

FINE ART

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Flowery script

Andrew Lamprecht visits Willem Boshoff's outdoor exhibition comprising 15 000 artificial flowers

From almost any vantage point in South Africa's botanical treasure house, Kirstenbosch Gardens, visitors will see thousands and thousands of flowers on the central lawn, each seemingly alike. But, unlike the other flowers in the gardens, these are the creation of local artist Willem Boshoff.

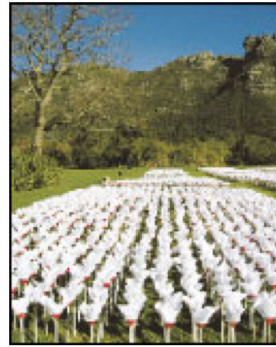
Garden of Words III is an installation of 15 000 artificial flowers, arranged in 15 "beds" in a 3x5 pattern. The "petals" are made of pieces of cloth imprinted with the Linnaean scientific name of plants that are under threat of extinction. Each one is unique, attached to its stem with a bright red button.

The installation drew far more attention than anything else on the bright Sunday I went to see it. Children gambolled around while parents relaxed nearby, and small clusters of tourists

and Sunday walkers could be seen contemplating the sight. Entertaining and a welcome distraction it may have been, but what does it mean?

For decades now, Boshoff has been constructing dictionaries in visual and physical form as part of his art production. Generally categorised as a "conceptualist", his work frequently deals with the way things become words and words can then be presented as things. The human obsession with naming things is of great significance to him. Boshoff states the act of Adam naming all living things in the Garden of Eden as being of relevance here, but this work is about more than mere labelling.

Information boards near the installation make it



Willem Boshoff's Kirstenbosch installation

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clear that this is a funerary work in progress. Boshoff says it is less than halfway to completion; there are more than 30 000 plants threatened by extinction and by the time he has finished cataloguing and recording their names, more may have to be added.

On arrival, I was concerned by the sight of children crashing into the artwork. But as I watched, it became clear that nothing had been displaced and the kids were taking great pride in fixing any damage they might have caused. At another spot, a middle-aged man was reconstructing one of the flowers that had somehow come undone. If people could pay this much attention and care so much about an artwork reflecting an impending ecological disaster, then maybe there is hope that Boshoff's elegant gesture will prove to be its own lie.

Willem Boshoff's Garden of Words III is on at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens in Cape Town until October 8. Call (021) 799 8899 for more info