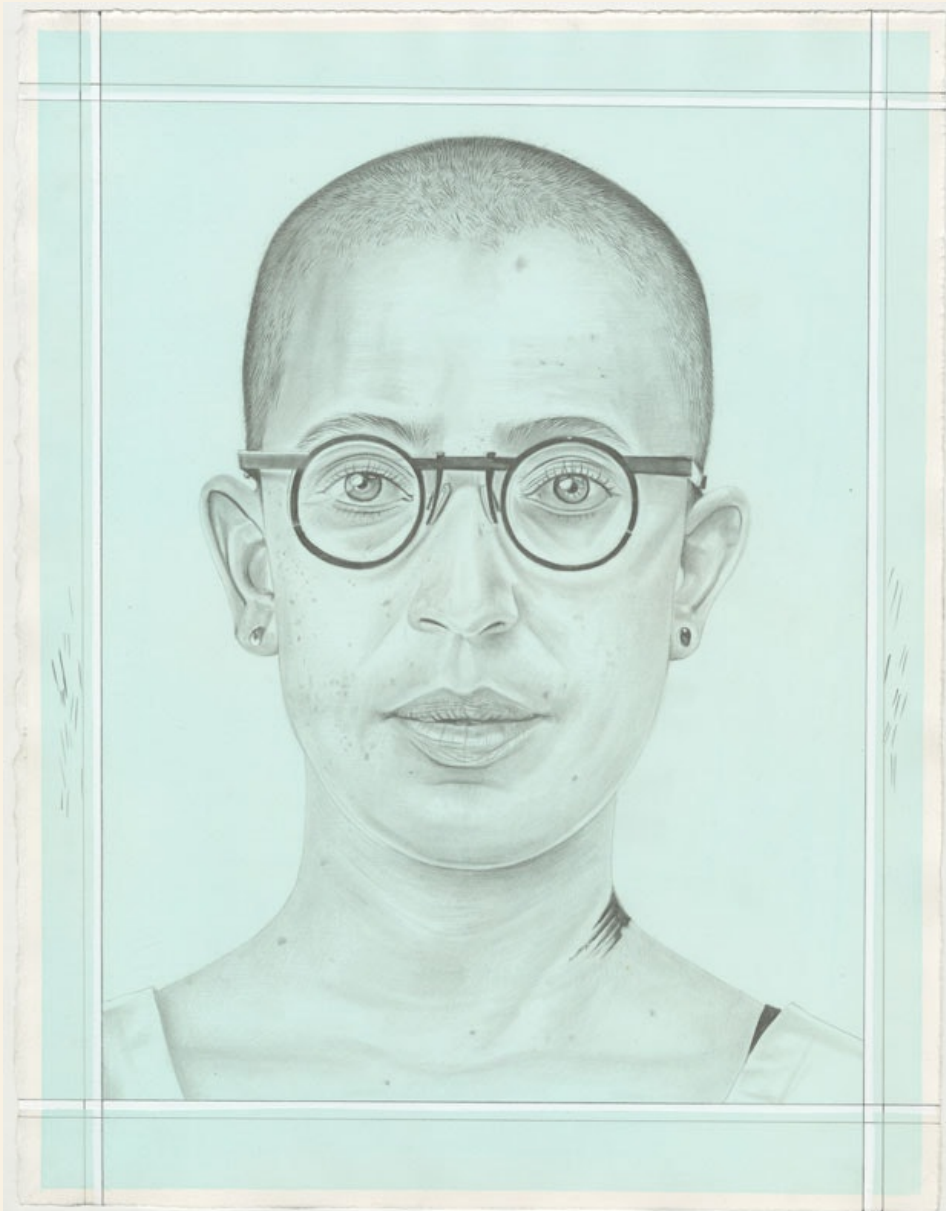




Gabrielle Goliath With Amadour – The Brooklyn Rail

[Art In Conversation](#)

“As much as a work like *Chorus* is about confronting a situation of difficulty and radical difference, it’s also about forging community.”



