

Sculpture sparks debate

Anena Burger

A sculpture displayed at Gearing Point as part of the FynArts Festival has caused an outrage on social media.

The sculpture, *Catholics Altar Boys Toy's IV*, by artist Lwandiso Njara, had residents of Hermanus up in arms on Thursday after Julie Venter Bouwer posted her displeasure about the piece.

"Art? This piece is currently on display in Hermanus at the art festival, overlooking the Old Harbour area. No apologies and I will not be silent. This is nothing but the display of devil worship and paganism. In the name of art you are letting this evil thing sit guarding our beautiful town. I don't care what any artist says nor any art lover. I speak out as a saved child of God. This is evil and appalling. Everything about this is disturbing. I urge you to take it away," Bouwer wrote.

Several comments from residents followed demanding that the sculpture be removed as they saw it as an attack on the Catholic Church.

But according to Njara this is not the case at all.

The 31-year-old artist who hails from Transkei was quite surprised to hear how the sculpture affected residents.

Njara says: "This piece was inspired by a childhood memory of growing up in the Catholic system in Transkei, but my aim with this sculpture series is to reflect or engineer the new Jerusalem, characterized by a fusion of animal, human and machine. What I didn't realise is that the residents of Hermanus are outraged by my work."

Njara says the message that he tries to convey with his work in general is how society through the industrial and technological age is losing touch with their emotional and spiritual selves. Like sheep they flock together and just accept the way society evolves.

"People don't feel anymore and they don't experience life as they used to. Everything has become mechanical and mundane.

"This sculpture is almost robotic, almost like an alien – a lament on the human condition today. Children don't play anymore and are raised with technology, almost like machines," he says.

But this is not the first time that his work has caused an outrage. Njara says there was an incident where people visiting his previous studio in Midrand, Gauteng, contacted the SPCA.

"I was busy producing new sculptures of the goat heads with hairs in them, people were outraged, began to panic and wanted to call the SPCA to come and arrest me. They thought I used the real heads of animals put on a pedestal,



This sculpture by Lwandiso Njara, *Catholics Altar Boys Toy's IV*, caused an outrage among residents in Hermanus. Foto: Anena Burger

but it was sculptures cast in cement." Although his work has caused people to stop in their tracks and shocked them, Njara says he will continue with his work and expressing himself. "Life goes on and I keep on making art whether it's shocking and morally unacceptable or not."

Hermanus Times contacted Bouwer on Monday after she removed her post from social media. Bouwer says her reaction to the work was purely from a spiritual standpoint. "I didn't even look at who the artist was. The piece just moved me instantly and I had to speak out. People have different opinions. Personally I did not think the sculpture was an attack on the Catholic church as others thought it was, but it just shocked me to my core. It was my personal feeling and I felt I had to give my opinion on the piece as we all have a right to an opinion in this country."

Bouwer says she removed the post from social media after she thanked all the participants who took part in the conversation.

"It had a massive positive and negative reaction which I feel had to be aired."

Njara's solo exhibition titled *Engineering The New Jerusalem II* is currently on display at the Lizamore gallery in Rosebank, Johannesburg.

For more information about the work of Lwandiso Njara visit lizamore.co.za or contact Teresa Lizamore, director and curator of Lizamore Gallery, on 011 880 8802.

Public art 'offers opportunity for community engagement'

In response to the ongoing discussion about the controversial sculpture, *Catholics Altar Boys Toy's IV*, Mary Faure, Festival Director of Hermanus FynArts, points out that the symbolism in this artwork has been "seriously misunderstood".

"We celebrate the fifth annual Sculpture on the Cliffs exhibition this year, a FynArts project that has grown in quality and stature through the increasing number of esteemed sculptors who have accepted our invitation to exhibit. We are indeed privileged to bring the works of these artists to Hermanus.

"When inviting artists to participate in the cliffs exhibition the following points are considered: variety of styles, materials, whether established or up-and-coming artists and whether their work is realistic, expressive or abstract. Size and placement must be in such a way so as not to interfere with the views and magnificence of this spectacular, and much-loved area.

"Public art offers an opportunity for community engagement and discussion. Over the years this exhibition along a short stretch of the Cliffs has brought a great deal of pleasure and interest to visitors and residents alike, both for its photographic and aesthetic appeal as well as for the discussion it stimulates.

This particular artwork has, unfortunately, been seriously misunderstood. It is not religious. It is the artist's comment on, and search for meaning, by drawing on his life experiences. While the symbolism of his work might be foreign to many, it is no reason to censor the work at first glance but rather an opportunity to try and understand its symbolism and message.

"The message Lwandiso tries to convey is likely to be shared by many - that society does not 'feel' any longer and accepts the loss of the spiritual and emotional in life. Whether or not this view is shared, it is certainly worth debating or examining. It is also worth trying to understand the imagery used by an artist for whom these are familiar symbols that he associates with growing up in rural South Africa.

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