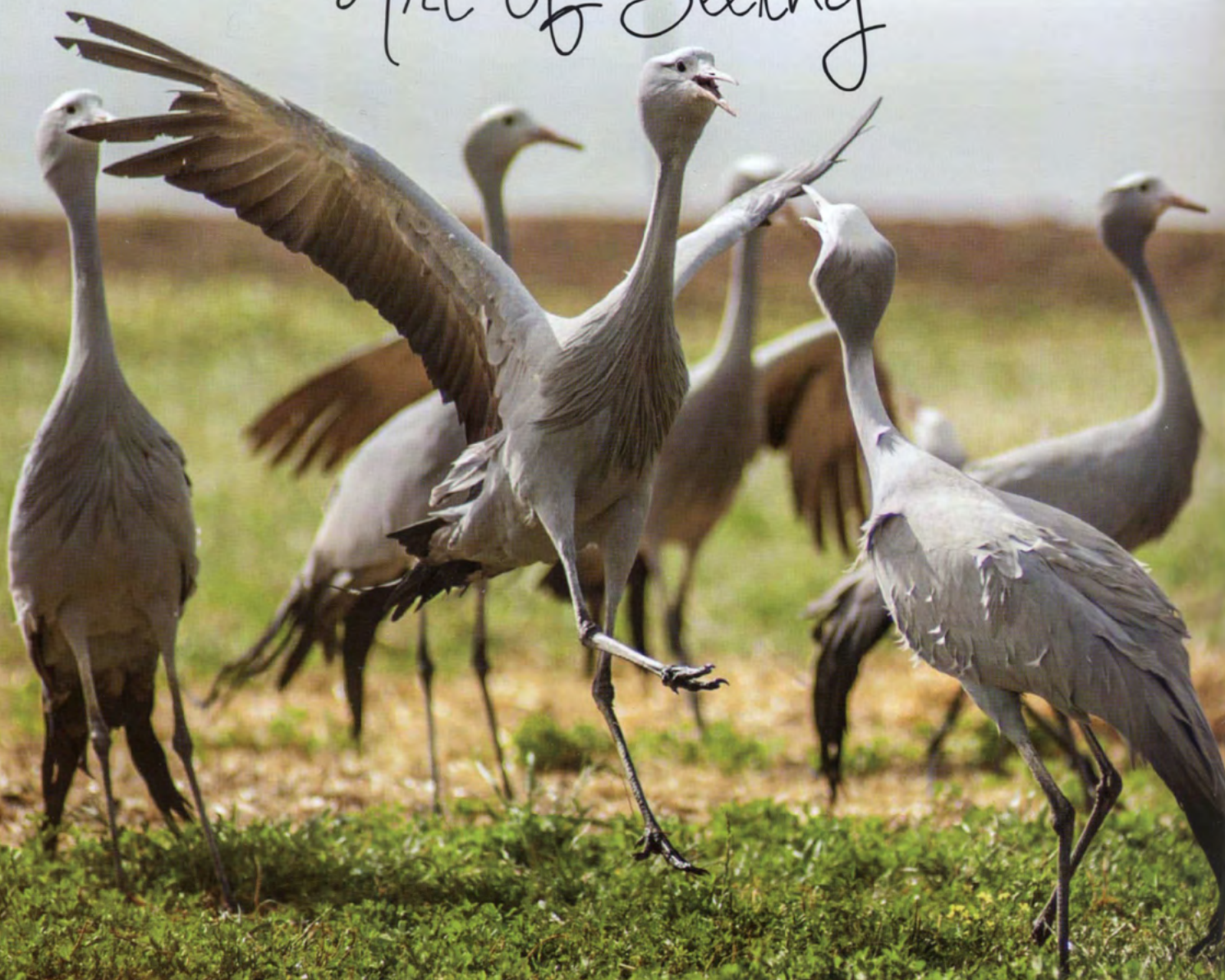


BAARDSKEERDERSBOS and the *Art of Seeing*





Seeing and Light are the two words that seem to sum up the quality of Baardskeerdersbos, the small rural settlement in the Overberg

My whole life has been tied up with the Overberg. Originally 'migrants' from Kenya, in 1965 my parents bought a farm near Bot River. Over the years I have discovered secrets about this area between the Hottentots Holland Mountains and the Breede River. The moment you think 'I know this area' along comes another Overberg gem that says 'Sorry Boet, you know *nuffink!*' A recent trip to explore the Baardskeerdersbos Art route proved this point.

I used as many gravel back roads from Greyton as possible on my way to the somewhat oddly named Baardskeerdersbos. October is a stunning time of the year in the Over 't Berg as it was called in van Riebeeck's time. Fields a lush green, the sheep grazing with pockets of our blue cranes dotted amongst them. But turning off from the Akkedisberg Pass on the R326 to Stanford, passing the turn off to Salmonsdam Nature Reserve, I had to stop and take a photograph. The fynbos was so dense and in full bloom I could have been in another country!

