

Joint exhibition by world renowned SA sculptors a must see

Wilma Cruise and Richard John Forbes's Scorched Earth — A Conversation gives comment on how human hubris and greed affects the environment



PEOPLE & PLACES IN THE GARDEN ROUTE
Elaine King

Knysna Fine Art Gallery was abuzz this past weekend with curious visitors, serious art-buyers and locals — oohing and ahing over the latest exhibition, the first of 2025.

The exhibit, opened on February 8, is titled *Scorched Earth — A Conversation* and is a collaboration between two world-class SA sculptors; Wilma Cruise and Richard John Forbes, who have both relocated to the Garden Route in recent years.

People should, I imagine, never touch works of art.

But I cannot help running my hand gently over one of the Kalahari rose quart pieces Forbes has on show.

It's cool to the touch and open to personal interpretation ... it invites me to dream.

With names such as "Lepidoptera" or "Memory" there are a selection of quartz pieces on show, but also some terracotta clay creations with names such as "On Deaf Ears We Fall".

Who can help patting Cruise's bronzed sculpture "Pup Zara" as he is dramatically juxtaposed, guarding, one of Forbes's marble pieces placed on the floor.

Cruise's "What on Earth" (2020) is a mixed media collage on canvas with a ceramic snake and it dominates a wall at the gallery.

It's zany, every viewer will see a different story as you get lost in it.

Cruise is well-known for her signature baboon sculptures in bronze.

"I want a banana", "I've got the banana" and "I need a banana" are the names of three baboon statues placed together (only one has a banana and looks very smug).

These baboons are funny, they are complex, they are in deep thought and they evoke the feeling of human-animal empathy, which is what Cruise aims to do with her work.

The exhibit came about as both artists wanted to show concern for the environment that has been scorched by human hubris and greed.

For the purposes of this show, some of their work was actually subjected to naked flames, whether it was to vitrify clay, temper steel or melt igneous rock.

Some of the artists' pieces have scorch marks or evidence of fire.

The theme of how are humans are



LARGE-SCALE ENDEAVOURS: Richard John Forbes...an ode to rose quartz Picture: ANTHEA POKROY

destroying Earth does not have a morbid ending though as Cruise and Forbes also tell me about how nature is capable of healing itself, rather like fynbos coming back after a fire.

Lest I give away all the magic of this important exhibition, it is open until early March 2025 at Knysna Fine Art.

Whether you are in the market to buy art or just window-shopping, this is a wonderful way to escape the humdrum of life.

Internationally acclaimed

The internationally-recognised sculptor, or carver as he likes to call himself, has travelled and worked all over the world and now lives at the foothills of the Outeniqua mountains in George, where he has converted a heritage barn into his studio.

He uses natural materials ranging from marble to wood, iron to stone, and any other discarded matter that takes his fancy.

His work ranges from small rose quartz pieces to massive garden and land art installations.

He is also versatile and has pretty much put his hand to the gamut of his profession from restoring buildings, to drawing, print, film and even making theatre sets.

He has had some 55 collaborative exhibits throughout the world and 20 solo exhibitions.

His work, in various mediums and sizes, lives in private collections in SA, the UK, Australia, Holland and the US.

The original Woolworths family have some of his work, as does Spier Wine Estate, and an Israeli art dealer has his largest piece yet, says Forbes.

Included in his public works is "Dark Codex", which is a huge piece of carved steel that looks to me almost like a honeycomb.

It stands proud at the Norval Foundation, an art museum and sculpture garden in Cape Town.

NIROX Sculpture Park, at the Cradle of Mankind in Gauteng, hosts more than 50 permanent and long-term installations by artists from across the globe and it is home to Forbes's "Synesthesia of Water", a monumental land intervention sculpture that explores our relationship with the natural energy and power of the earth, in this case,

water.

Forbes completed high school at the National School of The Arts in Gauteng.

In 1991, he did an apprenticeship with eminent SA sculptor Guy du Toit at his bronze foundry in Pretoria.

Then he set off to explore the world, intent on resisting military conscription.

