

# GARDENS OF WORDS (COMPARATIVE NOTES)

Excerpt from the dissertation: Repositioning Marianne North and Botanical Art

Written by Natalie Souchon, Department of Fine Arts, University of South Africa, October 1999

**Ms Souchon's dissertation deals primarily with Marianne North's<sup>1</sup> endeavours as botanical illustrator in the nineteenth century, contextualised in view of the work of other illustrators of flora. The excerpt below compares North's work to Willem Boshoff's Gardens of Words.**

[I] examine the work of Willem Boshoff (b. 1951) which I think falls within the realm of ecology aesthetics (rather than consumer aesthetics), because it plays a meaningful role in today's ecological crisis. Boshoff states that he is the "defender of the rights of plants" (Interview 1999). Boshoff's approach is in tune with that of Levi-Strauss, who also asserted that plants should have the right to have a space to live in, rather than be overexploited and colonised. Boshoff's work portrays interdependent relations between the human and non-human world, through securing these rights. Like (Marianne) North, he makes friends of plant species through his frequent pilgrimages to natural reserves and botanical gardens, where he spends several days at a time filling notebooks with the names of plants in the order that he sees them. These botanical records inform his works, not in terms of visual representations, as in North's paintings, but as labels. But, like North, it is a lifelong project, a race against time<sup>2</sup>. At present, he has recorded around 12000 plants but hopes to have recorded around 30000 by the end of his life. He states that this is significant in that there are just short of 25,000 plants on the world *Red Data List*<sup>3</sup>, and he feels that he would liken to go a little way beyond this figure (Interview 1999). In this way, his work is informed by the world-wide problem of plant extinction. Edward O Wilson, a Harvard biologist, states that we do not know how many species of plants and animals exist: "Its like a library of unread books, and we haven't even read the first chapter ... we're losing species before we can even turn the next page" (Morell 1999:28)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Marianne North (1830-90) undertook the self-appointed task of painting the tropical flowers of the world. By her fifties she had won a name for herself as a botanical artist. In 1990, the director of Kew, G.T. Prance, reaffirmed her position as one of the great plant explorers of the Victorian age.

<sup>2</sup> Both artists have set themselves a self-imposed task – Boshoff to record 3000 plants (begun in 1982) and North to paint the tropical flowers and trees on all the continents. For North, the time to paint was regarded as precious and not to be wasted; she frequently expressed her frustration at not being able to paint fast enough, or long enough. She states that "it was impossible to paint fast enough, but we can all work hard enough at what we like best" (Recollections 1894 (2):219 in Losano 1997:3).

<sup>3</sup> At least one in eight of the world's known vascular plant species is under threat of extinction, according to the World Conservation Union's new seven pound, 800 page 1997 *Red List of Threatened Plants*. The *Red Data List of Southern African Plants* consists of six categories: extinct; endangered; vulnerable; rare; indeterminate and insufficiently known.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Pimm, (conservationist and biologist) state that it's not only the rain forests or large mammals which are disappearing, but "it's everything and everywhere. It's a world-wide epidemic of extinctions" (1999:46). And Sir Gillelan Prance (present director of Kew) states that the loss of species "faster than we can catalogue

Both Levi-Strauss and Boshoff present a revolutionary discourse, a radical position that aims to find a way of safeguarding pluralism and diversity. Boshoff envisions mass plant extinction, which suggests regression to monoculture as opposed to the assumption of advancing progressive society. Likewise Levi-Strauss equates modern culture with loss of species, loss of biodiversity, which takes away the right and pleasure of living. He states that

[a]s for ourselves, we are dispossessed of our culture, stripped of the values that we cherished – the purity of water and air, the charm of nature, the diversity of animals and plants – we are all Indians henceforth, making of ourselves what we made of them (Levi Strauss quoted in Conley 1997:54).

Levi-Strauss' apocalyptic perspective on the human activity towards the environment is made manifest in Boshoff's latest works, *Garden of Words 1* and *2* (1982-99), which are defined by his as eschatological<sup>5</sup> gardens of remembrance. They represent the spirits of the plant world, as they would be accusing us at the [end of time]. He is not working with the image of plants, but with the hopeless memory, where words become gardens of remembrance. The memory is what grows, not the plants themselves. Killingsworth and Palmers' discussion (1996) on millennial ecology as an apocalyptic narrative can be related to the work of Willem Boshoff. They state that the image of total ruin or destruction – in Boshoff's case the destruction of biodiversity through mass plant extinction – implies an ideological shift. They state: "In depicting the end of the world as a result of the overwhelming desire to control nature, activists have discovered a rhetorical means of contesting their opponents' claims for the idea of progress with its associative narrative of human victory over nature" (Killingsworth & Palmer 1996:21 in Herndl & Stuart 1996).

