

AUDIENCE WITH A DRUID

Carrying on the tradition of tricksters

BIG DRUID IN HIS CUBICLE, an interactive exhibition by Willem Boshoff at SMAC Art gallery, Cape Town. Until December 7. **LUCINDA JOLLY** has an audience with the Big Druid.

"I CONFESS to an attraction for uncertainty and inconclusiveness," says Willem Boshoff. It's the 21st century and yet I've just had an audience with a druid. I use the word audience rather than an interview as it feels more appropriate.

There is very little information on druids and most of it comes from the recollections of the ancient Roman writers.

A druid is defined as "a traditional seer, elder with special discernment in the wellbeing of individuals and society... one who shares charms and talismans".

Like the druid and most shamans, sangomas and inyangas, Boshoff survived a near-death experience – from lead poisoning.

This particular druid, the former head of the fine art department at the Technikon Witwatersrand, is a bearded, shuffling giant of a man with widely spaced, twinkly eyes. He wasn't in a long robe and cloak but dressed in khaki gear and the biggest pair of Croc shoes ever. He's not at all chilly and removed or superior – he's gentle. And what is compelling is his fascination with the world, nature and language.

It's not just knowledge for knowledge sake, it's a head, heart and groin engagement. He was playfully wicked, questioning everything and believing nothing and everything.

One of the druid's roles is that of the trickster, a role often assumed by the artist. "I'm seriously committed to trying to make trouble sometimes," he said. Ask him if he believes in God and he tells you it's a trick question with two answers: yes, and equally, no.

He will be spending five weeks living in the gallery, sleeping on a narrow mattress on the floor, in keeping with a spartan, meditative lifestyle making art and holding druid walks. He is surrounded by his *goeters*. There's a wall of walking sticks, one of which is a gardening fork. These are an optophonetic composition in which one can "see" percussive sounds. There are cabinets full of his collections and the walls and floors exhibit a new body of work beautifully crafted from a wide range of material, from wood to granite.

Among his concerns is the disruption of polarised thinking, whether political or religious, and includes the idea of the hidden made visible. The result is language made visual using humorous visual puns. There are constructions made from acacia thorns and alphabet beads spelling the word "prick" and fragments of religious texts. There's a piece made from used intrauterine devices, influenced by the cover of a book on druidism.

Prior to my audience with Boshoff, I developed a pressing need to bring him a gift. After all, there's a tradition of bringing shamans or seers either money or libations. The gift at best must be a challenge, something worthy of a man who has written 15 dictionaries, at worst



DISCARDED: Artist Willem Boshoff's collection of pieces reflects his engagement with language and nature.

something to add to his collections. I was stumped at first. Then it came to me. On my office window sill was something that looked like a discoloured piece of polystyrene. I found it on the dunes around Hermanus lagoon. A boy of eight was the first to inform me what it was. I hoped Boshoff would recognise it but I also hoped he wouldn't.

The gallery person got it. Boshoff did not and I was quite pleased. But then he got himself off the hook by explaining that he was not familiar with the coast and then sensitively placed it in a drawer. It was a great scatological opening, and it seemed fitting for the artist who once made a large conceptual work entirely out of the dung of sheep and chickens. The work is literally a "document" written in shit. Another, *Tipping The Scale*, pays

homage to the ancient Roman god Sterculius, god of dung and excrement, with sheep's dung weighed up against fool's gold.

"I am an artist and I know the value of things discarded, of Arte Povera and of abject hopelessness," he wrote. Any psychologist knows that gold lies in what is discarded.

Archaeology 101 often gives students the exercise of going through a contemporary household's rubbish to ascertain information about its inhabitants. Weren't Freud and Jung keen amateur archaeologists, understanding the similarities between the strata of the earth and the onion layers of the psyche?

Boshoff pulled up images on the computer screen of 40-year-old cow dung which traced the folds of the animal's colon, and a range of pellets from all kinds of antelope.

This is Boshoff's third druid show. The first one took place in 2009 at the Art Fair Basel.

An earlier show was more dramatic, with smoke and snakes. Recognising all artists are diviners who carry on a tradition, Boshoff believes the most vital function of divination is to help us think.

Of his artistic influences, in true druid fashion, he says: "I hate everybody and I love everybody." He may know cutting-edge art but he prefers to look at flowers.

Halfway through the audience he lets me know: "You are now having a true session with a druid cos I know stuff. I'm an academic, I can tell you stuff." But he is also visited by people who are struggling with psychological issues. "I listen to them, I don't say anything – they talk their hearts out – I don't offer advice. If I do, it's the kind that makes them feel someone is listening to them. I don't want to preach."

If you take in one exhibition only this year, see this one and go on one of the druid walks before he drives off into the distance in a chunky turquoise Chevy truck.

● *Big Druid Walks* are held on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays between 9am and 11am. Booking essential. Call 021 422 5100.



DADAIST: Willem Boshoff's *Homage to Kurt Schwitters*.

what's on

Harveys gig

The Darius Brubeck Quartet will perform at Harveys at Winchester Mansions on Sunday from 11am to 2pm. The quartet's line-up is Darius Brubeck on piano, Mike Rossi on sax, Matt Ridley on bass and Wesley Gibbens on drums. Call 021 434 2351.

African jazz

The Frank Paco Art Ensemble, featuring Shaun Johannes on bass, Dave Ledbetter on guitar, Muriel Marco on keyboards and Byron Abrahams on sax will perform at Oude Libertas on Sunday at 6.30pm with young singers Esther Philander and Abgail Swartbooi. The ensemble plays jazz with African roots influences. Tickets are R120 to R140. Call 021 809 7473.

Garden carols

Cape Town Concert Brass and the Cape Town Male Voice Choir will perform carols at Kirstenbosch from December 12 to 15 at 8pm. Gates open at 5pm. Tickets are on sale at Pick n Pay stores. Entry includes a glow stick and song sheet. See www.kirstenboschrotary.co.za.

Café Roux gigs

Zebra and Giraffe and Gangs of Ballet will perform at Café Roux in Noordhoek on December 14 at 4pm. Joshua Grierson will take to the stage on December 18 at 7pm, followed by Shortgun Tori on December 19 at 7pm and MacStanley on December 21 at 4pm. E-mail info@caferoux.co.za.

V&A music

Acoustic soul outfit the Paige Mac Band will perform at the V&A Waterfront Amphitheatre on December 14 at 6.50pm, followed by Gerald Clark on December 15 at 6pm, classical guitar duo CH2 on December 16 at 6pm, world fusion band Sheraaz on December 16 at 6.50pm and Elvis Blue on December 17 at 6pm. See www.waterfront.co.za.

Carols at Steenberg

The Steenberg Hotel will hold a Christmas carols picnic evening on December 19 at 5pm. Felicity Kiran and the Steenberg Festival Orchestra will get the carols started at 6pm. Bring a picnic basket or choose from the hotel's festive menu. Tickets are R120, or R75 for children under 10. See www.quicket.co.za.

'Just Me'

Alistair Izobell will invite fans to take a closer look at his life and childhood in *Just Me, Net So* at GrandWest's Grand Arena on December 21 at 8pm. Tickets are R120 to R170. Call Computicket at 0861 915 8000.



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