In many ways Baardskeerdersbos or B'Bos as its known to locals, has managed to stay relatively undiscovered for ages. Not surprising though that this fertile valley close to Gansbaai and Stanford, would eventually lure a collection of artists to its bosom. Although remaining 'hidden' for so long, Baardskeerdersbos is mentioned in van Riebeeck's diary. An expedition of five men were sent

to report back on the valley with Khoikhoi inhabitants as early as 1660. Apparently there was a type of spider called a 'Baardskeerder' (Beard Shaver) that used human hair for its nest, hence the strange name of the small hamlet!

Luckily I'd shaved that morning and I headed up the gravel road to my first port of call, artist Amanda Jephson and photographer Kali van der Merwe. Both artists live on the Jephson's farm up in the foothills of Assegaaibos Kloof. Looking at my map I think the farm's name is Tierfontein. A more beautiful setting for art would be hard to imagine. Amanda Jephson's art gallery is housed in two small buildings surrounded by a low woven wattle fence. Kali van der Merwe's cottage is on past Amanda's gallery. So I pop into Amanda's gallery first. Amanda is there to welcome guests with a glass of ginger flavoured cordial. It's so addictive I need to *skollie* the recipe as soon as I can!

I know nothing about art but I loved Amanda's bright, happy, colourful paintings. There are farm roads and farmhouses, lots of cats and ducks and straw bales and blackbirds jumping out of pies. The pictures put me into a happy cheerful mood at first sight. But it's the room with the magic lemony ginger elixir that warms the cockles of my heart. It is light and airy with its uneven ceiling painted white. Dishes of strawberries await arriving visitors. It's a tall wooden dresser with its neighboring printers tray in a corner near the sash windows that has me fascinated. Tortoise shells, porcupine quills, tiny buck horns, nautilus





Amanda Jephson's studio and gallery is on their farm in the low foothills of the Assegaaibos Kloof.



A lot of Amanda Jephson's paintings are colourful, fun filled studies that leave you with a spring in your step.

shells and on the bottom shelf a scuffed carved African wooden bowl tells a story of long walks along this nearby eastern coast; kelp, sea shells and the sea dulled balls of tangled fishing line sculptures draws you into Amanda's light airy studio.

I meander along the path from Amanda's studio and gallery to Kali van der Merwe's cottage. Eish man! As a photographer I need to take a leaf out of the way that Kali displayed her art. One walks into a light filled *voorkamer* with a large khelim rug on the floor – the far wall an electric green. On that green, the predominantly red tones of her fynbos photographs drew you into this fascinating woman's world of seeing. From the opening fynbos pictures in the entrance space, one moves into the dining room. Here Kali has photographs, mostly self-portraits, often nude, that are startling, thought provoking and beautiful.

Perhaps I am taking the easy way out here but I am going to quote from Kali's website. *'Three years ago, out of a desire to return to more personal creativity, Kali put herself in front of her own cameras. In this practice she works with long exposures and light, exploring archetypal and mythological states of being from a contemporary perspective. She has also been deeply inspired by the fynbos and indigenous forest in her surroundings and images show a sacred connectedness between the embodied soul and the soulscapes of nature.'* All I can say is go and look at Kali's photography

and it will challenge your way of seeing the world!

Well the seeing challenge was continuing as I headed back towards the *dorp* of B'Bos itself. I was on the way to see the work of Joshua Miles. Once again I could go into the *hanna hanna* of – *Joshua studied fine art at the University of Cape Town... blah blah blah*. But **Joshua's reduction woodcuts and oil paintings simply take your breath away**. Joshua is fascinated by water and light and he finds his inspiration in the landscapes of the Overberg and the Little Karoo. The further I get into this story the more I am aware of the word 'seeing' cropping up over and over. The magic of Baardskeerdersbos is its attraction to more and more people that encourage all of us to open our eyes and SEE.

I didn't really have time to talk to Joshua, as there were so many visitors. He had time for everyone. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted across my nostrils. It was Josh's good wife Angela, serving the sacred brew. Admiring the woodwork in the kitchen, typical male that I am, I discovered this woman with the strong Scottish accent is a qualified cabinetmaker. A crafts woman of the old school, Angela would choose to use hand tools for every job if she could! I also learnt that she and Joshua had lived in Scotland for a couple of years. The Beard Shavers Wood fascination continued unabated.

I was getting a little peckish after

all my hard talking as I mooched up the road to artist Niel Jonker's home in No. 11 Granaat *Laan*. It was a continuation of my voyage of discovery. Once again the Xhosa word, repeated, *Eish! Eish!* That describes this experience. Before I even entered Niel's world of seeing in its manifestations of paint and bronze, I got to taste the tastiest, most delicious, healthiest food south of the Equator. You see food plays an important role in this family's life. Niel holds bread-making workshops at his home in B'Bos at the end of each month. And on the bi-annual open studio weekend, Gabi Jonker serves delicious meals, sourced from her verdant vegetable garden at their home.

Niel is a well-known sculptor and a painter. Seeing his work is a humbling experience. Niel is a prolific worker with regular exhibitions of his work taking place around the country. His paintings are most often made in-situ, a way of painting that he loves. Many of the paintings Niel was exhibiting the day I visited were painted on his recent trip to New York. I have just spent some time on the internet now looking at Niel's work. It really is worth taking a trip out to Granaat *Laan* if you want to see some truly meaningful art.

