



THE EDOARDO VILLA WILL TRUST
Sculpture Grants for A PLACE IN TIME
NIROX Sculpture Park 2016

As night fell an entirely unfamiliar and vivid sky
came into view and I was reminded why our
ancestors tried to make sense of their place
in the universe through naming and taming
constellations - Helen Pheby

A Place in Time curated by Helen Pheby PhD, Senior Curator of Yorkshire
Sculpture Park
and Mary-Jane Darro11

NOTE FROM THE TRUSTEES

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JONI BRENNER

“When you pursue something, it unleashes other things in unexpected ways,” says Joni Brenner (47) of the opportunity Nirox offered her in 2013 to create a work for the 2014 Winter Sculpture Garden. “I initially said no. My work is small and, made in clay, it is not very durable.”

An art history lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand for nearly two decades, Brenner balances her day job with her art. Born in Zimbabwe, she studied fine art at Wits, majoring in painting. “I started working with portraits in my fourth year in 1990. I struggled in my studio work for most of my senior years of study until something gave and at the end of my fourth year I presented this series of enormous painted portraits - done from photographs. It pushed me to want to do my masters: I felt like I was only just beginning and it was already the end of my degree.

“The first thing I did in my masters was work from a live model. Wilson Motane sat for me for 20 years. He died in 2010. He was almost the only model I ever had.”

Brenner’s transition to three dimensions was gradual. “I really wanted to shape the face, flesh, bones and form. A brush is quite direct, and I used thick paint, but it was still frustratingly flat. Then I started to work in relief with clay slabs incised, moulded and cast in plaster.”

By 2004, Brenner felt her familiarity with Wilson’s face and head was making her work too abstract. She wanted to retrain her eye and borrowed the human skull from the Wits School of Arts; which is used to teach drawing. She’s been working with it for 12 years. “Something must be said for the kind of repetition that doesn’t lead to staleness but leads to new invention. If I had to define creativity, the crux of it is repetition, or variation on a theme. “Retrospectively, I’m very grateful,” she laughs at her terror when Nirox knocked on her door. “I felt pushed. And then I said I can work on a new series of small skulls, and if anyone is interested in upscaling them, they can.” But Nirox arranged for sculptor Angus Taylor to help Brenner upscale the series of four, based on a human skull. “Mary-Jane described the upscaling as simple. They do it digitally: they scan it, cut an armature and pack it with clay; the only thing they can’t do is the surface ... she made it sound like I could go there in a dress and just sort of work the surface a bit!” she laughs.

The process began. “I get the three-dimensional scans with an image of the armature. And an instruction to bring a half a ton of clay. The process was arduous, unwieldy, uncertain and frightening” - she didn’t go in a dress. “It was the hardest thing for me. I couldn’t see what I was doing. My body ached. You had to throw the clay onto the armature; you could lose track of what was where.”

Five days later, Brenner recalls “I felt defeated. But then I said, let me just see if I can do this for another two days.” And then something gave. Three of the four skulls were cast in bronze.

When she received the Villa Trust Award for the Nirox Winter Sculpture fair 2016, she decided to make the fourth. “It’s a new chapter in my career, but it has different constraints. I don’t control the whole process. The scale is something your whole body must learn.”

JONI BRENNER (South Africa)
Kin, 2015/2016
Bronze, Edition of 5



HANNELIE COETZEE

As you enter Nirox, on your right, there is a clump of trees. Look carefully and you see a giant dragonfly. Standing 6mX5mX10m, it's pixelated: pieces of black wattle are packed, mosaic-like, forming its shimmering compound eyes. Stand near it and its cohesion dissolves. Stand away, and this miraculous creature, *Glinsterjuffertjie uit Swartwattelboom* by Villa Bursary recipient Hannelie Coetzee (45) jumps out at you.

"It's a drying stack, in preparation for its next use," she says. "I believe if art can't be made to last a thousand years, it has to be reused. When this dragonfly falls over, it will be firewood. The most exciting thing about receiving this bursary is the acknowledgement: for a female sculptor making a temporary work."

Coetzee was born into a staunch Christian family affiliated to the deeply conservative Doppe church. "I really believed lightning would strike me if I didn't go to church," she rejected the religion, but retained the work ethic. "I come from a family of makers - we always had stuff to make." The daughter of educated nationalists - her mother was a journalist, her father was employed by the apartheid government - Coetzee studied photography at the Vaal Technikon: her father insisted she follow a field that had job potential. To the quasi-industrial Vaal was a culture shock for her.

It took some years for Coetzee to meld her photography with her art; several research-orientated road trips on which she embarked between 2002 and 2010 really opened her eyes. "My big beef was the apartheid regime suppressed research."

In 2010, she mounted her first solo art exhibition, *Uitpak*, at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. "I found waste stone from Freedom Park's memorial engravings at a dump site and brought it to the studio. It was the first time I collected stone, rather than documented it.

"The exhibition comprised a dry-stacked corbelled house which I built at the JAG with these stones, drawing from my knowledge of how this architecture originated in Basotho and not Voortrekker culture as we had been taught." Coetzee learnt that the Voortrekkers had tried copying the Basotho corbelled houses with trench stone-stacked walls during the First Anglo-Boer War in the 1880s.

Her historical curiosity matured into scientific focus. "The more I work, the more I want what I'm doing to contribute to environmental health."

A turning point in Coetzee's career was brought about when landscape artist Strijdom van der Merwe took an interest in her work. "He organised site specific festivals at Plettenberg Bay in 2011 and 2013. For the first, I did a time-lapse work, *Family Portrait*, on Lookout Beach, consisting of 14 stone-stacked figures, portraits of my family. Each high tide, they fell. And then I would stack them again." The piece was well received and van der Merwe had her in his sights: "Whenever there's been a public art opportunity, Strijdom's emailed me. Nirox was one of those: I went via Plett to Nirox," she grins.

