolises the opposite pole of public identity construction and projection of the self represented by the exterior of the bag (see Chapter 2).

Yet, Anthony Elliot states that “we often think of the self as primarily a private domain, an inner realm of personal thoughts, values, strivings, emotions and desires” (2001:24). This view is in contrast to sociologists’ outline of personal identity and the self: “Sociology demonstrates the need to look at the impact of other people, the wider society, as well as cultural forms and moral norms, in the making of the self” (Elliott, 2001:24). I apply and employ the notion of the habitus of Pierre Bourdieu because this theory accounts for both agency and structure as locations for identity construction: “The central thesis to emphasise, then, is that habitus is a mediating construct, not a determining one. It is also ‘a virtue made of necessity’ (Bourdieu, 1984a:372 cited in Harker *et al.*, 1990:12). Agency, for me, also indicates the privacy of the inner self, while structure represents the public.

The private and intimate nature of carrying a handbag and the investigation of the private contents of handbags relate to the body in terms of abjection. I approach this relationship in a symbolic manner. Julia Kristeva (theorist of language and literature, psychoanalysis and feminism) describes abjection in her essay *Power of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* in terms of ambiguity and uncertainty: “[It is] not [a] lack of cleanliness or health that causes

abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kirsteva, 1982:4 cited in Nead, 1992:32). Kirsteva defines the abject as follows,

Objects that produce abjection are those that traverse the threshold of the inside and outside of the body – tears, urine, faeces and so on. The abject, then, is the space between subject and object; the site of both desire and danger (Kirsteva, 1982:11-12 cited in Nead, 1992:32).

According to Lynda Nead in her book, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, the most significant border, according to Kristeva, is that between the subject and the object and the distinction between the inside and the outside of the body (Nead, 1992:32). As for my research, the distinction between the exterior of the handbag in relation to the interior of the handbag is the most significant border and also motivates the inclusion of Kristeva and her notion of abjection in my studies. A second reason for including abjection is the fact that objects (such as tampons, knickers, tissues and birth control pills) representative of traversing ‘the threshold of the inside and outside of the body’ always form part of the contents of women’s handbags. The series of photographs in Chapter 4, titled *Stillewe van ‘n Selfportret I-VI*,<sup>46</sup> illustrates the different types and variety of objects found in handbags. It is clear from these photographs that those tiny shreds of paper, tobacco and dust that gather at the bottom of a handbag also tell a story about the handbag’s owner.

The private and abjective objects found in handbags, like knickers, tampons, sanitary pads and birth control pills, are commonly hidden in side pockets or placed in separate private bags inside the handbag to avoid the risk of public exposure and subsequent embarrassment in case the object is revealed. Nead states in her study of Kristeva that “[s]ubjectivity is organised around an awareness of this distinction and the sense of the body as a unified whole, defining the form and limits of corporeal identity” (1992:32). The ways in which “subjectivity and sociality are based on the expulsion of that which is considered unclean or impure from the clean and proper self” (Nead, 1992:32) is a concern for Kristeva. This expulsion entails a “rejection or disavowal of the subject’s corporeal functioning, especially those functions that are defined as filthy or anti-social” (Nead, 1992:32). However, “this process of rejection can never be final or complete but

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<sup>46</sup> See page 196 (Figs. 4.82 to 4.87)

remains always at the border of the subject's identity, threatening to dissolve apparent unities and making identity a continuously provisional state. It is the individual's recognition of the impossibility of a permanently fixed and stable identity that provokes the experience of abjection" (Nead, 1992:32).

I discuss abjection in order to illustrate the privacy of the inside of the handbag, the function of this private space, and the way it is managed. I will explain how these reasons relate to my Protea Collection.

#### **3.3.4 Conclusion**

The inside of the handbag relates to privacy and security as socially located structures. Due to the current high crime rate in South Africa, security is of central importance in this society. The 'collective' contents of a handbag reveal and indicate such characteristic aspects of the society in which it is located. Abjection, as representative of a global society, can be related to the inside and privacy of the handbag.

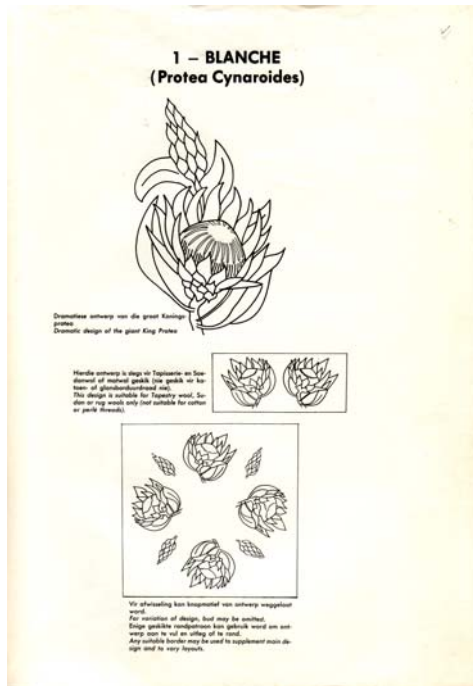


Figure 3.13  
Design

Blanche – *Protea cynaroides*. (Lups, 1976).



Figure 3.14

Embroidered example

Blanche – *Protea cynaroides*. (Lups, 1976).

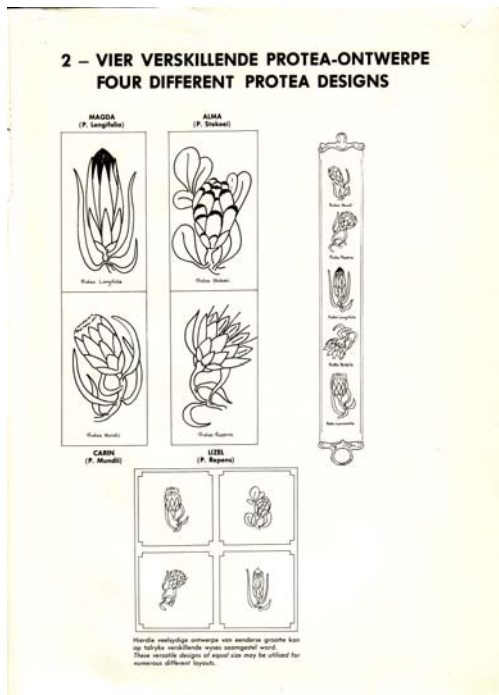


Figure 3.15  
Design

Four different Protea designs. (Lups, 1976).



Figure 3.16

Embroidered example: Lizel, Magda, Carin, Rene, Estelle, Maria. (Lups, 1976).



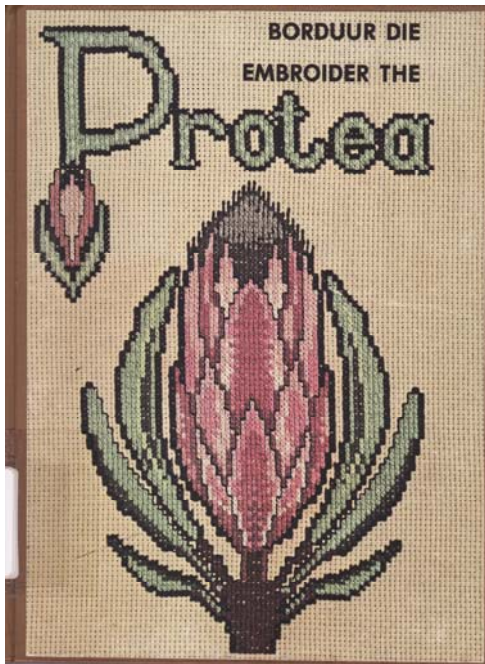


Figure 3.17

Title page: *Catherina - Protea repens*  
*Borduur Die/ Embroider The Protea.* (Lups, 1976).



Figure 3.18

Back page: *Louisa - Protea cynaroides*  
*Two flowers and monogram of authors.* (Lups, 1976).

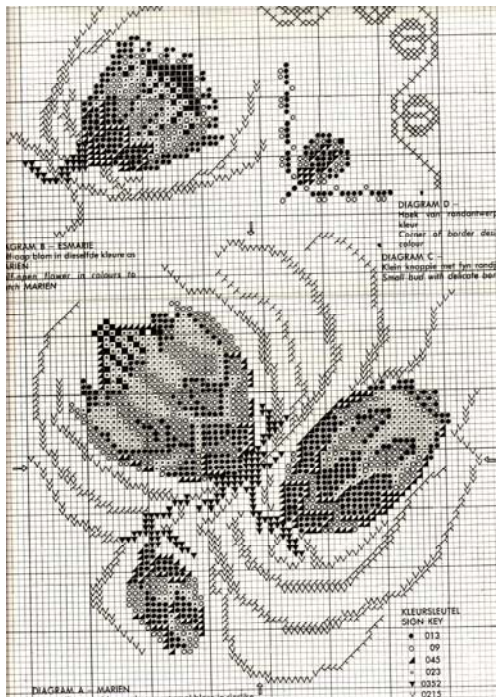


Figure 3.19

Pattern  
*Marien - Protea Minor.* (Lups, 1976).



Figure 3.20

Embroidered examples  
*Marien, Emily and Maretha.* (Lups, 1976).



Figure 3.21

The South African National Cricket Team Emblem  
Internet Image (South African Cricket, 2008).



Figure 3.22

The South African Parliament Emblem  
Internet Image (South Africa Parliament, 2008).



Figure 3.23

*Protea cynaroides* or the king protea  
Internet Image (Citrusart, 2008).

## 3.4 The Protea Collection

### 3.4.1 Introduction

To be able to discuss and critically analyse the Protea Collection I will start by describing its origins. I will refer to the reason why I chose the protea as an icon and cultural reference. Thereafter I will describe to a more personal approach in employing the protea as symbolic object.