Killingsworth and Palmer (1996) state that progress has become a 'total ideology' or all-inclusive system of comprehensible reality. Boshoff's position is against totalitarianism and rationalist projects founded on the notion of a progressive, ordered, fixed state of affairs. Ashraf Jamal states that Boshoff's "tenacious pursuit of knowledge" (Jamal 1996:3 in 23<sup>rd</sup> São Paulo) Biennial catalogue 1996) shows a denial of certitude, finitude and the pure idea or concept that precedes making art. Boshoff subverts these assumptions through his 'study of ignorance' (the study of what one does not know). Certainty is replaced with getting lost and futility. Boshoff deconstructs traditional notions of universal truth and order, replacing them with chaos, deferral of meaning, uncertainty, getting lost, being ignorant and not proclaiming to know all of nature's secrets. His position reflects a conception of the world as chaosmos as expounded by the theorists Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers. They equate nineteenth century thermodynamics as founded on the need to control nature that

them" is significant in that "every time we lose a species we lose an option for the future. We lose a potential cure for AIDS or a virus-resistant crop" (Morell 1999:56).

<sup>5</sup> *Eschatology* is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as the doctrine of death, judgment, heaven and hell. Boshoff uses this word to describe the nature of his work (Interview: 1999).

was felt to be beyond control: where thermodynamic laws were built on the fear of biological complexities, thus initiating a drive towards repressing or simplifying the qualities of nature, but Prigogine and Stengers conclude that nature cannot be simplified, or made into a closed, predictable system<sup>6</sup>.

Similarly, Michel Serres argues that 'rationality' is not an original or pure form since it emerges from chaos. Boshoff rejects a confrontational and self-assured logic, which is part of a move away from global or universal values towards fragmentation and pluralism, and is also part of an ecological worldview that promotes biological diversity. In this sense, his work reads as destabilisation of the world not given to reason, (believed to be harmonious, static and finalised), and through the foregrounding of the plant as "subject", he decentres the place of humans as 'self-willed, conscious subjects endowed with projects, or subjects endowed with stable identities and well-established customs, that is, citizen of a world that we believed had been made for us' (Conley 1997:72).

Boshoff's perspective on plant subject matter differs from that of the botanical artist. Whereas botanical art involves the interaction of text and image, the text for Boshoff is the image, where the visual rendition of the plant is excluded. Hence his work can be viewed as a conceptual representation of the 'real' plant – a garden of the mind rather than a real garden. His *Garden of Words 1* (1982-97) consists of more than four thousand labels, arranged in lists on clipboards along the wall and in rectangular wooden blocks, with the Latin names inscribed, along the floor. The floor pieces are arranged in a number of rectangular sections, bound together by coverings of glass sheets. They look like coffins or hothouses at the origins of time and language. They may symbolise the funeral of the plant as it is dried and buried (they remind us of herbarium samples). Boshoff tries to retrieve information through remembering, through storing knowledge, through writing and rewriting the plant names (sometimes he encounters the same species in a different location with a different name, according to the people who have represented it in their gardens<sup>7</sup>). He 'saves' the words for himself – it is a futile exercise in that his work does not further scientific knowledge. Rather, his intention involves the administration of the ecology of the mind. We plant things in our minds, even though they get lost. What is relevant now becomes irrelevant and extinct. He believes that one day plants will have to be remembered, and that we may have museums, which tell us about them or help us to remember them.

*His Garden of Words 2* (1997-99) which was displayed at the Horticulture exhibition at Nantes, France (May 1999) consists of grass-like transparencies inscribed with the names of about six thousand plants arranged in ten plates. The wind blows the transparencies reminding the viewer of how fragile, annual and transient life is. There is a sense of loss, of the

<sup>6</sup> They state that Newtonian mechanics and thermodynamic reason which conceives of nature as a 'clock' or 'motor' on a path of progress leading towards a stable reality is now being superceded by new conceptual structures based on a new understanding of thermodynamics: "Thermodynamics and information theory propel the living organism into movement. Human bodies are in constant flow, maintaining a delicate balance between stasis, redundancy and disorder in themselves, and each other, and with the environment" (Conley 1997:62).

<sup>7</sup> In *Garden of Words 1* the names on the placards are all in Latin and arranged alphabetically, but the names on the clipboards include Latin and many other names in other languages. In this way his labels swell to include several different names that describe the plant.

