

WHISPERS OF INSPIRATION

Viewing the World through the Art of Chrisél Attewell

Deeply inspired by her environment, artist Chrisél Attewell focuses on understanding the complex interactions between people, places, and the events that shape their common destiny.

Downtown Joburg is a lively, intimidating, decadent place. Once a sleepy mining town, Jozi has outgrown itself many times over in the last 134 years. It has been built, broken down, and rebuilt, to become the economic powerhouse of South Africa, and one of the world's 50 largest urban areas.

It must be recognised that the city's transformative process is inextricably linked to its people, whose aspirations, fears, dreams, and disappointments literally line the streets, and form the very foundations on which the metropolis stands today.

In August House, one of the city's most iconic creative spaces, artist Chrisél Attewell explores the tethers that link people to the physical world that surrounds them, that forms part of their identity, and that they, in turn, continuously shape.

Driven by this connection, Chrisél's work holds a mirror to the world, while

also reflecting her emotional and physical connections to the people and places to which she connects most intimately.

Although the city is one of those places, Chrisél is currently exploring the devastation wreaked by the Knysna fires of 2017, the impact of the event on the natural environment, the animals and people of the area, and the resilient regeneration of this extraordinary ecosystem.

Signature called on Chrisél in her Johannesburg studio, for some insight into her life, her past work, and her upcoming exhibition 'Earth, Wind and Fire' at Berman Contemporary in Johannesburg, which opens on 29 August 2020.

Could you perhaps share how your artistic journey began, and your transition from Academia to everyday life as a working artist?

"My artistic journey has always been profoundly informed by my socially orientated upbringing. Although my childhood experience was quite



Memories of The Leonardo III, 2019, Ed 1/1 (Drypoint etching on 340gsm Habnemuble paper, 50x100cm)

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conservative – my father was a minister in an Afrikaans church – my late mother, who was a social worker, made a point of exposing me to different cultures from an early age. The work I do as an artist is always very inspired by people as a result.

While I thoroughly enjoyed my studies at the University of Pretoria, I was so used to being in an academic environment where your work is judged through a very focused lens, that I struggled with being confident in my own work once I had left university. I would constantly analyse it in an academic way. Working among so many creative artists at August House, however, helped me

to build trust in my intuition and artistic passion. Here I became inspired by the energy of the city, and two years on, although I still find the environment amazing, I feel a constant, lingering need to broaden the scope of my work."

Your use of the city and its melancholy in your work is well known. Could you share more on that?

"I love the city, I truly do, and I've been greatly inspired by it. But I would rather describe my work as being influenced by the environment, not so much that I have one particular concept that I work with,



Memories of The Leonardo I, 2019, Ed 1/1 (Drypoint etching on 340gsm Hahnemühle paper, 100x50cm)

such as only doing urban work. I could never do that; I'd become bored very quickly. I don't see myself as that kind of artist. I'm not a factory, and I don't make factory pieces. Art should develop and be inspired by what inspires the artist at that moment. Regardless of how conceptual the work, and how different the medium, there will be a continuation or golden thread that brings all my work together, because I am the one creating it."

In that light, tell us about the body of work you are currently producing.

"I am currently working on an exhibition - together with the German/French artist, Barbara Schroeder - to be called 'Earth, Wind and Fire' - which will be showing at the Berman Contemporary later this year. It is a body of work that has its origin in Knysna after the forest fires of 2017. I have always loved visiting Knysna, to me it is one of the most beautiful places on earth, and I couldn't help but to be moved by the devastation of the disaster there."

How did the residency at Entabeni Farm in Knysna come about?

"I was introduced to Barbara Schroeder and was given the opportunity to do some peer mentoring with her. That period really helped to inspire me and develop my artistic instincts. Barbara is so free with the way she expresses herself, and that has helped me to move away from my academically correct musings. I was impressed by her ability to create directly from how she feels at any given moment, so when she called me to ask if I'd like to come with her to Knysna, to participate in a residency made possible by the South African Foundation For Contemporary Arts, I gave her a resounding 'yes'. The timing was perfect, and I truly loved being isolated and to focus on my work. It was a refreshing change from the distractions of the city."

How has the impact of the fires on the people of Knysna inspired your work?

"So, when I went to Entabeni Farm, I spoke to some of the workers there and asked them about their experiences during the fires. You could see the trauma in the eyes of everyone I interviewed. I think that had a significant effect on me. Also, how they described the events; like how many of them referred to the smoke, and how some people spoke about how the water turned black in lakes surrounding Knysna.