Secondly, I will discuss the transformation of this icon in my art-making processes. I will describe those processes involved in creating the Protea Collection, with reference to its material transformation and development. I will also discuss the first silicone handbag, the wedding bag. After this I will discuss each individual piece in the silicone Protea Collection to explain metaphorical and symbolic meaning.

### 3.4.2 Origins

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth explanation and discussion of the reasons behind choosing cultural icons<sup>47</sup> as thematic material for my art-making processes. When I started selecting cultural icons, the protea posited itself as one of the most prominent and obvious symbols. The book *Borduur die Protea/Embroider the Protea* (Figs. 3.13 to 3.20) suggests the national importance of the protea and the role it played in the South African handwork aesthetic. The protea is a national symbol. It is officially declared to be the national flower of South Africa. It was declared as such during the apartheid era by the previous government and the current government continues to uphold it as national flower and symbol of South African identity. It serves as logo and name of the South African National Cricket team (Fig. 3.21) and features in the emblem of Parliament (Fig. 3.22). This flower represents national pride and an identity of unity in the minds of South Africans.

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<sup>47</sup> See pages 36 to 37





**Figure 3.24**  
*Protea cynaroides* or the king protea  
Detail: leaves look like velvet  
Internet Image (Citrusart, 2008).



**Figure 3.25**  
Nanette Nel, 2008. Visual study, Drawing  
Inside of king protea resembling a faceted stone.

To justify this collective acknowledgement of the protea as symbolic of unity, I refer to Pierre Bourdieu. He states that “[t]he practice of each individual is taken to be an embodiment of a collective history of practice. This means that the system of dispositions (habitus) which structures the practice of the individual is no more than a homologous variant of the system of dispositions which have structured the practice of all the other individuals who have belonged to the same group or class throughout its history” (cited in Codd, 1990:140).

In the process of social learning that is the genesis of practice, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class are able to pass from practice to practice (i.e. from adult to child) without going through discourse or consciousness. Both structure and habitus, therefore, exist in what Bourdieu calls *bodily hexis*, which is ‘political mythology realised, *embodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*’ (Codd, 1990:140).

The decision to use emblems from my cultural heritage was motivated by a need to understand my own identity construction. I reckoned that facing my culture and by using its symbols I might understand more about myself.

The reasons for choosing the protea as an icon in my practical research originated from my own personal history of growing up in this country. I went to school and grew up in Newcastle in Northern Natal. Coming to Stellenbosch in the Western Cape after school to study felt like moving to another country. Winter, instead of summer, is the rainy season; the summer is dry and the vegetation brown, hard and dry in contrast to the grasslands and subtropical weather of my hometown. To live here required significant adaptation.



Relocating to a new and strange place and dealing with this experience in a completely self-reliant way transformed my awareness, understanding and perceptions of life and the world. These new perceptions also brought new perspectives on my past and heritage, enabling me to translate both the old and the new into my art work. I fell instantly in love with this region. I will always associate my engagement with this new environment with freedom. In my art-making processes the protea, a flower that is indigenous to this region, signifies and symbolises such associations.

To explain how my personal history, relocation and eventual inner transformation can be translated into such extended and allegorical meaning in the form of art works, I refer to the habitus and its relevance. It is through understanding habitus and the light it sheds on my own perceptual propensities that I gain knowledge and understanding of my art-making processes and their motivational forces and origin. The contribution I make through my art is distinct from that of others. I am interested in the particular composite elements of my art and what they signify. I do not see my art so much as a reflection of reality, than I understand and practice it as performing my own voice, reflecting my own construct of reality and making meaning of my world.

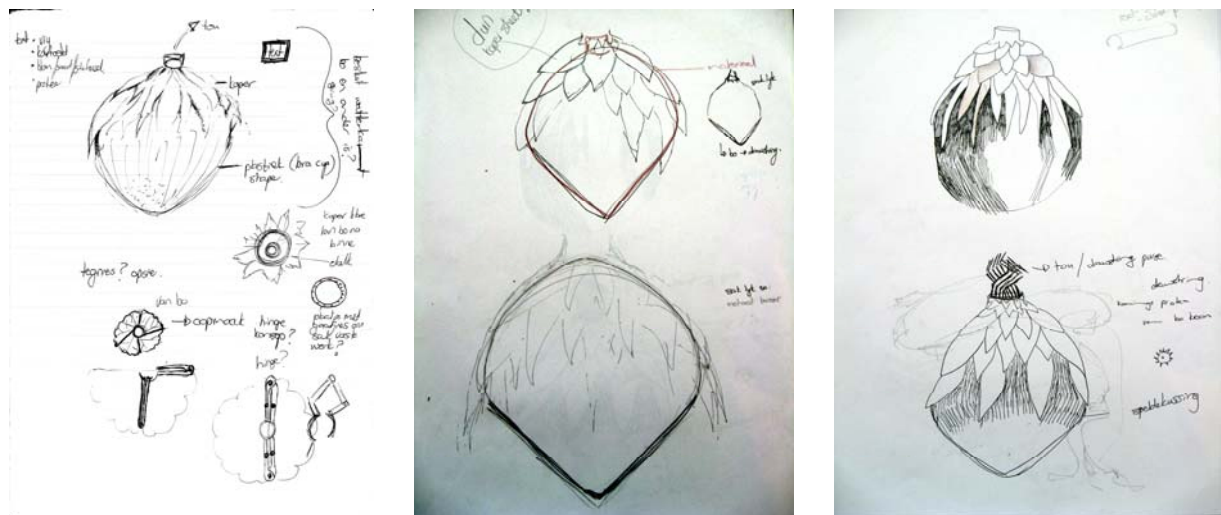


Figure 3.28

Nanette Nel, 2006. Detail: *Design Drawings*. Visual research for the Protea Collection. Single protea handbags designs.





Figure 3.29  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea sculptures. Clay designs and models.



Figure 3.30  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea sculptures. Wax protea models.



Figure 3.31  
Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail, *Bronze Protea*.

### 3.4.3 Transformation

#### 3.4.3.1 Introduction

The transformation of the icon, the protea, into a final Collection happened by means of an in-depth visual research process.

The protea, and especially the *Protea cynaroides* or the king protea (Fig. 3.23), fascinated me as a result of the significant role it plays in South African culture. As the previously discussed examples suggest, the symbolism connected to the protea has underlying male connotations.<sup>48</sup> I assume this relates to the physical nature of the flower. Usually flowers have a female or strong feminine connection, but the protea is a hard, stiff and tough flower with pointy hard leaves (Fig. 3.23). The texture of the leaves resembles that of velvet (Fig. 3.24). The inside of the protea consists of multiple single threads which form a faceted core (Fig. 3.25). This core resembles the shape of a brilliant cut stone turned upside down. One must take into account that this description of the protea is subjectively based on my associations with the flower and also on the way I studied it (Figs. 3.26 & 3.27). It is in no way related to or done in the 'scientific' botanical manner, but rather in a visually interpretative way of looking at it. When I started to work with the protea I focused on those various characteristics of the flower that I found visually striking. I concentrated on a combination of the various shapes present in it and the physical sensation it afforded: its peculiar combinations of velvety softness and hard, angular rigidity.

In the process of re-translating the protea into a handbag form, I started to think about jewellery and the conventions of jewellery design and manufacturing (Fig. 3.27). I saw the resemblances between designing jewellery and designing such a handbag. In both design processes one becomes aware of certain boundaries positioning themselves to result in definite specifications for the object that would work in structure, material and manufacturing. Practical considerations are unavoidable, whether regarding design elements such as size, structure, proportions or functionality. One has to make decisions regarding what to hang it on as pendant, a way to attach it to the ear as earrings, a way to wear on the hands as a ring or a way to attach to the clothes of the wearer in the case of a

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<sup>48</sup> See page 97 (Fig. 3.21)

brooch. I know that these considerations constitute the conventional ways of approaching jewellery. To challenge the conventional ways of designing with these basic elements and considerations, one needs to understand them. I studied conventional forms of handbags in order to challenge them. In a certain way, the object 'took over' at some point and guided the process and incidences of decision making. The decisions that were demanded in this way also generated new options and directions in which the object could possibly go. Instead of placing a handle on a shape and calling it a handbag, my aim was to challenge such conventions by applying my specific idiolect.



Figure 3.32

Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail, Bronze Protea Sculptures (candle holders). Bronze, steel, sandstone.



### 3.4.3.2 **The bronze protea**

Deconstructing the conventional elements of handbags and reconstructing them in the translation of the protea as an icon was largely guided by the visual examination of the shape of the protea and the resulting understanding of the object's potential to become a handbag (Fig. 3.28). Working with various types of proteas resulted in a variety of designs emerging from the research processes (Fig. 3.29). Only when I decided to use the silhouette of the king protea (the biggest protea) in three-dimensional form did the process expand and develop. I made moulds of the protea in order to use the protea upside down as a drawstring purse. I cast the protea in wax (Fig. 3.30), which was processed into lost wax bronze casting. The bronze protea was finished off with a black and white patina which gave the bronze a softer velvety look (Fig. 3.31). At this point I realised that if I transformed this piece into a handbag it will become a safety hazard. The bronze protea weighed 1kg and had pointed edges which would make it nearly impossible to wear, which could serve in interesting ways as social commentary, but was not what I wanted to communicate. Here I decided that the bronze proteas should become sculptures (possibly candle holders) (Fig. 3.32). The bronze protea was thus a learning curve in the process, even though the results were not successful in the end. This assessing of the functionality of the bronze protea and those obstacles presented in its development, occurred during the creation of the Bronze Mielie and also played a role in the evolvement of my aesthetic disposition as discussed in great detail in the previous chapter.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.4.3.3 **Material transformation**

Those design problems presented by the bronze protea also occurred in the bronze mielie.<sup>50</sup> The bronze mielie was visually successful, the protea not so. Despite my efforts to exploit the male connotations with the flower by emphasising its hardness, that is not what communicated visually. I tried other materials such as resin and plastic (Fig. 3.33). These materials were lighter but came across as too heavy, non-functional and solid. The pink colour of the silicone and all it entails in symbolic and allegorical terms was an effective visual reference to the icon. I realised that working with soft, flexible material would emphasize the hardness of the flower. I retraced my steps and decided to revisit the shape and the mould-making process. In this way, I learnt I could employ suggestion,

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<sup>49</sup> See page 51

<sup>50</sup> See pages 48 to 50 (Fig 2.35)

allegory and metaphor to add meaning or to communicate my intentions. Pink, for example, has come to symbolise the gay community<sup>51</sup> or culture. My pink proteas, in this way, involved the maleness of the flower in an ironic way and in direct opposition to the macho male culture that is also very prevalent in South Africa amongst all its diverse cultures.



