

## WILLEM BOSHOFF – ART SOUTH AFRICA



### **KIRSTENBOSCH BOTANICAL GARDENS, CAPE TOWN, 1 SEPTEMBER - 30 NOVEMBER 2006**

Willem Boshoff should have installed a video camera at the site of *Garden of Words III*, to record the responses of visitors to his outdoor installation at the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. Children, in particular, have reacted with a mixture of caution and curiosity, unsure whether to negotiate the intervention, reverentially, as a museum piece, or to attempt a more hands on approach. Boshoff could not have asked for a more receptive audience.

Over the years Boshoff's conceptual pieces have inspired awe, both in terms of their intellectual acuity and etymological density. His obsession with collecting information and tracing the elusive trajectory of knowledge has become an odyssey. Yet Boshoff's labour-intensive perfectionism and his spartan aesthetic have sometimes resulted in the works becoming too clinical and cerebrally-charged in their efforts to articulate the abstract.

*Garden of Words III* is refreshingly free of visual verbosity. Boshoff has composed a memorial that is utterly in harmony with its natural environment and unexpectedly profound in its clarity and simplicity. Part three of a trilogy, *Garden of Words III* is an environmental memorial – a garden of remembrance. It serves both as a homage to nature's ethereal beauty and as an essay on bereavement. In short, it is a botanical obituary to all the species of flora that have been or are about to be decimated

Framed by Table Mountain and 'planted' on an undulating stretch of lawn, from a distanced the installation reminds one of *A Hundred White Daffodils*, the title of a book of poetry and prose by the late Jane Kenyan. Although one should avoid simplistic analogies between Kenyan's preoccupation with religion and the regenerative force of nature, and Boshoff's philosophical peregrinations, *Garden of Words III*, like Kenyan's essays, evoke a determined poignancy and intelligence. .

Boshoff's written exegesis on the work is straightforward. Inspired by a visit to a cemetery in the Belgian town of Ypres, recalling the carnage of World War I, *Garden of Words III* consists some 15,000 flowers, each diligently documented and re-created. On closer inspection the floral sea is really thousands of white handkerchiefs, each printed with the Latin names of individual flowers and their area of origin. The petals are attached to red cups, recalling the Flanders poppy fields that grew profusely

in the trenches of battles and which still signify Remembrance Day.

Although the historical and geographical allusions are almost as vast as Boshoff's extensive lexicon, the warning of environmental genocide is singular. Yet the installation functions most effectively not in terms of polemics but on philosophical and sensory levels. This is art aimed equally at the head and heart.

**Hazel Friedman**