BUSINESSDAY Art
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Art in the State of Siege, 1988, silkscreen on Velin d'Arches Crème, 300 gsm and brown paper

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

World famous artist rooted in Jozi

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ART HOTELS

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The Graskop Hotel and Cape Town's Daddy Long Legs ditch traditional decor in favour of unique cultural experiences

EDITOR's NOTE

A COMMENT artist William Kentridge made to Josef Talotta in an interview (see pages 6-7 of this edition) got me thinking. The gist of it was that while Johannesburg has the one of the greatest concentrations of wealth anywhere in the world, its wealthy citizens do precious little for the common culture of the city — or, for that matter, of the country as a whole.

When I first sat down to write this column, I was full in agreement with Kentridge. But the more I thought about it, the more reason I found to disagree.

I started with Brett Kebble. One cannot ignore the mining magnate's efforts in the art world, whatever his motives were. In two short years the Brett Kebble Art Award did a huge amount to change the way art competitions are held in SA, and took our artistic output to a whole new level. Sadly, Kebble is no longer with us, and the art award along with him.

Then there is Anton Rupert, who with his wife, the late Huberte, also made an important contribution to the art world.

And I can't go on without mentioning Dick Enthoven or the many corporations that have launched numerous art initiatives over the past few years. Standard Bank's staging of a Picasso exhibition in SA next year is just one of the recent endeavours by big business.

And, even though most of our art treasures remain locked up in private collections and out of reach of average citizens, there are programmes such as the one run by MTN, where the cellphone company takes its art collection out to township schools.

The Randlords did their bit by opening the Johannesburg Art Gallery a century ago. The city's citizens are doing their bit now.

That said, though, I must concede a point to Kentridge — we should be doing more.

Julius Baumann
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Companies help close the gap

SOUTH African artists are still reeling from the decision in October to axe the Brett Kebble Art Awards. The family of the slain businessman found it too emotionally difficult to deal with the competition and reversed its decision to continue it in tribute to him.

The Kebble awards were highly regarded. The competition actively sought out new talent, and curator Clive van den Berg says it offered an opportunity to explore different kinds of content and subjects. He said just weeks before the awards were cancelled: "We make (an) effort to find artists interested in working in those languages that are transgressive in some instances. But we are equally interested in artists (who are) interested in the continuation of a craft tradition which modernism could erase."

In the 2004 Brett Kebble Art Awards catalogue, he pointed out that most art competitions were formatted around the idea that artists worked in painting, sculpture, printmaking and photography, sidelining new media, and "competitions mounted during the past decade minimally reflect the modes, practices and arguably ideas of contemporary art."

David Barritt, producer of the awards, says Kebble's motivation was a mixture of personal interest and a concern that not enough was being done to develop new talent in SA. "It's a disgrace government is not doing more…. But art can be a viable business, generating incomes for lots of people…. We have the talent and the unique voice."

Companies have to some extent bridged the gap. DaimlerChrysler, Absa, PPC and Standard Bank sponsor prominent awards, with different criteria and motivations. Some, like Sasol New Signatures, have particular target markets. It has in the past excluded artists who have exhibited solo. Teresa Lizamore, the group's art curator, says: "It is a competition for young, new talent…. There are no restrictions in medium and the work is very often experimental as entrants are mostly students."

Others, like the prestigious Tollman Awards, are decided without a competition. The R100 000 prize is based on exhibitions over the past year and awarded to a young artist hampered financially in realising work.

Nicola Danby, CEO of Business & Arts South Africa (Basa), says competitions could deliver useful benefits for artists, depending on how they are structured to create recognition. "A crucial factor is to have a credible panel. Very often the selection process is geared to an imperative of the sponsoring company, perhaps, which would also determine who would participate.

"But broadly, the more we can do to mainstream the arts, the better. And corporate sector involvement, one hopes, does achieve that."

Short of an "applause-o-meter" as devised by Cape Town's Obz Café for its short film and video competition, a balanced panel is regarded as the best option. One of the newer awards, the FNB Art Prize launched in 1997, also invites nominations from the public.

The impetus for the Absa Atelier 20 years ago under the Volkskas brand was rooted in apartheid-era isolation, says Absa curator Cecile Loedolff. The award includes a residency in Paris. Loedolff says it helped the careers of many artists through international exposure and publication in the catalogue.

"The competition has lifted out magnificent artists. Penny Siopis was the first overall winner and Tommy Motswai was a merit winner in the competition's second year. Isaac Khanyile (1996 winner) got more opportunities to exhibit overseas, including the South African embassy in France and Australia. And he is ploughing back his expertise into his own community in KwaZulu-Natal."

Sanell Aggenbach, who won in 2003, says it offers something beyond a monetary prize: "An opportunity for relatively unknown young artists to gain recognition by offering a corporate platform for exposure."

The six-month residency is also a luxury to create work without external pressure to deliver.

She says competitions are useful to create awareness. "A small percentage of people can afford to invest in original work or bother to visit galleries. Awards create a context of value and solicit curiosity."

But AVA gallery director Estelle Jacobs says competitions usually favour artists with resources. She concedes they play an important role in stoking debate, documenting the art scene and attracting public acclaim. "There is a positive element — competitions are important on a CV and do a lot to promote artists."

Kim Gurney

Elmarie Costandius, 11 Official Languages (detail), (11 glass bubbles), 2005. Costandius is joint winner of the 2005 Sasol New Signatures competition

Below, the judges for the Brett Kebble Art Award hard at work

Early openings leave plenty of time to get around

JOIN the dots …

Braam Kruger

In a world where hedonism is the norm, it's not about plonk, art and finger food

GALLERIES are the best pick-up joints in town — a prying brief from my editor. I might otherwise not have noticed the paramount perk of my vocation; an art world populated by voraciously wanton hedonists, which is the norm and not the exception.

For the uninitiated, the common pick-up line is: "Shall we go somewhere for a bite afterwards?" That's vague enough to allow room for anything. You didn't really believe we went for the art, plonk and finger food? It took me years to get the picture; this is why openings are traditionally held so early, to leave plenty of time to play.

Thin ice that I skate on here, for I know the darkest recesses of all who passed through my 35 years of art philandering — the who, the why and the when, even the shape and size of things to come, what excuses and what behaviour to expect of the famous and obscure among academics, professors, museum directors, gallerists, curators, collectors, artists' models and, ultimately, the artists, young and old.

I am the conscience of your infidelities and wicked escapades, but read on, for I won't name names — too many, too close, untold allegiances lost and found.

I shall stick to the gun I know best, to illustrate how gallery openings embellished my life.

At my first art school opening I was lured home by a kinky married woman in a wide-rimmed hat, who knocked her husband out with sleeping pills on the bed beside us. The clock was set, my fate was sealed.

My second opening drove my buxom art history lecturer into my willing arms and transformed into a raging nymphomaniac, well known under the important artists of the time. It was 17 hours before she let this badly bruised but grinning writer out of her apartment to lick his wounds, until next time.

My first wife was met like this, then my second, at the after-party of a show of mine, the day I divorced the first. I slipped away with number two to elope to Europe for a year, to duck her outraged, newly wedded husband, who found us anyway through Interpol.

And that is just the tip of the iceberg, for after-parties are where decadent mischief breeds.

Lest you think these are the reminiscences of a prime gone by, just this year an artist and his wife arrived at my loft after his show, and dropped their knickers at the door, claiming they had planned it for months. And later still, the young artist who wouldn't take my card, saying I'd never call, insisted on following me home, where we cavorted until the sun rose. I woke up later with my entire being covered in drawings, but the girl was gone.

We still see each other at openings, and smile knowingly, because we know it is all in the conquest, while our eyes scan the gallery for willing or unsuspecting prey. It may well be you.

Show day for Melrose art

Karoo Farm Problem, Matthew Hindley and Peter Eastman, lambda print on photographic paper

BOOKS do furnish a room, is the sardonic title of a novel by modernist British author Anthony Powell, describing the lives of London's upper middle classes 50 years ago. He would have appreciated some of the ironies of the latest venture in applied art, an exhibition in Melrose Arch by Pam Golding to launch the next phase of executive apartments for sale in this temple of high capitalism.

Art does indeed furnish a room, and very nicely too, if the show apartment is anything to go by.

The mastermind behind the enterprise is interior designer Mullerie Rabe-Taljaard, who worked with Golding's Peet Strauss. Strauss is an art lover and aficionado whose friendship with Willem Boshoff has engineered the loan of some of the most significant works by one of SA's leading conceptual artists — items taken from his KykAfrikaans play with words. But while much of his work is an attack on the establishment, the effect of hanging these framed and mounted items in exquisite and expensive rooms diminishes their social comment and turns them into decorative objects.

The new apartments are being marketed, off plan, at R1m-R8m, and by the end of the show weekend 40 of the 62 had been sold. The show tent, an elegant, Arabian-style edifice in white, featured a central display of work by six local artists, chosen by Strauss and Michael Obert, owner of the Obert Contemporary gallery in Melrose Arch.

Obert is an American with a background in development studies and a passionate interest in local art. He is an aggressive defender of Melrose Arch, which he calls an exciting lifestyle option. His gallery is minimalist chic: a cement floor, desk tucked discretely to one side, and no intruding staff, the sort of hip image, he reckons, that appeals to the Melrose Arch clientele and wannabees.

Interestingly, the works on display were modestly priced at R5 000-R20 000; this was at Strauss's request, to make the work accessible, and the result has been quick sales.

The big drawcard is young Zimbabwean Kudzanai Chiurai, a recent graduate of the University of Pretoria, whose critical portrayals of President Robert Mugabe and his government have made him persona non grata in his home country. His work is hot property: his first exhibition at Obert Contemporary earlier this year was sold out, as was work in this exhibition. Chiurai's work adjoined that of Peter Eastman, Mark Erasmus, Belgrade-born Maja Maljevic's abstracts and the neo-baroque of Henry Symonds, tongue in cheek florals that mimic chintz furnishing fabric samples.

