

**dates of exhibitions:** Friday 21 June – Friday 19 July 2013

**exhibiting artists:**

Garth Erasmus, Andrew Verster, *Spirit of our Stories revisited*: print exhibition, *The Hourglass Project* - *the miniatures*: print exhibition;

**Festival exhibition:** Benon Lutaaya, *Process*, Wednesday 26 June – Friday 19 July 2013

for more details on the artists' works, please read the texts on each artist's exhibition page.

**key words:**

Arnold, Marion; image and word; poetry; printmaking; residencies; Seferis, George; The Caversham Press; The National Arts Festival Grahamstown; The Standard Bank Young Artists Award;

**Celebrating history and influences**

This month sees the opening of the 39th annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape - or the Grahamstown Festival, as it is commonly known. It takes place from 27 June to 7 July 2013.

In 1981, the National Arts Festival introduced an award for young visual artists, originally sponsored by Five Roses. In 1984, the sponsorship was taken over by The Standard Bank, and The Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Arts (SBYA) has become one of the most prestigious awards for Visual Arts in South Africa.

In the publication *Standard Bank Young Artists: 25. A retrospective exhibition (2009)*, Emil Maurice wrote:

Standard Bank is ... not the only role-player in making the award a huge success story and a major cultural attraction in South Africa, as, in partnership with the sponsor, there are also those involved with the selection of the winners. The selectors are called upon to make far-reaching decisions of great consequence for the unfolding of cultural history. This is an enormous responsibility which calls for courage, firm belief, and faith in one's convictions. Three such figures with the necessary gumption and foresight are Alan Crump, Marion Arnold and Andrew Verster, all of whom have been intimately involved with the selection of the Young Artist Award winners and their presentation to the public over the years. (2009:7)

These three selectors contributed essays to this publication about different aspects of the SBYA.

Alan Crump stated:

Art inevitably expresses the nature of society: its pressures, hopes, insecurities and aspirations, particularly in a country like ours, which has undergone so many radical changes over so short a time. This is certainly evident in the *Standard Bank Young Artist: 25 years* exhibition. South Africa is not a land for the shy, the 'laid-back' or the bored. ... The pace of change may be happening at an uncontrollable rate but contemporary art strives for, and requires, the cut and thrust of constant reinvention, so that it continues to question the society in which it exists.

Andrew Verster described the requirements of the award selectors: "The artist has to be someone with a record of achievement, as promise alone is not enough. We need proof of the artist's commitment, recognition, originality, imagination, passion and ambition. The award is the catalyst that pushes the artist over the edge to greater heights." (2009:27).

Marion Arnold spoke of the significance of the award for artists – recognition, acknowledgement and bringing their work into the world for engagement: "Producing art is one thing but making it visible is quite another. Images in studios do not stir debate or exert influence." (2009:20)

This year's National Arts Festival website remarks that the 2013 visual art exhibitions seem to feature "a contemporary look at the historical". The current **outoftheCUBE** exhibitions look at aspects of the artists' own histories, whether their cultural histories or their histories of creative influences. And this particular group of artworks are in the traditional media of printmaking and painting.

Philippa Hobbs (1997) identified the founding in 1985 of the KZN-based printmaking studio The Caversham Press by Malcolm Christian as the point at which South African printmaking could be considered to have joined the arena of contemporary international printmaking. The first significant Caversham exhibition, a retrospective of five years of work, was held at the 1989 Grahamstown Festival.

Malcolm and Caversham developed a long history of association with The Grahamstown Festival. In 1991, Alan Crump conceived the idea to celebrate the first ten years of the SBYA, and Caversham published a ground-breaking series of prints, *A Decade of Young Artists*, which was exhibited at the 1991 Grahamstown Festival. The Caversham Press went on to exhibit regularly at the Grahamstown Festival, including in 2012. Both Marion Arnold and Andrew Verster have strong connections with Caversham, as friends and as artists who have printed there regularly.

### **Curatorial decisions**

The opening of our current exhibitions on **outoftheCUBE** coincides with the cementing of a more formal relationship between **outoftheCUBE** and Caversham. Mandy has had almost 20 years of involvement with Caversham, and this has informed much of her knowledge about printmaking and influenced her outlook on the importance of process in artmaking; while in recent months, Kevin has spent many hours in conversation with Malcolm, leading to a significant shift in his own perspective. Malcolm has been on the **outoftheCUBE** team since inception.

To acknowledge this history and influence, four of our five current exhibitions feature print portfolios of work from The Caversham Press: the collaborative *Homage to Seferis* portfolio by Andrew Verster; the *Spirit of our Stories* project, exhibited at Grahamstown in 1995, which provided a showcase for The Caversham Press Educational Trust artists; *The Hourglass Project: A Women's Vision* (1999), the result of Caversham's first residency for international and local artists to share skills and stories; and this paved the way for further residencies, where artists and writers could work together in an atmosphere of creative collaboration, as demonstrated by Garth Erasmus's *Arc of Testimony* (2003).

The fifth exhibition, which will begin its run on the opening date of the Festival, introduces the working processes of the young Johannesburg-based Bag Factory artist, Benon Lutaaya, who is exhibiting at this year's Grahamstown Festival in the Provost, the space taken by our associate gallery, The Lovell Gallery.

### **Andrew Verster: creative influences**

The *Homage to Seferis* portfolio consists of ten screenprints by Andrew Verster, and each has a companion poem by the Modern Greek poet, George Seferis. 2013 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the year that Seferis won the Nobel Prize for literature, and Andrew created this portfolio in 1987, the year that he turned 50. In 2013, this work still has relevance in its links to the on-going debate around art and text.