I would go on regular hikes in the forest in search of materials and inspiration for my work. Here I found logs with these intricate patterns carved into them. Upon further investigation, I found that these patterns were made by carpenter ants that are said only to inhabit the bark of dead trees. After the fires, millions of these ants migrated to Knysna to play their part in the natural decomposition and regeneration process. What fascinated me is that, although they could be perceived as mere insects, they always work together. It is never just one ant that you see doing something. It's all about the community and being connected to one another and to their environment.

This process, for me, spoke to the trauma of the event, and how one can overcome such devastation. I could relate to the work on a personal level then, as I was also dealing with the personal trauma of losing my mom in a car accident. It was a massive shock to me, as only two years prior, I had moved in with my mom after my parents' divorce, and we spent a lot

Memories of The Leonardo IV, 2019, Ed 1/1 (Drypoint etching on 340gsm Hahnemühle paper, 150x100cm)



of time together, trying to come to terms with the change in our circumstances.

This loss was soon followed by the passing of my friend and mentor, Benon Lutaaya, as well as that of my loving and supportive grandfather soon after."

How did you manage to be creative while being faced with so many traumas in your own life?

When I came to Knysna, I was experiencing so much death in my own

life; I was grieving deeply. Interestingly enough, having been to Knysna before and having seen its beauty, I had always associated the place with innocence in a way. I remember telling Barbara before we left for Knysna, that I couldn't wait to show her the many beautiful places that I loved in the area. Driving around Knysna in search of a particularly beautiful spot I always enjoyed visiting, I realised that none of the places that I had loved existed anymore. I spent the



Chrisél installing copper printing plates at The Leonardo

rest of the day in a state of shock, but on Barbara's insistence, we returned the next day to find something else to work with. That was when I discovered the logs with the carpenter ant carvings.

The concept for my next body of work was formed in that forest. Inspired by the resilience of the ants, I knew that I had to understand better how we deal with trauma as a community and as individuals. How do you overcome it, and how do you relate to it? Why the ants were so interesting to me is because the patterns they created became like symbols to me, like a language that I could learn. Everything was about resilience, and the incredible role these tiny creatures play to speed up the decomposition process of the forest. Equally, when they die, their bodies act as a source of nutrients for the earth. The entire show comes from that, and I'm currently working on paintings where I retrace the patterns made by the ants on the bark. Ultimately this will form the basis of the lines that you see in my paintings."

Is it important for you that viewers understand the story behind your work?

"Yes, with all my work. You need the story behind it to understand the

context of the work and to understand what I'm trying to convey with it. I recently completed a commission for The Leonardo in Johannesburg. In this body of work, I was extremely motivated to create a reminder for people viewing the work, of the human beings who performed the physical labour to build that building. I needed the work to be something that honours the often overlooked, undervalued, and invisible workers, and to remind future patrons that they are standing in. I always find that the story helps to give the work more meaning while improving the experience for the viewer.

Briefly getting back to your new work. What are you planning to do with the tree stumps you've collected?

"I'd like to do an installation with them. I would like for people to be able to touch them and use them as a guide for understanding the work. In the end, I don't want them to immediately read as a piece of wood; I like it when there is some mystery in a piece. The show is still some time away, so I at least have some time to figure it out before then. 🍷"

about the artist

Chrisél Attewell is a multidisciplinary artist born in 1994 in South Africa. She received her BAFA (Fine Arts, Cum Laude) from the University of Pretoria in 2016. Her work has been represented locally and internationally in numerous exhibitions, residencies and art fairs. Attewell was selected as a Sasol New Signatures finalist (2016, 2017) and a Top 100 finalist for the ABSA L'Atelier (2018). She was chosen to participate in the RMB Talent Unlocked Peer Mentoring program and exhibition at the Turbine Art Fair (2017). Hereafter she continued to showcase her work in multiple group shows around South Africa where her work has become part of various national and international collections. She had three solo exhibitions: "Architectus Konstruksie" at the Klein Karoo Nationale Kunstefees (KKNK), "Under Construction" at Assemblage in Braamfontein, and "Substratum" at Lizamore & Associates in Rosebank. Attewell was selected as a 2018 recipient of the Young Female Residency Award with The Project Space, founded by Benon Lutaaya. She had been invited for SAFFCA residencies in Knysna (2019) and Saint-Emilion (2020). Her work was showcased at the 2019 Contemporary Istanbul Art Fair as part of a two-woman showcase with Berman Contemporary. Chrisél Attewell is represented by Berman Contemporary in Johannesburg. For more info, visit chriselart.com or bermancontemporary.com Instagram: @chrisel_art

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