Blending environmentally savvy work with mosaic and dry stacking, Coetzee's dragonfly was born. "Black wattle came into the country under British rule - it was planted to serve the mining industry. But today, the trees' thirstiness and the rapidity at which its footprint is expanding are concerns. There's a large plantation of it on a farm neighbouring Nirox.

"The keystone species that returns after black wattle is extracted, from Nirox according to the scientists, is the dragonfly." Coetzee stalled her proposal until she knew it could be sustainable for the community. "Working with Benji is remarkable," she adds. "The more I get to know him, the more he trusts my gut instinct."

HANNELIE COETZEE (South Africa)
Glinsterjuffertjie uit Swartwattelboom/Glistening Demoiselle out of Black Wattle
(Phaon iridipennis out of *Acacia mearnsii*), 2016
Wood, scaffold and oil



RAIMI GBADAMOSI (South Africa)
The Republic Faces the Sun, 2016
Glass and steel

RAIMI GBADAMOSI

When you first think of British artist Raimi Gbadamosi (51), his trademark use of black, yellow and white in distinctive geometrical works in his ongoing project The Republic comes to mind. When you see his work on the Nirox Winter Sculpture fair 2016, you may think he's broken his own rules. No, he explains. It's an illusion that the work has other colours. It's because of the sky and the way natural light works on colours.

"There is something ceremonial about the sun," he says. "I wanted The Republic to exist in the world, outside. The Republic is a nation state of which people can become citizens. Some pieces I make for The Republic. Others I don't. Sometimes there's a combination where The Republic intrudes into whatever an existing piece is." But Gbadamosi's piece on Nirox is not only about black, white and yellow. "Other concerns are important to me, too. Such as the number nine. There is a beauty to the number nine. It is a magic number. There are nine panels on the piece.

"When I went to Nirox to look around, I realised Nirox was quite beautiful on its own; there is something about looking at the world and realising that the best thing to do is not to do anything. I had to take into account what is here, how it functions in its own beauty.

"The outside world is amazing. Sometimes you can go for the biggest, most impossible idea and it becomes too small. And if it is too small, you figure why bother as you've made a piece that could be shown in a gallery, but instead, you've plonked it outside. So scale is important to me too.

"And then there is my concern around aesthetics. I am a neo-conceptualist, and I am really interested in how beautiful things are. I want people to look at this piece and enjoy the experience of engaging with it, and be forced to remember where they are".

He read for his doctorate at London's Slade School of Art in 2001; sculpture was his first love. "In sculpture you could do anything. When I make pieces I think of them in terms of sculpture, even when if they're fastened to the walls.

"I don't consider what I do installation. Installation for me is about transforming a space into something else. And I'm not interested in transforming the space. I want the space and what I do to function side by side. The space is just as important as the work itself. "

Currently heading the Department of Visual Arts at Pretoria University, Gbadamosi, who was born in Manchester, was invited to take part in the 2016 Winter Sculpture fair by its curator, Helen Pheby.

He arrived in South Africa in 2012: he'd been invited to apply to the Wits School of Arts. "I was quite happy in London - I had my studio, my house, I was making work, occasionally selling some. I was a fellow at Slade. I wasn't the number one artist on the hit parade, but that wasn't the issue. I was writing, curating. I was part of the world I wanted to be in.

"South Africa is an amazing place. As a black person in this country, I am constantly made aware of how race, language and power function. Moving to another university in South Africa has given me a new set of insights into how the country works, how the academy works. It is fascinating.

"When I identify myself to myself, however, it's always as an artist."



HAROON GUNN-SALIE

“The work is complex to wrap one’s tongue around,” says Haroon Gunn-Salie (28) of his Nirox Winter Fair 2016 work. Named A Place In Time it’s a life-size map in shards of stone of the remains of an ancient kraal some 15 minutes from Nirox itself. He explains that it’s the only permanent work at Nirox, so far. “During the time I’ve known about Nirox, I’ve been having a continuing conversation with Benji Liebmann,” he begins.

“I was told that when the Cradle was subdivided and allowed for private purchase, there was a national survey done in 1995 on the land to find key historical places, define them as heritage and retain the site and the road allowing public access to that site forever.

“I was also explained that the survey missed some of these sites. And the kraal the work replicates is one of these sites. This kraal is very special: a normal kraal has an inner circular wall and an outer circular wall. The inner wall was where the cattle were held and the outer wall was for protection. The inner kraal was also used for ceremonial purposes.

“Now this kraal has an inner circular wall. The outer wall snakes around it irregularly. There is a buffalo thorn tree on the north axis of the inner circle around which there are the remains of three huts. This tree indicates that a king lived there once. And we do not know what this kraal is. Without a survey, we cannot. The Catch-22 is private land ownership in the Cradle does not want these surveys to happen as it may affect what the private owners can do with their land.”

The son of an uMkhonto weSizwe activist, Gunn-Salie was born while his mother was on the run. She had been framed and was arrested soon after she gave birth. “I spent much of my babyhood in prison. We were in Caledon in the rural Western Cape. In a powerful art gesture, one day, I jammed the lock full of wax crayons - an attempt to free us, in a sense.”

Nursing an interest in graffiti and a reputation for cocking a snook at what he believed society expected of him, Gunn-Salie majored in sculpture at the University of Cape Town. He quickly earned an award-winning reputation for collaboration on international projects about oral traditions translated into artistic interventions.

Bemoaning the fact that heritage can be privately owned as he feels it can impose limits on research, Gunn-Salie says, with particular reflection on his Nirox project: “That, I feel, is the next generation’s role: researchers, social activists and artists should learn about these things and raise awareness.”

