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NETWORK

## NEWS FROM OUR PARTNERS

### ‘Art should do more than sit on its ass in a gallery,’ says nature artist van der Merwe

Lily Robinson

July 30, 2023

*This artist profile is one in an ongoing series highlighting the role creative work plays in connecting people with nature and inspiring a culture of stewardship. If you are an artist whose work is inspired by nature and would like to be featured in a future ILCN newsletter, please reach out to [lrobinson@lincolninst.edu](mailto:lrobinson@lincolninst.edu). We will accept visual fine art, photography, poetry, personal essays, music, and more.*

Centuries ago, Knysna elephants roamed freely across South Africa’s rich and diverse biomes. Herds traversed lush forests and desert plains from the coastal Garden of Eden in the west to expansive grasslands of Addo in the east. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the creatures had vanished entirely from the corridor—which was heavily impacted by land-use changes and became rife with hunters throughout the 1800s—but the ancient migrators and the path they once imprinted are remembered in a protected corridor featuring an interactive sculpture that mimics their trumpeting call.



*“Calling the Herd” by van der Merwe, Plett, South Africa. Credit: van der Merwe.*

Strijdom van der Merwe is a South African artist whose work is inspired by, and made from, nature. Growing up on a farm, he spent much of his youth immersed in the outdoors. Later, when he attended art school, he realized that all the concepts he was learning about—color, texture, perspective, and more—were present in nature. So, it became his medium.



*“Balancing stones” by van der Merwe, Meyerton, South Africa. Credit: van der Merwe.*

As he progressed in his career, van der Merwe began to have his work commissioned. He would travel to the site, find inspiration in the landscape, and create sculptures from the natural materials in that space. “The land is not a setting for the work but part of the work.” He said. “Whenever I get a feeling that there is a possibility to do a work, I would sit down and meditate, take in what the land has to offer, try to understand the reason for the land and its material.”

He never arrives at the site with an idea for what he will create. Instead, he waits for the land to tell him.

In 2013, he was commissioned to build an installation in Plett, South Africa, as part of the Eden to Addo Corridor Initiative. The initiative—inspired by the migratory paths of the now extinct Knysna elephants—currently conserves about 50,000 hectares of land in South Africa, connecting several of the nation’s largest and most biodiverse parks and protected areas. To raise funds for the project, Eden to Addo launched Land Art, a “land art route” to attract hikers to the corridor. Van der Merwe’s work would be one of several pieces along the trail.



*"Drainage cover, Global warming/Desertification" by van der Merwe Tankwa, Karoo. Credit: van der Merwe.*

As he contemplated what he would create, a colleague told him the story of the Knysna elephants and explained that van der Merwe's work was part of an initiative to remember and protect the path they once walked. He wondered, "[what] if we could symbolically call the herd again to find their old migration route?"

Using steel, he created an interactive piece that sprouts from the landscape and can be blown into to create a trumpeting sound.

"[It] may be the sculpture is all that is left to remind us of the times that used to be."

Both with this and other works, van der Merwe prompts his audiences to reflect on nature and the sometimes-fraught relationship between land and people. Many of his pieces are transient. He constructs them from the land and then leaves the land to naturally deconstruct them, reminding people of the world's state of constant change.

"Calling the Herd" is a permanent installation, but he created it with the same intent to spark deep thought and nature connection. "What is most important to me is that, even if I use 'outside' material, the message of the work must always revert back to nature or nature related issues."

He sees an important role for artists in the land conservation movement. "The role of artists over centuries has, and always must be, to challenge our way of thinking and seeing." Visual communication can be particularly poignant and artists are sometimes able to impart messages through their work that others have failed, many times over, to get across through written or spoken words.

Concepts such as climate change can be difficult for people to conceptualize and art can help overcome this disconnect. When people can see and feel what will happen to them as a result of warming seas and rising tides, they will react. Working in nature, van der Merwe is acutely aware of these changes. "It is our duty to make the public aware of these issues," he said. "Art should do more than sit on its 'ass' in a gallery."



*"Accidental tourist" by van der Merwe, Stellenbosch, South Africa. Credit: van der Merwe.*

**More About the Artist:**

Strijdom van der Merwe lives in Stellenbosch, South Africa, and has had his work shown in 19 other countries from South Korea to the United States. He has an extensive academic portfolio, having studied art at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, the Hooge School Voor de Kunste in Holland, the Academy of Art and Architecture in the Czech Republic, and the Kent Institute of Art and Design in England.

Van der Merwe's work has been featured in major festivals around the world and earned awards and accolades, including a medal of honor from the South African Academy of Arts and Science, first place at the It's LIQUID International Contest, and finalist status for the International Award for Public Art.



View van der Merwe's full portfolio on his website at <https://www.strijdom.com/> and follow his work on Instagram [@strijdomvandermerwe](https://www.instagram.com/strijdomvandermerwe)

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