

# WHERE POETIC CHAMPIONS COMPOSE

(with apologies to Van Morrison)



LIEN BOTHA looks back at the land art, and its poetry connections, that graced parts of Stellenbosch as a component of

the town's garden initiative in October.

MANY YEARS AGO, on a wall next to the River Avon in the UK, a poet left an ode to watercraft. The poignancy of Ian Hamilton Finlay's unobtrusive plaque 'Evolution of the boat' was a flawless fusion of image and text and I sacredly kept the 35mm slides taken of it. Recently I took them out of their small Kodachrome box and held them up to the light in an effort to rekindle how the encounter mesmerised me.

Closer to home, near a river with another name, the spirit of nine adventurous artists was evoked this spring when the *Poetic Land Art* exhibition ran as part of the Stellenbosch Garden Initiative in early October.

At the helm of the art project were Andi Norton and Hanlé Hill of the Stellenbosch Outdoor Sculpture Trust, who appointed award-winning South African artist Strijdom van der Merwe as curator. His biography meanders through major site-specific and design events such as 30 Nature Artists in the World and the Global Nomadic Art Project in South Korea, and his commissioned work and residency invitations have come from countries such as Belgium, Denmark, the USA and Lithuania. He has held numerous solo and group exhibitions and his work is known locally and internationally.

Artists who took part in *Poetic Land Art* were invited on the grounds of their relevant artistic output, as well as key demographics, and they were requested to source a poem that would inform the work they proposed to create. Each poem appeared on the information plaque at the site in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. The sites where

the works were displayed extended from the farm Bethlehem in the east to the Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography.

Inspired by Breyten Breytenbach's poem 'Nirvana', a meditative piece by siblings **PC Janse van Rensburg** and **Anni Snyman** was located in the Jan Marais Nature Reserve. Prior to making a start on their work, they summarised their approach. "The stump of the fallen tree on the lawn resembles a head, and the trunk and branches the limbs of a person (a body-tree). We propose to make this resemblance visible by sculpting a head and hands in thick wire and metal panels that we will anchor in the wood and the ground."

**Cow Mash** (Kgaogelo Mashilo) used her own poem 'Tshela', which in Sepedi (Northern Sotho) has the dual meaning to 'jump over something' or 'skip'. Her interactive piece was installed in a walled grass area at 60 Dorp Street.

*Sixth day has come and gone  
Laundry day was skipped  
don't. waste. time  
Tshela ka mo  
Tshelela ka mo  
O tla bapala le mang?  
don't. waste. Time*

Cow explained that the washing line poles in the artwork held the position of the two players who would swing the rope in a skipping game. "Of course, the poles are not people, in which case the game will be standing still. The stillness of the game is echoed in the poem

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** *Catching the wind, Strijdom van der Merwe focused on this force of nature; PC Janse van Rensburg and Anni Snyman transformed a fallen tree into a person resting on the ground; Gordon Froud's labyrinth graced Ryneveld Street; and Andrew Hofmeyr turned the viewer's gaze with his use of colour.*

through the rhetorical question 'o tla bapala le mang?/who will you play with?' While the rope hangs in a position ready to start the game, the washing line poles are a reminder of responsibilities calling a halt to the game."

As part of the ongoing art project *Droomstroom*, on the old farm Bethlehem in Kylemore, **Hannelie Coetzee's** stone gravure is titled *Merkmaak*, citing a poem by Jaco van der Merwe. The full-length walking figure engraved into the stone during the week of the exhibition is still on the farm. According to the artist, it contemplates how we should tread lightly with other people, on our history and on the planet. "My gravures scratch at the surface, interrogating the deep past archaeologically," she said. Hannelie uses natural materials in unlikely partnerships and industrial waste or obsolete archives to build site-specific artwork, the meaning of which is also carried in the material she uses. Her artworks are sometimes permanent but often ephemeral.

For his piece *Verstaan*, on the corner of Mark and Herte streets, **Andrew Hofmeyr** cited 'Turn', from Gabeba Baderoon's *The Museum of Ordinary Life* (2005).