Gunn-Salie’s work, measuring 6 000m², is made of stones from the original site. “About 100m from the kraal, there is a stone quarry,” he says explaining how these stones were laboriously quarried and moved onto the Nirox site for the construction of this piece. The work is virtually flat: like a rough stone path along which you can walk. “The height of the ruins at the site is translated into the depth at which this work is dug, and it is filled with rock from the quarry. You see the footprint.”

Gunn-Salie created the piece in collaboration with architect Malcolm Campbell and ACG architects and development planners. “But it’s not complete, yet,” he adds. “There is still ongoing research necessary on the original site. There is the question of the site itself. We need a viewing deck, so whenever the public is allowed in, they can see the original site and my reflection on it.”

HAROON GUNN-SALIE (South Africa)
Above and Below, 2016
Rock



MICHELE MATHISON (Zimbabwe/SA)
Fissure, 2016
Steel and enamel

MICHELE MATHISON

“You cannot not be influenced by the traditions of sculpture in Zimbabwe,” says Michele Mathison (b. 1977) who has a complex heritage that reaches from Jewish Lithuania to Ireland and Italy; he was born and raised in Zimbabwe. “It gets ingrained in your being. You’re surrounded by it. The national emblem on the flag is a sculpture: the Zimbabwean bird.”

Sculpture was an obvious choice for Mathison. “I was raised by my mother. I was always interested in making things, but as my father was absent, I never had know-how. At Michaelis School of Fine Art, at the University of Cape Town, I was drawn toward the alchemy of being able to create things from tough mediums like bronze, steel or wood.”

Mathison’s eyes were opened at an exhibition of Young British Artists (YBAs) at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe which he experienced as a teenager. Seeing the work of sculptors such as Anish Kapoor, Richard Long and Antony Gormley for the very first time, “really blew my mind!”

Mathison graduated in 2000, under arguably the triumvirate of the best sculptural education in South Africa at the time - Jane Alexander, Gavin Younge and Bruce Arnott - where he was taught modelling, carving and assembling, but it was some years before he launched himself as a sculptor.

“The degree developed my eye, but I didn’t know how to be an artist after graduating. I ended up making commercial films to earn a living. I loved the language of filming and editing. I believe there’s an easy relationship between photography, sculpture and performance. Not only in making stuff, but also in how it is looked at.”

Mathison’s work came to the attention of Nirox’s Benji Liebmann in 2011, at the time of his first solo exhibition. “I have always had this thing with objects - like tools - and their symbolism and meaning, politically and socially, they are more than just what they are,” he says. His work *Breaking Ground*, with its dynamic implied movement with several picks welded together, became for him a touchstone to further developments.

Fissure is his work on Nirox’s 2016 Winter Sculpture Garden. “It evolved from the pick sculpture ... I started looking at other tools which do similar things [to the pick] and found long sharp crowbars for digging holes. That repeated motion of the straight thing going into the ground was the spark for me in this piece. I abstracted it and deconstructed it into a much larger scale. Deciding when the work is complete has to do with the engineering but also the aesthetics of the project. Achieving the moment, the movement and the form is a delicate balance, because you can overreach that mark.

“It is a violent piece,” he reflects on how intrusion into the ground to break it or extract something from it is implied by the work. “And yet it is quiet. It’s a kind of monument,” he adds that without the Villa Bursary he would not have been able to create this work.

“Installing the 7m piece was conceptually a part of the work. We had to take out a chunk of ground to give it that stability. The hole is about a metre deep. It has quite a substantial foundation.”

Recently back from a residency at Segera in Kenya, a ranch owned by German art patron Jochen Zeitz, Mathison speaks of his work’s mixed critical response: “I have weathered criticism that my work was too ‘designy’. It’s a double-edged sword I’ve always battled with. But it’s the rigours of outdoor sculpture: if it is not well made, it won’t last.”

MOHAU MODISAKENG



The classic pair of leopards from ancient Benin has over the last hundred years or so come to dominate African craft stalls all over urban South Africa, their noble stylisation and bearing feels denuded of its originally royal values in contexts where you can find the beasts cast in brass or bronze in a variety of sizes and poses. They originate from an association between the Benin ruler, the oba: They both have the ability to take lives. They both became emblematic of power. Mohau Modisakeng (30), who has emerged onto the contemporary art world with a splash, and who blends performance gestures with sculptural reflections and forays into photography and film, as he explores what South Africa's violent history has influenced who we are as human beings, presents a pair of Benin-evocative leopards in Nirox's Winter Sculpture Garden of 2016, with the assistance of the Edoardo Villa Memorial Bursary.

Modisakeng's are no ordinary Benin memorabilia, however. Created with buttons welded together, these noble beasts in most respects adhere to the ancient stylisation, only they are caught in trappings which evoke colonialist moulding. Each wears a saddle and the two are entrapped in a cage of black wrought iron that evokes a bird cage.

Born in Soweto, Modisakeng graduated from the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town in 2009. He lives and works between Johannesburg and Cape Town and was the Standard Bank Young Artist for visual art in 2016. Since 2010, his work has been shown internationally.

"I developed a strong interest in the visual arts when I first travelled outside of the country in 2004 as part of a group of students who were invited to travel to London on a high school exchange programme," he says. "While in London I visited a number of galleries and museums, including the Tate Modern and the Saatchi Gallery, where I've since shown work as an established artist.

"I think the subject matter I work with, though steeped in South African history, speaks to issues of race, culture and politics in ways that resonate with other contexts," he says. "I tend to take a multi-disciplinary approach to my work, but my favourite medium has always been sculpture.

"The real work for me is in relating the visual signs and symbols of the abstract - be it in music or in my dreams - into a narrative that resonates with the collective social experience."