smallness or transience of the human condition, which comes through in his work. Like North, Boshoff dwarfs the human element through the proportions and scale of the works so that the entire collection of plant 'portraits' becomes larger than life. Here he decentres the human being's role in the world, involving an ontological shifting of human nature and its relationship to the environment. The viewer is humbled in that he or she feels a sense of awe at nature's breath when confronting the work<sup>8</sup>. But for Boshoff this is not a fleeting, spontaneous response. It is more studied, more reflective. His working process consists of the careful and tedious collection of plant names that slowly expand his mind's awareness of nature. Boshoff's approach is that of the practical travelling naturalist who copies faithfully what he sees. His realist approach is in line with that of Linnaeus' travel diaries<sup>9</sup> or North's rather untranscendental or unromantic view of the natural world. North's interaction with nature is informed by her insistence on getting up close to the plant, and seeing, befriending and sharing with the subject with to arrive at a better understanding of its qualities. Likewise, Thalia Lincoln<sup>10</sup>, Auriol Batten<sup>11</sup>, Ellaphie Ward-Hillhorst<sup>12</sup> and Gillian Condy<sup>13</sup> trek out into the field to get a feeling of what plants are looking out onto. All share a passion for plants. A prerequisite to understanding the plant in all its moods, as well as its structure, according to Wilfred Blunt, is that the artist must love what he or she draws. Willem Boshoff's demeanour projects a sense of seeds and soil that is not physically present in his work. Perhaps this is because Boshoff (like North and the other botanical artists discussed above) is a *biophile* – a lover of nature<sup>14</sup>.

I think that Boshoff's work offers an 'ecology aesthetic' in that it forces the viewer to stop and consider intellectually demanding works dealing with not so innocent plant subject matter (because it is threatened by human development). Boshoff states that

[w]hen people see me taking notes in public gardens or in greenhouses, or when I talk about my work with relations, they think I'm crazy ... But when they see my work, they stop laughing and their expression suddenly becomes serious (Boshoff 1999:13, in Newtown Zebra 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Consider how North also dwarfs people in her paintings, thereby foregoing the flowers as *portraits*, as the main subject that overwhelms everything else.

<sup>9</sup> Linnaeus' *Lapland Journey* was full of sketches and descriptions of places, animals and plants he encountered on his trip to Lapland. His diary is a typical example of the pains the naturalists went to in order to preserve the record of their discoveries and observations.

<sup>10</sup> Thalia Lincoln (b. 1924) was educated at the University of Cape Town and after a career as commercial artist began botanical drawing in 1961. She has produced illustrations for the book on the *Mimetes* species.

<sup>11</sup> Auriol Batten (b.1918) has exhibited in South Africa and overseas, including the Royal Horticultural Society at Westminster, a solo exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum. She is currently engaged in illustrating the Eastern Cape species of *Gladiolus*.

<sup>12</sup> Ellaphie Ward-Hillhorst (1920-94) worked as a mapmaker and in advertising before becoming a freelance artist in 1973. She produced 800 paintings, her major project being the three volumes of *Pelargoniums of Southern Africa*.

<sup>13</sup> Gillian Condy (b. 1952) trained at art colleges in England and is currently employed as botanical illustrator by the National Botanical Institute of South Africa in Pretoria.

<sup>14</sup> Edward O. Wilson (a Harvard biologist) thinks that the love of nature is not an exceptional trait: "I think that humanity is biophilic. We love creation around us" (Morell 1999:28). Humankind has also been describes as the 'exterminator species', as stated in the article *Biodiversity taking stock of Life* (Morell 1999).

In conclusion, Boshoff's approach suggests, firstly, a move towards a vision of nature as 'chaosmos', a rupture of symmetrical harmonies and equilibrium and radical change, towards the multiple, the temporal and the complex. His work points towards more ecologically interdependent, horizontal and democratic relations of humans with the environment as opposed to mankind's external control and power over it.

Secondly, Boshoff's work with plant subject matter reflects a pluralistic or multidisciplinary approach in his decision to exhibit outside of the gallery – the official art world – and into public areas – the botanical garden. His work moves between artistic, scientific and horticultural disciplines. The installation at Nantes<sup>15</sup> is described by *Newtown Zebra* (May 1999) as an original *coup d'art*, "and one cannot help feeling good for helping Willem Boshoff 'intruding' at the fair for the sake of art" (1999:13). Boshoff is the 'outsider artist' working within the botanical and horticultural sphere; North is the 'outsider botanical explorer' whose works have been afforded criticism by the fine art world. It is not always important what category we put artists into, be it artistic or scientific. It is the meaningful contributions that artists make, embodied in their choice of formal presentation, which count. By placing his work within a horticultural context, Boshoff reaches a different public, alongside that of the 'art world'. Like North, who devoted her work to Kew, Boshoff helps inform the layman, the artist, the art critic, the conservationist, the ecologist, the horticulturist, of ideas that transcend the boundaries of the gallery and, in Lucy Lippard's word, "reintegrate art into social life" (1983:6). His work incorporates the meeting of science and art, which aims at a reintegration of the environment into social systems – more particularly, the plant portrait into a context that helps us re-evaluate our connections with other living species and with the earth as a whole.

---

<sup>15</sup> Willem Boshoff was the only participant at the world-renowned Florales horticultural exhibition to present a display with no flower, nor vegetal life.