

Coming Full Circle

Caroline Bittermann's stone pyramid completes a major project on enlightenment, gardens and human origins, writes **Daniela Goeller**

The German artist Caroline Bittermann recently spent a two-month residency at the Nirox Foundation in the World Heritage Site, the Cradle of Humankind. During her stay, she realised a site-specific work, inspired by and dedicated to the San people. Her sculpture forms a ruined gate and its shape suggests the three letters that form the word "San". It is installed on the invisible boundary between the European-looking landscaped gardens of Nirox and the African bush. It also stands between the gardeners' and the owner's living spaces as a passage from one side to the other. Whereas the owner was involved in the conception of the work, the artist invited the gardeners to participate in the construction and the planting. The sculpture refers in multiple ways to the history of the site and gives the landscape and garden an active role. Instead of asking what landscape is or what it means, the question remains what it *does*.

The word "San" falls apart into three elements – a bench, a pyramid and two columns – made out of recycled and found materials – natural stones, used burned bricks, cement, corrugated sheets and steel. The S can be used as a bench. Historically, the curved line represents one of the most influential aesthetic categories in eighteenth-century garden art and was opposed to the stiff authority of the French baroque garden. In the contemporary context of this installation, the dynamic and liberal serpentine construction creates a space to sit and have a visual connection from the wilderness to the lush gardens.

The A is a pyramid, an ancient symbolic form derived from Egyptian culture. As a garden folly it can be found in many eighteenth-century gardens. It represents the connection to the spiritual world and constitutes the culmination point of the Masonic initiation path. It refers here to the healing dimension of nature and of this particular site, but also to the "frozen sunbeams" of the four pyramid corners, linking European and African culture on the common ground of ancient Egyptian history. The word "San" is "written" by the rising sun on the floor inside the pyramid, the letters getting smaller and smaller as the light travels through the day, vanishing altogether at sunset. This symbolises the San people – all human DNA is said to lead back to them, therefore they represent our genetic origin – and reveals the contradiction

between the scornful, racist treatment of the San and their importance for South African identity – indeed for the identity of all humankind.

Two broken columns form the N. Columns are the most important structural device in Western architecture – from ancient Greece, through the Renaissance, to the early twentieth century. Broken and fallen columns, suggesting the passage of time, are also to be found in the landscaped garden. In this context they allude to the famous park of Ermenonville near Paris, designed by René Louis de Girardin. In the park's Temple of Modern Philosophy by Hubert Robert (c. 1770), each column represents a philosopher or scientist. Bittermann's two broken columns here – found, kitsch objects in the "colonial" style – ironically question the identity of the "right" African philosophy.

Bittermann's work, together with Richard Long's circle of stones, now forms part of the permanent collection of the Foundation. An art video documenting the construction of the sculpture, and presenting the context of its creation and its philosophical and historical background is in planning. The film will feature interviews with the gardeners and managers of Nirox as well as with scientists, researchers, and members of the San community.

The sculpture at Nirox is the culmination of an artistic project entitled *Jardins d'amis* (gardens of friendship) that the artist has been developing over the past seven years. It started with the realisation of a garden in Germany, based on a quote by the German Romantic poet Novalis. This was followed by a series of gouache portraits, first of the artist's friends (friendship is a key value in the Romantic tradition), and then of historical and contemporary persons with whom the artist has an affinity, or who have influenced her work. The series, now numbering over one hundred paintings, will include the participants of the Nirox project, completing *Jardins d'amis* by returning to the origins of humankind. Bittermann's work at Nirox led her back to a *real* place where she created a sculpture that forms a gate between the garden and the wilderness. As Novalis put it: speculation completed leads back to nature.

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Caroline Bittermann, *Jardins d'amis: The Gate in Ruin (SAN)*, 2011/12, angle-iron, corrugated sheets, steel, natural stones, bricks, cement and plants, bench: c. 250 x 50 x 40cm, pyramid: c. 350 x 350 x 350cm, columns: c. 200 x 100 x 100cm, Nirox Foundation/Khatlami-Reserve, Johannesburg. Photo Caroline Bittermann



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