Figure 3.33  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea experiments. Plastic, pva paint.



Figure 3.34  
Nanette Nel, 2006. Protea experiments. Silicone, thread, needles.

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<sup>51</sup> See page 130 ( Figs. 3.69 to 3.70)

All such experimentation led to my infatuation with the material characteristics of silicone and processes of mould making. I found the mould (the negative) more interesting than its positive, resulting in my starting to experiment with the mould as final form (Fig. 3.34). I tested a variety of silicone types until I found the appropriate one for this Collection.

These developments and transformations of material in the Protea Collection are very important. I studied a contextual history of materials and their influences on the development of the handbag. I recount a brief history of the development of materials here in order to create a historical framework for relating the material transformation that occurred in Protea. Traditionally, handbags were made of textiles and leather. The Industrial Revolution<sup>52</sup> introduced huge varieties of new products that could be manufactured faster. One such was papier-mâché. It was used on a large scale and often combined with cut steel (Figs. 3.35 & 3.36). Even though steel had already been manufactured in Europe since the Middle Ages, the Industrial Revolution improved the production process and cut steel became popular in the nineteenth century as hardware for various objects (Van Eijk, 2004:172).

Tortoiseshell and ivory (Figs. 3.37 to 3.40) were used in the nineteenth century in the manufacturing of clasps, combs and so forth, but because they were not easy to come by and also difficult to work with, they were very expensive. After the arrival of the first plastics, such as celluloid (1868), casein (1897) and cellulose acetate (1926), tortoiseshell and ivory were often imitated for mass production of more affordable products. Thus, the practice of copying luxurious products also facilitated the development of the handbag. This can be seen in approximately 1919, when plastics were no longer used as a cheap alternative, but rather as a good and strong modern structure (Figs. 2.41 & 2.42) (Van Eijk, 2004:182).

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<sup>52</sup> The Industrial Revolution is usually considered to have begun in around 1760 in England (Van Eijk, 2004:172).



Figure 3.35  
Papier-mâché handbag with cut steel frame:  
France, 1820s  
(Van Eijk, 2004:177).



Figure 3.36  
Detail of lock of cut steel frame on handbag,  
German, 1820  
(Van Eijk, 2004:179).



Figure 3.37  
Leather handbag with cover-sheet of tortoise-  
shell inlaid with mother-of-pearl: Germany, 1820  
(Van Eijk, 2004:186).



Figure 3.38  
Leather handbag with cover-sheet of tortoise-  
shell inlaid with mother-of-pearl: Germany,  
1810-1820  
(Van Eijk, 2004:186).





**Figure 3.39**

Leather handbag with ivory cover sheet, Greek dancers, silver border: Germany, 1920 (Van Eijk, 2004:188).



**Figure 3.40**

Leather pochette with ivory cover-sheet, Pallas Athena, silver border: Germany, 1925 (Van Eijk, 2004:188).



**Figure 3.41**

Left: Maison de Bonneterie, Right: Elizabeth Arden  
USA, 1950s, plastic beads  
(Van Eijk, 2004:277).



**Figure 3.42**

Four plastic Rodolac pouches;  
USA, ca. 1937  
(Van Eijk, 2004:276).



**Figure 3.43**  
Silver ring mesh handbag with ivory ring to open and close  
Germany, 1910  
(Van Eijk, 2004:267).



**Figure 3.44**  
Mesh handbag designed by Elsa Schiaparelli for Whiting and Davis  
USA, 1936-1937  
(Van Eijk, 2004:266).

By the end of the nineteenth century, metal bags and purses were highly popular, especially those in silver and ring mesh. These ring mesh bags were expensive because the rings were attached to each other one by one using jewellery techniques (Fig. 3.43). They were often made of silver, but plated and other metals appeared. After 1909 the ring mesh bags and purses became considerably cheaper due to the American A.C. Pratt's invention of a machine for manufacturing ring mesh. Another American company, Whiting and Davis, acquired the patent and became the best known company in this field. They manufactured bags designed by well-known designers such as Paul Poiret and Elsa Schiaparelli (Fig. 3.44) (Van Eijk, 2004:262).

This history shows that by trying to copy the luxurious and expensive existing handbags, the search for new materials evolved, both for the designers who imitated luxurious objects in cheaper alternative materials and for designers working in expensive materials for making luxury goods (that in turn would be copied in cheaper alternative materials). In this way, new materials were generated specifically as a result of the requirements of the handbag-manufacturing industry. As explained above, the Mielie's and Protea's development depended to a large extent on experimenting with and utilising unconventional materials. The historical development in utilisation and invention of new materials described here influenced many of my decisions in designing and making the Mielie and Protea Collections.

#### 3.4.3.4 **Wedding bag**

The first silicone handbag I made was a white protea bag. I called it *Trou-Trou* (Fig. 3.45). The aim was to create a bunch of flowers arranged as a wedding bouquet traditionally carried by the bride. This bag was translucent and had a very strong visual reference to a condom due to its colour and the texture of the material. I decided not to include this piece in the final Collection, because its technical execution was not good. It also conveyed meaning that was at odds with that which is conveyed by the integrated final selection of Protea pieces.





Figure 3.45  
Nanette Nel, 2007: *Trou-Trou*  
Silicone, perspex.

In the design processes of the Protea Collection (Figs. 3.26 & 3.27)<sup>53</sup> I continued to experiment with the protea as a bouquet. This led to the idea of making a wedding bag. Transforming a flower into a handbag as notion, combined with the design processes involved in such transformation, highlighted issues dealing with gender. This development gave birth to the idea to make a wedding bag. I include a brief contextual history that creates background information on the concept of a wedding bag.

Different types of handbags, each appropriate to specific social, religious and cultural rituals and ceremonies, also carried a variety of applicable meanings. Handbags were mostly worn by women and therefore became gender specific or mainly associated with women. The practice of wearing a specific type of handbag of symbolic value to traditional Western wedding<sup>54</sup> ceremonies dates back to the end of the 1300s. Anna Johnson states that “[t]he tradition of the wedding or betrothal bag originated in the medieval custom of a groom presenting his bride with a sack of coins” (Johnson, 2005). An example of a wedding bag is the silk bridal bag decorated in silver and gold thread (Fig. 3.46) dating from the 1700s in Italy. The bag features heart and flower motifs that were usual decorations on bags symbolising love, loyalty and commitment. These decorations can also be seen in the illustrations of the letter cases (Fig. 3.47), which were used from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. These types of letter cases were apparently popular gifts at wedding or engagement ceremonies, because both men and women stored their letters and valuable papers in cases such as these (Van Eijk, 2004:48).

According to *Bags*, a publication by The Tassenmuseum Hendrikje, Amsterdam in the Netherlands, a tradition in various European countries was to give a purse containing money as a wedding present. “In the French city of Limoges, special bridal bags were produced between 1690 and 1760. These bags were little flat oval purses made of silk with enamel depictions of the bride and groom, or resemblances of saints, on both sides” (Van Eijk, 2004:35). Anna Johnson states in her book, *Handbags: The Power of the Purse*, that these Limoges silk purses (Fig. 3.48), adorned with cameo portraits on each side, were

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<sup>53</sup> See page 101

<sup>54</sup> A tradition that reminds of the current practice of exchanging wedding rings, which also creates an important and lucrative industry for jewellery designers and manufacturers.

presented to the bride to prove the bounty of her groom during the wedding ceremony (Johnson, 2002:298).



Figure 3.46

Silk bridal bag with decoration in silver and gold thread, Italy, ca. 1700 (Van Eijk, 2004:39).



Figure 3.47

- a. Leather and silk letter case with embroidery, poem and miniature by Favorin Lerebour, France 1806
- b. Finely embroidered letter case, France, ca. 1800
- c. Silk letter case embroidered with silk, silver thread and sequins, France, early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Van Eijk, 2004:54-55).

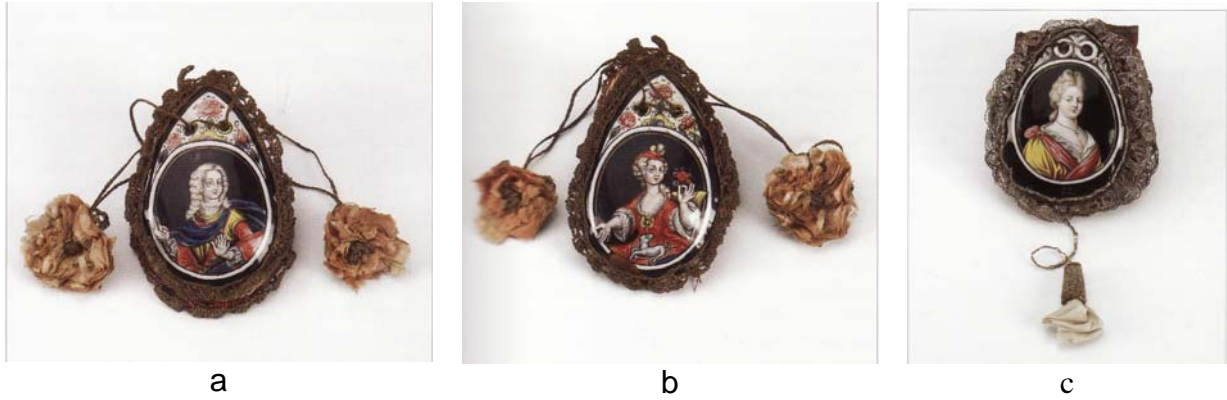


Figure 3.48

- a. Silk bridal bag with groom (the French King Louis XV) on enamel on copper, Limoges, France, 1752
- b. Silk bridal bag with bride (Princess Maria Leszcynska, the bride of King Louis XV) in enamel on copper, Limoges, France, 1752
- c. Silk bridal bag with gold lace and bride and groom in enamel on copper, Limoges, France, 1690-1715 (Van Eijk, 2004:46-47).