"We wanted to appeal to the young and funky," says Obert, "who would enjoy works like Erasmus's unframed geometric grid rather than gilt-framed wildlife and landscape."

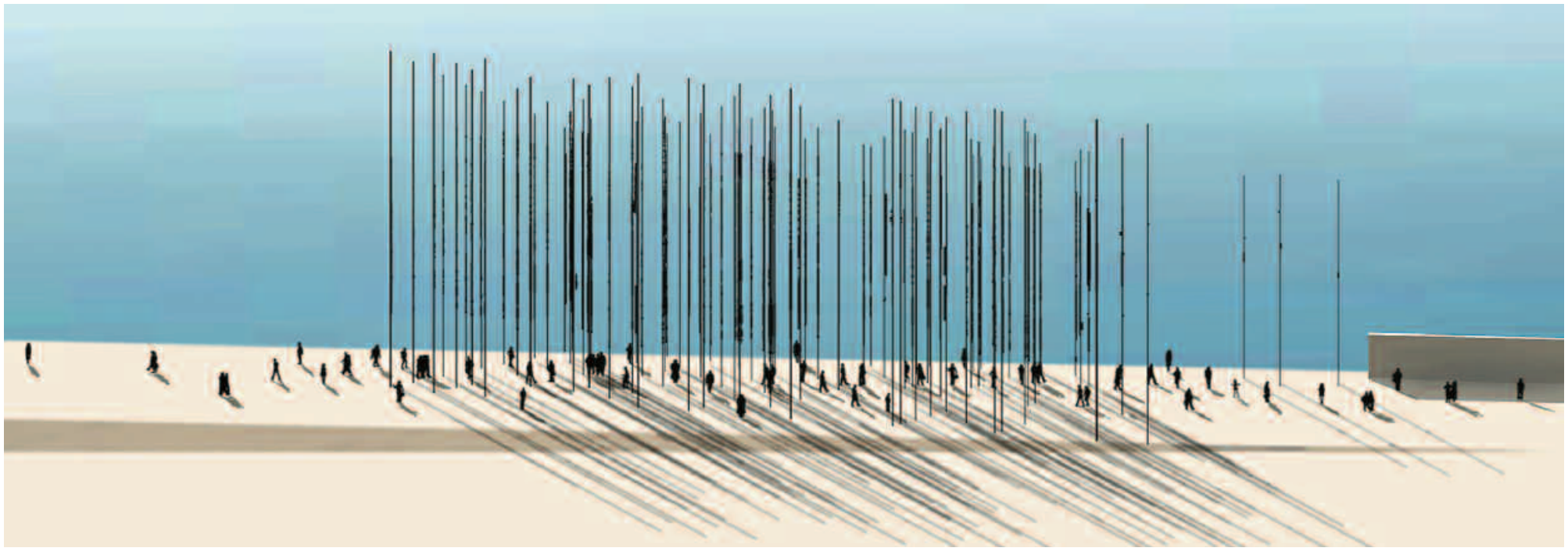
The synergy with Pam Golding is one of many transactional relationships Obert cultivates. "My artists have become my friends," he says, "and have befriended each other.

"Also, I work with other galleries rather than against them", particularly what he classes as SA's top six.

Obert says that these, and Sean O'Toole's Art South Africa publication, have had an enormous effect in stabilising SA's art market. Informed criticism, and a quantifiable tracking of art and artist offered by Warren Siebrits from his gallery, make it possible to assign value and worth.

Says Pam Golding's Strauss of the joint venture: "It has been a success and we'll definitely do it again."

Heather Mackie



Reflection, exploration and experimentation

IN THE same week that artist Marco Cianfanelli's show opened at Gallery Momo in October, his decidedly post-modern water sculpture was launched at the University of Johannesburg's impressive new art centre. Only weeks before that, a contoured steel sculpture evoking evolution was installed at Forum Homini, a chic new boutique hotel in the Cradle of Humankind.

Engineered by the same artist, but spanning the public and domestic sphere, these events signal a fresh duality in terms of how an artist defines himself in contemporary Johannesburg. Although his fans are probably most familiar with the hauntingly monochromatic white laser-cut paper works that won him the prestigious Absa Atelier Award in 2002, Cianfanelli has always been drawn to the inventive possibilities inherent in a work's "materiality".

"I get a kick out of taking applications and using them for a different function," he says. "There's an unbelievable amount of materials and processes out there and every single one of them has been made for a specific function. Once you start tapping into that and translating their possible use for artwork, it gets very exciting."

Over the past 10 years, he's experimented with burning mielie skins, branding animal hides, mosaics, works in concrete, sculpted sea sand, video, painting, masked glass and digital imaging.

His interest in materials and different modes of production was sparked from an early age, growing up around south and central Johannesburg. "My parents had a printing works and my uncle's engineering works was across the road, so I'd get to see new things all the time."

It was partly this fascination with materials and partly the exigencies of surviving as an artist in Johannesburg in the mid-nineties that led him into the realm of public sculpture.

In 2000 he was commissioned by KCS Projects to design and install two sculpture fountains for Media24 in Sandton. "It was the first big commissioned project I did on my own and it scared the hell out of me.

"Everything was new — working as a contractor, being accountable, doing stuff like laser cutting…. It was the start of a whole new style of working," he says.

Cianfanelli has come a long way since then. His reinvention as a public artist turned largely on a project he did in 2001, as part of the Hollard Street Mall upgrade in the heart of downtown Johannesburg. Commissioned by Green Inc Landscape Architects, he designed an abstract steel sculpture subtly introducing the client's (SA Eagle) corporate image by casting an eagle-shaped shadow on to the sandstone square into which it is embedded. The steel poles of the sculpture are picked up in strips of colourful mosaics set into the paving, depicting the street grid of Johannesburg, overlaid with iconic urban images.

Since then Cianfanelli has been a very busy man, completing a huge mosaic artwork for MTN's head office, designing and installing a fountain installation for Roche Pharmaceuticals, and producing a mosaic work for FNB's call centre.

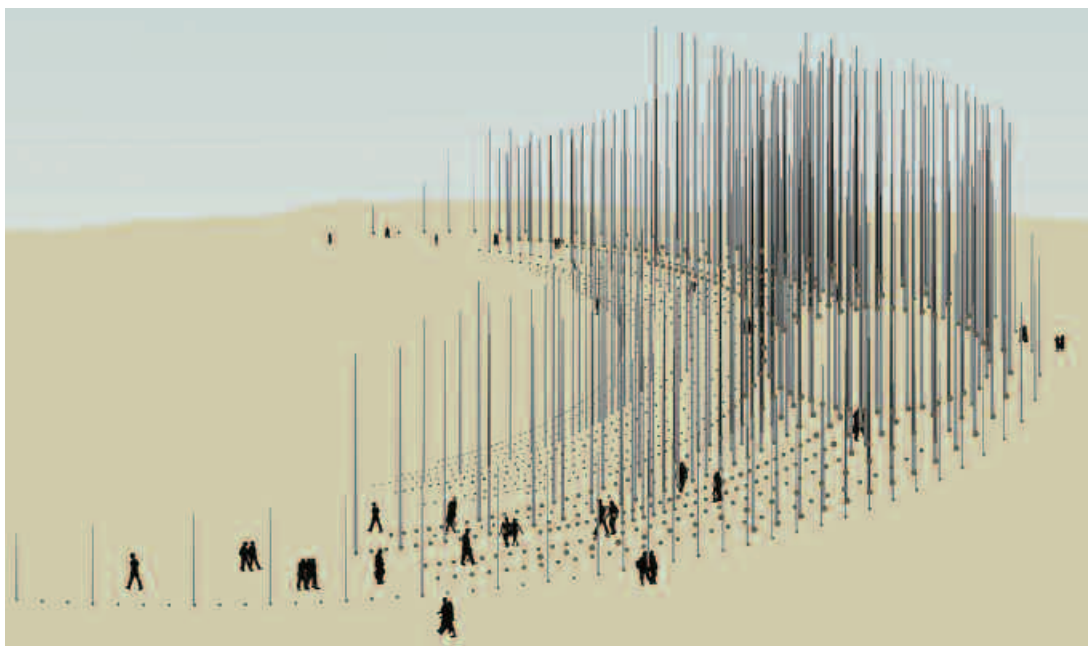
At first, companies seemed to buy into negative stereotypes of the artist as "bohemian loafer" and were nervous to entrust him with the kinds of budgets and responsibilities that projects of this nature entail.

