

It's only words, but words are all we have

**Red
Eye**
SUZY
BELL



AN ICE-AGE crack slices through the capital U – as if a violent interruption of an innocent game of Scrabble – to spell out the word “trust” on a solid black marble gravestone of a sculpture titled *Broken Trust*. It echoes SA's fractured politics from *swaart gevaar* and *die volk* to our present naivety in still expecting our political leaders to be spiritually and morally obese.

That the two artworks, fused like a jigsaw, rest side by side – as Dylan Thomas would say, like a Sunday roast – alludes to that eternal quest for some form of cosy deluded hope in a society shattered by violation, broken promises, disillusion and all that sad-groove maskanda.

Acclaimed international artist Willem Boshoff is in love with text. “Ignore duality of meaning at your peril,” he would holler from the top of the Voortrekker Monument draped in long song sheets and brave, celestial words. But instead, he channels his insight into his art – and my, what sublime conceptual art.

Pig is an exquisite piece that bristles like a beautiful Vietnamese pot-bellied pig on heat and linguistically, much more.

Boshoff is indeed intellectually seduced by lexicon and religion. “This work consists of a massive sheet of handmade milkweed paper, into which Hebrew, Arabic and English texts have been interwoven,” he says. “P-I-G is scrawled untidily across the page in human hair, specifically chosen on account of the genetic similarity between pigs and people. Words have been torn from the Torah, the Qu'ran and the Old Testament and placed into the work. All of these religious texts



IN TEXT WE TRUST: Willem Boshoff exhibits *Broken Trust* in text works at the SMAC gallery in Stellenbosch.

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prohibit human beings from eating the flesh of swine.”

In this piece, he considers the negative associations that have been forced on pigs through the writings of these religions.

Definitive texts, Boshoff explains, “are dangerous things... Text makes knowledge permanent”. He references Leonard Shlain's book *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, which proposes that “the process of learning alphabetic literacy rewired the human brain, with profound consequences for culture”.

Boshoff is widely celebrated for fusing words and language with an astute awareness of the natural world and socio-political discourses. He works in a number of modes and media, from monumental stone and wood works, to ephemeral works from sand, to “concrete poetry” (his own dictionaries and taxonomies).

The SMAC art gallery in Stellenbosch, where Boshoff now exhibits with Britain's Richard Long – one of the world's most established land artists – attributes Boshoff's extensive local and international recognition to his “almost obsessive ethic and

painstaking approach, in conjunction with a convergence of craft and concept... Boshoff handles sand, stone and especially wood with impressive skill and intimate intricacy.”

He has an honorary doctorate from the University of Johannesburg, has represented SA at the São Paulo Biennale and was the winner of the FNB Vita Award for Art. He won the Ludwig Giess Preis, awarded by the Letter Stiftung foundation in Cologne, Germany. In 2001, he was the recipient of an honorary medal for visual arts and sculpture from the South African Academy for Science and Art.

Night Winds, strung beads on cloth inspired by Lucebert's *Alles Van Waarde is Weerloos/All Things of Value are Vulnerable*, consists of three beaded banners, also called “leaves”. Each is woven with the word for “wind” from three different languages, which Boshoff invokes as the “breath of the physical world”.

The exhibition runs until September 2.

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