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## Artist Pierre Vermeulen on life, the universe and vipassana

Adman Mike Abel of M&C Saatchi Abel treats us to one of his deep and meaningful Q&A sessions with Cape Town artist Pierre Vermeulen, whose work mostly involves gold leaf, sweat and doing drag

Words: Mike Abel  
23 October 2017

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Pierre Vermeulen  
Image: Supplied

**Describe the colour yellow to somebody who is blind.** For a warm yellow, stand in the sun on a hot day. Feel the top layer of the skin warm up and follow the heating of each consecutive layer. The smell of a yellow freesia can also be yellow.

**What's the most interesting thing about you that we wouldn't learn from your CV alone?** I do drag, her name is Rene Sans.

**What are you known for?** Art wise: Gold panels, sweat and hair.

**Teach me something I don't know in the next five minutes.** Get present! Set a timer for 5 minutes. Sit cross-legged with your hands gently on your knees or lap and eyes closed (even better with an eye mask). Take note of your breath entering and exiting your nostrils. Try not to verbalise the action or count the breaths. Just observe the action as it is without liking or disliking it. When a thought comes to mind just allow it to pass by, by bringing the focus back to the breathing. Take harder, yet calm, breaths if you find it difficult to feel the air moving past your nostrils at first. When the timer pings, take a moment to feel your calm body and mind.

**What inspires you?** Moments in which I'm completely present. The clarity of a meditated mind is incredible. My partner. Drag queens and Diskotekah. Time in nature. Nutrigenomics - eating according to your genes. Raw chocolate - eat a whole slab and feel the rush. And obviously good art and good conversation.

**What's the last thing you watched on TV and why did you choose to watch it?** Nocturnal Animals by Tom Ford. I'm a fan of his debut film, A Single Man. Not the intensity I expected! Yoh!

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**What was the last gift you gave someone?** Amanda Lear's record Never Trust a Pretty Face.

**What do you think about when you're alone in your car?** I endlessly ramble on topics concerning the human condition. Especially people's perspective of themselves and how they see themselves fit on earth. I recently read the books *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* by Yuval Noah Harari. It expanded my understanding of the human-earth-relationship. I also sing a lot, stretch the vocals - at the moment it is Erasure in the 80s.

**You're a new addition to the paint box. What colour would you be and why?** At the moment it is probably verdigris. It is the final colour of the oxidation process on the sweat and gold works - especially in high concentrated areas of sweat. I like the idea of a colour developing over time as a chemical reaction when materials touch each other. Although the actual latest addition to my paint box is a couple of large tubes of black and white oil paint.

**How do you handle criticism?** By observing it. Getting upset about critique only wastes your own energy that can lead to health issues. So it's really your own doing. Stay healthy and observe it.

**What is the first thing you do when you wake up in the morning?** I slide out of bed to meditate for about 40 minutes. And then a bulletproof coffee.

**Tell me about a time you did the right thing and no one saw you do it.** Saved goslings off the freeway. It was a quiet night and I wore dark clothes, so not too many people saw me.

**What do you worry about, and why?** I try not to worry, but there are so many things to worry about. Especially climate change. The displacement numbers of people and wildlife in recent years have escalated and will only get worse: Extreme weather conditions of drought and flooding, desertification and ocean dead zones. Nuclear weapons are still being made, oil drilling is booming and everything is being wrapped in plastic.

Things are not looking promising at the moment unless a big change is made. Actual change. Not small finicky change - we need a change of perspective, to live along with nature. People are hoping for someone or something to bring the quick change and fix it when change is very accessible within yourself. We have to strive for greater collective enlightenment and aspire to increase the scale and scope of human consciousness.

I think it has got a lot to do with a warped fundamental viewpoint of the world. Many hold the view that they came into this world when actually everything and everyone came out of this world.

They view themselves as alien to the planet they come from and need to be defended from it - thus don't respect it. This inspires self-disrespect as you 'other' yourself from the natural world.

Most people don't even understand how much self-hatred they have accumulated and this gets projected outwards. Without respect for the world, this includes animals and ourselves, we won't be able to live in harmony. For too long people have been trained lived the greedy way, with complete disregard to the laws of nature.

"When the last tree is cut, the last fish is caught, and the last river is polluted; when to breathe the air is sickening, you will realize, too late, that wealth is not in the bank accounts and that you can't eat money." By Alanis Obomsawin

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**How do you define success and how do you measure up to your own definition?** To be a beneficial human for the earth and its beings. Nature is very successful, which I try to follow.

**Give me an example of when you failed at something. How did you react and how did you overcome failure?** Being late has always been one of my failures. I feel terrible about it for a bit, acknowledge it and then get better for a while until a glitch forms in the new habit.

**Would you rather be liked or respected?** We don't have to like everything and everyone. Differences (dislikes) are what drive new innovative ideas. We do need to respect each other to live together.

**What is the last book you read?** *Homo Deus, a Brief History of Tomorrow* by Yuval Noah Harari. I recommend it to everyone. Perhaps read *Sapiens a Brief History of Humankind*, by the same author, first.

**If someone wrote a biography about you, what do you think the title should be?** Do, don't, ought to and should.

**What makes you angry?** S.N. Goenka said: "When I generate anger, hatred, ill will, or animosity, I am the first victim of my anger. I am the first victim of the hatred or animosity that I have generated within. First I harm myself and only afterwards do I start harming others. This is the law of nature."

**What was the biggest risk you ever took and what did you learn from it?** The concept of risk is very important in expanding your life perspective. It's stepping into the unknown, a space of new wonders. With all these internet algorithms curating our lives I think risk taking is even more important. Otherwise, you will become a whirlpool of your old self within yourself. Same-old-same-old. I don't remember where I heard this, but it always reminds me to re-evaluate when I'm hesitant to change: Most people die after their studies but the body only gets buried at 75.

**What's your most significant project? Tell me about it, what did you get/reach? How?** You have to start with yourself and expand outwards. Existential crises have been a hobbyhorse of mine growing up. So to have found a way of life that makes sense to me was a significant change of path. My first Vipassana meditation course. You meditate for over 100 hours in 10 days, talk to nobody and repeat the same pattern of living for 10 days. No form of stimuli like books, notepads, obviously no phones, no nothing. Only yourself with your mind. I learned to understand my mind better and experience how powerful it can be. You rewire your brain's perception of craving and aversion by learning not to react to it, but to observe it and see the sensation pass by. If I can recommend only one thing to everyone it would be to go on a Vipassana 10 day course. It's very tough, but literally, life changing.

**If you were a brand, what would your motto be?** I have two. The first one is a quote by Lao Tzu: "Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?" The second one is: Stand still and rot.

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Some images of Pierre Vermeulen's work:



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