Portrait of Gabrielle Goliath, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

South African artist Gabrielle Goliath and curator Emily Edwards spoke with me to discuss *Chorus*, Goliath's first institutional exhibition in the United States. Goliath dismantles the complex traumas of colonialism and apartheid by constructing communal spaces of remembrance and mourning. *Chorus* is an elegy to Uyinene "Nene" Mrwetyana, a nineteen-year-old student from the University of Cape Town who was raped and murdered in 2019. She was killed in the Clareinch post office in Claremont, Cape Town, by postal worker Luyanda Botha while going to collect her mail. Mrwetyana's death sparked the national #AmINext movement in South Africa and outrage abroad, putting in bold the international issue of gender-based violence.

Goliath's work strives to honor Mrwetyana and the victims of such atrocities by creating an opportunity for reflection and dialogue. *Chorus* is a twenty-three-minute looped video on two channels projected on blocks mirroring each other. On one block is a performance by the University of Cape Town Choir, who maintain a unified hum across their vocal ranges. On the other screen is a vacant choir stage representing the void of life from those lost to femicide in South Africa. A large wall behind the empty stage features a long list of 680 names commemorating the lives of women, children, and LGBTQ+ people lost to this order of violence.

In this interview, Goliath discusses acts of healing, negotiation, and building community. She views her artistic vocation as "the life work of mourning" by making connections that create an open space for the audience to keep a person's memory alive and reaffirm life. *Chorus* is presented with the blessing of the Uyinene Mrwetyana Foundation.

Amadour (Rail): Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I remember going to the Venice Biennale a few years ago and seeing Teresa Margolles's *La búsqueda* (*The Search*) (2014), which addresses the plight of so many people that endured femicide in countries in Latin America, including Mexico and El Salvador. Your work, also in Venice, *Elegy* (2015), made me recall that work, and now *Chorus* (2021) sheds light on this global situation.

Emily Edwards: I was sharing with Gabrielle that in *Chorus* the sound of the speakers surrounding you, even the pillows, makes everything vibrate. It's almost like your

body is humming, and you're part of the ensemble. It was just very emotional to feel like you were in there with those named on the walls and having a bodily response, honoring all of the women, children, and non-gender-conforming people murdered. The sound system causes you to feel like you are participating.

Rail: It's incredible and so extraordinary. Honestly, I was in tears when I went into the exhibition space. I didn't understand what was happening. At first, I was expecting somebody to come up on the screen. It is profound to see the choir humming in unison; on the other side, it is just silence. The emptiness of it all is charged and even more potent. The six hundred-plus people it represents are there; for those twenty-three minutes, it's as if you are with them in that space. Gabrielle, your work is intensely detailed and moving.

Gabrielle Goliath: I'm grateful you're both here to experience the work. For me, this is not the form of witness we associate with a static mimetic artwork—with the implicit distance between viewer and work—it goes beyond viewership. You participate. You become one with it. To some degree, you have both reflected something of that in your bodily responses to the work. As I often say, with the sonics of a piece like *Chorus*, it inhabits you as much as you inhabit it. It calls out to people and asks them to engage in a synaesthetic and deeply relational encounter, collapsing the distance that is conventionally associated with the “distant suffering” of others. Your body becomes implicated in the work.

Rail: I also think this topic is dense to navigate for many people, especially men. Bringing up the issue of femicide to a man, regardless of orientation, identification, etc., can be a tough conversation. And it's one that is often blindsided or looked at in a “gender-based way.” It's not a singular matter that only affects one sex; this is our collective issue, and it's not just in one place. The names of these victims may be pertinent to South Africa. However, everybody has a story of somebody affected by femicide or not with us today—it's something universal, cross-cultural, and globalized.

Edwards: Referencing the men, I was aware of watching the female-identifying individuals in the chorus. Today, when we were in the exhibition, I watched the men's

responses. It was exceptional to think about how these men chose this moment and felt it was their duty to be part of this piece. It is a very moving experience. And again, it's just interesting to think about who chose to honor Mrwetyana and the victims. The men's representation in the chorus echoes as, "We are all in this together."

Rail: Gabrielle, how did you choose the participants? Did they volunteer? What was the process?

Goliath: The great significance of this particular choir is that it's the University of Cape Town Choir. This is the institution that Uyinene attended as a student. And so I always knew I would collaborate with the UCT Choir to realize this piece. And what is quite profound, if you look closely, is that a few singers are crying and sometimes unable to sustain the lament.

Rail: I did notice that, especially with a girl in the center left of the choir who keeps touching her face and appears to wipe away tears.

Goliath: Yes, some of the choir members were Uyinene's friends.

Rail: Oh, my Gosh. Wow.

