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My Journey into the Photographic Arts



Veronica Coetzer

My journey into the photographic arts started with a recurring dream when I was young. I regularly dreamt of a place where I knew I belonged, but initially could not identify its location. Over the years my perception of the place developed in clarity and detail but exactly where it was still eluded my searching mind. Then, in 2008, two things happened.

First, I was invited to a New York university law school to talk about both my life story and my art. The professor wanted his students to understand the effect of child abuse on a person's life and, with my having been a victim between the ages of 3 and 8, he felt that my story would be informative. I had suppressed the fact for many years, having hidden it from even my mother and my sisters; speaking about the trauma to a body of academic strangers in a foreign country was a challenge. But the experience did diminish my phobia of public speaking and helped me to a greater understanding of the trauma caused by the betrayal of trust in, and respect for, a revered family member. While I was in New York, my sister and I visited St Peter's Cathedral. On entering the magnificent structure, I confessed to her that something about it resonated with a place I had encountered in my recurring dreams.

On my return to South Africa, I was commissioned to take wedding photographs on a remote farm in the countryside. There, for the first time, I encountered a labyrinth. The owners of the property had constructed the unicursal pathway in stone. It immediately struck a chord with me and raised an uncanny awareness of something I had encountered in my dreams.

On March 29 2010, having two pieces of the puzzle of my dream in the form of photographs I had taken of the cathedral and the labyrinth, I compiled an artwork, which I titled "The Labyrinth." Some time later, I was walking past a television set when my attention was arrested by the images of a program that was playing. The piece was a documentary on the famous Cathedral of Chartres, situated in the small French medieval town of the same name.

The experience triggered in me an instinctive and inexplicable yearning to visit that cathedral, as I recognized it as the place in my dreams. At the time it was a spiritual aspiration so remote from being achieved in reality, but I set the intention to do everything in my power to go there. Then, exactly two years later, on March 3 2012, I visited the Cathedral of Chartres. It was the most profound experience of my life.



Two months after returning from Chartres, I had been commissioned by Linda Tucker of the Global White Lion Protection Trust to create 22 artworks illustrating the story of her book, *The Mystery of the White Lions*. We were sitting around a campfire listening to the roaring of the White Lions in the vicinity when someone asked whether there was any other place on earth with which I felt as strong a connection as that which I have with the Timbavati and its white lions. I resisted mentioning my feelings about Chartres, convinced that no one in the group would know what I was talking about. But they insisted and when I revealed my visit to the Cathedral, there was a collective explosion of incredulity. The White Lion Leadership Academy was about to be launched some weeks later in Chartres, on July 5!



One of the images I then created was titled “Things We Can’t Untie.” Soon after that, at another visit to the Timbivati, in what I consider a serendipity moment, I met a lady who spontaneously engaged in conversation with me as I was about to leave to travel home. Although we were complete strangers to each other and did not even exchange names or many personal details, the common interests discovered in our brief moment together, and the overwhelming feeling of knowing, led to an agreement to meet again a week later. It was then that I discovered that she was Dr. Apela Colorado, the person who launched the White Lion Leadership Academy in Chartres.

The result was that the following year, 2013, I was invited to exhibit my White Lion Art at the New Chartres Academy during the first of the seven Liberal Arts Congresses hosted by the Ubiquity University. It was there that I joined the Dream Team of Dr. Apela Colorado and started making artworks of other people’s dreams. After returning home I became seriously ill, was declared disabled and found myself confined to a wheelchair. My illness prevented me from attending the 2014 Congress in Chartres.

The following year, in March 2015, I received an invitation from Dr. Apela Colorado to be part of the dream team

again; and simultaneously, from Karen Rivers, the Director of the University, to do another exhibition. My caregiver read the emailed invitation to me and there was shocked disbelief from everyone when I signaled my intention to accept it. But determination and four months of intensive therapy by a dedicated team of specialists made it possible for me to attend the Third Liberal Art Congress in Chartres.

Early every morning many of the delegates would come to our gathering to recount their dreams. A scribe would write down the dreams they shared, a glyph would draw a picture and I would photograph the person telling the dream. Afterwards, when the day’s program started, the members of the dream team would explore and collate the collective narrative of the day’s dreams. I would then create an artwork depicting the day’s aggregate of dreams. I would do that every day of the week and by the end of the conference I would have made an artwork of all the dreams of that week with the collective message that the Dream Team had derived from the dreams. Another image I created in July 2015 is called “The Keeper of the Chartrean Dream.” Included is one of the individual images I did of one of the days during the Congress, as a detail image, before I created the composite image of all the dreams of the week. The image, “Remember the Future,” was done in July 2018 during the sixth of the seven Liberal arts congress in Chartres.



In December of 2019, the Worldwide Indigenous Science Network brought a group of indigenous cultural practitioners and healers to Egypt. Unlike in other WISN dream sessions, dreams began to unite us prior to the journey. Multiple people had prophetic dreams of golden grasses (unbeknownst to us, these



grasses had sacred significance). The Nile, sacred sites and lands all spoke to us through our dreams before, during and after the journey, continuing for nearly a month post travels for everyone present, and common themes emerged that are captured in the detail piece entitled Nilotic dreams. Then, from December 14 to January 13 the dreams turned dark, and I was compelled to make another image on January 15 with the title “Dark Dreams.”

I feel honored to be able to share the story of how my recurring dream led me to Chartres, the place I now love with all my heart and soul. I feel humbled by my passage to the White Lions of



the Timbivati, by my involvement with Dr. Apela Colorado, and with my interaction with the people of the Dream Team. The way I now give artistic expression to people’s dreams found its origin in the town of Chartres. My journey, which is deeply invested in the very soul of my being, will always claim an element of the miraculous in my mind.

Little did I know that the miracle was yet to be revealed. Just before the pandemic my sister asked me out the blue if I knew that I resembled my great-grandfather. I found myself standing in front of an oval framed portrait of my great-grandfather, and I was struck by the resemblance. In that moment, for the first time I realized that his surname, Marais, is French. During the long days of complete lockdown I started to research this branch of my family. I didn’t even know what my great-grandfather’s first names were. I was pleasantly surprised to find that my father was named after him. With the assistance of the South African Genealogy Association, I found that my ancestors came from a little village just outside of Chartres. I dreamed my way home!



Veronica Coetzer is a portrait, landscape and wildlife photographer from Pretoria, South Africa. First acclaimed for distinctive portraiture, she combined photography with a devotion to nature and wildlife, leading photographic safaris; then began creating surrealistic works inspired by her dreams and those of others. Her works have been exhibited locally and internationally.