The next artist lived on a little gravel road on the edge of B'Bos. His name is Phillip John and what an intriguing man he turned out to be. You see some of Phillip's work uses a strange material. His medium



Amanda Jephson talks to a visitor in her studio



I particularly like Kali van der Merwe's fybos series of photographs. Hard to describe but somehow Kali manages to capture a mystical element in all her images.



Gabi Jonker preparing one of her famous meals at 11 Granaat Laan in Baardskeerdersbos.



I popped in at Marietjie's Pub and Grill. As I was parking I saw these guys with the horse and cart

is found in abundance in this area: dung! Don't laugh! Wait until you see what this once university lecturer of Afrikaans literature has created with this seemingly strange material. He explains, "I love the plasticity of the dung. .and I love that you don't quite know how it's going to dry out." Well his sculpting in his special 'clay' and the sandstone carving I spied in the fynbos are fascinating.

Phillip also paints wonderful, quirky, humorous, paintings that have an element of Walter Batiss combined with Bushman art. Walking up his steep driveway to his studio, scattered amongst the fynbos are other pieces of this talented artist's work.

What's that piece in the Bible? "So the last shall be first, and the first last" This holds true for Ivan Trollip, artist and live-in owner of the Baardskeerdersbos Art Gallery. I had met Ivan and local estate agent Helena Swart at a Cape Meander function organized by Lizette Kok in Caledon. The moment I phoned Ivan about the art weekend he immediately offered me a place to stay at the art gallery. Typical Overberg hospitality I have to say!

Ivan is another of the B'Bos *bewoners* that has made art his full time occupation. I really loved his rich textured oil paintings of Namaqualand. I was fascinated with his technique. "Its called an impasto technique" explained Ivan. "I use a palette knife to thickly layer the paint." It's apparently a time consuming technique, as the multiple layers need to dry properly before adding the next layer. Botanical studies and a series of African portraits with their traditional headgear are also part of this talented artists repertoire.



I love the backroads of the Overberg. On the way to Baardskeerdersbos I stopped numerous times to take photographs.





Niel Jonker, artist, sculptor and artisan bread-maker with his young daughter Emily. Niel originally trained as a sculptor and this shows in this small bronze on display at his house in Baardskeerdersbos.

Joshua Miles, reduction woodcut artist has time for every visitor. His fascination with water and light is evident in many of his superb pieces



Phillip John, sculptor, painter and once academic is a quiet man with a wonderful understated sense of humour. I felt this came through in both his whimsical paintings and his sculpture made out of cow dung

I took a picture of this proud local farmer and his grandchild at the packed Marietjie's Pub and Grill.

Marietjie's Pub and Grill is the local gathering place in the dorp.

As I walked up through the fynbos to Phillip John's studio I saw this quirky wooden piece in his garden

Oom Snoekies, a well known local character with his horse and cart.





Ivan Trollip artist and owner of the Baardskeerdersbos Art Gallery very kindly offered *Experience Overberg* accommodation in the gallery. So this old *skollie* snored away surrounded by some really great paintings.



Oom Kallie Lindes - the owner of the Strandveld Pub and Grill. The pub is in the old school building and serves a char grilled steak that would keep a Texan happy.



Sonja Fourie from Hermanus was the invited artist on this year's Baardskeerdersbos Art weekend.

Every year the art route invites artists from around the country to display their work. The guest artist, Sonja Fourie and her husband Johan, stayed over at the gallery during my visit. I really liked Sonja's work, from large colourful naive art to small detailed landscapes and farmhouses. I particularly liked the smaller detailed paintings. Sonja and Johan, who live in Hermanus, were just such *lekker* people.

I realize that I have only scraped the surface of this small collection of artists, farmers and well, just characters. Characters like Oom Kallie who owns the Strandveld Pub and Grill. Outside Oom Kallie's place, which is the old school and boarding house next door to Ivan Trollip's, I spied a donkey cart. This turned out to be Oom Snoekies Groenewald's. Oom Snoekies was involved in telling a story about the origins of the name Baardskeerdersbos. He had a fierce glint in his eyes as he explained what these little spider like creatures had done to his *Ouma* after she passed

out in the *bos* after consuming too much home-made witblitz.

If it's a decent refreshment you are seeking don't forget to pop into Marietjie's Pub and Grill in the main road. Marietjie Uys was born and bred in the district and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of 'whose who in the zoo'. Behind the bar is Sanna van Wyk who is related to Oom Manie of the Baardskeerdersbos Boere Orkes fame! This band is apparently well known in the Afrikaans music world.

So to all the artists, musicians and characters please forgive me. But fear ye not; I have just bought an old camper from the '60's. Although her top speed is most probably 50 miles per hour tops, it gives me the opportunity to drink in the scenery and drive. So watch out guys I am going to come back sooner than you think. And I am going to grow a beard just to test out the legend of your magnificent Baardskeerdersbos. ☺

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