

Willem Boshoff visits Mogale City

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By Lucille Davie

ARTIST Willem Boshoff popped into Mogale City on the weekend, and left something large behind – something weighing almost 10 tons.

That 10-ton item is a granite sculpture, a long, flat shape called Calculus Moo.

Boshoff explains that “calculus” is the Greek word for “pebbles”. Greek children learned addition and subtraction with the help of pebbles, and would be asked by their parents: “Did you do your pebbles?”

Moo is taken from the lettering on the owner’s aeroplane.

As always with Boshoff’s huge stones, he has inscribed wording on the stone in seven languages. The sentences on Calculus Moo are taken from Genesis chapter 11, verses 6 and 7, where there is a description of people arguing over the Tower of Babel. At that time everyone spoke the same language, but the argument led them to split up and move off. This resulted in different languages being developed across the world.

It’s been bought by the owners of the Cradle Restaurant and farm, and if you sit enjoying a meal in the restaurant, looking over the valley and up the next koppie, and you’ll see the sculpture sitting quietly in the veld, surrounded by clumps of short trees.

“We moved heaven and earth to get the rock in place in time,” says Boshoff. It was installed on Friday, 9 October, two days before visitors were to view it on Sunday.

The restaurant was full of people on the Spring Art Tour, a four-day event taking place in neighbouring Johannesburg; the last event was the trip into the country.

Tour goers were invited to spend some time walking around the grounds of the Nirox Foundation down the road beforehand. Nirox is based in the Cradle of Humankind, on the northern edge of Mogale City.

Originally a trout farm, the land was bought two years ago by a not-for-profit organisation. The ponds were cleaned and neat lawns were created from the bushveld grasses, offsetting the tall planes and Chinese maples. The old farmhouse was transformed into a comfortable set of spacious living rooms, with several studios.

Now visitors can wander the grounds, walk over bridges, up and down gentle grassy mounds, and admire the wonderful artworks. A glance either way to the tall dry grasses and natural shrubs will remind you that you’re still very much in the dry highveld.

An artists’ residency programme was established in these idyllic surrounds. Artists, writers, filmmakers and archaeologists spend three months at the foundation, with

birds, tumbling water and tall trees as company and inspiration. They are required to leave behind a piece of work when they leave.

In addition, some of South Africa's top artists have been invited to exhibit in these landscaped, 15ha gardens.

First artist

Boshoff was the first artist to take up the residency in 2007, but under his conditions. He was approached to do so by the Goodman Gallery, he says.

"But I have to fend for my family; I can't just take three months off," he told the gallery, adding that if it bought four of his works he'd go to Nirox. The gallery went away to think about it.

He had another condition: he had to have his complete workshop with him if he went. In the meantime, the gallery came back and said: "Okay, we'll buy six pieces."

So, it was arranged. His workshop was moved out to Nirox, and the gallery bought his sculptures.

"I was able to think at the Cradle," he says.

Morabaraba Stone

He left behind at Nirox his Morabaraba Stone, another long shiny, black piece of granite, with 96 shallow cups carved into the granite, and weighing six tons.

Sentences along the sides of the stone describe the value of cows, how important they are in African societies. It stands at Nirox within a half moon stone wall enclosure, with the shadows and shapes of the green branches overhead reflected on its gorgeous surface.

"Morabaraba is a game played all over Africa, the oldest record of a game in the world – it is almost prehistoric," said Boshoff in the catalogue for the exhibition, Sources – contemporary sculpture in the landscape.

"In those very early societies – I think it was in Ethiopia where they found it – they took so much pride in it and respected it to such an extent that they carved it in stone, and thereby ensured that the game would be preserved forever."

Once the Nirox visit was over, people on the Spring Art Tour were invited to book a table at the Cradle Restaurant, then stay afterwards and listen to Boshoff speak about his work and the sculpture he has just completed.

He spoke about how it took 10 stages to prepare a piece of granite to become a piece of art. The raw dusty-brown slab of rock certainly bears little resemblance to the finished polished product.

"This is a monument to the way we came about in different languages," he said of his sculpture on the hills near the restaurant.

Calculus Moo is one of a series of six granite sculptures, entitled Children of the Stars. Three of them can be seen at Nirox; the other two are privately owned.

Top artist

Boshoff is one of South Africa's top artists – his work is to be found in universities and galleries around the country, in the Constitutional Court, and in the UK, Europe and the US. He has been winning awards since 1971, and he has exhibited around the world.

His vision has no bounds – he creates large installations, visual poetry and sculpture, using wood, found objects, and graphic and mixed media.

He has also written several unusual dictionaries: the Dictionary of Colour; the Dictionary of Manias and Phobias; the Dictionary of Morphology; the Dictionary of -ologies and -isms; the Dictionary of Beasts and Demons; the Dictionary of Winds; the Dictionary of Obscure Financial Terms; Unmentionabilia; the Oh No! Dictionary; Beyond the Epiglottis, a dictionary of extraordinary terms of rhetoric.

Ten years of researching 200 dictionaries resulted in a dictionary of perplexing English.

“I love working with language,” he says. “I work with words; I don't work with images.”

Boshoff's interests are vast: botanical gardens, medieval and early music, avant-garde music, ecology and language systems that subvert traditional thinking. He is a morphologist – someone who studies the form and shape of objects – whose artworks take the shape of a variety of things: pebbles, discarded library cards, toys, sand, jigsaw puzzle pieces, scrap paper and words.

Write on water

Boshoff says that one of his goals is to write on water.

“I have many ideas of artworks that I want to make, but never get around to solving technically. But there are a couple of things that I still want to do. The one is that I want to write on water, and I've devised many schemes for [doing it],” he says in the Nirox catalogue.

He describes how two billion years ago the earth was molten, and the granite would have been liquid.

“So what does granite look like when it's molten? Well, we don't know, but the closest we could get to it was to polish it so that it has that surface that looks liquid.”

Maybe he's achieved his goal.



Willem Boshoff in his study at home



The 6-ton Morabaraba Stone can be seen at the Nirox Foundation in Mogale City