Figure 3.49  
 Revivals, 1999. Modern wedding bag (Johnson, 2002:262).



Figure 3.50  
 Gioia, 2000. Hand-made silk bridal bag (Johnson, 2002:420).

The historical wedding bag had various purposes, but the contemporary or “modern” wedding bag is explained by Anna Johnson as “the most ornamental purse a woman will ever own, and the most old-fashioned” (2002:262). I do not agree with her, especially when looking at the contemporary artist Ted Noten’s work, which will be discussed in the following paragraph. Johnson also refers to a modern wedding bag (Fig. 3.49) when she states that “[t]he tradition of the purse as medieval symbol of female chattel and worldly wealth is revised in a lacy pouch adorned with a vintage clasp shaped like a cupola” (Johnson, 2002:262). The current wedding bag (Fig. 3.50) is covered in flowers, representing the bouquet. This handmade silk bridal bag is considered by Joy Liotta, a Connecticut designer, to be “bridal heirlooms to be passed down through the generations” (Johnson, 2002:420).

Ted Noten, a contemporary jeweller living in Amsterdam, produced a wedding bag called *Ageeth’s Dowry* (Figs. 3.51 to 3.53). The work was an open commission from the groom, who instructed Noten to make something beautiful for his new wife within the limits of the given price range. Ted Noten wrote letters to their family members, asking each to send him a ring of their own that would be contributed to her dowry. The collection of rings was cast in acrylic and turned into a handbag that she wore on her wedding day. He asked the family members to “provide an anecdote to go with the ring. Why this particular ring? What was its history or connection to the family? What did it tell about them and the relationship between them and the bride?” (cited in Staal, 2006:48). He received 50 stories that were printed in a book. Ted Noten describes the book as a “charming little document full of personal memories and emotions connected to jewellery” (Staal, 2006:48).

Although this bag draws on sentiment (refer Noten’s words regarding ‘memories and emotions’ above), it moves beyond mere ornament, both in its conception and final non-traditional form, contrary to Johnson’s statement above. It brings to the traditional wedding bag new meaning, and it is this characteristic that proved to be formative in the development of my own wedding bag. The protea as masculine symbol transformed into a wedding bag worn by a female bride, created or promised interesting and ironic interplay and tension between these particular elements combined into new form, namely a Protea Wedding Bag. Gender as concept started to play a central role in its conception.





Figure 3.51  
Ted Noten, 1999. Designing: *Ageeth's Dowry*  
56 gold rings and other paraphernalia cast in acrylic, pearl. 18x25x8 cm (Staal, 2006:49-52).





**Figure 3.52**

Ted Noten, 1999. *Ageeth's Dowry*

56 gold rings and other paraphernalia cast in acrylic, pearl. 18x25x8 cm (Staal, 2006:53).



**Figure 3.53**

Ted Noten, 1999. *Ageeth's Dowry*

56 gold rings and other paraphernalia cast in acrylic, pearl. 18x25x8 cm (Staal, 2006:53).



**Figure 3.54**

Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: Inside the Silicone Protea.  
The translucent characteristics and textured detail of the material Silicone.



**Figure 3.55**

Nanette Nel, 2007. Detail: The Silicone Protea.  
The flexibility and movement of the material Silicone.

#### 3.4.3.5 **The silicone Protea Collection**

I will discuss each piece in the silicone Protea Collection. The Collection consists of three series. The first series consists of two handbags, the second of two brooches and the third series consists of a number of rings. Firstly I will discuss the general characteristics of the Collection in terms of material, media and their physical descriptions. Then I will analyse the creation of new meaning and knowledge which is generated by this.

The translucent characteristic of the material (Fig. 3.54) guided me into creating details that are different on the inside from those on the outside of the object. Playing with the inside and the outside of these objects (Fig. 3.55) was the next logical step, as these two elements that also represented the private and public sphere of the handbag were the

most interesting parts of the handbag for me. The inside of the piece is matte, while its exterior has a glossy finish.

The action of turning them inside out is a statement in itself that literally refers to the externalisation of the internal, the action of creating something that is informed by the internal or exposing that which is supposed to be private. The hiding and exposing of elements that is such an integral part of the concept of a handbag became the pivotal elements on which I focused during the creation of this series. Steven Connor says in *Bags*, an expanded transcript of a talk broadcast on BBC Radio 4, that “[b]ecause they are in essence such fleshly or bodily things, bags enact as nothing else does our sense of the relation between inside and outside. We are creatures who find it easy and pleasurable to imagine living on the inside of another body” (Connor, 2000). The protea becomes the bodily suggestion, the inside turned to the outside, pink flesh-like objects creating a certain womb-like experience. I did not intend these pieces to convey these ideas, but they do.

When I developed the technique I made various silicone pieces. I played with them, turned them inside out and then made a selection of the ones that were going to form the final Collection. Although I did not originally intend it, some of these pieces became jewellery pieces. I will discuss the physical, material development of the pieces, the mould, silicone, technical solution, and other materials. Then I will analyse the meaning created or relevant knowledge, also referring to the secret aspect of the piece.

### 3.4.3.5.1 The handbag series (Figs. 2.48 to 2.59)

The silicone handbag series consists of two handbags that can also serve as neckpieces. Given the technical constraints, a smaller size proved to be more successful. The basic structures of the two pieces differ slightly from each other. The one that is turned inside out, titled *Verkeerd-om*, has symmetrical leaves, while the other piece, titled *Om-gekeerd*, has asymmetrical leaves. The moulds were made to create a vein-like motif or texture on the inside. This, in combination with the pink colour, made the pieces look somewhat fleshy, but amusing at the same time, as the pink is too pink to resemble flesh, but it does resemble the colour of intestines.

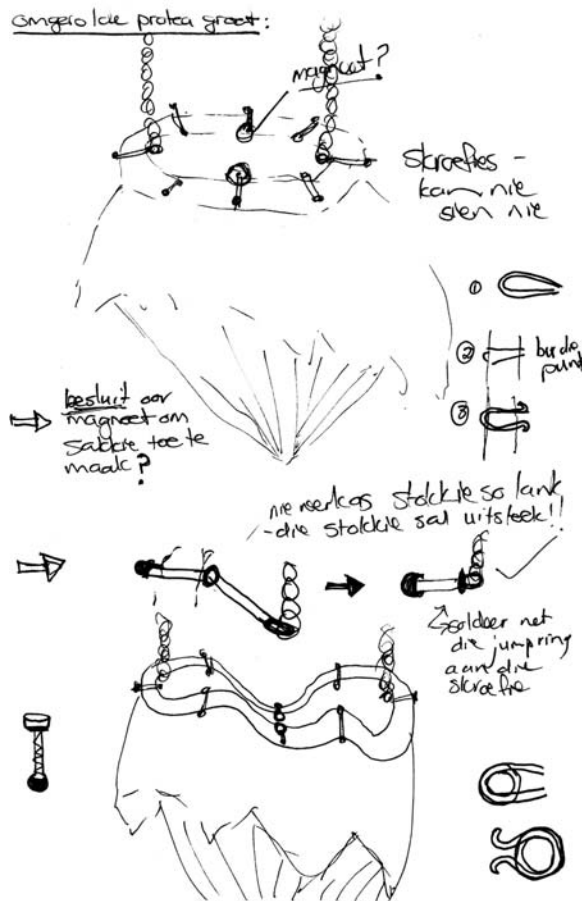


Figure 3.56  
Nanette Nel, 2007. Design: *Om-gekeerd*  
Design drawings and technical planning of handbag series.

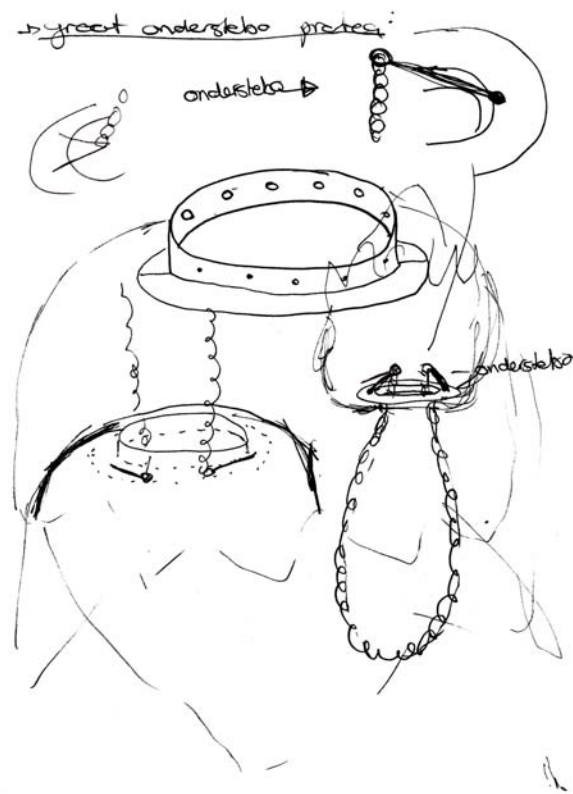


Figure 3.57  
Nanette Nel, 2007. Design: *Verkeerd-om*  
Design drawings and technical planning of handbag series.

