

Matter & Treasure and Paint

Images John Hodgkiss

Bronwen Findlay's solo show of new and old work at this year's National Arts Festival beautifully reveals her ongoing engagement with the relationship between art and life. CLASSICFEEL's Lara Koseff sets foot on Findlay's both charming and outlandish terrain.

Walking into Bronwen Findlay's home is like entering a three-dimensional manifestation of her paintings. It's colourful, eclectic and overflowing with compelling and bizarre objects that have either informed her work or bear a resemblance to those that physically feature within it. This experience is reflected in her assertion that everything she does is connected. 'The way I work and the way I teach and the way I live my life is all the same thing,' Findlay says.

Her artistic process alludes to the synthetic cubism of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who, by incorporating elements of the real world into their canvases, attempted to create a channel through the immeasurable gulf between art and life, roguishly muddling reality and fancy.

Yet Findlay's method is more intimate, almost seamlessly overlapping with the way she lives her life. This seems to be directly linked to her very open approach to art making. She has taught and lectured extensively in various schools and institutions and has always brought her work into the spaces where she teaches. Her classrooms become her studios and her studio has become her classroom. She recalls a young student of hers once saying, 'Ma'am, when you finish teaching us you don't really stop, it's all the same...' Findlay found this movingly perceptive. 'To me, it is all part of the same thing,' she explains, 'painting and working and making things and teaching people and living with the stuff in my house and moving some of the things from my home into my paintings.'

She now has a large studio at home where she gives art lessons, her students often providing her with input on her work. She is also working with a group of women at Natalspruit Hospital

in Katlehong. Most of them are unemployed, have been abused and have never explored the medium of art. Findlay views her interactions with them as an exchange; they learn certain techniques from her and she gains from their responses to her teachings.

Some people find this overlap baffling. In 1999 Findlay was an artist in residence at the National Arts Festival (NAF), working in a space in the Albany Museum that was open to the public. She had her paintings on easels surrounded by tables with objects that had influenced them. 'Some people came up, picked up a box of henna and asked if they could buy it... they thought it was a shop,' Findlay explains. Rather than taking offence, she seems to have enjoyed the response.

This slightly unorthodox approach – standing in heavy contrast to the solitude that many artists require in order to produce their work – has driven Findlay towards various collaborative projects. She worked quite extensively with the late artist Daina Mabunda. In the travelling exhibition *Printing, Painting and Stitching* (2001) Findlay, Mabunda and artist Faiza Galdhari jointly exhibited works that were connected only in scale. Galdhari printed, Findlay painted and Mabunda stitched works for the show. Findlay also collaborated with Jane Durant and Andrew Verster on the design of a mosaic at Melrose Arch in Johannesburg. In both cases the work seemed to come together beautifully, the technique and approach of each artist complementing one another.

Her solo exhibition at this year's NAF, titled *Matter and Treasure and Paint*, includes three massive paintings as well as a range of smaller works, which make up a series. Works that have been exhibited before are *Belongings* (2007) – a panorama of objects with sentimental associations combined with simple things



| *A Field of Flowers*, 2007, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 300 cm



Belongings (detail), 2007, oil paint and mixed media, 200 x 300 cm

Findlay came across, such as stones she picked up while walking on the Melville Koppies – and *A Field of Flowers* (2007), which incorporates dead flowers collected over a period of time, flowers from a friend's father's funeral, flowers that died in vases or on the canvas while the work was in progress. Both works embrace Findlay's interest in the combination of the beautiful and the grotesque, using thick metallic paint engulfing the objects and dead flowers in a way that is both compelling and, at a closer glance, slightly sinister in places.

She carries this approach over to her smaller paintings, which are arranged in a way that one might proudly display an assortment of small distinctive artworks in one's home. At a closer glance, Findlay laughs, many people were disturbed to find quite abject elements such as a small squashed frog's corpse within these seemingly decorative and dainty pieces. The artist enjoys such responses explaining, 'I play around with people's reactions – and maybe that's good for them'.

Findlay's paintings work so well in that they seem to grow organically out of her life. 'I live with them and they're part of my life...' she says. To view these works, together, in one space will inevitably be an extraordinary and spellbinding encounter and is an opportunity that should not be missed.

Matter and Treasure and Paint will be on at the National Arts Festival from 2 to 11 July at the Ntsikana Gallery at the Monument

Other Visual Art highlights at this year's National Arts Festival:

Umtshotsbo

A solo exhibition of work by Standard Bank Young Artist Award Winner for Visual Art in 2009, Nicholas Hlobo
Venue: Monument Gallery

Construct: Beyond the Documentary Photograph

A group exhibition curated by Heidi Erdmann and co-curated by Jacob Lebeko, featuring the work of Roger Ballen, Zander Blom, Lien Botha, Jacques Coetzer, Abrie Fourie, Nomusa Makhubu, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Barbara Wildenboer, Dale Yudelman and Bernie Searle.
Venue: Thomas Pringle Hall, Monument

Transitions

A solo exhibition of work by Paul Emmanuel
Venue: Alumni Gallery, Albany History Museum

Standard Bank Young Artists 25: Retrospective

Curated by the late Professor Alan Crump and Barbara Freemantle of the Standard Bank Gallery.
Venue: Standard Bank and Grahamstown Galleries, Albany History Museum