



PARK LIFE

NAMIBIAN ART ENJOYS LITTLE CURRENCY IN SOUTH AFRICA. THE OPENING OF A RECENT SITE-SPECIFIC PROJECT AT ETOSHA NATIONAL PARK ALLOWED **KIM GURNEY** TO MEET SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S MORE ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

top left
Artist Wiebke Volkmann tests out her 'bed'
composite image
Wiebke Volkmann, *Part of Unknowing*, 2007, found objects including window frame, copper tubing, bed linen, tyre rubber, copper wire, isolators, concrete, elephant dung and seeds, 600 x 600 x 300cm (approx)

My first visit to Fort Namutoni, the eastern base camp at Namibia's Etosha National Park, was a sobering experience that etched itself on my teenaged psyche. Our school tour bore witness to an elephantine copulation at Namutoni's King Nehale waterhole that tested the bounds of physics, let alone secondary school biology. Namutoni now offers a new sort of spectacle 16 years on, in addition to the wildlife. The park's centenary this year precipitated a bout of frenzied renovations that have transformed the camp into a plush destination where, according to management, "the customer is god".

The Namibian president, prime minister and political contingent were on hand to celebrate in a formal red-carpet affair with

invited guests on September 28. According to *The Namibian*, the festivities cost N\$1.4m (or R1.42m). Between the pregnant pauses and close observation of protocol, much was said. But not one speaker mentioned arguably the most compelling addition to Namutoni: several site-specific artworks are now dotted around the camp against the impressive backdrop of the looming German fort.

The public art is largely the result of Namibian artist Imke Rust's initiative, with the backing of state-owned Namibia Wildlife Resorts. Rust assembled a team of established and emerging talents to create sculptural installations to mark the centenary in a project called *Expressing Etosha*. The eight artists visited the site

in June to brainstorm ideas and in August returned to install their works. As Rust explained, many Namibian artworks end up overseas – bought by foreign collectors or taken with artists leaving for brighter lights. *Expressing Etosha* was one way of keeping local heritage rooted.

Afforded the least official fuss, the project articulated more eloquently than rhetoric the complex and contentious dynamics behind the park's creation and existence. Take for instance the sophisticated work of Hercules Viljoen, head of the visual arts department at the University of Namibia and one of the country's most accomplished artists. He appropriated an old prison cell in Fort Namutoni, tucked away in the corner of the

huge courtyard. It takes a bit of initiative to find the work and view it, through a small peephole in the prison door.

The resulting sight is a visual feast of optical illusion that plays magically with the senses. Photographic images of indigenous human figures (the Hai//om were Etosha's former inhabitants) on light-reflecting paper are placed in a half-circle. Miniature animals are suspended in front of these figures, bound in light-reflecting fabric and set in building fragments recovered from renovations at the fort. The figures and animals appear to hover in a trick of black light, which illuminates both from below.

The mythological scene appears to float in front of the eyes, at once permanent and shifting, present and absent. It triggers a host of associations that in turn are rooted in the viewer's ideological disposition. In typical Viljoen style, the work is an elegant synthesis of form, content and material. He says the title, *Etosha Sympathetic Magic*, is a reference to aspects of rock art, dream and trance while the combination of elements potentially signifies symbolic aspects of conservation, survival and history.

Wiebke Volkmann also successfully recontextualises Namutoni fort fragments in her work, *Port of Unknowing*. Here, an entire reclaimed window frame is welded onto a pole, shot through with vine-like copper tubing.

Alongside, Volkmann has created a literal bed of mixed media. The pillows of copper wire are stuffed with an uncomfortable headrest of telephone insulators. The bedding, stitched together from the resort's old sheets, is itself an historical comment: it bears the insignia of four different park administrators. It is pierced with cut-out animal hoof prints through which perennial grasses are intended to grow from a bed of elephant dung beneath.

This alludes to the importance of animal interaction in churning up the soil to allow for new growth – a call for symbiosis, if you will. Volkmann is a great believer in "holistic management", an approach to managing resources that builds biodiversity. A rug of rubber tyre treads, in the shape of an animal-skin, completes the ensemble. This humble place of rest was installed by Volkmann adjacent to the resort accommodation: "I put it in a very specific place for a very specific reason," she confirms.

Imke Rust's *Weeping Women*, adjacent to the communal swimming pool, comprises large salt blocks assembled to approximate seven figures that are glued together with Etosha clay. Her work is based on an historical San myth about the origins of the salt in Etosha Pan – the many tears of mothers mourning their killed children. The work is intended to erode away over time as the annual rains turn the blocks back into salty tear-drops. Rust says the impermanence is fundamental as it represents the cycles of nature.

Alongside Rust's sculptures is a tall wooden column erected on a raised platform. Jost Kirsten's *Dream II* is cleverly and meticulously constructed out of purple-heart wood – the same imported wood from which the resort's new walkways and decks are made. The surface of the faceted sculpture is burnt with repetitive incisions. Its overall geometric and monolithic form relates strongly to the imposing fort in the background. Land is conquered in an horizontal movement, says Kirsten; *Dream II* provides an alternative impetus to connect with another dimension.

Kleopas Nghikefelwa opted for a playful theme for an artwork positioned en route to a waterhole. He installed a hopscotch game of concrete discs scored with both a human and a leopard print. In its interactive connection with childhood fun, it recalls Bili

Bidjocka's stepping stones from *Room of Tears* at *Africa Remix*. The new elevated walkway that passes alongside *Playground for All*, however, does not encourage visitors to step down and interact.

The other three works are less resolved: Helena Iitembu has created concrete blue forms derived from the water of Etosha Pan. They are embedded in the earth near the swimming pool but could unfortunately get lost in their sandy surrounds. Lionel Pietersen created an untitled work of natural wood, resin and found objects that reference the termite heaps in the park environment. And Shiya Karuseb's *Stone Path* cites three eras of human civilization through the lens of conflict resolution.

Any artist who has been involved in public art projects will know all about the red tape that has to be navigated as part of the process. But there are other challenges too. In this project, tape of another sort – chevron – was for the centenary celebrations nonchalantly tied from Karuseb's artwork to a wheelybin in an improvised crowd control measure.

But it was an off-the-cuff remark by a filmmaker that really drove home the gulf that sometimes exists between maker and viewer of public art. After interviewing Viljoen about his work for a documentary on the centenary, the filmmaker said: "This is the fluffy stuff to make it more palatable." His comment seemed to miss the point entirely. Fine art at its best can be a powerful subversive tool; when it tastes sweet, it's usually coating a bitter pill. But so be it: let the wolf enter in sheep's clothing. Those viewers with the eyes to see will find a new way of looking at the world – fluff-free.

Kim Gurney is an artist and writer based in Johannesburg. She travelled to the Etosha centenary celebrations courtesy of Venture Publications

left – right
Hercules Viljoen, *Etosha Sympathetic Magic*, 2007, photographic images, found objects, historical building fragments, fabric, black light, 220 x 234 x 310cm
Imke Rust, *Weeping Women* (detail), 2007, rock-salt, clay from the Etosha pan, 420 x 350 x 190cm
All photos Leigh Daniz