On his **outoftheCUBE** exhibition page, there is an interview that tells the fascinating story behind this portfolio of a network of history and influences that go far beyond Andrew and Seferis ('in conversation'), along with a description of the process from conception to completion. It marks a moment in time when four creative people collaborated due the work of a fifth, and here the intensity yet transitory nature of such a project becomes a microcosm of the process of life, and by association, suggests mortality. In the words of Seferis:

*Stop looking for the sea  
And the fleece of the waves  
Hurrying the caiques along:  
Under the sky  
It is we who are the fish  
And the trees the seaweed.*

### ***Spirit of our Stories*: reflecting a time and place in history**

*Spirit of our stories* is also related to art and the word – this time mainly tales from Africa's oral tradition, although some artists brought their own stories. The impetus to use African narrative came from stories generously provided by the well-known traditional storyteller Gcina Mhlophe and proved to be a strong motivating factor for the artists in image creation.

**outoftheCUBE** shows 12 prints, a fragment of the original *Spirit of our Stories*, including a work by Marion Arnold. An art historian, academic and artist, Marion's print *Irma in a mask remembering*

was inspired by the book she had been researching, *Irma Stern: a feast for the eye* (published 1995). About her print, Marion wrote:

*Now she returned ... spirit coming to remember. Remembering that she had left the Cape garden and gone into Africa, seeking Eden in Swaziland and Zululand and the Congo where she found spirits in wooden stools, figures and masks made by people who laughed and danced, knowing in drum beat rhythm that life is expression and passion.*

### **The Hourglass Project: memory and exchange**

In the late 1990s, Malcolm began to explore the possibility of international dialogue residencies between artists – the first of which was *A Women's Vision* in 1999 – and this developed into residencies for artists and writers to work together in an atmosphere of creative collaboration. This residency was the first time that Caversham had generated a space for international and local artists to meet for the purpose of creative dialogue. The 1990s was a time when many international artists wished to visit South Africa, to interact with our artists, and for skills-sharing

The brief for this residency was *Icons for the Millennium*, and, in dynamic triangles of three women working together, 15 artists explored the themes of the passage of time, and ways to gather and preserve social and personal memories to take forward into the new century. Here, **outoftheCUBE** shows the miniature prints that resulted from this residency, as well as the book of portraits. Mexican artist Cristina Cardenas described the residency as:

*... the opportunity to use my art as a passport into other cultures, providing a rich source of visual imagery. The experience of sharing my work and entering into a dialogue with other artists from such varied backgrounds and beliefs, nurtured my growth as an artist.*

### **Garth Erasmus: crossover of creative disciplines**

*E-POS* was a partnership between the Frans Masereel Centre, in Kasterlee, Belgium and Caversham. It provided an opportunity for a creative dialogue between the two continents and between visual artists and writers that resulted in 5 small print portfolios, with works that transcend the boundaries of language. At Caversham, Flemish writer, Frans Boenders, and artist Linda Vinck, worked alongside South Africans Mavis Smallberg and artist-musician Garth Erasmus.

**outoftheCUBE** is exhibiting Garth Erasmus's *Arc of Testimony*, where he explores aspects of his ancestral roots, using the Khoisan musical bow as a symbol throughout the images, while poetic texts form a subtle underpinning to the imagery. Mavis Smallberg's poem was inspired by the exchange:

*I hear the bow strings  
in my heart's breath  
the mystery of collective memory  
trance-scending time  
melody of rock scratch  
and mantis flight*

*sand wind and stars  
testimony to souls' song  
youinme  
meinyou  
dancing with time*

### **Benon Lutaaya: exploration through process**

From Kampala, Benon arrived at the Bag Factory in Newtown, Johannesburg as part of a residency program – and stayed on. Two years later he is an energetic and prolific artist, working mainly with collage and/or paint, With these two media, he explores the faces of the people on the street around him, and is especially fascinated by subtle facial expression.

Benon has generously allowed **outoftheCUBE** to exhibit a PowerPoint presentation that he has produced specifically to show his creative and technical development since his arrival in Johannesburg. This is in keeping with the **outoftheCUBE** focus on process, and forms an interesting parallel to his exhibited works at the Grahamstown Festival. At The Lovell Gallery in March 2013, Benon gave demonstrations of his technical process, and similarly, his work on show consisted of incomplete and completed works to show his process. His representative Tamzin Lovell Miller commented:

*Both are fascinating, and by showcasing the two together, we hope to inspire viewers with a deeper understanding of this upcoming artist and his passionate drive to perfect a technique as he develops it.*

### **Mapping memory**

The processes of sifting through memories and assessing their significance ... the processes of creating art and text - poetry, oral tradition, writings of experience ... these are all creative activities that demand a non-literal representation, need metaphor, require the distillation of an experience down to its essence. And why?

This short poem may give a clue, written by Andrew Verster at the time of his large retrospective exhibition *Mapping Terra Incognita*, in 1997, the year of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday:

*Tomorrow intrigues me: and today  
Where I've been doesn't:*

*my history is only useful  
if it helps me to find where I'm going.*

*And unless painting is something more than making pictures,  
I've missed the point.*

The National Arts Festival is sponsored by Standard Bank, The National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund, Eastern Cape Government, Department of Arts and Culture, National Arts Council, City Press and M Net.

### **Sources**

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<http://www.nationalartsfestival.co.za/show/contemporary-collections-consider-the-historical-at-national-arts-festival/>