For the better part of the 1990s, Forbes roamed Portugal and the UK earning a living by restoring structural heritage buildings.

At the age of 26 in 1996, he served an apprenticeship as an English heritage architectural stone restorer under master Paul Carter at David Ball Restoration in the UK.

Forbes became a sought-after and specialised artisan who worked on important restorations such as Wellington Arch, Hyde Park Corner; The Royal Institute of Architects building, Westminster; The House of Parliament member's tunnel, Westminster; St Luke's Church, and other notable buildings in London.

He returned to SA in 2000 and his first solo show in Johannesburg filled the Godart Gallery with a body of work called "Attitudes".

It was an interactive artwork and touching this work was encouraged.

He also worked with eminent SA artist William Kentridge to forge four large bronze sculptures for the Western Australian Museum of Art.

In 2007, he turned huge dead trees into public works.

ABSA Bank sponsored "The Burghers of Prince Albert" which stand massive and proud on Church Street (Main Street) in the Klein Karoo town.

This project was the beginning of future large-scale endeavours and commissioned public works which stand tall in Berea Park, Johannesburg, among other locations.

There's an important piece of Forbes's work in a private collection called "Vault", which is the entrance wall and doors to the King Suite of the Michelangelo Towers Hotel in Johannesburg.

This piece took him 18 months to complete, it weighs tonnes and was fashioned from rare African hardwoods.

Forbes has been invited to lecture at the University of Pretoria and has



ACCOMPLISHED ARTIST: SA sculptor Wilma Cruise working on a piece Picture: SUPPLIED

been a guest speaker at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, in the US.

Trailblazer

Cruise is a something of a legendary South African sculptor and visual artist. She blazed a trail in the world of sculpture at a time when there weren't women doing it.

She vividly recalls joining a group of sculptors at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg in the '70s, only to be "surrounded by men with beards and broken nails" who asked her what she was doing there.

She turns 80 in February and is an inspiration, not only through her work which has garnered recognition worldwide, but in the way she lives her life, always pushing the boundaries, for example, getting her doctorate at the age of 72.

Cruise's list of academic qualifications include: a Transvaal Teachers Higher Diploma in 1966; a BA Honours from Wits University in 1969; a BA Fine Art (cum laude) from Unisa in 1989; a Master's in Fine Art (cum laude) from Unisa in 1997, and in 2017 a PhD from the University of Stellenbosch.

Cruise works mainly with fired clay in her renderings of life-size human and animal figures which are most often bronzed and her sculptural installations are often accompanied by large format drawings on paper.

Her work exists in public, corporate and private collections throughout SA, while she has also made her mark on the international art scene.

She has participated in the Havana Biennial, the Florence Biennale and the prestigious 7th Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale of Korea — to name just

some. Cruise's work lives in Holland, California, Turkey, the UK and quite possibly could pop up anywhere in the world, she says.

She is a fellow of Ceramics SA and writes extensively on the field of ceramics.

She has had 25 solo exhibitions at leading galleries and she's lost count of how many shared exhibits she has participated in.

Cruise has curated exhibitions and completed a number of public works, including the "National Monument to the Women of SA" at the Union Buildings in Pretoria (in collaboration with Marcus Holmes); "The Memorial to the Slaves" (in collaboration with Gavin Younge) in Cape Town and "The Right to Life" at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg.

One thing that struck me while talking to both Forbes and Cruise, is that creating art is not easy or quickly done.

The physical work involved in carving takes its toll on Forbes's body he says.

It's also not cheap, especially when it comes to bronzing pieces, with their price tags reflecting the expertise, talent and time put in.

Simultaneously, a solo exhibition by celebrated photographic artist Daniel Naudé was also introduced at Knysna Fine Art on February 8.

His showing is called — "Seeing is Believing Glancing Back".

It's a collection of his most defining images from 2008 to 2019.

His work lives in high places throughout the world. He has photographed President Cyril Ramaphosa's Ankole cattle, Harry Oppenheimer's horses, and is full of surprises.

I have run out of space, so watch this space to read about Naudé.