The fact that these objects are totally flabby also associated with fleshiness, emphasising their tactility. They bounce back into their original shape and become voluminous once picked up. When placed back onto a flat surface, they become flat, floppy and deflated. It is not necessarily immediately evident that these pieces consist of silicone. The silicone adopted an unusual 'look', probably as a result of the object's particular shape, the thickness of the silicone wall and its colour in relation to its shape. I deliberately aimed for these qualities during the manufacturing processes and it turned out to be very effective. The right type of silicone that would yield the appropriate effects proved quite difficult to find and, once found, demanded several attempts before I could create the perfect objects.

It was difficult to finish these objects, because the possibility of the silicone turning out to be visually too heavy the metal was quite a risk. I had to deal with more technical difficulties in the manufacturing of this series and the brooch series, illustrated in the design drawings (Figs. 3.56, 3.57, 3.71, 3.74). Most of these manufacturing problems were caused or aggravated by the pieces acquiring lives of their own. Nothing was predictable or could be done in any systematic way. The manner in which they spontaneously changed their shapes during handling required different and on-the-spot solutions.

The nature of each piece guided me in solving its particular problems, which varied from one to the next. One specific bag with a glossy exterior serves as example for explaining such problem-solving processes. Playing with this handbag, rolling its top to the outside, I realised that clamping this rolled section would provide the necessary strength for holding the silicone section in place without tearing it (Fig. 3.56). I could not possibly predict how it would respond to handling during the design process. Only in its manufactured form could I discover the above solution to the problem of joining the silicone to its metal ringed frame.

Once the piece starts to materialise, things happen that demand incidental and unforeseen changes to be made to the original design. I find this to be an effective method of developing a piece. It is in constant flux and ever changing, until it reaches a state that answers to my specific aesthetic sensibility or standards. I often form new ideas while working on one piece to employ them in the next piece. In this way, each work carries the

spectre of the next one, eventually to evolve into my own coherent idiolect as represented in an integrated body of work.

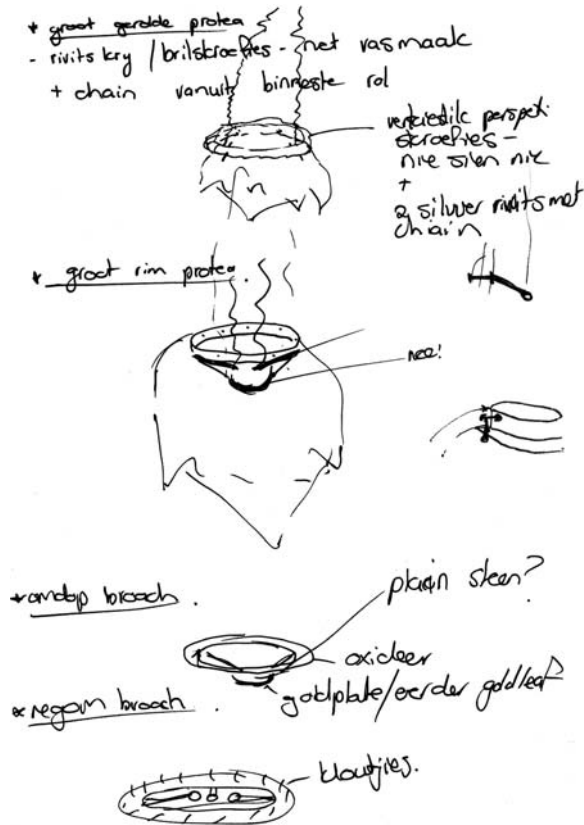


Figure 3.58  
Nanette Nel, 2007. Design drawings and technical planning of handbag series: hardware.

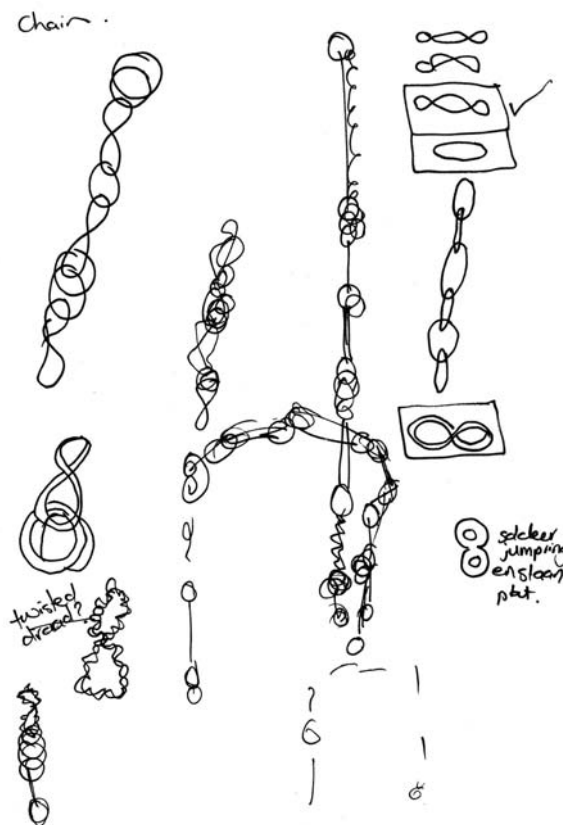


Figure 3.59  
Nanette Nel, 2007. Design drawings and technical planning of handbag series: Chain.



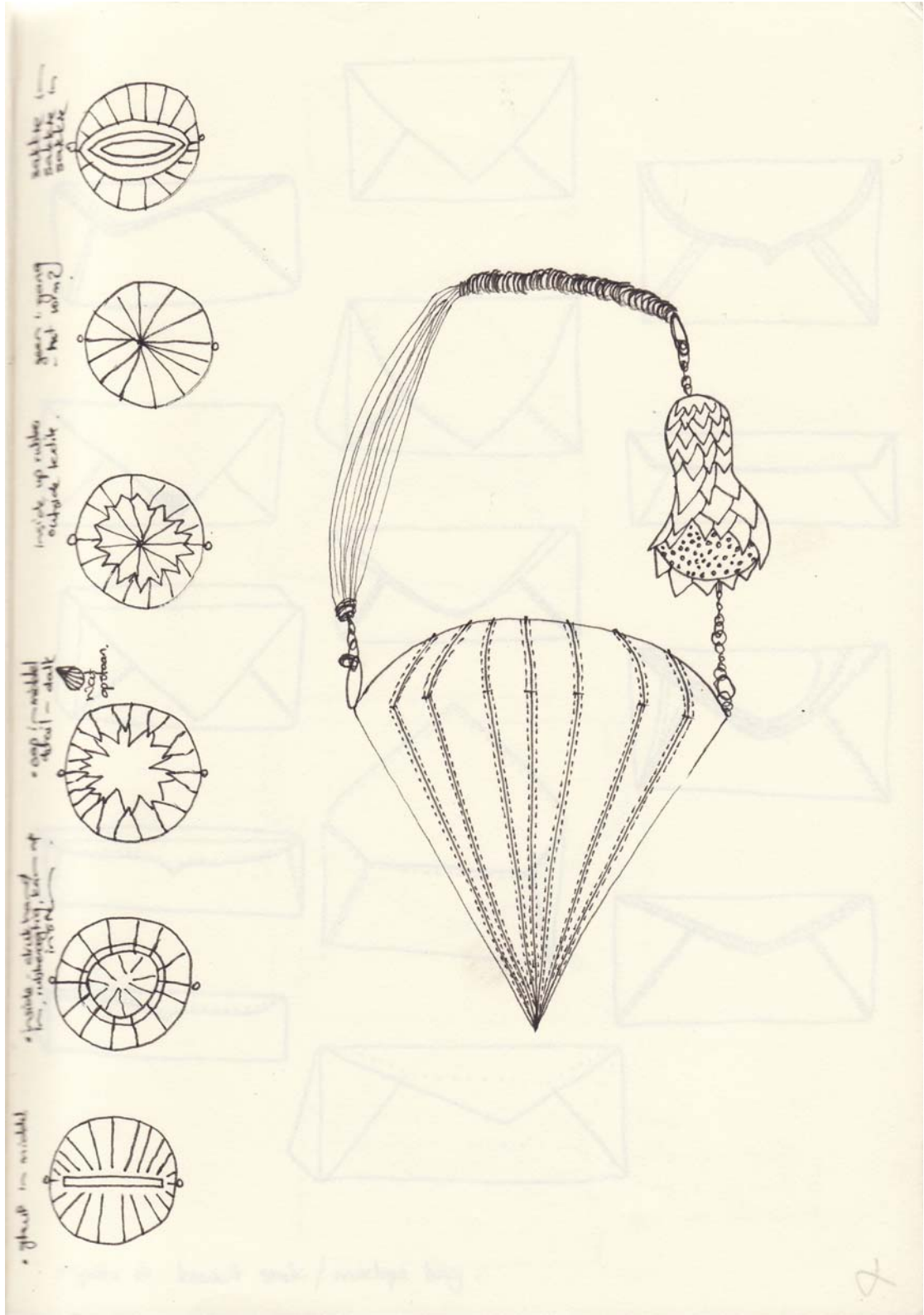


Figure 3.60  
 Nanette Nel, 2008. Design drawings.