Currently reading for a masters degree in fine arts at New York's Columbia University, Modisakeng is immensely committed in many aspects of his career. With several solo exhibitions in Europe, a touring South African exhibition with the Standard Bank, and collaborations with top South African artist and the launch of two book projects archiving some of his recent work, he feels unstoppable.

Many aspects of Africa's tainted history come under Modisakeng's loupe in the way in which he creates and conceptualises his work, which engages with symbolism as it plays with the theme of violence on political, economic, psychological and spiritual levels.

William Ewing describes Modisakeng on the Saatchi Gallery website as being "all for the coming together of the peoples of postcolonial Africa, but [he] feels that this can't be done at the expense of history. There are scores to settle, and better that they are settled in symbolic combat than blood.

"For the most part," writes Ewing, "Modisakeng works as a sculptor, with recourse to performance, video and photography as the concept requires ... this is a fighter come to seek justice. He emerges from a dark past, striding forward into the light, clothed in history."

MOHAU MODISAKENG (South Africa)
Lefa La Ntate | Heritage Father, 2016
Mixed media

LWANDISO NJARA



Concrete is the medium which Transkei-born sculptor Lwandiso Njara (29) turns to every time, whether he mixes the patina with iron and nitric acid or copper and nitric acid to create a deep, light resistant rich patina in brown or dark green. "I just love what I can do with it, in terms of moulding and control, colour and form," he says. Speaking of his work *Spiritual Journey* which is the smallest work in the fair and a weird mix between a goat and an aeroplane, Njara speaks of his personal nostalgia for his ancestral roots that the work embodies.

Born and raised in a rural part of South Africa that is defined by the rich beauty of its landscapes and the material poverty of its people, isiXhosa-speaking Njara used to instinctively draw landscapes and write stories as a child. "I developed, but my parents didn't know much about the arts," he says. "I didn't have much support until I started doing bigger paintings. It was then that Dr Bara, a friend of the family, suggested I study art at the Russell Road FET College in Port Elizabeth.

"From there I never stopped. I was encouraged by a cousin to move to Pretoria, where I could do a BTech in Fine Art at the Tshwane University of Technology. The whole thing started with the PPC competition that I won in 2009," he speaks of the trajectory of his career thus far. "My winning piece, *Industrial Action*, was bought by the presidency. It was inspired by a metro bus- and taxi strike at the time. I was staying in Silverton and studying in Pretoria, and the strike affected me which encouraged me to make this piece.

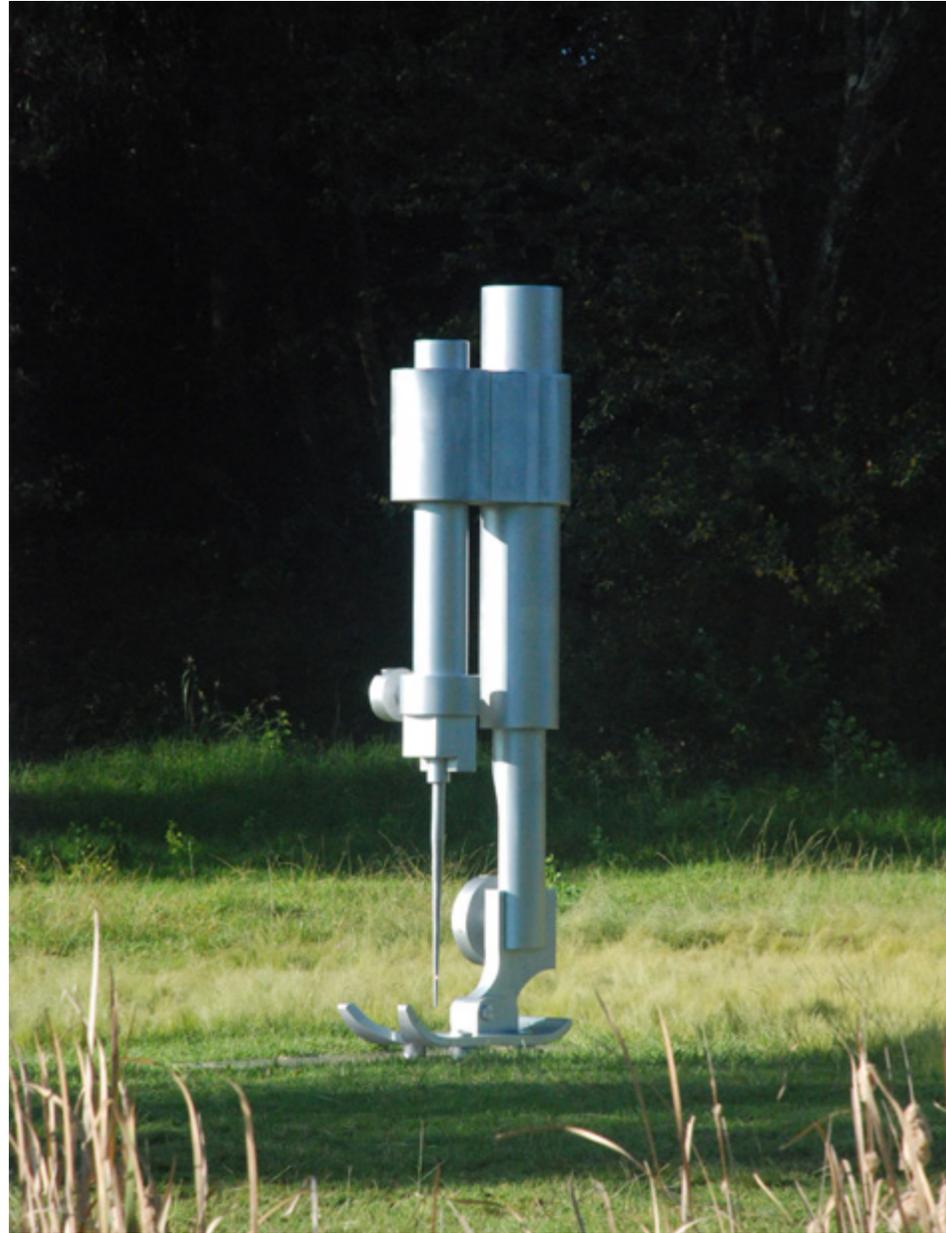
"At TUT I was introduced to all the disciplines of artmaking, but sculpture blew me away. I studied under Renier Le Roux, Ian Redelinghuys and Jan van der Merwe, who pushed me to do the best I could." He agrees that winning art competitions can put one into a winning streak - in terms of developing one's own confidence to experiment and invest energy in one's work. He was acknowledged in the PPC award several years running and also bagged the Thami Mnye Fine Art award in 2012.

