

# How the Leopard Got His Spots

Hidden away in a rambling Elgin garden, a temporary land-art exhibition celebrates the magnificence of the natural landscape

WORDS FIONA MCINTOSH PICTURES SHAEN ADEY, ANDREW TAYLOR, JO ELKIN, CHRIS LOTTER PRO PHOTOGRAPHY, FIONA MCINTOSH



ABOVE: Every year Barry Gould and Alison Green invite an artist to exhibit, using Wildekrans Country House garden and the Groenlandberg as backdrop. RIGHT: "Now YOU are a Beauty!" said the Ethiopian is designed to be seen at its best at sunrise, when sunlight and shadows play on the wall.

It's dawn. Sunlight and shadows play on the north wall of the old Wildekrans homestead in the Overberg dorpie of Houw Hoek, on the edge of the Groenland Conservancy. Painted with natural pigment on this vast canvas is the dotted outline of a large leopard.

The creation, named "Now YOU are a Beauty!" said the Ethiopian, is the work of Anni Snyman, PC Janse van Rensburg and Ingrid Schöfmann. They belong to Site\_Specific, an organisation of voluntary members, artists and land-art enthusiasts

that promotes land art and site-specific work in South Africa, and which has put on an exhibition called Nature Art Interventions at Wildekrans Country House.

"The title of the work comes from a Rudyard Kipling short story, *How the Leopard got his Spots*," Anni Snyman explains. "It's a beautiful story that recalls the bygone era to which the Wildekrans homestead belongs."

Wildekrans is within the territory of a Cape leopard called Popeye. He has been caught on film, but is so well camouflaged he is rarely seen. It is this difficulty in seeing the



beauty that is right in front of us, which is the subject of the trio's work.

Wildekrans owners Alison Green and Barry Gould are passionate about art, and there is a wealth of paintings and sculptures in the house and the garden at Wildekrans. "We've both collected art for most of

our lives," says Alison, an engineer. "Every year we've added a significant painting or sculpture. In 1999 we relocated from Johannesburg to Elgin, where we have many interesting sites for sculpture."

Barry, an architect, has now become an avid, although he claims lazy, gardener. "For me gardens are extensions of the built form," he explains. "You can create spaces, moods and excitement in the way that you can with buildings. Wildekrans Country House had well-established, formal gardens when we arrived. We pulled out anything that was high maintenance and replaced it with fynbos. And works of art."

"In 2011, the bridge over the Jakkals River at the bottom of the garden washed away," Alison continues. "Replacing it was going to be expensive, so Barry said we should make something of the bridge and it could be our artwork for 2013." They commissioned well-known land artist Strijdom van der Merwe to design and build

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Strijdom van der Merwe building Barry's Bridge; Site\_Specific co-founder Anni Snyman; Barry's Bridge reflects the metamorphosis from formal, well-groomed garden to wild, natural garden; Barry Gould - and Smeagol - on his bridge.

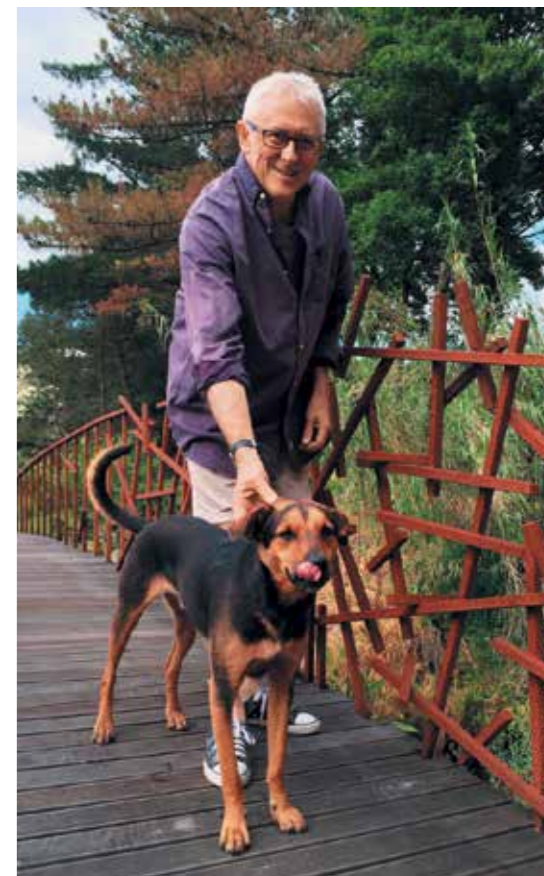


a functional art bridge across the river.

Strijdom elaborates. "As a land artist, my sculptural forms take shape in relation to the landscape. I work with the natural world, using rocks, sand, wood and water to create art forms, which become part of the cycle of nature and decay." In this case, the bridge was designed as a permanent structure but took the landscape into account. Barry's Bridge links the formal garden of Wildekrans to a wild garden, the natural landscape of the Groenlandberg Conservancy.