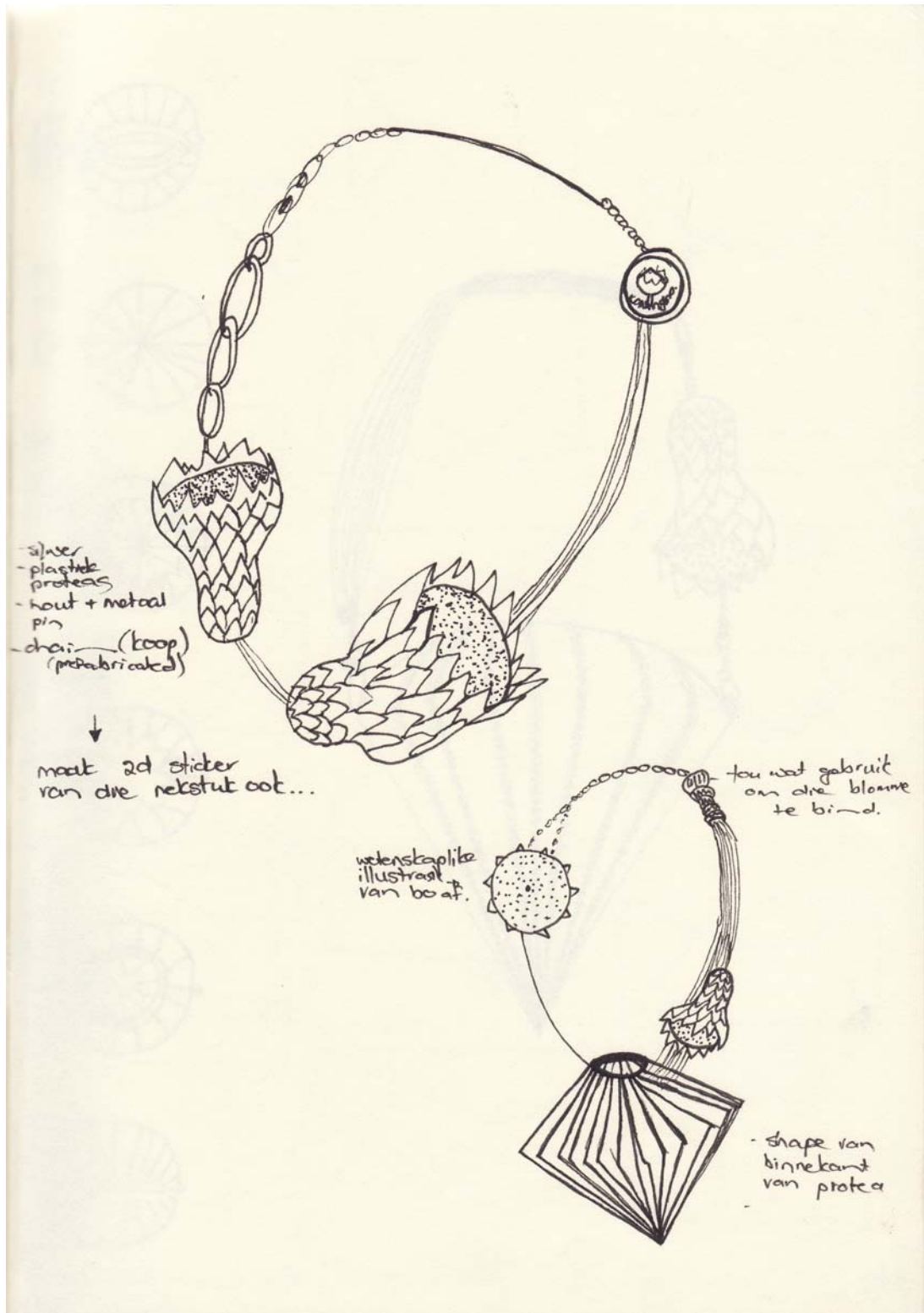


Figure 3.61  
Nanette Nel, 2008. Design drawings.

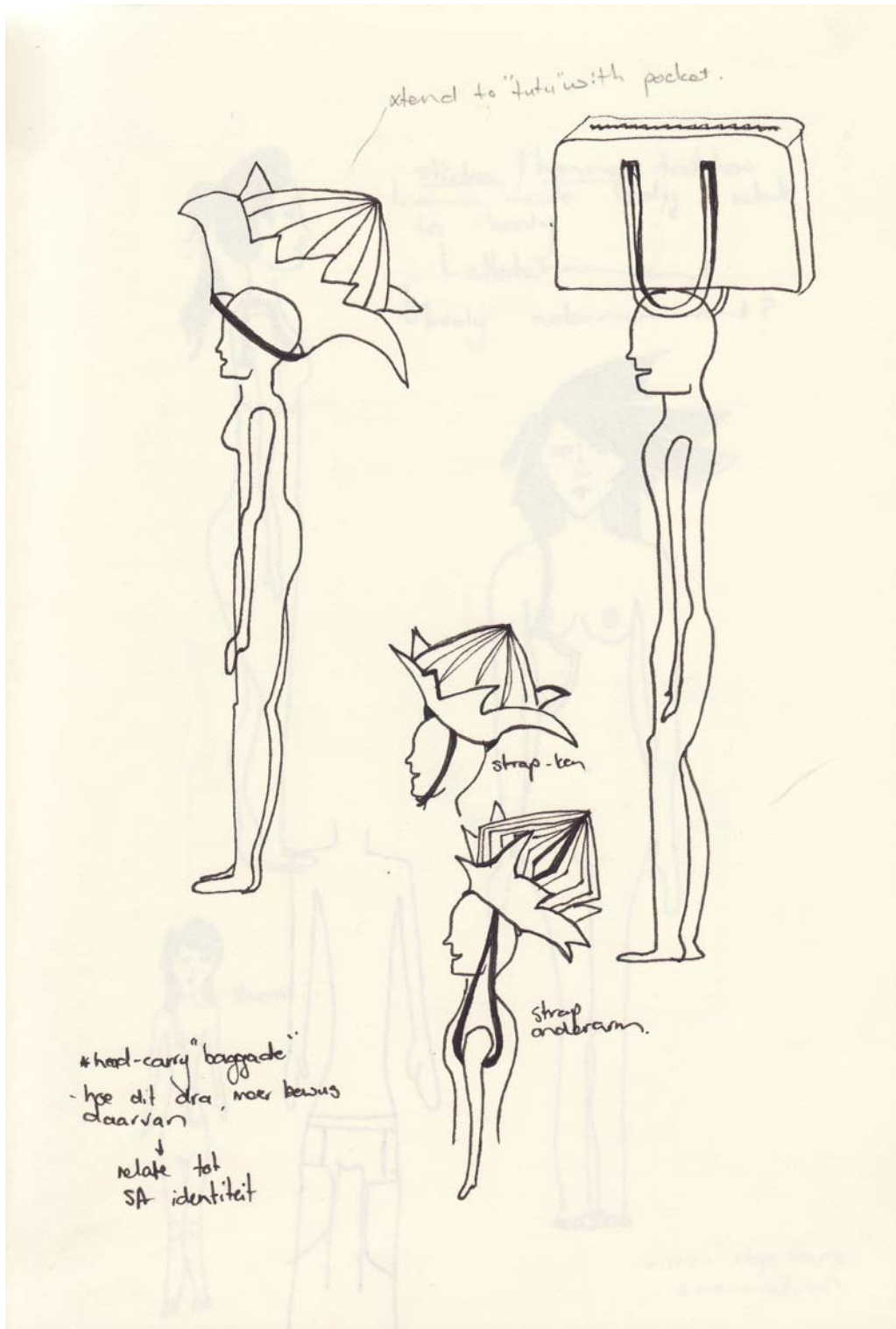
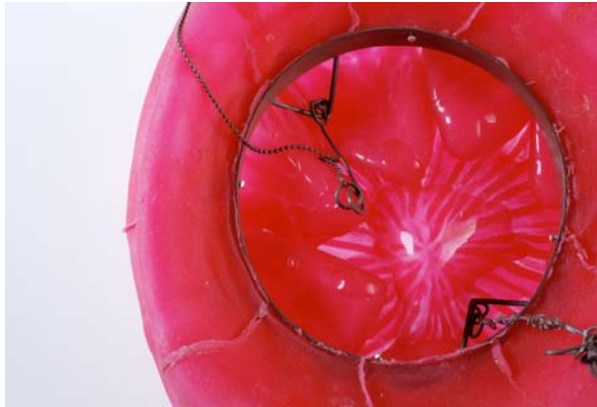


Figure 3.62  
Nanette Nel, 2008. Design drawings.



**Figure 3.63**

Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag*.  
Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.



**Figure 3.64**

Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag*.  
Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.



**Figure 3.65**

Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag*.  
Detail of the bottom of the handbag.



**Figure 3.66**  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd*  
*Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.



**Figure 3.67**  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd*  
*Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the top and opening of the handbag.



**Figure 3.68**  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd*  
*Silicone Protea Handbag*. Detail of the bottom of the handbag.



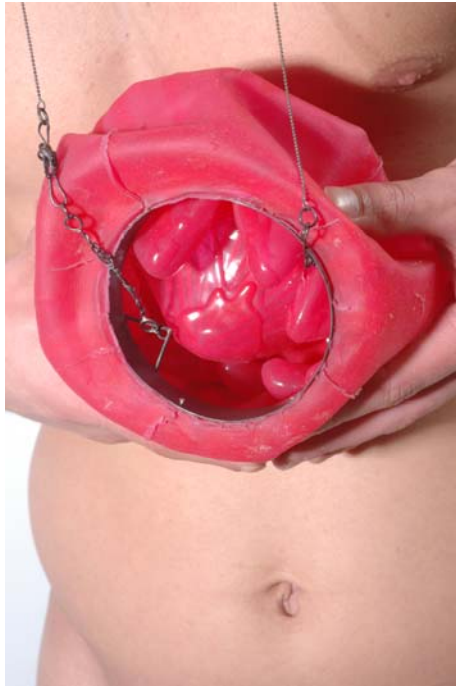


Figure 3.69  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Verkeerd-om Silicone Protea Handbag.*



Figure 3.70  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Om-gekeerd Silicone Protea Handbag.* Male model playing with handbag.