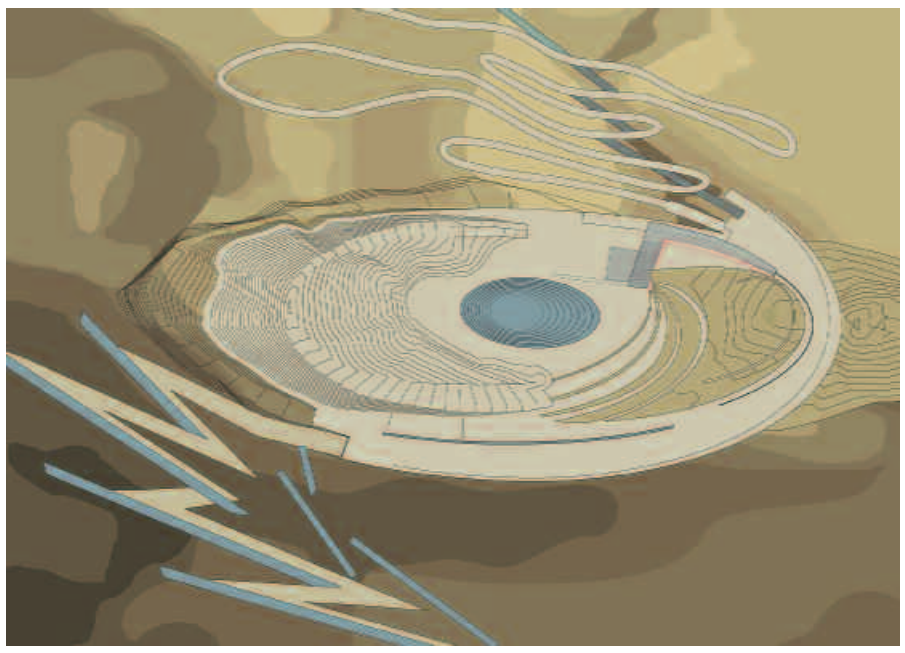
"But for me the idea of people thinking I was useless was just unacceptable," he says. "I had to spend a lot of energy presenting the idea, getting it across, convincing people to do it." The investment paid off and he managed to build a name for

> *"Building a million houses is going to be easier than healing people's psychological spaces"*

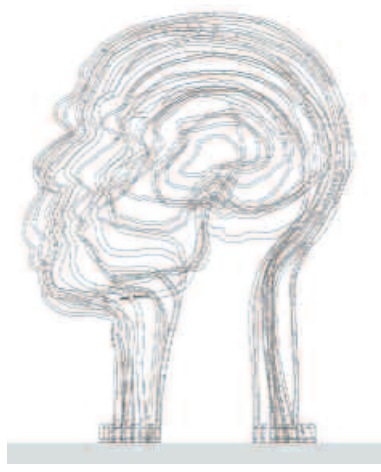
Short-listed submission; the side elevation (top) and front elevation (above), submitted by Marco Cianfanelli and Jeremy Rose to the Nelson Mandela Bay Statue of Freedom Competition

Conceptual digital sketches by Cianfanelli in collaboration with the design team of Freedom Park (GAPP, MMA and Mashabane Rose), rated by President Thabo Mbeki as democratic SA's most ambitious heritage project yet





A contoured steel skull installed and designed by the artist for Forum Homini, a new boutique hotel in the Cradle of Humankind



himself in the corporate sphere by honouring his commitments and delivering quality work on time.

"After a lot of initial scepticism, I ended up gaining respect from a very tight industry," he says.

This year has been his most intense yet. Earlier in 2005 his joint submission in the Nelson Mandela Bay Statue of Freedom Competition made it to the final short list. He worked with Jeremy Rose of Mashabane Rose Architects, famed for their work on the Apartheid Museum, to conceptualise a sculpture commemorating the achievement of freedom in SA for the Port Elizabeth Harbour.

Continuing his association with Rose and Monna Mokoena of Gallery Momo, he is also part of the multidisciplinary team conceptualising and designing the monumental public space at Freedom Park, just outside Pretoria.

Rated by President Thabo Mbeki as democratic SA's most ambitious project yet, Freedom Park is intended to be "a place of historical wonderment, where all ignorance and hatred are crushed, where freedom symbolises a milestone in the South African evolution".

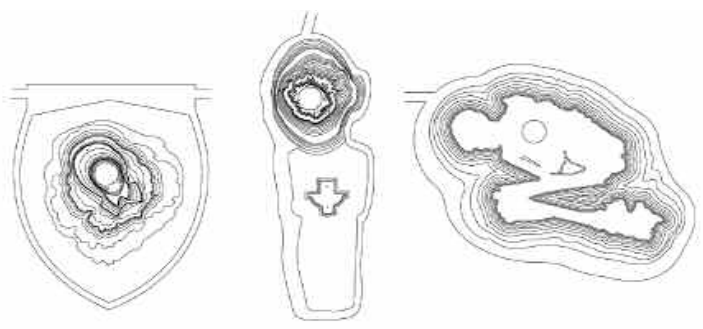
It is perhaps at this level that the term "public art" is at its most contested, invoking unnerving associations with the nationalist impulses inherent in a redundant colossus such as the Voortrekker Monument. Should it fall on the taxpayer to bankroll these excursions of hubris?

Cianfanelli is quick to admit the term "public art" is a contentious one. Asked about its possible purposes in a post-totalitarian society such as ours, he responds: "I don't think we are in a position yet to answer or qualify that question and this very condition might be a good prompt for us to take chances in what we do. A bit of probing, a bit of reflection and research, a bit of communication, a bit experimentation and exploration…. I try to apply my skills to each context/project in the most suitable manner and that requires an evaluation of function, audience/viewer, budget, material, language and so on."

What role, if any, can public art play in the SA's transformation process? "Well, I think the argument about it being excess has fallen by the wayside. This country so desperately needs healing. It's the thing we most chronically need and we're racing against time. I think building a million houses is going to be way easier than healing people's psychological spaces.

"Art has to play a role in that. But it has to merge with corporates and with government to do that. They can't do it on their own. You can't assign the role of transformation to artists, you can't assign it solely to government or corporates. I think SA might be an example of these three sitting around a table more often than in a lot of other places."

Alex Dodd



Far right, the artist at the recently launched water sculpture designed and implemented for the University of Johannesburg's impressive new art centre. Picture: TYRONE ARTHUR
Above is a conceptual drawing and below is detail of the sculpture

Kentridge: International icon,

IT's deliciously curious that one of the world's most iconic artists lives and works on a highveld koppie, perched high above the City of Gold, with sweeping views over its northern suburbs. In the distance are the decentralised business districts of Rosebank and Sandton.

On a clear day you can see forever — past the '70s-era Randburg skyline and onward to the golden-hued Magaliesberg.

Below him courses the cacophonic lifeblood of a tree-lined megalopolis — home to kugels and squatters, business tycoons and hawkers, commuters and joggers, Balkan immigrants and Zimbabwean refugees. He's firmly part of this world. And unintendedly not.

His work hangs in the world's leading galleries and museums. His most recent exhibition, a retrospective, travelled from Italy's Castello di Rivoli to contemporary art museums in Düsseldorf, Sydney and Montreal and, ultimately, the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

So, what keeps William Kentridge in Johannesburg?

"Inertia," he smiles. "Who knows? The children's schools? The people I work with? It's home."

Kentridge is laid-back, with a slightly academic air about him. He's friendly, but not forceful. Secure, but not arrogant. Engaging, but not gushing. There's the feeling he's in his groove — old enough to know what he likes, young enough to go after it.

"I did spend six months in New York," he says, "and I could have enjoyed living there. But sometimes it's best not to work in the centre. I was unproductive while I was there; more productive when I returned."

Kentridge relishes his collaborative projects: "Working with (composer) Philip Miller can be done on a spin," he says.

Says Miller: "Our first collaboration was Felix in Exile, about 10 years ago. Over the past decade, we've learned to find a common language with one another. As with a marriage, or any other relationship, energies either work, or they don't.

"What I enjoy about working with William is that he provides interpretive freedom in the narrative.

"His narratives often aren't completely clear or mapped out at first, and he likes it like that. The interpretations become part of the creative process.

"We often seem to find our common language together quite quickly. It's not like normal film work where you're handed completed concepts. It's conceptual, where you're given figurative snapshots of imagery — a rough sketch, an object or footage. Sometimes four or five items, sometimes seven or eight.

"For example, on our latest project, the Black Box, William showed a short piece of black and white footage of an old rhino hunt and asked me to compose an elegy for a 'rhino'. In that sense, he serves as a catalyst for me and my work, planting ideas in my head," says Miller.

"It's a very exciting process — a lot of unexpected things start to happen when working with William, who has an ability to make you feel comfortable with playing with different ideas until you find something together that can work with his overall vision of how a project should look, feel and sound."

> "A lot of unexpected things start to happen when working with William"

Says Wits University's Jane Taylor, who collaborated with Kentridge on a number of projects: "I enjoy working with William for an enormous range of reasons. But I think one of the main reasons is that I have an academic background, one that's language-based, and I approach things intellectually.

"William works from the opposite direction: working in a dialogue with himself, constantly referring back to and engaging with his own visual production. It's almost an instinctual process and yet, at the same time, we're asking the same questions with different approaches.

"His powers of observation are astonishing. His visual acuity leads his creative art. In other words, it's by looking and finely observing that he knows where to go — it is fundamentally a highly developed visual sensibility, which institutes its own process of analysis."

Taylor says Kentridge's work "has an enormous emotional complexity about it, often in very short frames. So, in four, five or six minutes he's able to capture a sense of loss and the potential for catastrophe. His ideas are often profound and philosophically rich, but still not alienating. For the viewer, it's often almost as simple as a drawing class, and very accessible."

"His work only gets better," says Miller. "It was rougher before, with a real sense of process, with the rub outs. If you look at Johannesburg: The Second Greatest City After Paris, you'll see it's very rough, on some levels almost crude — and it's this

Above: Sleeper — Red, 1997, Etching, aquatint drypoint from two copper plates on velin d'Arches Blanc 300 gsm paper. Below: Installation shot: Preparing the Flute, 2004/05, front and rear projection film on DVD

IF YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE ONE ...

IT's near-impossible to price Kentridge's art, particularly as he works in so many mediums, writes *Josef Talotta*.

A small-edition DVD Kentridge movie just sold on auction for about £80 000 at Christie's, London. What's more, you're up against some of the world's leading galleries, museums and private collections and let's be straight: very few are willing — and able — to install a Kentridge opera in their homes.

But to give you a first-hand idea of Kentridge's ascent on the global art scene, I purchased a 35cm x 45cm lithograph, The Jug in the Vineyard, signed and numbered, from Johannesburg's Goodman Gallery in June 2001 for R3 500.