"This year I'm focusing on taking part in art exhibitions," he speaks of invaluable time he spent as a studio assistant with Angus Taylor recently. "I learned so much about the bronze casting process in that beautiful studio." "I had my solo at the Art Association in Pretoria; I'm currently showing at the University of Johannesburg gallery in Auckland Park with Carl Jeppe. I've just delivered works for the Turbine Art Fair, and then, there's the Rooftop Sculpture in Pretoria."

Njara met Benji Liebmann and Mary-Jane Darroll about two years ago. "I don't ever let an opportunity to make and exhibit new work go by. When MJ told me about the Winter Sculpture show which was to be curated by Helen Pheby, I grew very excited. My main ambition right now is to broaden my profile and build my career," he adds.

"Working on *Spiritual Journey* was difficult because of time pressures, which is one reason why the work is small: I submitted sketches for Benji and MJ's approval - But the pressures of the Nirox project were clashing with the deadlines of my exhibition at the Lizamore gallery at the time, so I had to balance the two."

Unperturbed, Njara acknowledges this balancing act - and others, concerning time, the space to work, and money - is par for the course. The challenges of being a full time artist are not on appro.



MARY SIBANDE (South Africa)
The Mechanism, 2016
Mild steel and paint

MARY SIBANDE

Mary Sibande (34) burst to life on the South African art spectrum in 2007 with *Sophie*, a larger-than-life cast figure in an exaggerated maid's uniform made of fabric that drew from black South Africans' urban heritage under apartheid. It was an idea she started developing as a student at the University of Johannesburg, and it captured the imagination of art lovers and lay people alike. It dominated billboards and galleries in 2010 and became emblematic for a new generation of South Africans. Her work on the Nirox Winter Sculpture Fair of 2016 was a digression in medium, but this giant sewing machine presser foot and needle fits her iconography.

"For me it was time to explore other avenues," she says. "I thought: what is the thing that since day one has been present in the construction of my work? My sewing machine. So I took a section of the sewing machine and blew up the scale. I also used materials foreign to my established working practice: stainless steel, mild steel, away from fibreglass and fabric which I was used to. I had to work with a team of different people - who had an approach that bordered on mathematical. The work is in a new language, new environment, new people, new challenges. It was scary." Sibande first met Nirox's Benji Liebmann through Monna Mokoena, the owner of Gallery Momo in Johannesburg a couple of years ago. "He talked about the Winter Sculpture fair, in one of its earlier manifestations," she recalls. "At that time, I produced a figure throwing seeds. When it came to the 2016 I discovered I was pregnant when it was time to make the work and I couldn't work with the toxicity of resin and fibreglass so I rethought the approach." Trained as a painter, Sibande was seduced by the idea of sculpture by the third year of her degree. "At that point, I discovered the work of Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz, who works in papier mâché, resin and bronze; it made me so excited. I rushed off to my supervisor, Marialda Marais and said I have this idea. She showed me the work of Yinka Shonibare, Kara Walker and Tracey Rose. This gave me my vocabulary. My lecturer Gordon Froud introduced me to Angus Taylor, and the rest", she grins, "has been history".

Sibande won the Standard Bank Young Artist award in 2013. "It established my momentum. I have lots to give. Lots to share. I don't want popularity: being influential is another thing."

Sibande's work is romantic for contemporary South Africa. She comes from a heritage of domestic servitude. "My drive to break that chain came from the high school I went to," she says. "It was an Afrikaans medium school and made me want to become the kind of South African my grandmother will never be. She raised me from the age of 10, as my mother became a migrant worker and moved to Johannesburg.

"School made me think about how people exist. Yes, at home we talked about white wealth and white privilege, but we never contemplated why they are like that, and we are like this. Only at university did I learn of all the dirty history that makes this South Africa.

"I realised the realities of being this skin colour and how the world will reject me as certain people have made the world comfortable for themselves and I can only enter that world as a servant and disappear at night back to my four-roomed cookie cutter house. That was the future I was looking at. That's where it all started."



JOHAN THOM

“If you have the right people in place, in institutions, they can make real differences,” says Johan Thom (40) of the Nirox Winter Sculpture Project. As one of the recipients of the Villa Trust Bursary, which he used to create his work *Hanging Gardens*, he speaks of the freedom to create a piece not restrained by commercial or political ideas. Materiality has been a concern of Thom’s since his early childhood. Raised in Boksburg, east of Johannesburg, by parents who demonstrated a strong work ethic and exposed him to a lot of contemporary art during his formative years, Thom describes himself as having grown up “between the mine dumps and the art galleries. There was a strange kind of synergy between the material - the dangerous mine dumps, the soil, the thunder and the earthquakes that made Boksburg, Boksburg - and being creative, allowing art to give you the power to challenge boundaries.

