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SOUTH AFRICAN 'ART' GARDEN PAYS HOMAGE TO VANISHING FLORA

Posted on Friday, September 15, 2006 (EST)

At first glance, the brilliant white flowers nestled in green fields in the heart of Cape Town's Kirstenbosch botanical gardens appear to be another example of the living glories of nature.

Willem Koekkoek

Gallery specializes in the sale & purchase of paintings by Koekkoek
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Willem de Kooning

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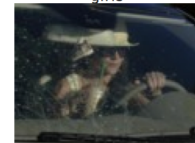
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- ▶ Home
- ▶ Bollywood
- ▶ Celebrity Slideshows
- ▶ Entertainment
- ▶ Fashion
- ▶ Fashion Designers
- ▶ Gossip
- ▶ Health and Science
- ▶ Lifestyle
- ▶ Tech
- ▶ Travel
- ▶ About

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Fashion

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Celebrity Watch: Nicole Kidman at New Line Cinema 40th Anniversary Gala in New York

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Celebrity Watch: Rihanna at the Late Show with David Letterman in New York City

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Willem Boshoff's "Garden of Words III"
© AFP/File Gianluigi Guercia

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AFP) - But on closer inspection, the thousands of stalks are plastic topped by printed pieces of paper, a solemn garden of remembrance to the plants and flowers which have fallen victim to the ravages of man.

"Garden of Words III" is the latest in a series of works by the award-winning South African conceptual artist Willem Boshoff, who has been obsessed for the last quarter of a century with capturing the demise of flora around the world.

The two previous chapters of his trilogy have followed a similar theme as obituaries for species which have either died out or face extinction.

But Boshoff hopes that his latest creation, now on display at the National Botanical Gardens on the southern tip of Africa, celebrates the beauty of wildlife as much as it signals the troubles it faces in the 21st century.

"It looks like flowers, it's happy, but it's ambiguous also -- the sadness is there as well," said Boshoff in an interview with AFP.

The idea for his "Garden of Words" series was born during a visit to a cemetery in the Belgian town of Ypres, where row upon row of white tombstones recall the carnage of World War I.

"It's a memorial garden," he said of his latest creation. "Flowers to remember the flowers that are going to die."

"It's like soldiers. You fight with them in the war and you know they



Celebrity Watch: Victoria Beckham at the Roberto Cavalli opening in Paris



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It's like soldiers. You fight with them in the war and you know they are going to die."



Willem Boshoff's "Gardens of Words III" © AFP/File Gianluigi Guercia

A total of 15,000 'flowers' make up "Garden of Words III". Each piece of paper carries the Latin name of a flower which is now either extinct or on the danger list and its area of origin.

"I started very slowly but I carried on. I started making notes. I have learned the names of many thousands of flowers.

"It's not scientific at all. It's a philosophical project. It's a project of sadness," says this 55-year-old Afrikaner whose work -- often large installations that explore the power of language and memory -- has won international recognition, notably in 2001 at one of the world's foremost showcases for contemporary art, the Venice Biennale.

"I find ways to make an abstract thought reality. I take thoughts and I make them into objects," he said, adding he feels "compelled to do this crazy thing."

According to Brian Huntley, the head of the South African National Biodiversity Institute which manages the gardens at Kirstenbosch, Boshoff's work carries a salutary warning about the dangers of global warming.

"The Cape flora is amongst the most threatened by climate change in the world," he said.

"In South Africa, we have got over a thousand plants that are seriously threatened" with extinction.

"It is essential that we try to get across this reality. But for most of the public, the issue seems just too academic."

Boshoff's exhibit will remain on show in Kirstenbosch for several weeks but Huntley hopes that it will later be uprooted to other continents in order to ram home the message about global warming.

Boshoff meanwhile will continue his work as a biological obituarist and is already planning more of his word gardens.

"As I get older, I think I am going to remember less and less and to forget more and more. So it is going to be a very sad work for me."

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