In 2002, a lithograph from the same edition of 55 prints sold for R6 500; its most recent sale last year realised more than R25 000.

In other words, its market value has increased more than seven-fold in less than four years. That said, local curators suggest you can still purchase original Kentridge etchings or lithographs from about R9 000 or R10 000.

■ David Krut Publishing will soon publish a new book on the artist. William Kentridge Prints is the first book to focus solely on his formidable print oeuvre, filling a gap in published work on the artist to date. It is also the first major publication on William Kentridge to be published in SA and includes more than 180 works.

still working from home

crudeness that's what makes the film so powerful."

Although Kentridge was awarded the Carnegie Prize at the Carnegie International 1999-2000 in Pittsburgh, he doesn't make a hoo-ha about his success: "For the size of our art community, there are a lot of South African artists who are doing well internationally. Certainly a much higher percentage than any other country I know."

What drives this collective success? "I suppose it's our socio-political environment," says Kentridge, "as it's a great pressure-cooker for the making of art."

His retrospective tour featured at some of the world's leading contemporary art museums, but it's the installation at the Johannesburg Art Gallery that most impressed. According to Kentridge "it's those perfect Lutyens rooms. It was, without a doubt, the most beautiful of my shows."

The preservation of art and culture is, understandably, important to Kentridge: "The Johannesburg Art Gallery should be kept," he says. "As a facility, it can never be replicated elsewhere in the city. Unfortunately, it's in the midst of an organic taxi rank, which doesn't even work for the taxis as a space.

"So many of the original Randlords spirited their money out of the country," says Kentridge, "with the notable exceptions of (Alfred) Beit and (Lionel) Phillips. I think it was Lady Phillips, when lobbying for a public art collection, who said something like, 'Unless today's business leaders give back to the city, their names will not only be forgotten, but they will be damned'."

The same holds true for today's captains of industry. Although Johannesburg is home to some of the world's wealthiest families, there's precious little to show for it through public projects — no Heinz halls, no Guggenheim museums, no Munson-Williams-Proctor arts institutes. "Unless something is done, Johannesburg will become a city of private wealth and public poverty," says Kentridge.

The artist was en route to Berlin at the time of his interview, where his latest work, Black Box/Chambre Noire, was about to open at the Guggenheim Berlin. The museum describes the work as "politically engaged, visually spectacular and concerned with the theme of memory. (It) plays with three meanings of 'black box' as the theatre space, the chambre noire (or body) of a camera and the flight-data recorder … while also exploring early film history and the German colonial experience in South West Africa, now known as Namibia."

Is he happy with his latest endeavour? "I never know the atmosphere until it's done," he says. "What drives the work is the work itself."

Josef Talotta

■ *Black Box/Chambre Noire is at the Guggenheim Berlin until January 15. The opera, Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute), tours France and Italy next year before coming to SA in 2007.*

Top left: Zeno Writing II (Soldiers/Italian Front), 2003, Suite of seven photogravures with drypoint from two copper plates, on Hahnemuhle
Above: Installation shot: Preparing the Flute; 2004-05
Bottom left: William Kentridge at work

Step into Daddy Long Legs' parlour

LONG Street has long been the mother city's liveliest locale, night and day. In recent years it has benefited from Cape Town's inner city restoration project and today, the street is tidier and cleaner than it has been for a while, and as vigorously charming as ever.

Among the premises to receive a particularly special touch of late is a pretty, three-story Victorian-styled building dated 1903. Reborn as Daddy Long Legs, a "boutique hotel for independent travellers", the establishment is now a well-appointed and fully inhabitable interactive art exhibition, featuring 13 en suite rooms individually designed by South African artists across nine creative genres.

Check in and you are treated to the interior decorating interpretations of a visual artist, photographer, poet, graffiti artist, animator, sculptor, group of musicians, architect and designer.

"We wanted to celebrate the creative spirit of Cape Town in a unique way and, at the same time, establish a stylish and comfortable hotel that adds to the cultural experience of the city and country," says Cape Town businessman Jody Aufrichtig, who managed the project and owns the building in partnership with Nicholas Ferguson.

Artist and curator Kim Stern expresses her experience of strange bumps in the night in the Do Not Disturb room with braille walls, astroturf floors and an extensive karaoke unit, which is set up even in the shower.

Graffiti artist Mak1One says he wants to take guests "into his head" with the three-dimensional roof sculpture in his room. "When I look at objects I see them from every angle, all the shadows and shapes and contours. I never just see something flat and smooth," he says. The view from the window extends the graffiti theme with a mural by fellow graffiti artist Faith.

From Khayelitsha to Kalk Bay ... Anthony Smyth's The Photo Booth room

Musicians Freshlyground created a colourfully funky room that invites guests to enjoy each band member's selection of music, while animator and sculptor Frank van Reenen appeals to travellers who are sad to leave their dogs at home. "The world would be better place if people could just take their dogs with them wherever they go," says Van Reenen. "When I go away I feel traumatised by the thought of having to leave my dog Nesbit behind. I fantasise about ways I could bring him with."

In his room, Travel Dog, he offers humorous suggestions on how one might travel with a dog. The result is a playful yet restful space.

In The Photo Booth room, photographer Anthony Smyth assembled 3 240 black and white images of Capetonians "from Khayelitsha to Kalk Bay". Poet and author Finuala Dowling muses on "meaning and memories" in her soothing room, Palimpsest. In Far From Home, Robin Sprong brings the Karoo to Long Street with a landscape photograph that entirely swathes the walls and envelops the bed.

Aufrichtig and Ferguson have invested heavily in property on Long Street and are champions of the "authentic lifestyle" of this region of Cape Town. "The Daddy Long Legs art project has exceeded expectations," says Aufrichtig. "We are in awe of the enthusiasm, creativity and dedication of the artists and delighted with the outcome."

Penny Haw

A smorgasbord of South African flavour

LODGES and swish retreats are hardly an endangered species in SA, but finding one that is stylish and soulfully authentic without replicating the safari cliché is something well worth writing home about. Beyond the leopard skin ottoman, beyond the hunting trophy and mosquito-net bed cover, lies the fabulously fresh Graskop Hotel — an eclectic palace of homegrown ingenuity.

As one of SA's few authentic local art hotels, there's simply no other establishment like it. In addition to being stylishly furnished and decorated with traditional and post-modern African artefacts, the hotel is home to an extensive collection of contemporary South African art works by artists including Claudette Schreuders, Pippa Skotnes, Willem Boshoff, Andrew Milne, Stefanus Rademeyer, Jan van der Merwe and Heidi Nel.

Where else in this country can you book into a room and find yourself in the mysterious riddle of a visual art installation? Several of the 19 en-suite bedrooms leading off the long tongue-and-groove upstairs corridor have been kitted out by individual artists, so you get to stay in the Abrie Fourie suite, the Cecile Heystek suite or the wonderfully flamboyant Barbara Wildenboer suite. We checked in to Room 18, an urban surrealist installation by Nicole Vinokur, featuring a delicious cerise ceiling offsetting the white ceiling fan and crisp linen sheets. Her work is based on the unexpected thrill of finding precious things in the ordinary, which is exactly what we felt on entering our inventive suite, which overlooks the grand swimming pool and lush gardens.

There's something innately erotic about hotels, but in this case the thrill of booking in is coupled with the secret excitement of being surrounded by hundreds of oblique messages encoded in the artworks. And there's nothing predictable about the selection of artists or works, no copping in to a prescribed A-list of who's who in the art zoo. The selections are refreshingly personal and idiosyncratic, and therein lies the hotel's other decadent thrill.

There's something sweetly satisfying about the idea that this whole boutique hotel concept and all the plushness it entails has been built on the good fortune of a pancake baron. The passionate patron behind this splendid art hotel is none other Harrie Siertsema — he of Harrie's Pancakes fame. In a generous departure from the elegant but slight French crêpe, Harrie's lush pancakes are the stuff of local legend. A trip to the lowveld isn't quite the same without indulging in a sweet or savoury treat at one of Harrie's pancake parlours in Dullstroom or Graskop. (There are also branches in Pretoria, Cape Town, each with a gallery attached. Plans are afoot to extend the network to Franschoek, Plettenberg Bay and Richmond in Northern Cape.)

Beyond the leopard skin ottoman: the Graskop Hotel offers an eclectic mix of authentic South African art, above, along with the famous Harrie's Pancakes, below Pictures: WENDEL FERNANDES

Throughout history, from Medici to Kebble, the dubious funding sources of arts patrons have been an irksome tug on the artistic conscience, so I took personal delight in knowing this plenitude of art had been funded on the human weakness for sweetness. Right down to the statue of St Augustine in the hotel gardens, good intentions seem alive and well. A friend of Siertsema's tells me that he's "a huge animal lover. He's quiet and reserved — very intellectual, but a really nice person, with a lot of passion for the people around him."

Siertsema — who pronounces his name "Hurry", with a rolling gurgle of an "r" — bought his first painting, a watercolour by René Brisley, back in 1968 when he was still at school. He attributes his lifelong passion for the arts to the influence of a "competent and respected" art teacher — "Mrs Connie Brand". He went on to study architecture at the University of Pretoria and then, beckoned by the wideness of the world, joined South African Airways as a flight attendant.

But he found gravity again on a visit to a friend's family in the mountain village of Graskop. Perfectly situated on the well-known Panorama route to the Blyde River Canyon, only 7km from God's Window and 40km to the Kruger National Park, the lazy lowveld town won his heart.

A tall strong man with short, cropped hair that's more salt than pepper, Siertsema says he's been collecting over the past 30 years and is most drawn to "abstract/realism". While we were visiting the hotel, Cedric Nunn's photographic show Blood Relatives was up in the hotel gallery, while works by young Pretoria artist Donna Kukama were on show in the Art Space, linked to Harrie's Pancakes.