Goliath: It's incredibly significant that the choir of this university enacted this lament in memory of Uyinene.

Rail: And you know, I was taken aback by reading all the names, dates, and locations on the wall of victims of femicide in South Africa after watching the choir, crying, and being in a meditative space with it. So many different thoughts and ideas were going through my mind; it was a lot to take in. I walked the length of the wall and read all of the names. And at the end of it, you write, "And those unnamed..." recalling victims who have not yet been identified or remain unknown. The first name is Uyinene "Nene" Mrwetyana's at the top of the list.

Goliath: Yes.

Rail: How did you choose to make that wall?

Goliath: The presence of the roll call of names is so paramount. And, of course, it sits in devastating tension with the empty rostrum. It's so quiet yet profoundly populated and occupied by those not present. It's the absent presence of those who we have lost. The roll begins with Uyinene, who was killed on August 24, 2019, and then tracks the murder of women, children, trans, and non-gender conforming individuals in South Africa, up until August of this year, 2022.

Rail: I read on the wall text that you also include a few men and children in the record of names. These individuals were heroically trying to defend a victim by interfering with the murderer and, in the end, became victims themselves.

Goliath: Yes.

Rail: Can you speak more on that?

Goliath: Well, their losses are as significant as the others. For me, this circles back to the question of men and how to reckon with this violence. It's about the order of modernity, the modern subject, the historical beneficiary of social life as we know it, and how it orders the world. Whose life counts? Whose life doesn't? Whose life is grievable? Whose life is disposable?

Rail: Who is remembered?

Goliath: Who is remembered? And that's thinking about modern subjects as historically white, heteronormative men, but nonetheless, attending to the significance of those rendered precarious through this particular regime of violence as an ordering of differentially valued life. So, I know this seems circuitous, but it's about holding a space of commemoration and mourning for those often Black, brown, femme, queer, Indigenous lives. And I think of the equal significance of those whose lives are rendered precarious through racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence, and those who come in defense of others are equally precarious. And so, for me, it was a significant thing to include those men within the roll call of names.

Rail: I think it also goes to say that the victims of femicide and gender-based violence are not monolithic. It can also pertain to female genitalia mutilation, amongst other

forms of violence that may not be as publicized or known. How do you feel people are mourning these experiences?

Goliath: Well, you pick up on an important word: mourning. And this is so central to my practice, to what I call the *life* work of mourning. I think about my work as coming in the wake of violence, as opening space within the normative conditions of precarity. By attending to absent presences, we recall and bear with us the Black, brown, femme, and queer lives lost to an order of violence we hope to transform.

Rail: That's beautiful.

Goliath: There's a political imperative driving this life work of mourning to recollect and acknowledge lives deemed superfluous. The simple act of recalling a name is powerful.

Rail: Absolutely. I mean, how many people forget someone's name? To keep alive, the memory of victims in this way means they are seen.

Goliath: Exactly, exactly.

Rail: In a meaningful manner, it also recognizes the people that remain unknown by making them visible and declaring their existence.

Goliath: Yes, it's fundamental. It's thinking about addressing violence, which can relegate these individuals to anonymity, to faceless, generalizing statistics. It's about the lived life: a named individual, a loved individual, a grieved-after individual. It's crucial to sustaining conditions of hope and possibility. We cannot imagine or realize a world otherwise, one hospitable to those rendered precarious, without holding these losses with us. To recall, to remember is to counteract violence.

Rail: *Chorus* is projected life-sized onto two large screens mirroring one another in the center of a dark room with the audience able to sit on large pillows in between the screens or walk around the large projections. An intense moment is when the choir members walk off the stage at the end of their lamentation. Initially, it is perceivably a very sad moment. It's incredibly ungratifying because it's over. I didn't know what to do with myself. But after contemplating that experience, I returned to

hope in the most prodigious sense of the word. I felt it in myself to fuck shit up and stand up for others to prevent injustice. Whatever I can do in my life to help somebody, I will do. *Chorus* makes me want to go out into the world and strive for excellence. If you can make a change in somebody else's life to avoid something unjust from happening, why not go and do it? And to me, Gabrielle, that's what you are doing. I want to ask you a question that may be personal, but how do you feel about those who take inspiration from you? How are you inspired to do work in your community?