“Many artists I admired as a teenager all had a sculpture practice,” he says, speaking of how his career teeters between performance, video and sculpture. Thom enrolled in 1995 to do a Fine Arts degree at the University of Pretoria. “But I had grown up looking at performance. There was not much of it in South Africa at the time, but during my masters degree, I start thinking about it and tried to draw links between performance and sculpture. When I left for London to do my doctorate at the Slade School of Fine Art, I really had a moment when I stopped and said: okay, what, really am I interested in? I wrote my dissertation on materiality as a performative framework, arguing the idea that the material body is fundamentally an open-ended kind of performance.

“Nirox interests me,” he continues. “Because of the idea of responding specifically to the materiality of the space, its performativity. It was ideal for me to get a Villa Trust Bursary - it coincided with my thinking that something must happen with sculpture. I wanted to make something big. I want to think about contemporary sculpture and what it could possibly do in South Africa right now.”

But he speaks of the fear of using a lot of money to create objects without practical or commercial value. “I had sleepless nights about this,” he refers to his glass vitrine with weeds growing inside it, a pair of severed bronze-cast feet atop it and builder’s foam dominating it. “None of the big collections will be interested in purchasing a work like this, because it’s just not that kind of a work.

“As we speak, the work is growing and changing and the monkeys in the area are contributing to it ... it was my initial ambition that the work is performative and that the piece has a political backdrop outside those material considerations. On a superficial level, those bronze feet speak of the state of sculpture in South African right now. Public sculpture. Large public sculpture. What’s it doing? How are people interacting with it? The grandiose ambitions of monumental public sculpture invariably intersect with highly politicised interests or commercial interests.”

Thom considers the symbolism in the material of *Hanging Gardens*: “The wooden decking refers to the safari industry. The glass is about the culture of museums and protection. There’s an environmental level there that tries to respond to Nirox as a perfect garden, a utopia. And there’s a dystopia playing itself off against the idea of nature and of the not-so-ideal realities of having big sculpture in South Africa’s decolonial moment: the changing relationship between politics and art. I think it is quite dangerous.”

JOHAN THOM (South Africa)
Hanging Garden, 2016
Process based intervention with wood (pine, salgina), glass, bronze, plants and mixed media



BERCO WILSENACH

The “painterliness” of *Cloud Container* by Berco Wilsenach (42) in the 2016 Nirox Winter Sculpture Park seems to belie his approach to his work thus far. “Yes and no,” he grins, speaking of how his work with mathematical fractals won him the coveted Volkskas L’Atelier Award in 2005.

“I come from a mathematical background. It’s who I am. I studied three years of mathematics in my fine art degree at Pretoria University. I have a very analytical precise approach to my work, which I think is visible. And yet, I don’t see myself as a mathematician. I am far more interested in the philosophy behind mathematics than mathematics itself, which translates well into a reflection on the stars. It’s the same kind of thinking, the same kind of approach to looking at the world.

“What I really like about the clouds piece is it’s a bit more free - in it, I’m not so stuck in the constraints of what I think it has to be like. There are 14 layers to the work: I started in the middle and work out. The approach is painterly, which I enjoyed because my work generally is not like that.”

Wilsenach’s project *Blind Astronomer*, exhibited at the Museum of African Design in 2013 initially got the attention of Nirox’s Benji Liebmann. This three-part project featured an installation called *Written in the Stars*. Based on the almost “superficial correlation between the dots on a star chart and the dots of Braille, where they use similar coding systems to exchange information,” *Written in the Stars* comprises a series of star maps sandblasted into seven glass panels seemingly suspended in mid-air. The glass is illuminated from within; as you look at it, it seems as though you could leap the bounds of gravity and reality and merge into space. But when you look closer, you notice Wilsenach has incorporated a legend at the bottom of each panel in Braille. These words “explain the night sky to somebody who constantly lives in darkness”, he says.

Written in the Stars is the artistic forebear for *Cloud Container*. Installed between Nirox’s trees and bodies of water, it comprises 14 rectangular frames one metre from each other. Sandblasted glass panels are suspended from the frames; when seen as a whole and from a distance, a cloud appears. Wilsenach notes the impact of the landscape on the work. The landscape becomes a part of the material.

“I am very interested in the meaning of the material I use,” he continues. “I’ve been working a lot in glass lately but I’ve not really found someone who works exactly as I do. This uniqueness, specifically in a South African context, makes it difficult: My work is not political. I don’t deny this country’s political edge, but I believe there is something bigger. South African art theory discourse is very narrow in that context and people writing about art are using art to promote their own agendas. It is very scary. To a large degree I think I have been marginalised out of the South African art discourse.

“Personally, where I am in my development as a human being, I don’t have a problem with that, but people don’t know about my work, because it is not written about. It’s a Catch-22.

“I am a sculptor. I am also an installation artist,” he adds. “One of my strengths is the activation and manipulation of space. But, it seems I always work with temporary installations in nice spaces. I would like to do more public pieces in permanent contexts, but let’s see where opportunities take me.”

BERCO WILSENACH (South Africa)

Cloud Container, 2016

Installation consisting of 7 glass panels with sandblasting (180 x 240 cm) in 7 steel frames (3000 x 3000mm) installed consecutively to create a cloud contained within the glass

Sandblasted glass, steel frameworks

WRITER'S WORKSHOP FACILITATED BY ROBYN SASSEN

Three of the artists who received Villa grants were selected by students for review as part of the writers workshop facilitated by Robben Sassen in collaboration with the Tshwane University and the University of Johannesburg. These are their reviews



REVIEWS

HANNELIE COETZEE: A PORTRAIT OF THE DRAGONFLY AS A CIPHER TO THE FUTURE

"When dragonflies congregate in an open piece of land, it demonstrates that the environment is healthy," says artist **HANNELIE COETZEE** (44), who since 2012 has become something of an institution at the NIROX Winter Sculpture Fair.