Siertsema says he has "a real interest in the work of young artists" because of the inherent "challenge of trying to predict" where they're headed. "The real reward comes when they weave their way into major collections or galleries," he says. His tip to aspirant collectors is: "Always buy with your heart and soul, but with the assistance of a gallerist or curator.

"My priority has always been art that I appreciate," he says plainly. And that's what makes the Graskop Hotel such an unpretentious aesthetic pleasure. "Good contemporary art is too often hidden away in museum storerooms and corporate buildings. My quest is to bring art into public spaces."

Alex Dodd

A tall order for Legacy's Raphael hotel

THE Legacy Hotel & Resort Group's recent involvement in art, particularly with emerging artists in Gauteng, transpired when Nicky Wessels, project manager for the luxury Raphael Penthouse Suites in Nelson Mandela Square in Sandton, contemplated the large, bland spaces created by the building's eight atriums that open up to the sky.

"The massive, four-storey atrium walls — 9m high and 4m wide — called for attention and, after visiting numerous talented but mostly unknown artists in places like Alexander and Soweto, I realised what superb canvases the wall could be."

Wessels introduced the Raphael Mural Art Competition and invited artists to propose ideas for murals in the atriums.

The winners were selected by a panel of judges: Moleleki Frank Ledimo, head of Vansa and the Craft Council of SA; Nicola Danby, CEO of Business & Art SA; Dr Ivan May, CEO of the Cow Parade; artist and educator Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa; Bart Dorrestein, CEO of Legacy; Karel Nel, professor of art at the University of the Witwatersrand; architect Francois Pienaar; and artist Naomi Jacobson.

"Once selected, the winners, who had never previously undertaken a commission of this size, had to be trained and championed to meet the opening deadline. Their determination, and the end result, was breathtaking," says Dhlomo-Mautloa.

The winning, and subsequently commissioned, artists were Alan Kupeta (With Bicycle); Kamogelo Makhonki (A Day in Soweto); Clint Singh (Beaded Raphael); the Soweto Ladies' Art Club from Regina Mundi (River Mosaic); Siphiwe Ngwenya (Together); Abe Mathabe (Untitled); and Thabo Phala (I Khasi). The winners received R20 000 each on completion, with all costs covered by the developers. A plaque with a story about the mural and the artist is displayed opposite the murals.

"The competition opened our eyes to just how much talent there is right on our doorstep," says Wessels. "The hotel is such a fantastic place to display South African art so we decided to take the project further."

Legacy commissioned curatorial facilitators Marcus Neustetter and Stephen Hobbs of The Trinity Session to curate the extended Raphael art collection, which includes hundreds of works by about 150 local artists. These are incorporated into the design and décor of the suites and reception rooms. The work is labelled and similar pieces are available from a nearby gallery.

"The Raphael project started something extremely exciting," says Wessels. "Not only have we created a unique art collection that is now accessible to an influential market, but we have also provided some phenomenally talented artists with a platform."

The group plans extend the idea to the new Michelangelo Towers Hotel.

Penny Haw

An artist's life:

Scott, who says he paints not to eat but because he can, is writing his name on the planet's surface

RICHARD SCOTT

Childlike simplicity and a big plan

THE artist dips his brush into the palette, scooping up a big lick of colour and slapping it onto the canvas with glee. A splash of shocking blue; a burst of sunshine yellow; a jolt of blinding Arctic white, the colour that isn't even a colour.

The artist lets go of the brush, like a caveman resisting the impulse of evolution. He jabs his fingers into the palette, and begins daubing colour onto the floor and walls, as if the canvas isn't big enough to contain his imagination. Meet Richie Scott, 3, contemporary artist.

He has been invited into the studio, in Melkbosstrand, near Cape Town, by his father, Richard, 37, who is working with slightly more restraint on a painting of a woman in a bikini, outlining her curves with a series of fluid black lines that lend flesh and substance to the numbing nothingness of white. "Ja," says Scott senior, casting a glance at the paint-splattered toddler heading for the trestle-table, "in the beginning I would take a little strain when people told me that my work was childlike. Now I take it as a compliment."

Picasso once said he spent his career learning to paint like a child again, but Scott seems to have got it right from the start. His bright, witty works appeal to the three-year-old inside us, but at the same time they are entirely grown-up in their almost brutal discipline: a series of pet subjects (cats, cars, trees, flowers, cottages, lighthouses, "babes") etched in solid white against blocks or splodges or dribbles of smack-in-your-face colour.

You can tell a Richard Scott from across the room, which must explain why Woolworths uses a selection, blown up to banner size, to shout the way to the kiddies' section. But it is not just the retail textile merchandisers who have fallen under the spell of Scott's astutely marketed brand of, well, let's call it Kiddy Pop.

Since persuading the Hout Bay Gallery to hand over R300 for Two Trees in a Field of Sky, a 90cm x 90cm impasto and acrylic on a home-made pine frame, Scott has sold hundreds of works at home and abroad, not because he needs to, but because he can.

"I don't paint to eat," he says, having made his bread-and-jam in internet development during the dot.com boom. In 2002, he sold his thriving Cape Town company, Shocked, and reinvented himself as a full-time artist, drawing only on a few years of art class and a stint as a technical illustrator: "You know, those guys that draw exploded views of engines and stuff."

This background seeps through in his nuts-and-bolts approach to art, which he views with a disarming absence of pretension, and a sly sense of reverse psychology that implies he couldn't care less about his own success. "I would rather someone wanted my art," he declares, "than had it in their possession."

But of course he does care, and on an exponential scale, just as his canvases have zoomed from modest squares into almost wall-size oblongs. Already, plans for the Richard Scott Foundation, which will provide space and funding for aspirant artists, are well under way.

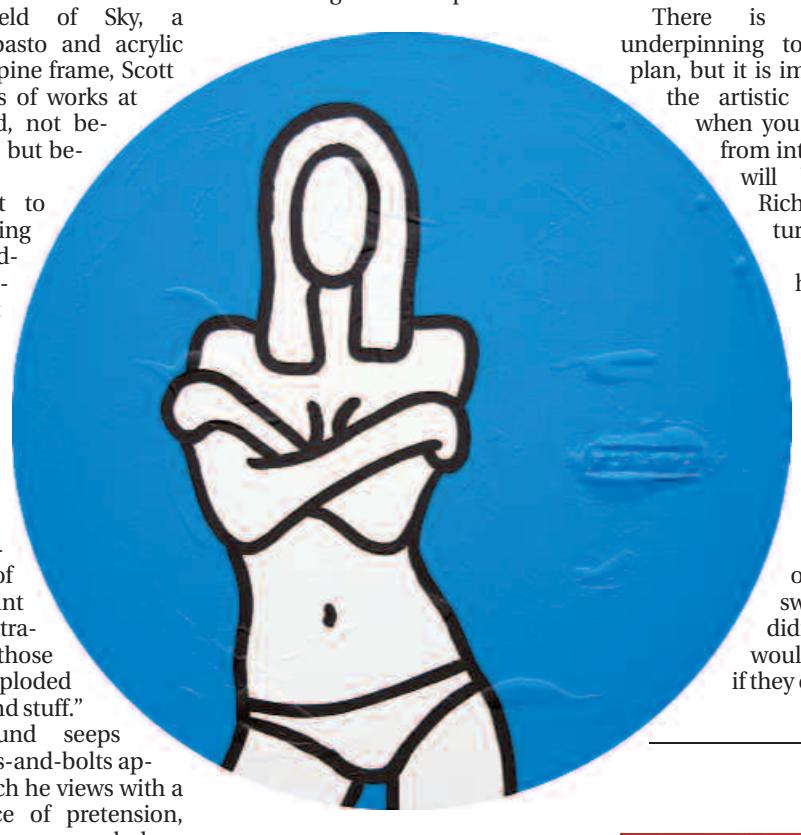
There will be seven buildings, in seven cities around the world, each devoted to a different medium, and each taking their shape from the lowercase letters of his stamp-block signature. The first "r" will be built in Cape Town soon, with the rest to follow within the next 15 years.

There is a philanthropic underpinning to this starry-eyed plan, but it is impossible to ignore the artistic vision: one day, when you are looking down from interstellar orbit, you will be able to see Richard Scott's signature from space.

For now, he is happy enough to make his mark on the planet in colour and line, in a style that will make some people go, "But my three-year-old could have painted that!"

To which the only possible answer is that they didn't, and the world would be a better place if they did.

Gus Silber



Above: Blue Who, 2004, impasto and acrylic

Right: Richard Scott in his studio

Below: Rose Redhead, 2004, impasto and acrylic

IF YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE ONE ...

WANT a Richard Scott on your wall? Only three years ago, you would have been able to pick up a 90cm x 90cm Richard Scott canvas for less than R500.

Today, you can expect to pay up to R10 000 for a work of the same size, and about R2 000 for a 30 x 30cm work.

On the auction market, a set of six 30 x 30cm Scotts fetched R16 000 at Sotheby's last year, while a 150cm x 150cm work went for R35 000 in Rotterdam.

Scott's work is available at several Cape Town galleries, including the Hout Bay Gallery (www.houtbaygallery.co.za), the Rossouw Gallery (www.art10-.co.za) and the Virtual Gallery (www.vgallery.co.za).

For more information, contact Scott's agent, Charl Bezuidenhout, on 082 901 5045, or visit www.richardscott.com.

An artist's life:

Young artist is still finding her way, but her sheer professionalism will steer her to eminence

THERESA-ANNE MACKINTOSH

Walking a thin line

THE fine art fraternity is very precious about their heart-rending sacrifices and unwavering commitment to their work during their struggle to make a living from art, which remains a painfully uncertain occupation.

