

Artist: Hannelie Coetzee

Glinsterjuffertjie uit Swartwattelboom / Glistening Demoiselle out of Black wattle (Phaon iridipennis out of Acacia mearnsii)

From A Place in Time Exhibition 2016, Nirox Sculpture Park, Gauteng, South Africa

Dimension and medium: highX 5meter wide X 8meter long, Approx 10 tonnes, *made from* black wattle, oil and scaffold.



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

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

Coetzee was born into a staunch Christian family affiliated to the deeply conservative Doppe church. "I really believed lightning would strike me if I didn't go to church," she rejected the religion, but retained the work ethic. "I come from a family of makers – we always had stuff to make."

The daughter of educated nationalists – her mother was a journalist, her father was employed by the apartheid government – Coetzee studied photography at the Vaal Technikon: her father insisted she follow a field that had job potential. To the quasi-industrial Vaal was a culture shock for her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Written by Robyn Sassen for the Clare and Edoardo Villa Trust 2016