Coetzee, who studied at the Vaal University of Technology and the University of the Witwatersand originally trained as a photographer and worked in the field for over 20 years; it was only recently that she became interested in the idea of creating site-specific sculpture. While much of her early work deals with her Afrikaner identity in relation to various sites in Johannesburg (such as the Rissik Street Post Office), her recent projects are primarily focused on ecological concerns. As she often collaborates with scientists and ecologists, Coetzee's practice can be viewed as a dialogue between disciplines, grappling with climate change issues while aiming to improve society's relationship with nature. Last year, her work Eland and Biko, developed in close conversation with Wits scientist Sally Archibald, created a controlled veld fire over five hectares of land in the emblematic image of a boy reaching out to an eland. This spectacle monumentally expressed Coetzee's concern with how people's decisions alter the physical appearance of the landscape and its ecology. Dramatic and sensational, the piece was highly publicised, which furthered Coetzee's intention to engage urgently with a wider audience as a means of generating awareness.

This year Coetzee's large scale sculpture, 'Glinsterjuffertjie (or Glistening Damsselfly)', consists of 80 black wattle trees stacked and cut to represent the portrait of a dragonfly. Coetzee explains that this piece conveys the plight of the poetically named Glinsterjuffertjie, a genus of dragonfly indigenous to the Highveld, which disappears when the waterbed is reduced due to invasive or alien trees such as Black Wattle. By physically removing these trees from the aquifer in the Cradle of Humankind to construct her sculpture, Coetzee makes a direct impact on the site, as this indicator species returns when riparian river systems are relieved.

This demonstrates how Coetzee's practice can be understood as socially and ecologically conscious, as her works are also functional through their response and positive contribution to the environments in which they are placed. Furthermore the piece is entirely recyclable, which is not only environmentally responsible but also demonstrates the relationship between medium and concept in Coetzee's works, where one is intrinsically informed by the other.

Interestingly the dragonfly in this sculpture is portrayed as a subject, in portrait format, rather than a specimen. Coetzee hopes this will encourage viewers to approach the insect face-to-face, as it were, rather than viewing it in a coldly analytical manner. Thus, she invites you to rethink how you perceive and interact with the environment.

Coetzee is passionately committed to using art as a platform for environmental conservation. She is fascinated by the schism between Western thought and indigenous thought – as her Glinsterjuffertjie monumentally poses the question: what can we learn from nature?

[**ROXY DO REGO** is currently reading toward her PhD at the University of Johannesburg]

REVIEWS

JOHAN THOM: DISRUPTED DREAMS OF UTOPIA

Nestled in the fertile plains between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in ancient Mesopotamia, the city of Babylon once bustled with promise. It was home to the tallest manmade structure of the time, the Tower of Babel. And then it fell. Babylon. The place of the celebrated hanging gardens: the birthplace of linguistic diversity, it was synonymous with sin and pride. Exploring binaries of order and discord in his own adaptation of this ancient ruin is **JOHAN THOM** (40) – a doctoral graduate from London's Slade School of Fine Art, who currently teaches visual art at Pretoria University.

Titled 'Hanging Gardens', Thom's saligna and pine wood terrace (2m x 3m), adorned with a glass greenhouse, stretches up to the heavens with a small "garden" – a patch of growing weeds – inside. They're protected as if they are sacred. The artist reigns over his creation through two bronze feet, the same size as his own, atop the glass vitrine.

The Utopian structure is juxtaposed with an uncontrolled bubbling mass of polyurethane foam. This builder's material which often features in Thom's work weighs 103kg (Thom's weight) and flows from the bronze feet and over the installation, symbolising the ultimate chaos man carries with him.

A sculpture of conflict, 'Hanging Gardens' presents you with binaries: man vs nature; structure vs chaos; control vs the uncontrollable. The sculpture reflects dreams of Utopia, which turn into what Thom describes as a "messy affair."

The work seduces you to come closer, but then it may repel or perplex you: "By setting boundaries you tend to exclude certain people," says Thom. After the fall of apartheid, he adds, optimism reigned in South Africa. Today the pendulum seems to be slowly swinging back to fascist principles, which won't be contained.

In a crisp, polished stainless steel frame, the glass vitrine is, in Thom's description, the "everpresent sparring partner of the museum visitor." The warm wood stands in stark contrast to this detached box; the foam is the "antitheses of the relative, though persistent wholesomeness and naturalness of the garden and the ideals that underpin it."

By "building a nightmarish 'antigarden'" in NIROX Sculpture Park, Thom introduces rebellious discord. "Chaos is a willingness to admit that everything is not planned. We live in a world where many of our freedoms are disappearing because of a small group of farrights and fundamentalists. It's great to be able to make such a large and ridiculous thing ... in an idyllic sculpture park – something completely noncommercial – in a time where the gallery market is dominating the art world. And sometimes the world just needs a good 'fuck it'." Thom's work has always been designed to unnerve. He expects most NIROX viewers will not understand this piece. "That's okay. But if a few are bogged ... I know I'll see them again."

He describes the whole process, the assembly and installation of the work as almost theatrical. Thom plays out the drama of 'Babylon' against the backdrop of the sculpture park and conjures up beauty, unease and confusion in equal measure. To enforced rules, confinements, expectations and idealism, he raises a metaphorical middle finger.

[Liaison Officer at Dionysus Sculpture Works in Pretoria, **ELANI WILLEMSE** holds her masters degree in Art History from the University of the North West, in Limpopo]

BERCO WILSENACH AND A LONELY CLOUD

A Place in time. It brings to mind that moment when you're at the apex of a swing: fleeting, yet still. But, time continuously moves. **BERCO WILSENACH** (42) challenges this truism with sandblasted glass and a wise sense of possibility.