But everything associated with money is not necessarily dirty or corrupt. In fact, throughout history it was the artists with solid business acumen who became successful — Giotto, Da Vinci, Rubens, Monet, Braque and our own William Kentridge who, after all, is admirably a self-made animator, which is what makes him so important as a role model in this context. Frankly, pseudo-academic artists will do well chasing an MBA instead of an MA.

This long-winded introduction is aimed at showing why Theresa-Anne Mackintosh, despite her impressive track record, her awards in the commercial animation world and her MA cum laude from the University of Pretoria, will be evaluated as an artist exclusively on her two recent exhibitions, which mark her re-entry as a "real artist" into an art world that appears from outside to be a veritable Alcatraz, but is an incestuous muddle-puddle, based on who screws whom or who lectured whom.

I briefly taught the shy and secretive Mackintosh on a locum stint and introduced her to the FIG gallery, where she and many of her inordinately talented classmates had their first solo exposure.

I first took notice of her new work after revisiting Quinton Tarantino's Kill Bill, confirming my wonderment at his superb sense of fusion in cinematography, which interfaces so well with his private world and our growing globalisation.

Mackintosh's animation, and sculptures of her own cartoon characters, showed an uncanny echo of the Japanese Manga school Tarantino so admires. She constantly refers to movies like Magnolia and Eraserhead and Rosemary's Baby, and says she would rather be in the camp of Tarantino, David Lynch or Michel Gondry (a music video director) than many artists. But she needs to go easy on the influence, for personal parody on other art can easily slip into imitated pastiche.

An alert Alexander Sudheim flatly accuses her of cribbing one too many elements from Radiohead's music video Paranoid Android (Art South Africa, 2004) in Jackie the Kid (NSA Gallery, Durban, 2004). It centred on an absurd three-minute animation piece wherein Tina, who gave birth to a goat, approaches a pharmacist for goat's milk. In it Mackintosh obliquely addresses many personal and gender issues but for me it recalls the German Expressionist cartoons of the 1930s.

While the narrative is clearly important and future animated contributions will be welcomed, I am more interested in the sculpture of the stark and mute Tina, exquisitely manufactured multiples in fibreglass placed in the centre of the exhibition space. Few artists beyond Kevin Brand and Brett Murray produce work of such startling immediacy. It is as if the statues have more animation locked up in them than any cartoon could ever have. That, in fine art terms, is called presence.

Her exhibition this year, Theresa-Anne Mackintosh at Franchise Gallery, Johannesburg, was less contemplated and perhaps too soon. Though the sculptures were equally faultlessly executed, it was a shame her multiple slip-cast ceramic and variously glazed "babies" were called that, for it enforced my irritation by their installation, coyly seated on a cordoned-off carpet in the middle of the space, lending the show the ambiance of a crèche in a Pretoria mall. But, individually, they are powerful, alien, bear-like fetishes.

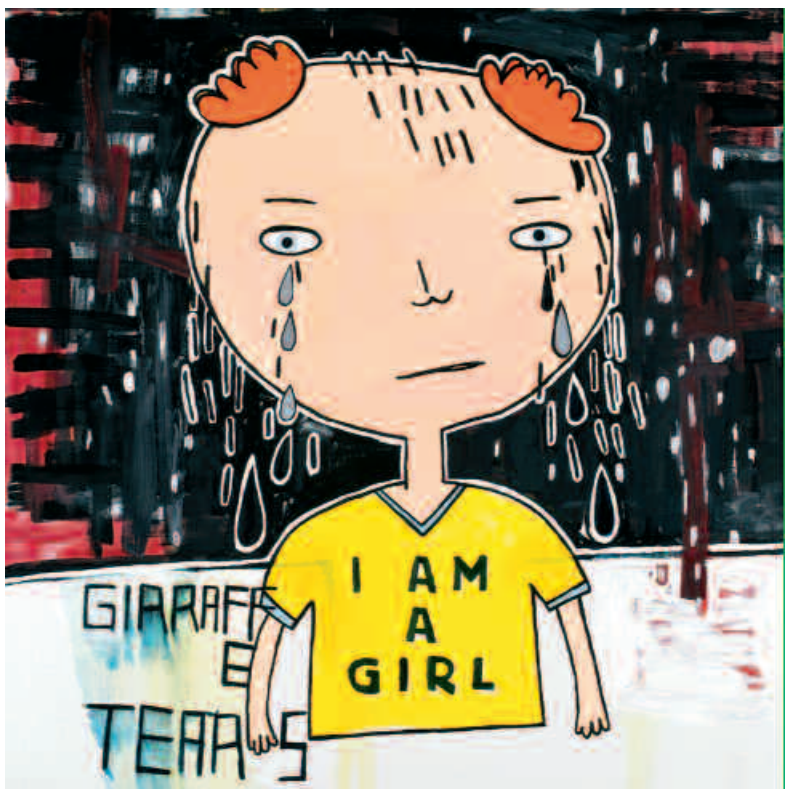
Though I sympathise with Mackintosh's desire to explore an assortment of challenges like painting, drawing and watercolour, they hardly relate to the main sculptures and actually read like a group show.

In these media she may well turn to the work of Conrad Botes, who also made the crossover from his underground and celebrated Bittercomix to fine art, with exhilarating panache in his recent lithographs.

However, as much as she values her unexceptional typeface, featured in so many works, I suggest she gets over it, and leaves it in her former life, where it belongs.

But Mackintosh's sheer professionalism, and meticulous documentation and commentaries in lasting catalogues, reflect her determination to succeed as an eminent artist, and I would be very surprised if she does not.

Braam Kruger



Above: Girl, 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas, 1 020mm x 1 020mm
Below: title: Jackie the Kid projection, animation

IF YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE ONE ...

TINA fibreglass sculptures each sell for R12 000, while Babies, ceramic sculptures, sell for R9 000 each.

Theresa-Anne Mackintosh is represented by Gallery Momo (Monna Mokoena), Tel: (011) 327-3247.

Mackintosh can be reached directly on 083 310-6924 or on e-mail: ta@mackintosh.co.za.

An artist's life:

In his exploration of his own identity, Magwa pays homage to dying African customs

LANGA MAGWA

In search of the self inside the skin

Above: Unta, Shield with Light
Left: Amaqanda kaCilo, wooden skin with headdress gear

THE skin is the largest organ of the body and, next to the brain, the most complicated. Because of the sources and complexity of his work, it is fitting that skin is conceptual sculptor Langa Magwa's chosen medium.

Magwa's face was scarified when he was about three years old, in accordance with Zulu tradition on his father's side of the family. But a parental split meant Magwa was sent from Kwamagoda village near Richmond in KwaZulu-Natal to his Xhosa maternal grandparents near Adelaide in Eastern Cape.

In this different cultural environment, he continually asked himself: "Why do I have these scars on my face?" They were a constant source of insults and he grew up hating them.

"I even took wax from a tree and tried to erase them. My grandfather said: 'Don't. You have to have these things, they are your father's thing; they tell you who you are."

When he was 21, Magwa went back to KwaZulu-Natal. "I saw lots of Zulu people with scars on their faces. I relaxed. But I asked my mother, 'Why the scars?'.

"At 21 I saw my father for the first time. He told me who made the scars and what they mean. Then I attempted to love the scars. This precious thing, this information, I use as the theme and concept of my art.

"My work is deeply saturated in African customs embedded in the use of skin, human and animal, as a form of expression and communication. African people used to wear animal skins and sleep on them. Each animal and its skin has a specific role when practising our rituals, which include the rite of passage, identity (adornment) and medicinal use."

It's no surprise then that animal skins form Magwa's canvas. The resonant cultural objects he attaches to them — drums or Zulu female headdress, for example — and the images he burns into them, are akin to applying paint, or scarification. Magwa uses hide, the tough skin of animals, notably cattle, goats, buck and snakes. He "wants people to feel and touch the work — to be inside the skin".

Each of his sculptures proposes a robust discourse. Take Amaqanda ka Cilo, a headdress traditionally worn by older married women with children, mounted on a stretched Nguni cattle hide. "The devaluing of Zulu culture is very much perpetuated by the influence of urban or western values. For generations Zulu people have been exposed to western ideologies. They have slowly disdained their own customs, regarding them as primitive, uncivilised, even terming them as barbaric.

"Currently there has been a move towards recapturing traditional trends but, unfortunately, some of us lack the significant background information that comes with using such items that are valuable (or rather, that should be regarded as valuable). Hence you find individuals wearing without complying with the necessary code of conduct or knowing the meaning behind their adornments."

The search for meaning and identity, whether individual or group, suffuses Magwa's springbok-hide series. The springbok is particularly culturally resonant and relevant, he says: traditionally, young Zulus wear springbok hides when dancing; the springbok was on the old South African coat of arms, and remains the symbol of SA's rugby team. But, Magwa reveals, there are dark-brown springbok skins, as well as white and fawn.

At an artists' workshop in Scotland in 2003, Magwa took thumb prints from his 20 fellow artists (each from a different country) and later burned these onto five springbok hides. These works underscore identity, which is core to Magwa personally and professionally.

Inkone, wooden skin with wooden feather

Growing up in his Xhosa grandfather's household, Magwa experienced a cultural tradition different from his father's, and was circumcised — not a Zulu practice.

"My grandfather said: 'I know your people on your father's side don't do this, but you're under me here. You have to do this, otherwise you won't be recognised as a man.' Practising both scarification and circumcision led to the questioning of my origins and identity."

Finally, though, Magwa says: "Scarification played a big role in finding my identity, expectations from my community, and has expanded into me researching other similar rituals of the African people. My art then becomes a tool in expressing and searching for this identity."