TOP FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Sandile Radebe's colourful work at the Academy of Design and Photography; an invitation to skip by Cow Mash; and Title In Need by Paballo Majela, which comments on the lack of access to certain spaces. INSET RIGHT: Artist Kgaogelo Mashile uses the moniker Cow Mash; it comes from her childhood nickname Kgao, which sounded like 'cow' to the young Mashile. BELOW: For Merkmaak, Hammelie Coetzee engraved a figure on this stone which is displayed on Kylemore farm Bethlehem.



*You opened the door,  
Looked at me. I almost turned  
To see what you saw.*

"I chose this poem because of its simple beauty," commented Andrew. "Using materials that are connected to Stellenbosch, I created an immersive experience where the viewer is drawn in and physically turned. In this way, rather than a single point of view, the artwork invited the viewer to metaphorically shift their perspective. It was a playful celebration of colour and a journey of discovery."

*UbuZulu*, the title of Sandile Radebe's work, referenced lyrics by rapper Killah Priest from his 1998 debut album, *Heavy Mental*. Sandile said his aim was to encourage viewers to think about graffiti, and indeed language, in a new way while conjuring the city 'out there' through the creative navigation of time and space. "My work is centred on text, language and other writing systems," he explained. "My process is therefore influenced by the process of reading and accumulating and retaining information. I reflect and consider my everyday encounter with language in its various forms to see it anew. I achieve this by manipulating the form of text through exaggeration and/or translating it into other mediums. These translations create an experiential sense of text or sometimes accentuate the

aesthetic beauty inherent in text. Balance, harmony or colour are some of the aesthetic devices I use to achieve this." *UbuZulu* is to be installed permanently on the campus of the Academy of Design and Photography.

Paballo Majela's Sesotho poem to the Makhlokwe (Makgolokoe) people informs *Title In Need*, which is to be placed on the university campus, on Bosman Street, and will remain there as part of the Stellenbosch University's active Visual Redress Programme.

*Lekgolokwe!  
Ha miriti e theha!  
Kgohlong ho kenwa ka mapatso  
E seng ka lehlafi*

*Lekholokoe! (means warrior)  
When the shadow forms  
You enter the valley by cracks  
And not by doors  
(excerpt)*

"Makgolokoe historically are a Bantu-speaking people whose early history began in the central Congo, but they migrated southwards during 600AD," said Paballo. "Their journey to find greener

pastures wasn't made easy; the issue of land and property dispossession included brutal oppression and painful suffering, caused by people of a different ethnicity. Makgolokoe were forced to move around looking for a place to call their own."

For Paballo, the use of doors in this artwork alludes to the lack of access to certain spaces, an access the Makgolokoe would have been denied. "While the artwork speaks to the history of access, it can open a conversation about contemporary ideas of access."

Opposite the synagogue in Ryneveld Street, visitors were encouraged to negotiate Gordon Froud's labyrinth *Windmills of your mind*, based on the song by Michel Legrand with English lyrics by Marilyn Bergman and Alan Bergman. Having participated in various land art and site-specific events in South Africa and worked alongside international and great local artists in this field, Gordon has assimilated various approaches to this genre. "I looked at approaches to sites and considered the space allocated to me. This site had very little in the way of natural resources that I could rely on, so it was incumbent on me to find materials that would have minimal impact on it and would enable it to be restored as speedily as possible to its original state, with perhaps only a trace left behind. This work related to my exploration of sacred geometry in my own practice and extended into a greater pattern of existence – one that connects us all – that is activated or actualised by viewer interaction and participation through social media."

Strijdom van der Merwe's *Catching the wind* alluded to 'Who has seen the wind' by Victorian poet Christina Georgina Rossetti and was installed on the Koloniesland Trail at the end of Jannash Street.

*Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I nor you:  
But when the leaves hang trembling,  
The wind is passing through.*

*Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I:  
But when the trees bow down their heads,  
The wind is passing by.*

Strijdom has worked with this theme three times before: in Australia, Italy and Germany. "The wind is mysterious, it arrives out of nowhere and then it disappears again," he said. "I am intrigued by its sound through buildings and trees and am always aware that the first sign of its approach is when the leaves start to rustle. This is what I was attempting to express in the skeletal stems holding the leaves, suggesting the trace of the wind."

Land art, he concluded, is primarily about the value of experience and hardly about dividends at an art auction. It's about retrieving the magic of the memory of the art in years to come in an attempt to harness poetry rather than profit. **V**

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