Pretoria based Wilsenach is known for his sensitive, detailed works, polished to mathematical perfection. After attaining his masters in fine arts at Pretoria University, he rose to prominence when he won the Absa L'Atelier award in 2005 with a work about mathematical fractals. Acknowledging precision as his hallmark, he says "It's my strong point but it's terribly technically challenging."

Wilsenach is best known for his Blind Astronomer project (2009/2013) which was shown at Johannesburg's Museum of African Design. This threepart project featured an installation titled Written in the Stars.

Based on the almost "superficial correlation between the dots on a star chart and the dots of Braille," Written in the Stars comprises several star maps sandblasted into glass panels seemingly suspended in midair. The glass is illuminated; as you enter the room it seems that a million green stars have sucked you into a vast universe. But look closer: there is a legend at the bottom of each panel explaining what you see. It serves to "explain the night sky to somebody who lives in darkness", he says. But there's a catch: if you can see, chances are you cannot read the text. It is in Braille.

In playing this trick on his audience, Wilsenach reminds us that maybe we don't have a clue as to what's out there. We try to understand the constellations and with our hubris, we map the stars, attempting to bring the ever expanding abyss to a controllable science.

Wilsenach's work for NIROX'S 2016 Winter Sculpture Fair, 'Cloud Container', is reminiscent of Written in the Stars. Positioned between the trees and the dams of the sculpture park, its seven rectangular frames will be aligned at intervals of one metre. Sandblasted glass panels will be suspended from the frames. When seen as a whole, it looks like a cloud.

Unlike Written in the Stars, 'Cloud Container' is an outdoor installation. "It will be interesting to see how the environment around it changes; so it might be worth it to go a few times to experience these changes," he says.

You can walk right through this new piece of Wilsenach's. In enabling you to immerse yourself physically in it, he attempts to make tangible the intangible and give permanence to something fleeting.

The cloud shifts as you go through the panels, the landscape distorts as you view it through the glass, you become a fleeting presence for others, on the outside. The cloud continues to transform through the falling leaves around you. Something that was fleeting becomes static. It is caught between the permanent and the ephemeral in the landscape.

"But, face it," he grins. "There is no cloud, it is seven panels of sandblasted glass; I hope it will create the illusion of a cloud in which you can walk."

[**NOLENE GERBER** is reading for her honours degree in Art History at Unisa and is gallery manager for Fried Contemporary Gallery in Pretoria]



A LASTING LEGACY: THE CLAIRE AND EDOARDO VILLA TRUST

Edoardo Villa (1915-2011) is a pioneering figure in the story of South African art. His tall, muscular forms in bronze and steel played an important and often very public role in modernising the language of South African sculpture. His enormous output, the product of a remarkable work ethic, coupled with his creative experiments with volume and abstraction saw Villa's work routinely selected to represent South Africa on international exhibitions throughout the 1950s and 60s. Amongst that rare class of artists whose careers never flagged, Villa continued to produce bold sculptures and public commissions well into old age. Often remarked upon for his prodigious energy, at the time of his death, at age 95, Villa had produced an ambitious body of work numbering over 1000 works. His work is widely represented in numerous important public and private collections.

The Claire and Edoardo Villa Will Trust aims to celebrate and promote this rich artistic legacy. Named after the artist and his wife, Claire Zafirakos, whom he married in 1965, the trust encompasses two key functions. The first is broadly reputational and focuses on ensuring that Villa's important contributions to South African art history remain clear and accessible to both art specialists and the general public, now and into the future. The second purpose of the trust is to promote the professional advancement of sculpture as a discipline through a bursary/grant scheme.

Born on the outskirts of the northern Italian town of Bergamo, Villa arrived in South Africa in 1942 as a prisoner of war. After his release, in 1947, he chose to make Johannesburg his permanent home. The trust's reputational activities are focussed on documenting, describing and promoting the work he produced following this momentous decision. Activities related to this function include: the establishment of a comprehensive database of work; the cataloguing and authentication of individual sculptures and related work; the creation of a knowledge resource accessible to collectors, students, researchers and the lay public; the maintenance and preservation of Villa's numerous public sculptures; and the initiation of exhibitions that extend narratives related to this important sculptor's work. Villa's lifelong humanist concerns and collegiality towards younger artists saw him play an important role as mentor. Through his association with art dealer Egon Guenther's Amadlozi Group, for example, he befriended and helped emerging artists like Sydney Kumalo.

Later, through his friendship with artists Allan Crump and Neels Coetzee, he served as an external examiner at the University of the Witwatersrand. Villa's support for fellow artists, and his belief in the importance of art as a worthy occupation with a place in society, is perpetuated through the Villa Memorial Bursary. The bursary is principally concerned with sculptors and focuses on both professional practice and continuing education. Recipients of the bursary will be offered financial grants to produce ambitious new sculptural works and/or to pursue post-graduate studies or professional research involving, for example, international travel.

Nine grants have been awarded in 2016 to enable the production of new work. The recipients are Joni Brenner, Raimi Gbadamosi, Haroon Gunn-Salie, Michele Mathison, Mohau Modisekeng, Lwandiso Njara, Mary Sibande, Johan Thom and Berco Wilsenach. Their work will appear on the NIROX Winter 2016 Sculpture Exhibition, 'A PLACE IN TIME', which is curated by Helen Pheby of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, in collaboration with Mary-Jane Darroll (7 May - 31 July, 2016).

The Claire and Edoardo Villa Will Trust is administered by a group of trustees committed to preserving Edoardo Villa's legacy and ensuring his aim of promoting new sculptural talent. These trustees are Mary-Jane Darroll, Rick Herber, Benji Liebmann, Karel Nel, Mary Palmos and Amalie von Maltitz. The trust's secretary is Kobus Gertenbach.

Sean O'Toole 2016

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The participating artists

Texts on artists by Robben Sassen

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Claire + Edoardo
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