Goliath: When somebody is as moved and inspired as you are, it's always deeply humbling and grounding for me. Considering my work, the afterlives of it, the aftercare, my role as an artist, how the work impacts others, and what this kind of experience engenders is key. Many people have spoken to me about how this work makes them feel and how it has, in some way, been transformative for them. Personally, I do not identify as an activist but as an artist. It's working through art and thinking; what can art do? How can art be put to work? How can I make possible a different kind of aesthetic encounter? And I don't underestimate the power of such encounters. The work of advocacy and justice often implies that it needs to be mass, on scale, and measurable. We think of change as having to be enacted within an immense, often masculinist register. The way people responded to my work, and indeed to *Chorus*, have challenged me to think more expansively about activism and the transformative possibilities of art.

Rail: Activism is personal. Collectively we need help to consolidate our ideas, and it's easy to determine making a change is a group initiative. Thinking about activism is like, oh, you know, that person over there is donating blood to a cause. That person over there is picking up garbage from the ocean. They're doing it, so maybe I should volunteer. However, it's individual decisions that inform society at large.

Goliath: Yes. Exactly. I agree with you.

Rail: Yes. So tell me. In your upbringing in South Africa, was there anything you grew up with that is evident in making this work?

Goliath: Absolutely. Attending to the fact that I'm a brown, female-identifying individual who has grown up in a social context ordered by racism, misogyny, homophobia, and patriarchy is distinct not only in the content but in the chosen modalities of my practice. South Africa is beautiful yet devastating, and this personal context has informed my work. But it's not just the meta-political scene, but the individual, the relational, the familial. And in your question, I sense you may be referring to my work, *Berenice*, which is perhaps something we can discuss.

I created *Berenice 10-28* (2010), a photographic series in which nineteen brown women offer themselves as surrogate presences, "standing in" for Berenice. A pivotal moment for my entire practice was this personal loss, the loss of a childhood friend, who was killed on Christmas Eve in 1991 in an incident, or "accident," of domestic violence. I wanted to revisit this experience and think about what it meant for me, as an artist, to approach such a complex and personal loss. I did not want to approach this moment as violence "in general" and from afar, but instead from that proximate, close space of relation, as one entangled in a world of others. My interactions with Berenice's mother and sister reinforced that sense of deep implication and my accountability as an artist. I believe representation always runs the risk of doing harm or reinscribing violence, and we can't control that entirely. How we navigate a field of representation that is already inscribed by the norms of racial and sexual violence demands care. I continued the series in *Berenice 29-39* (2022).

Rail: I want to ask you, where were you when you first heard the news of Uyinene "Nene" Mrwetyana's murder? And how did you feel at that instance? Where was the "aha" moment to make *Chorus* after that?

Goliath: Yes, so the "aha" precedes Uyinene. And it takes me back to what you mentioned about your experience of my work in Venice.

Rail: Oh, yeah?

Goliath: *Chorus* is, in many respects, the culmination of a long-term performance project of mine titled *Elegy*. *Elegy* takes the form of a lament. Seven operatic singers collectively sustain a single note over an hour, passing it from one to another. Each of these performances dedicates itself to a specific individual, be it a woman or non-

gender conforming person lost to fatal acts of gendered and racialized violence. The work was initiated in 2015, with the first performance directed towards Ipeleng Christine Moholane, a journalism student raped and murdered in May of 2015. I heard her father, Mr. Isaac Moholane, speaking on the radio about the loss of his child and was undone by his experience of loss and the love with which he spoke of her. At this lowest moment, it must have taken so much courage for him to make himself publicly heard and to converse with others about this tragedy in an effort to say, “this has to come to an end.” I just thought it was so magnificent, humbling, and inspiring. I felt I had lost someone too. His loss had a bearing on me, and I had a responsibility to respond. At that moment, I began envisioning an artwork to counteract this abhorrent but normative brutality. How could I create something to refuse this order of violence—a space for others to participate and mourn? And that’s where *Elegy* began, and in a way, *Chorus* as well. This was not work to be undertaken as “the artist” untouched, removed, coming from a safe distance—but in community: talking with family members and friends about the work, gaining their consent, and, in the case of *Elegy*, asking them to share a eulogistic letter. These texts became a crucial element of each performance, allowing those gathered a tenuous connection to the one we were there to mourn. Not a nameless, faceless statistic, but a named individual with a favorite color, particular quirks, and qualities speaking to lives lived, loved, and missed.