"On the homestead side of the bridge you'll see parallel lines that represent the ordered garden, and then criss-cross lines represent the chaos of the natural garden on the other side," explains Strijdom. "As you cross the bridge you journey from human intervention to wildness."

Alison emphasises that in general Strijdom's work is fleeting. "So I explained that while I understood that he is passionate about momentary land art, we obviously







ABOVE: Erynne Ewart-Pipps *Boomslang* is constructed from woven pear tree trimmings and blue-gum branches. ABOVE RIGHT: *Adam and Eve before the Fall* by Wilma Cruise.



ABOVE: Janet Botes with her main work, *Leaves of Change*, which consists of wood collected on the farm, plus reeds, screws and hemp twine. LEFT: A discarded weaver's nest Janet Ranson found on the ground, and hung up and decorated.



wanted something more permanent. Ironically, the bridge turned out to be momentary: we had his creation for a mere ten days and it washed away in the big Overberg floods. We found it months later buried under silt some fifty metres downstream, and re-erected it on slightly higher ground.”

“The temporary gestures in the landscape – where nature has a greater impact on me than I do on nature – will always be closest to my heart,” Strijdom points out. “By working with the materials I find on site I gain a deeper understanding of that place and of nature.” Nature Art Interventions by Site\_Specific is all about developing that understanding.

Every year Alison and Barry offer the garden to an artist to put on a show utilising the surroundings and the backdrop of the mountain. It launches at Elgin Open Gardens early in November and runs until Easter the following year, and artists to date have included Nikki Swanepoel, Guy du Toit, Wilma Cruise, Strijdom van der Merwe and Herman van Nazareth.

“The idea for the 2015 exhibition at Wildekrans Country House evolved from our time with Strijdom,” says Alison. “In the last couple of years we have worked hard with the Groenlandberg Conservancy, clearing alien vegetation and restoring the Jakkals River, so we asked Strijdom how, with land art, we could highlight the importance of the environment within which Wildekrans Country House is situated.”

Anni Snyman takes up the story. “My brother PC [Janse van Rensburg] and I created our first nature artwork, *Earth Siren* at AfrikaBurn in 2008. It was a test run for a much larger work we hoped to create in response to the threat of fracking in the Karoo. Working on site we soon learned that we could not hope to create large-scale works without many volunteers, so we started Site\_Specific with Strijdom and Heather Greig.

“After Alison contacted us regarding the Nature Art Interventions project at Wildekrans, Ingrid, PC and I visited Wildekrans on several occasions. We considered all the sensory aspects of the site. The play of light and shadow on the walls of the homestead is fascinating, and the farm also contains many



pigments in the form of clay, shale and soil that offered an interesting combination of mediums.”

On one of their visits, Alison told them about Popeye and the Cape Leopard Trust. “We found leopard spoor and the remains of a hunt, but we didn’t see the leopard. It was the inspiration we’d been searching for: the idea of the dappled light casting the spots was born. The beauty is there, but it demands an effort from the viewer to imagine the leopard’s skin in the dappled light of sunrise.”

The artists spent the first three days testing and collecting different coloured stones and crushing pigment in order to get to know their medium. They painted the formal design of the leopard first then felt secure enough to paint more impressionistic, fun images on the other walls.”

Artist Janet Botes, whose major work *Leaves of Change* is part of Nature Art Interventions, says, “I became involved with nature art, and then Site\_Specific, after seeing Strijdom van der Merwe’s work in my art class. Site-specific work is guided by the historical, physical or other characteristics of a site. In my land art I aim to create a piece that honours the place or site, using only materials found on site.”

For her Wildekrans piece, Janet experimented with different materials and the shape of leaves. “It resulted in two other artworks that I placed in the sculpture garden.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Sacroiliac Dementia*, by Wilma Cruise is a permanent exhibit; Wildekrans portraits by PC Janse van Rensburg, Anni Snyman and Ingrid Schöfmann; Alison Green of Wildekrans Country House; *Fallen Tree* by Strijdom van der Merwe; *Sheep are Safely Grazing 2007*, by Wilma Cruise.

*Leaves of Change* only started to take shape after I had explored and immersed myself in Wildekrans and its possibilities.”

So how long will the land art at Wildekrans last? Alison says many of the artists have offered to maintain their structures, but even though the art was designed to have a life until Easter, the works will naturally decompose. Let’s hope the cycles of nature are slow. ■

Map reference G2 see inside back cover



### Nature Art Interventions

- The show is available for viewing by appointment.
- Guests overnighing at Wildekrans Country House can view the artworks at dawn in their best natural light. “Now YOU are a beauty!” said the Ethiopian, in particular, has been designed with sunrise in mind.
- If you walk the Green Mountain Trail you get it all – art, food, wine, the gardens and natural environment of the Groenlandberg, as well as a workout.
- Wildekrans Country House 028 284 9827, [www.wildekrans.co.za](http://www.wildekrans.co.za) [www.groenlandbergconservancy.co.za](http://www.groenlandbergconservancy.co.za)