#### 3.4.3.5.2 **The brooch series** (Figs. 3.71 to 3.76)

The silicone protea brooch series flowed from the wedding bag series. I created two protea brooches. Similar obstacles to those that occurred in making the handbags were present in this series. The protea brooches continue to explore the notion of that which is private versus that which is public. I created a detailed gallery functioning as back planes for these brooches. One such brooch is set with claws on a framework and decorated with three onyx beads. Another is screwed onto a framework and decorated with a single onyx bead and gold leaf on the inside. The function of the gold leaf is to create a slight shimmer or reflection of gold through the translucent pink protea when the brooch is worn. This detail is only known by the wearer of the brooch, hidden from the public and obviously symbolising privacy.

These brooches are meant to replace the flower posies traditionally worn by men on their wedding day. Because they are made of silicone, they are also extremely flexible and can be crushed between two hugging people. Once the hug is over, the protea jumps back into its original form. These pieces resemble breasts, especially when the brooch is worn in its conventional place (Figs. 3.77 & 3.78), off centre close to the shoulder. The centre of the pink object is pointed, suggesting a nipple, which renders its visual reference to breasts even stronger. These two pieces are humoristic and quirky. They maintain their original shape constantly, because compared to the handbags they are smaller and lighter. In this way, it was possible to fully exploit the characteristics of the silicone effectively. The sensation of touching them is strangely and eerily erotic because of their skin-like, rubbery texture and fleshy flexibility. All the silicone proteas were cast in individual moulds, except the brooches, which are inner and outer versions of the same mould.

When I made the smaller silicone pieces (those that became rings and brooches), I considered several options for incorporating the central themes of the handbags. Eventually I decided that these pieces were jewellery pieces. Once again, this decision represents a shift in meaning, away from object as ornament, in my work. This development is similar to the shifts that I describe in Chapter 2 in relation to the bronze *mielie*<sup>55</sup>. This realisation elicited further developments in this series. The concept behind

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<sup>55</sup> See pages 48 to 50

the brooches and the rings, being part of a Collection that centres on handbags, was to create a secret that only the wearer could know about. That is why the back of the brooch has all the detail and the front view, which is open to the public, is a pink protea with its erotic connotations. In the case of the rings, the protea can be removed from its wooden armature to reveal those hidden parts turned to the inside.

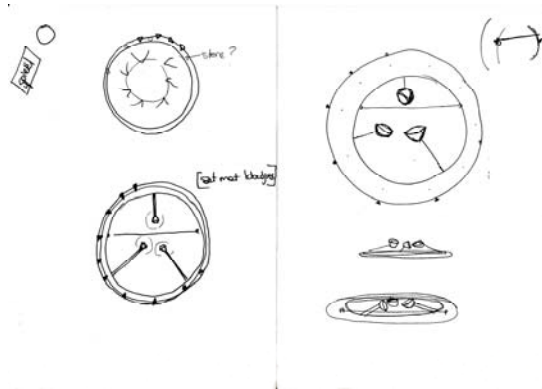


Figure 3.71  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Design:*  
*Silicone Protea Brooch I*  
Detail of the hardware of the brooch.



Figure 3.72  
Nanette Nel, 2007.  
*Silicone Protea Brooch I*  
Side profile of the brooch.



Figure 3.73  
Nanette Nel, 2007. *Silicone Protea Brooch I*  
Details of the bottom (left) and the top (right) of the brooch.

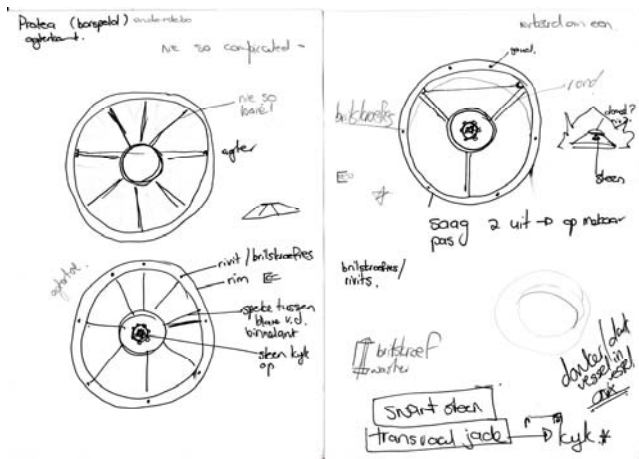


Figure 3.74  
 Nanette Nel, 2007. Design:  
*Silicone Protea Brooch II*  
 Detail of the hardware of the brooch.



Figure 3.75  
 Nanette Nel, 2007  
*Silicone Protea Brooch II*  
 Side profile of the brooch.

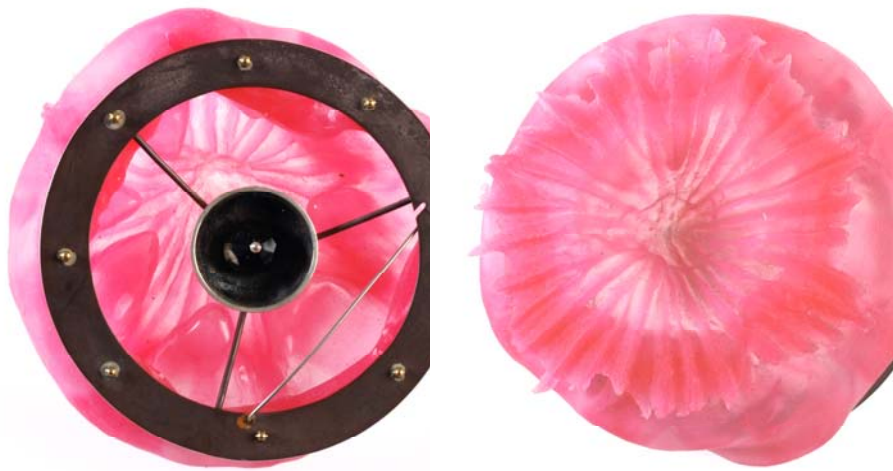


Figure 3.76  
 Nanette Nel, 2007. *Silicone Protea Brooch II*  
 Detail of the bottom (left) and the top (right) of the brooch.



Figure 3.77  
Nanette Nel, 2007-2008. *The Protea Collection*. The Collection worn on the body.



Figure 3.78  
Nanette Nel, 2007-2008. *The Protea Collection*. The Collection worn on the body.

### 3.4.3.5.3 The ring series (Figs. 3.79 to 3.83)

The ring series is the last in this Collection. I created a wooden ring as armature over which a tiny silicone protea is stretched. The hidden or secret inner sections of these forms, as representative and symbolic of privacy, remain important elements in the ring series. These hidden parts convey messages of privacy as something that is precious and that should be cherished or treasured. In the brooches such hidden details consist of onyx, silver and gold. The small silicone proteas that cover the wooden rings can be removed and, once removed, details like mirrors, black diamonds, gold and silver are revealed. My aim was to hide such 'precious' details from the public to create an element that would be known only to the wearer. Contrary to the nature of those secret contents of handbags I discussed earlier, these secrets are predetermined by me, as creator of the rings. They therefore remain permanently unalterable and it would be impossible for their wearers to remove them.

These rings also mark a return to jewellery. I never deliberately intended to include jewellery pieces from the outset. They evolved spontaneously from the manufacturing and design processes in developing the series.

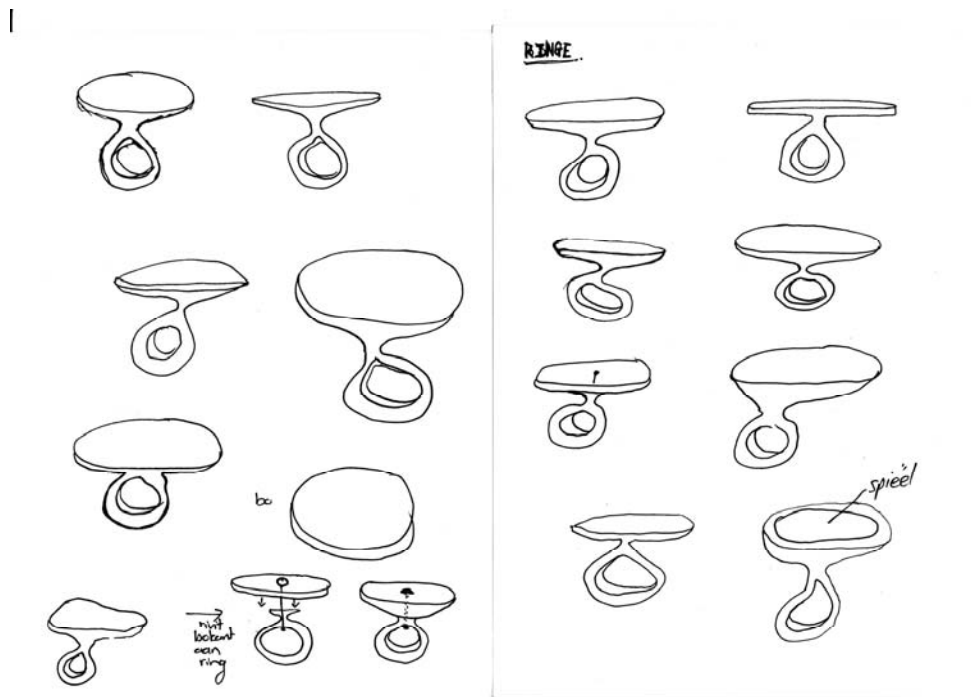


Figure 3.79

Nanette Nel, 2008. *Designs for Silicone Protea Ring Collection.*





Figure 3.80  
 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring Collection*.  
 Cherry wood, rosewood, embuia wood, gold leaf, silicone, black diamonds.



Protea ring, cherry wood, gold leaf, silicone

Figure 3.81  
 Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring*. The silicone can be pulled off of the ring  
 Cherry wood, rosewood, embuia wood, gold leaf, silicone.





Figure 3.82

Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring*. The silicone can be pulled off of the ring  
Embuia wood, gold leaf, silicone, gold dust.



Figure 3.83

Nanette Nel, 2008. *Silicone Protea Ring*  
Embuia wood, gold leaf, silicone, gold dust.