In 2019, with the news of Uyinene, there was this sense of crisis, a crisis of femicide and rape culture that is our norm. In response, and as a refusal, I wanted to recall and commemorate Uyinene but also hold space for all those other victims.

Approaching *Chorus*, it was a critical conceptual and poetic decision to work with a choir—to make this work collective. When one choir member runs out of breath and cannot sing anymore, there are other voices to carry on the lament. In this way, it’s not only about song, as such, but breath—a collective offering and holding of breath.

Rail: In discussing acts of refusal and various actions of remembrance, I find your “aha moment” so intimate and wholehearted. I also want to ask you about including Uvalde, Texas, and the Robb Elementary School shooting in your exhibition press release. How is this in connection to your first institutional show at Dallas Contemporary?

Goliath: In South Africa, it's not quite the same as what happens here in the States. For Emily and me, it was essential to think about locating the work within a specific context and site like the Dallas Contemporary in Dallas, Texas. It's about the resonances between the different areas. For me, it is essential to think about what happened in Uvalde in relation to the vestiges of slavery, imperialism, and, indeed, apartheid. Locating *Chorus* here is about contending with the afterlives of these moments of social rupture and catastrophe in the United States and South Africa. So, yes, these transnational resonances are fundamental to how the normativity of gun violence renders life precarious in the United States. And, yes, we were also thinking particularly about *Roe v. Wade* and this moment of continued patriarchal governance that infringes on women's rights. It is an urgent and poignant moment for a work like *Chorus* to sound within this particular place. From the conversations I've had, many people are mourning and contending with what's happened and what continues to happen. While there's specificity to these grammars of violence that shape and inform life as we know it, there are also resonances and overlaps—your pain has a bearing on me.

Rail: I'm sure you were thinking, how is somebody going to identify with what you're identifying with somewhere else?

Goliath: Exactly. From Basel, to Bamako, to São Paulo, to Edinburgh, to Stockholm, to Dallas, my work has touched others and opened up spaces for people to engage in close and personal ways with experiences of violence, but also of survival. So many people come to me and share what the work has meant to them and how it has echoed their own experiences and losses. As much as a work like *Chorus* is about confronting a situation of difficulty and radical difference, it's also about forging community.

Rail: In *Chorus*, with the multitude of choir members standing in unison with one another, as the viewer, as the spectator going into that work, you become one of those members in the chorus. You become another section of it. And you become the audience and the participant. You can even transgress that into, as you were saying, feeling the pain of others. And I think—how do you interact with pain? How do you negotiate pain? How do you address it? And what does pain evolve to—going back to

hope, right? I hope this continues to wake everybody and that it's not just forgotten with so many shootings happening everywhere. And it's like, everyone has been affected in one way or another. I want to ask you, in your travels that you've experienced, and have been with so many people, have any of those experiences led to new ideas for future work? Or are you still based very much in South Africa? Where is your mind?

Goliath: When I'm thinking about what my work is contending with, I think about how it's important not to silo off these "social ills." Here we have femicide, and here we have planetary collapse and crisis.

Rail: Another one.

Goliath: But for me, these catastrophes are not separate and discrete. They are deeply entangled.

Rail: Exactly.

Goliath: And so I suppose it's vital for me to think about my work as not being solely located in South Africa, in fact, but attending to a kind of dominant hegemonic order of racial-sexual violence. To that effect, I am currently working on a transnational, decolonial feminist project that will launch next year in Milan but will travel and register in a range of different contexts. Also, as I said earlier, my work is not about violence, per se, but rather the conditions of hope, survival, love, and joy we can find and make possible within and despite this context. I will be debuting a new work of mine, *These three remain*, at the Sharjah Biennale early next year. It's the first iteration of a love trilogy I have been working on and is very much about these fugitive conditions of possibility.

Rail: And how do you define love?

Goliath: This is love in-spite-of, as survival, as possibility. It is also love that is fallible, imperfect, and has the capacity to wound. Nonetheless, it is what remains. It's a love premised on difference and bearing. We think of difference as that which drives us apart from one another. But this is about reaching out across those differences—the political labor of how we come to one another. It's as much about my

capacity to love others as it is to care for myself. And for all of its difficulty, its stickiness, and entanglement, it's beautiful. And what is beauty if not love?