

On a quiet night, a long time ago, a dreadful rock as big as Table Mountain shot out of the sky into the Free State countryside near the town of Vredefort. Imagine Table Mountain at about ten kilometres wide zapping down like a flash of lightning. The 750 thousand ton of this terrible lump hit the ground at 20,000 metres per second. The fastest ever bullet to come from a hand held rifle was measured only at 1,220 metres per second. The Vredefort rock clocked in at seven times the speed of sound – the largest, insanely fastest thing ever to blast into planet earth.

This rock, or better put, ‘asteroid’, smashed the earth so hard it buried itself seventeen kilometres under the ground. What is left of it is now lying there undetected in a dark, still grave. Ironically, the deepest digging on earth is only 75 kilometres, as the crow flies, from where the asteroid lies, at Western Deep Levels goldmine near Carletonville. With the most advanced technology the miners have reached a depth of 3.8 kilometres. Temperatures at that depth are so high, progress is only made by the extensive use of ice. The original ten kilometre bulk of the asteroid is badly fragmented from the impact, but if we ever hope to see something of its remains, we have yet to learn to dig at least twice as deep as the record.

Fortunately the event happened two thousand million years ago when there was hardly any life. I remember thinking how Zen this was: “If a tree falls in the middle of the desert, can anyone hear the sound?”

The sky at night is filled with shooting stars, fireworks provided by foreign bodies of matter from outer space that enter the earth’s atmosphere, becoming incandescent as a result of friction and appearing as streaks of light. These flying sparks are called ‘meteors’, from the Greek *meteōros* ‘lofty’ or ‘from on high’. Few meteors ever make it to the ground and if they do, we can rarely tell the difference between them and the rocks around us. A meteor that survives its passage through the earth’s atmosphere to strike the ground is called a ‘meteorite’. More than 90 percent of meteorites are rock, while the remainder consists wholly or partly of iron and nickel. I remember my fascination as a child with the Grootfontein meteorite, north of Windhoek in Namibia. My dad had studied carpentry in Windhoek, and he took us back there to share his old favourite sites with us. One could see a metallic shine where somebody had cut a chunk out of the rock.

Any meteorite larger than ten meter is called an asteroid, from the Greek *asteroides* ‘star-like’. For the sake of my work I have named asteroids, meteors and meteorites ‘children of the stars’. Actually, I first decided to call them *les fils des étoiles*, the French name. I love the music of French composer Eric Satie (1866-1925), and one of his works for piano is named *Les Fils des Étoiles*. Satie based this title on a drama of the same name, published by Joséphin Péladan in 1892. So much for *les fils des étoiles* – hardly anyone around here knew what I was talking about and I didn’t really know how to say the name, so I switched to the English ‘children of the stars’.

The Vredefort asteroid shot into the earth like a bullet into a pond, shocking the flat surface of the Highveld into large concentric ripples for two hundred kilometres around. The rings of these ripples are by now well weathered and one can only detect them if one flies over the area and knows how and where to look. They are also visible on a geo-magnetic chart of Southern Africa and there is a marked resemblance

with the radar images we have of the rings of a similar impact crater on the planet Venus.

At the time of the impact the earth that made up the geography of the Witwatersrand consisted of level plates with a large inland sea. These shock waves caused the sea to drain away and upended the plates to such an extent that many ridges and caverns were formed around Johannesburg and the Sterkfontein area to the west. Over eons of millennia the rugged Sterkfontein landscape provided shelter and fertile circumstances for the emergence of the earliest man-like creatures called hominids. More than 500 hominid fossils dating back to around three million years were found at Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Kromdraai, and Wonder Cave. I inevitably measured this three million years against the two thousand million years ago when the rock fell out of the sky – it is nothing! Try to draw three centimetres on a piece of paper and then try to draw a line that is two thousand million centimetres next to it. There is not enough paper in the world to draw a line that long.

In 1999 this enigmatic area where the hominid fossils were found was proclaimed a UNESCO world heritage site under the name of “Cradle of Humankind” and eight years later, in 2007, I spent nearly four months at the NIROX artists’ residency in Kromdraai, planning my *CHILDREN OF THE STARS* as a series of artworks to be placed in the Cradle area. I wanted to make several large black stones that look as if they had fallen out of the night skies.

The asteroid that fell at Vredefort made it possible for human-like beings to emerge from the mists of time. My artwork *CHILDREN OF THE STARS* brings homage to us as children of the stars. More specifically, I wanted to make large, liquid rocks that speak of the emergence of languages and of reason from the obscure echelons of early human consciousness. Children of the stars gave birth to the human species and in turn our human mothers give birth to each one of us, but that is not where the mother/child relationship ends. Once a mother has born a child, she continues to give birth to his language, his manners, culture and customs. She is aided in this by others who bear out the best (and the worst) in us. At first this birth of customs and language in us depends on people and teachers who provide care and affection, but later on that delivery is extended to books, the media, experience and circumstances.

Because stars are in labour we are constantly so with thought: *parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.* The sky is the mind. In time language as concretized thinking emerged out of the dark firmament of human awareness and asserted itself as common ground between us, its presence as solid as a rock: unassailable, unavoidable and there to be dealt with. When we say or write something it remains said. We have managed to shift ideas from the constellation of our mind into our mouths to taste them there – to chew and shift them about in a linguistic act of tasting the finest evolutionary cuisine. We savour our contemplations until our ‘taste buds’ tell us they are an exact match for the things we have in mind and ready to be spoken. No wonder languages are called tongues when we finally turn them out.

*CHILDREN OF THE STARS* takes its cue from one of the oldest myths regarding the origin of different languages, the myth of the tower of Babel recorded in chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis. The story portrays us as speaking one common language and through some folly of our own we disperse to speak all the languages of the world as

we know them today. To refer to common humanity, to all people of all languages, I have collected the text of the story of Babel in as many languages as I could find. So far I have gathered more than a hundred versions, many of them in foreign non-Roman Alphabets and scripts.

*CHILDREN OF THE STARS* is made up of a number of stones placed at strategic positions within the landscape of the Cradle of Humankind. Each stone is sandblasted with a few lines of the Babel text to include languages from Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas. English as *lingua franca* of Southern Africa features on every stone. The story-line I have chosen from the myth of Babel reads as follows in archaic English:

“... Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.”

Belfast Black granite holds a special fascination for me. It is the blackest, most costly granite found in South Africa. When it is polished, it glimmers as dark as the night sky. In prehistory granite existed as a molten substance – a primordial, igneous liquid. Igneous stone is solidified lava or magma, from Latin *ignis* ‘fire’. I have a trusted team of workers near Belfast who dedicate their skills to making artworks in granite under my direction. Quarymaster Frans Haarhoff hauls selected stones from the remote quarry on his farm. He personally heads up the team that grinds away the rough outer crust of the stone in order to apply many merciless hours of sanding and polishing to bring back a glimpse of that former black, liquid glory to the surface.

Willem Boshoff