That process is being furthered by his MA thesis, The Use of Skin as a Means of Identity in Zulu Culture, which he is completing at the Durban Institute of Technology.

Darryl Accone

Ibahadi, skins with fingerprints

IF YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE ONE ...

LANGA Magwa's sculptures fetch between R3 500 and R6 500. Prices vary according to materials and complexity of conception and creation.

Of late, Magwa has replaced his signature stretched cowhides with what he calls "wooden skins", examples of which he displayed at the Renault 2005 Artists Exhibition in Sandton last month.

At that show, one of Magwa's most ambitious works, Ibahadi, went for R17 500.

An artist's life:

OBIE OBERHOLZER

Photographer Obie Oberholzer shoots from the hip, and expresses his passion for SA in bold colour – never black and white

Wanderlust in the HappySadland

OBIE Oberholzer, photographer, direct talker, teacher and Africa traveller, has a passion for the HappySadland — SA. In his photographs the skies are really big and blue, his soils are really brown, and the people are often smiling. Oberholzer's books show the real virtuosity of a wandering photographer.

Many of SA's art photographers use black and white and when they use colour, these are very subdued.

He calls himself a "photographic thug" and goes ballistic at the mention of the phrase "art photographer"; he rails against the lack of taste and visual literacy in SA.

"We have lost the word 'passion'. I'm often criticised because my pictures are too passionate, too colourful, too intense," he says. "We live in a tremendously passionate country and there are not many photographers who capture that. I try to capture what I feel.

To do that he uses only colour film. "I do my own colour printing. I have not done black and white for a long time, because I'm too visually singular to multitask on both."

He uses an Asahi Pentax 6x7 camera, and a medium format that ensures high quality and sharp definition in the prints.

Like his conversation, Oberholzer's books are slightly haphazard journeys. He thinks the best was Beyond Bagamoyo, about the nine-month Cape to Cairo journey he began after voting in what is now Mussina in 1994. Bagamoyo is a small former slavery and ivory port in Tanzania, and the name means "let your heart hang" in Swahili. He drew the maps for his books and in a few the text is in his handwriting. Some critics say his dreamlike writing is better than his photography.

Oberholzer loves the freedom of wandering. "Freedom is not knowing where I am going. I get in my double cab and take the seats out and have a bed. Freedom to me is coming to a T junction and saying, mmmmm, let's go left."

Oberholzer lectured on photography for 20 years until he retired three years ago as a professor of fine art at Rhodes University. He now works on his own photography and takes pictures to go with stories on Africa that appear in high-end magazines such as Conde Nast Traveller and German magazines including Stern. His latest project is a book of photographs on "more strange journeys in southern Africa".

His drift towards photography began with the interest in design sparked by his father, an engineer.

Oberholzer grew up on a farm outside Pretoria. At Stellenbosch University he studied graphic design, played rugby and had fun.

After realising he gained a "quicker fix" from putting an image on emulsion than from drawing or painting, Oberholzer went to the Bavarian State Institute of Photography in Munich, Germany, to study.

"Anybody coming from a privileged white background who goes to Stellenbosch and fails history of art is immediately struck by the work ethic and competition that exists in Europe. It was a real wake-up call."

He returned to SA and "jumped around a bit", working as a commercial photographer and teaching SA's first photography diploma course, at Natal Technikon. He returned to Munich for another year, then spent a career at Rhodes, teaching his students practical things, he stresses.

That theorists have hijacked the galleries and public taste is a theme of his. Students miss things like how to photograph a bottle or a landscape and have portfolios emulating what is in the galleries. "They lack understanding of words like line, form, shape, and can't get jobs," he says. "We have not had a culture about line, shape and light. There is a sadness there. Look in Plett and see 15 different architectural styles. Where is our feeling for the country?

"We have stopped looking at our whereabouts and at what we feel and where we come from. Every picture needs some intrigue."

Above: Self portrait, circa 1977, Durban
Below: Moonrise over Motel Swimming Pool, 1999, Bubi River, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

Jonathan Katzenellenbogen

IF YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE ONE ...

"I have no price tag," insists Oberholzer. "The museums don't want them because they say the colours have been manipulated because they are too bright and insincere and too happy. I love the journey. And if I had to worry about what people think, I would not feel the freedom," he says.

After a second call and some cajoling about editorial pressure, he relents — he will sell a 40cm x 50cm colour print, one of five, for between R3 000 and R5 000.

On the stoep in Fordsburg

IT's easy to tell where the artists preside. Pink plastic roses are twined around the filigree wrought-iron balcony and a makeshift sculpture decorates the wraparound stoep. It is almost lunchtime and Fordsburg's streets are abuzz with trade and traffic — shoppers, hawkers, beggars and businessmen shuffling along the pavements and calling across the street, getting in their last deals before the imam's call and the respite of midday. I ring the bell on the corner of Lilian and Main Road and the wooden door swings open to Carl Becker in a blue overall.

We climb a rickety flight of stairs to the first-floor studio he shares with Hermann Niebuhr and Dave Rowett, all graduates of Rhodes University's art school. "It was Hermann and Dave who found the place. It was completely derelict when they stumbled on it," says Becker. "We moved in in October 2003."

Before that, Becker, who plays in a band with renegade writer Riaan Malan, worked out of a studio in Yeoville for about 20 years. The rusting pressed ceilings, wooden floors and sash windows have prevailed from his bohemian student days, through the heyday of Rockey Street to the hubbub of Fordsburg, where they now seem to form part of an unspoken ethic.

Niebuhr emerges from his studio and we step into the kitchen with its old gas stove, aluminium kettle, boxed red wine and plateful of garlic cloves. Furnished with only the bare essentials, it strikes me as being a very "painterly" kitchen, each iconic object calling out to be reproduced.

It's been a big year for Becker and Niebuhr. Becker's solo show, History Paintings, yielded a splash of red stickers at the Everard Read Gallery in October and, earlier in the year, Niebuhr presented a winning solo of semi-abstract urban landscapes at the Absa Gallery downtown.

The aroma of brewing espresso competes with the distinctive brew of oil paint, turps and linseed oil. We step out into the sunshine and take up our positions on the stoep. Across the road Saad Butchery and Ghusia Foods (strictly Halaal) compete with MTN and Coca-Cola signage, and pigeons rest on the rafters of a red-brick factory building. From this distance, the ribbon of cars on the M1 resembles a long line of dinky toys.

Carl Becker's 98 Figures, 98 Years, 2004, oil on canvas

Neighbouring the Newtown cultural precinct, unassuming Fordsburg has been an underground artistic hub for years. On Mahlatini Street, the other side of the Oriental Plaza, lies The Bag Factory, home to big names like Sam Nhengethwa, Kay Hassan, David Koloane, Pat Mautloa and Tracey Rose.

Although Becker and Niebuhr were both painting Johannesburg before their move to Fordsburg, their presence on this side of the city has renewed their perceptions of the rapidly evolving African metropolis.

Haunted by Johannesburg's abandoned Edwardian buildings and slowly disappearing mine dumps, Becker's recent drawings and paintings recall the way German writer WG Sebald uncovers the ghosts of Second World War Europe in the decaying spas of Prague.

He has spent many a day wandering about the mine dumps and streets of downtown Jo'burg with his box of tricks, like some oddly displaced 19th century landscape artist on a field trip. "In a sense I actually come from the tradition of Romantic landscape painters," says Becker. "They were my precursors."

His landscapes become abstract territories in which Victorian ladies, women with buckets on their heads, knob-kierie wielding African warriors, giraffes, lions, prospectors, miners and magnates tussle over turf. While some wield weapons, others labour beneath the baking sun or loaf about, and fair-skinned faders retreat beneath umbrellas.

"I've been looking at the city for a long time. I did my first drawings in Jo'burg in the '70s," Becker says.

"But now, I'm looking at it from the other side and I suppose I'm also more in it now."

Becker was Niebuhr's drawing lecturer at Rhodes, during the era of Robert Brooks, George Coutouvides and Noel Hodnett, in the early '90s.

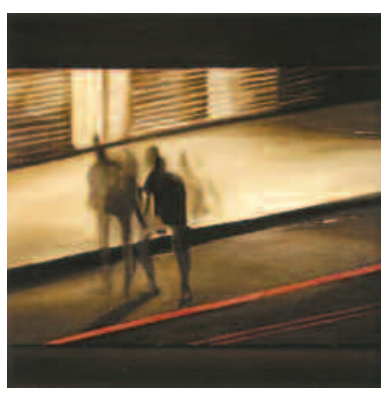
"There was a definite focus on landscape at Rhodes," says Niebuhr, "a rejection of contemporary trends and an embrace of classical training — a lot of drawing and that thing of 'learn your craft before you start expressing yourself'."

From top to bottom: Hermann Niebuhr's Blue IQ, oil on canvas; Year of the Rooster, oil on canvas; Main Street Lights, oil on canvas; Night walkers, oil on canvas

After Rhodes he spent six years in the Karoo town of De Rust, "continuing that isolated thing of coming to terms with painting, learning to read the landscape". On returning to Johannesburg, his hometown, in 2002, he and Becker embarked on a joint exercise, installing themselves with pencils and clipboards along industrial byways to chart Main Reef Road. In many ways the Lilian Street Studios grew out of that project.

Niebuhr's recent depopulated cityscapes are infused with the speed and pace of the city. More about selection and reduction than direct representation, they capture a sense of how it feels to be downtown.

"Most of the work for the last exhibition I made comes from here. There's no need to go much further than this vantage point," he says. "The location, this area, this studio, has been absolutely vital."