By turning some of the smaller objects into brooches and rings I connected the handbags to jewellery. The jewellery pieces are completely unconventional and unique in design and use of materials. The pieces convey an aesthetic idiolect that viewers (my supervisors and peers in the institution where I study) identify as unique to my way of working. It would be truthful to say the nature of the work, its physical appearance and conceptual meaning, can be identified with me. These pieces represent similar processes of evolution that occurred in the development of the protea handbag series. The process of combining known, internalised skills and knowledge (how to make jewellery) with processes of new discovery (developing the handbag series in silicone) enabled the production of a completely unique and new form that is identifiable as my own. As a result, the protea rings and brooches realised as a kind of 'Nanette Nel brand', with characteristics that materialised as a result of elements and references specific to my socio-cultural background, resulting habitus (perception) and the subjective translation of such elements into art form. It is difficult to categorise my work as either jewellery design or fine art. Despite having been educated as a jewellery designer who works in a relatively contemporary idiom of socio-cultural reference, my work cannot necessarily be defined as pure jewellery, as these Collections prove.

In an effort to place my work, I will refer to an article titled *Jewellery? What Kind Of Jewellery Are We Talking About?* written by Paul Derrez, the owner of a contemporary jewellery gallery, Gallery RA, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and published in the book *New Directions in Jewellery*. In this article I found the best definition for contemporary jewellery. Derrez categorises the different kinds of jewellery. He starts off with standard mass-produced pieces which are “shiny, glittering, easy to wear<sup>56</sup> necklaces, rings, bracelets and earrings”. He defines ‘easy to wear’ as “readily being recognised as jewellery – they do not evoke questions or debate”. He includes accessories in this category, both being part of a “constantly evolving fashion market<sup>57</sup> for accessories – a market aimed at change”. Secondly, he refers to exclusive labels that offer jewellery, which

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<sup>56</sup> This kind of jewellery is also easy and practical due to the size, flexibility and standard fastenings. This jewellery can be precious or semi-precious, bought at a jeweller or a department store, and is expensive or inexpensive (Derrez, 2005:11).

<sup>57</sup> In this same category he briefly refers to jewellery marketed to a wide audience from non-Western societies, which is often based upon a traditional technique, but in fact made for tourists and often represented in the fashion world as ethnic jewellery, but tailored to the fashion industry's market (Derrez, 2005:11).

he places on the same level as high street fashion.<sup>58</sup> Thirdly he refers to the smaller and alternative markets which include the work of silversmiths.<sup>59</sup>

Then, finally, he describes the next category as that of 'art jewellery', although he says, "... 'author' jewellery would be a better name as it is made by one 'author' who decides the concept and design" (2005:12). This category became realised and professionalised over the last thirty years. As this category developed and evolved, "the direction of jewellery as an art form" was accomplished, according to Derrez (2005:12). What developed were "forms of jewellery that did not comply with a demand (which by definition is always based on the recognition factor)" (2005:12).

He also states that "[p]riority lies with developing new meaning and a new language of form – a new aesthetic" (2005:12). "Any kind of material and technique can be used, but often research takes place within a small field and within strict boundaries. Due to the individual studio aspect of production, advanced technology is rarely used, as the availability and financial feasibility of using cutting edge technology is impossible on this scale" (2005:12)

When I read this article, I could verbalise how I understand my work, which can be categorised as 'author jewellery' since my work recounts a personal history, a unique identity formed through subjective processes of perception and translation. Such subjective translation adds meaning to the work that extends beyond the conventions of 'easy-to-wear' jewellery, accessories or exclusively labelled designer jewellery. The article also legitimised and confirmed the validity of my work in a domain of art practice that represents an interactive dialogue between jewellery design and fine arts. I can therefore define my work as contemporary 'author' jewellery design.

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Derrez describes this type of jewellery as "hardly exclusive in design and edition, but more 'image' and price. Costly advertising campaigns create the necessary brand image. Prestige is the key word here and they scream to be copied" (Derrez, 2005:11).

<sup>59</sup> More specialised items are sold here, sometimes privately made by individual silversmiths, but often purchased from larger distributors. "Here the unique and personal aspect is well promoted but in reality the choice is often from versions of existing designs, materials and techniques" (Derrez, 2005:11).

#### 3.4.4 The symbolic and metaphorical meaning of the Protea Collection

In this section I will focus on the meaning immanent in my work as new form. Such meaning also relates or recounts my processes of internalising externalities and externalising those internalities in my art work, as explained above. I will examine the Protea Collection in relation to gender, which will be followed by an explanation of the relationship between the Protea Collection and the human body, introducing an additional concept entrenched in my work.

During the process of creating the Protea Collection, I was repeatedly made aware of the so-called 'gender' of a handbag. As mentioned earlier, the handbag is traditionally worn by women and therefore, in social terms, became gendered as a feminine object. I wanted to portray this through the protea, an icon with predominantly male connotations.<sup>60</sup> I challenged this connotation by using silicone and making the objects pink. These flabby objects therefore became instantaneously feminine. The silicone material and the shape remind of female breasts and the sensuality of a woman's body, inviting physical touch and stroking. If people play with the objects they handle them with a familiarity born from their knowledge of touching the human body. This is a fascinating characteristic of both the jewellery pieces and the handbag series. Viewers usually pick them up, handle them with their hands and try them out by placing them on different places on their bodies. Usually they end up being held against the viewers' breasts or stomachs. The immediate reaction of viewers to physically connect the pieces with their own bodies struck me as indicative of the strong bond or relationship between any jewellery and the body and that my work evokes this notion.

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<sup>60</sup> See page 104



Figure 3.84

Ines van Lamsweerde, image for Patrick Cox

“The woman’s bag can resemble the Freudian unconscious [this image is] the link between the material world and the inner realm” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:55).

Steven Connor writes in an article titled *Bags* that “[i]f bags irresistibly suggest wombs, bellies and breasts, and may suggest identification with women in their containing function, they have some distinctively male ingredients, too” (Connor, 2000). Although the protea as icon is often associated with maleness and masculinity, it also has strong feminine connotations, since it is a flower. Valerie Steele and Laird Borrelli claims that “[t]he iconography associated by women with flowers goes back many centuries and crosses many cultures. Flowers are the sex organs of plants, and women have always traditionally been linked to sex and fertility. Also, because flowers usually bloom in spring, they are associated with new beginnings and with the fleeting beauty of youth” (Steele & Borrelli, 1999:69). The femininity of the Protea Collection can be related to the flower as a sex organ. This relationship between genitalia and handbags is in fact not new. Anna Johnson

says that psychiatrists have always held the bag in suspicion, imagining it to be a “vagina dentate” (2002:xii).

In Natalie Hambro’s book, *The Art of the Handbag*, she claims that “[a]ll good design, and particularly fashion with its obvious relation to the body, becomes a fetishistic process; one of imbuing inanimate objects with a magical or spiritual quality” (Hambro, 1998:8 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:11). Hambro further explains that the act of slipping one’s hand into the concealed interior of the handbag “has obvious potential for an urban fetishist” (1998:8 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:11). The handbag as a fetish (Fig. 3.86) reminds of Sigmund Freud’s description of ‘hollow receptacles’ as symbols of ‘female genitals’ (1953:384 cited in Steele & Borrelli, 1999:40). Steven Connor writes in *Bags*: “Human beings are given to conceiving of themselves in terms of bags and receptacles. The mother’s breast is perhaps at the origin of the sense of promise and secret goodness attaching to bags, and embodied in Santa’s bulging sack” (Connor, 2000). In this regard, Stuart Hall claims “[t]he fetish object often symbolises control and release, power and helplessness, sexuality and infantilism” (Schroeder, 2002:142).

The particular meaning consistent with my intentions is represented in all the above-mentioned notions. To me, the protea series communicates meaning that also challenges and disturbs traditional gender-related associations with handbags and jewellery. When studying the objects in psychological terms, I suppose they could refer to the inside of the body, to the womb of a woman, to that which is private as opposed to what is shown to the public. By extension, they also refer to breast implants because I used silicone as medium, which can also be interpreted as either a critical, humoristic or ironic commentary on the beauty industry cosmetic surgery has become. I think it is more critical in a humoristic way of the import that is being placed on external appearance and the perverse drive to conform to the norms of perfect beauty at all costs, even to the extent that it might mean physical mutilation or reconstruction.



### 3.5 Summary

Luxury and necessity as contrary concepts form the central subject under discussion in this chapter. I contextualise these two concepts in social terms. It becomes clear, through this discussion, that the handbag becomes an object of desire and that its development is stimulated or influenced by a socially located desire for improved status. I find luxury as concept to be the commonality between jewellery and handbags.

The interior of the bag, as representative of that which is private, relates to a social condition that is currently characteristic of South Africa, namely that of poverty and consequent increased levels of crime. The interior of the bag as protector of possessions (against crime and, by extension, against danger of any kind) explains the presence of this element in my work and its direct relation to a social source. The inside of the handbag symbolises both abjection as socially based symptom and expression of poverty; and the dual nature of privacy as it relates to abjection. As physical container it both hides the signs of abjection and shame about poverty and protects precious objects of wealth. In this sense, it also speaks of the enormous and growing divide that exists between the poor and the wealthy in South Africa. This could be interpreted as social commentary and criticism on this divide.

The Protea Collection underwent important transformations in the utilisation of materials and media in its processes of execution. As a result, a physical interchange evolved in which the inside of the bag turned out to become the exterior and the exterior turned into the interior. I describe this process to highlight material as formative element in my work.

I conclude this chapter by positioning myself as 'author' jeweller, a domain that would accommodate my self-ethnographic role as artist and the subjectively idiomatic language of the Protea Collection. I explain how it is generative of symbolic and metaphorical meaning that communicates social constructs, especially with reference to the body and sexuality. The femininity of these objects, the interplay between the inside and the outside, as well as those secret elements present in this Collection, address and epitomise the private and public theme as a social construct.