Alex Dodd

■ *Becker can be contacted on 084-873-2445. Niebuhr, on sabbatical in New York, can be reached at hniebuhr@yahoo.co.uk*

A pan-African gallery in the heart of Newtown

TEN years ago, a young Frenchman arrived in Johannesburg to begin a tour of duty at the French Institute of SA. His was to prove an unusual posting, notable for its longevity and the remarkable dynamism he brought to arts and culture projects, particularly in the visual arts. Much of the energy and innovative spirit were innate to him, but he drew inspiration also from the heady first decade of SA's democracy.

Early this year, Henri Vergon was granted permanent resident status here. Shortly thereafter, he left the institute and, with Billie Zangewa, began to realise a long-cherished dream: a pan-African arts platform that would bring Africa to the southern tip of the continent and vice versa.

That vision is embodied in Afronova, a pan-African gallery for modern and contemporary art situated in the cultural hub of Newtown in downtown Johannesburg. But Afronova's location is even more propitious: in the heart of The Market Theatre precinct, directly opposite the theatre complex and landmark restaurant Gramadoelas.

And there are more positive auguries yet, for Afronova occupies the premises of the long defunct but still hallowed Yard of Ale. From the late 1980s until the demise of apartheid, a legendary café society flourished at the Yard, attracting artists, actors, writers, dancers, directors, choreographers, intellectuals, activists and left-wing journalists.

> "The partnerships Vergon is forging are adding to the potential of the area"

Those past resonances aside, the venue has the virtues of high visibility and large windows that offer an unrestricted view into the gallery space. Had you come here in the first half of the year, however, the view would have been very different.

Various successors to the Yard had let the place run down inside and out. The splendid windows that stretch almost from pavement level to the ceiling had grown opaque with dust while the interior was an extravaganza of grease.

Vergon and his team set to work with gusto. Some anchor tenants and neighbours were concerned that the historic venue might irrevocably be changed but they need not have worried. When Afronova was unveiled, it retained the hallmark Edwardian tiling of the facade, and its original windows. Those windows afford more than a panorama into Afronova — they are windows into the world of contemporary and modern African art. Afronova, the gallery, is the display case for Afronova, the pan-African arts platform.

Since opening in August, Afronova has hosted artists such as Samson Mnisi (Johannesburg), Gera Mawi Mazgabu (Addis Ababa), Sandile Zulu (Johannesburg) and Gonçalo Mabunda (Maputo).

Vergon will produce catalogues for each show, at which he is a dab hand from his days at the French institute. Nonetheless, he emphasises that Warren Siebrits of Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art in Johannesburg is the master at making fine catalogues.

Another initiative is twinning exhibition openings with Artists Dinners. Held at Gramadoelas, these bring together invited visual artists, writers, playwrights, dancers, poets, designers, filmmakers, people from the creative industries and "cultural enthusiasts" in a "convivial and adventurous platform for gastronomy and networking".

Afronova's Henri Vergon kept the original windows of the legendary Yard of Ale Picture: TYRONE ARTHUR

Afronova has a carefully stocked bookshop with a catalogue of publications on African art. Already, its rectangular white interior has hosted a number of book launches. Vergon sees Afronova as a resource and facilitator for African art. His extensive travels on the continent, from Yaounde to Cairo to Dakar, from Ethiopia to Mali, have led to a network of international residencies and to easing the way for South Africans to premier cultural events such as the Bamako Biennale of African Photography and the Dakar Biennale of contemporary art. Plans for next year include Afronova residencies, of flexible in duration, and a pan-African outdoor sculpture biennale.

Conversations with Vergon justify faith in the ability of art to transform. Already, The Market precinct has a distinctly upbeat air because of Afronova's presence. The partnerships Vergon is forging are adding to the potential of the area. Collaborations are natural in this environment: the Bag Factory and the Artist Proof Studio are a few minutes' walk away, as are Museum Afrika, The Dance Factory and The Bassline.

Vergon's own act of faith was to invest all his savings in Afronova. "On the night we opened," he tells me, "I had zero in my bank account." The investment has paid off, because whenever you see Henri Vergon these days, he is smiling.

Darryl Accone

AFRONOVA LINEUP

Until December 7: Helen Joseph: Bound
December 9 to 17: Group show: Africanism
January 20 to 28: Nonhlanhla Kambule-Makgati: What I Saw
Hours: Tuesday to Saturday 1pm- 8pm
Phone: 083 726-5906
Safe parking: Corner of Miriam Makeba and Gwigwi Mrwebi streets

WHAT'S ON

David Krut Arts Resource
Address: 140 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parkwood, Johannesburg
Call: Tel: 011 880 4242; Fax 011 880 6368
Hours: Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm, Saturdays 9am to 4pm.
Until January 31: Collaborations: 25 Years of Prints and Multiples. This exhibition showcases the works of the many South African artists whose works on paper have been published by David Krut.

Forthcoming in December from David Krut Publishing
William Kentridge Prints, the first book on William Kentridge to focus solely on the artist's prints, and the first major publication on Kentridge to be published in SA.
www.davidkrut.com
www.davidkrutpublishing.com

Bell-Roberts Gallery
Address: 89 Bree Street, Cape Town
Call: Tel: (021) 422 1100
Hours: Monday to Friday 8.30am to 5.30pm, Saturdays 10am to 1pm.
December 7 to January 7: Robert Slingsby, Power House. Slingsby's first solo exhibition of paintings and bronze sculptures in Cape Town in 10 years.
January 11 to February 11: Contemporary Print Collection. A book portfolio of 20 original limited edition prints by 20 leading South African artists.
February 15 to March 18: Roelof Louw: New work.
www.bell-roberts.com

Michael Stevenson
Address: Hill House, De Smidt Street, Green Point, Cape Town
Call: (021) 421 2575
Hours: Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm and Saturday, 10am to1pm.
December 6 to January 14: South African art 1850 to now
January 18 to February 18: Deborah Poynton and Hylton Nel
February 22 to March 25: Pieter Hugo

FAIR VALUE

The lowdown on the art market

Buy with the heart, not the head — but keep an eye on the market, which many feel is too hot not to cool down. Oh, and anything by Walter Battiss is hot right now, is the advice of

MICHAEL BERNARDI

SA's temperature – as taken in Pretoria

ART buyers always hope the auctioneer hasn't done his homework and that they can get a bargain," says Michael Bernardi of Bernardi Auctioneers in Pretoria, commenting on the October auction and the excellent prices fetched for several items.

But anyone hoping that Pretoria might be Johannesburg's poor relation in the auction stakes should think again. The internet has made catalogues available to anyone with computer access, and Bernardi has been using the internet as a marketing tool since the late 1990s. The company also fields phone bids from all over the country.

One reason sales are held on a Monday is to keep out what Bernardi calls the sightseers; it's the serious collectors rather than the trippers the auction house wants to attract.

As to the diplomats, they do not constitute a substantial part of the art market and do not significantly affect prices. Anyway, says Bernardi, he would rather keep the works in SA. "It's bad for us when work leaves the country as it becomes impossible to track … and may end up in a garage sale somewhere like Calgary, where it's unlikely to be recognised."

So, what's hot at Bernardi's? For a start, Tretchikoff. Portrait of a Zulu Girl by SA's king of kitsch sold in October for R140 000, more than the R120 000 fetched by Karel Nel's pastel, Availing Themselves of Rotary Action, even though Nel's work seldom comes up for sale at auctions. The fact that Tretchikoff is no longer painting helps to push up the price and it may indicate a swing back to accessible work.

Other big names include Irma Stern and Pierneef, two benchmark South African artists whose prices have become a barometer. Bernardi sold two Sterns from her Zanzibar period. The seated Arab reading went for R55 000 (its estimate was R50 000-R80 000) while the oil on canvas depicting a Zanzibar family, listed as the most valuable painting on the sale, topped the estimate R200 000-R400 000 at R430 000.

This is the top price for any painting sold by Bernardi to date, and exactly the same amount netted by a Pierneef landscape in the August auction, the big Bo-Kaap scene of Upper Pentz Street. Of the four Pierneefs on sale in October, a Landscape of Trees in the Bushveld (not a major work) realised R280 000.

Bernardi was hoping to hit the half-million mark in August with the sale of Boy on a Crocodile by Alexis Preller. It fetched R325 000, which still puts Preller's work in the category of seriously collectable.

Of the record-breaking R1m recently paid at a Sotheby's auction for a Namaqualand scene by Pieter Hugo Naude, Bernardi said it was an extraordinary painting done specifically to order. His own Naude sale, in August, of a lesser landscape in Natal, fetched R90 000 — against an estimate of R50 000-R80 000.

In the lower reaches, Gregoire's still life went for R90 000, his still life and violin for R70 000 and Maggie Laubser's minor work Fish and Flowers, estimated at R10 000-R15 000, fetched a handsome R21 000 — proving Stephan Welz's point about the increased value of SA's woman artists. Norman Catherine's humorous, Battiss-like screenprints, estimated at R2 000-R4 000, sold for between R4 000 and R6 100.

Above, Tretchikoff's Portrait of a Zulu Girl, above, fetched R140 000. Right, Alexis Preller's Classic Head, oil on wood panel, fetched R95 000

These are hot; what's not, is less easy to identify. Bernardi is too much the gentleman to kiss and tell, preferring to refer, tactfully, to 10 or so minor works that did not sell.

His punter's tip, though, is anything by Walter Battiss, whose prices have risen substantially in anticipation of the major revival on display at the Standard Bank Art Gallery.

Bernardi lists two works he sold in August that exceeded estimates: Aspects of Life (estimate: R80 000-R100 000) sold for R110 000; and Three Women in a Landscape, from his Limpopo period (R30 000-R50 000) went for R65 000.

Like Welz, Bernardi urges prospective buyers to buy with the heart, not the head — but to keep a weather-eye out for the market, which many feel is too hot not to cool down.

Heather Mackie