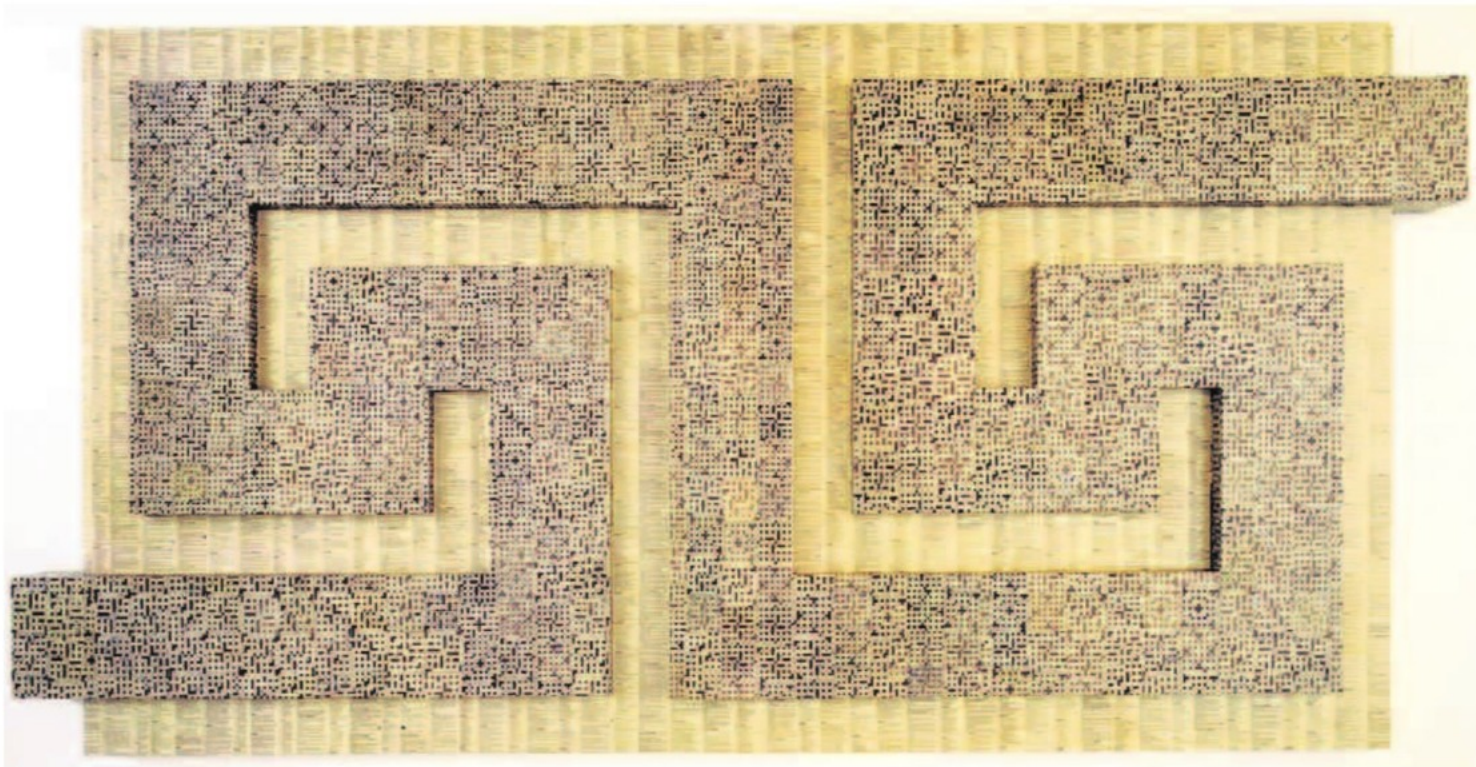


Lost for words

Willem Boshoff's latest exhibition celebrates the artist's lifelong obsession with words. By exploring the shape of language, Boshoff has made words works of art, replete with complex emotion and abstract significance, writes **Oliver Roberts**



PERHAPS it was the smirk of painkillers, or his body's way of detaching itself from the pain, but as five-year-old Willem Boshoff lay in hospital with broken legs, his mind stopped working in a normal way.

With the brutal memory of a head-on collision filtering into shiny echoes, Boshoff resisted the urge to recall the anguished cries of his father as he swerved feebly to avoid the oncoming car, and began to sink into the confines of artistic thought. It was words that stood out to him, and they showed themselves to be objects beyond their form; audible shapes infused with incidental circles and lines.

Incapacitation drove him to the solace of books. The more he read, the more words began to gather in a playground of language; they had colours, tastes, personalities. Instead of writing words, he began to draw them.

As a result of his time in hospital, Boshoff started his first year of school a few months late. With no friends, and an intellect that was already leading him into sublime isolation, the boy Boshoff was quiet and withdrawn — a loner. A willing phantom, he would drift around and just listen to people talking, watching words — intricately alive — dance from their mouths.

By the time he was halfway through high school Boshoff had already decided he wanted to be an artist. To appease his parents' chagrin (Boshoff's mother had a nervous breakdown over his choice to study art), he combined his studies at the Johannesburg College of Art with an art teacher's diploma. At 25, he began his first recognisable attempts at conceptual art, using text and language to create elaborate installations and sculptures.

"The necessity to be alone is where most of my work comes from," says Boshoff. "Art is a very lonely activity.

You come to a point where you have to confront yourself and meditate on what you find there; my art is the expression of that."

Boshoff is a big man, but his size is paradoxical to the minutiae of his manner. While Warren Siebrits, the curator of his latest showing at the Standard Bank Gallery, walks me through the exhibition, Boshoff follows a few steps behind, his only real sounds being the squeak of his dusty Crocs on the polished floor.

The exhibition, *Word Forms and Language Shapes 1975-2007*, is a collection of Boshoff's most significant pieces. Siebrits discusses the works one by one: *The Blind Project*, which is an installation only understood by sighted people if aided by someone who can read Braille; *Bangoek*, a diary — written in his own code — of Boshoff's thoughts when he refused to serve in the defence force during apartheid; and *KykAfrikaans*, poems written on a typewriter and expressed in various shapes.

"Fascinating. Remarkable." I'm dropping superlatives, desperately

Boshoff is such a hushed being, but the work he produces is like linguistic possession

trying to entice Boshoff to interpose Siebrits's commentary, but the man is just staring at the ceiling and fiddling with the keys in his pocket. Sometimes, when Siebrits says something amusing or ironic, Boshoff smiles and the two tiny beach balls inside his cheeks bulge, ready to burst.

When he does speak, Boshoff appears perpetually breathless, like he's just run up a flight of stairs. Sentences emerge climbing over one another, as if they've been waiting in a long queue in his mouth.

"Words are like a tumble dryer of sounds," he says. Then he tells me how he's been collecting obscure words and compiling them in dictionaries for 30 years. These sprouted from his interest in botany. Instead of learning the names of flowers in textbooks, he visited botanical gardens the world over, gathering more than 18 000 complicated botanical terms.

"Cataglottism is one of my favourites at the moment. It means 'to kiss with tongues intertwined'. I write the dictionaries to upstage people, to make fun of the bullies." The bullies, I suspect, are all those people — from primary school to present day — who have covered up their artistic incapacities with ridicule and criticism.

I can confirm that Boshoff is an inveterate pogonatraper because pogonotrophy, which means 'the growing of a beard', is another new word I learn from him. He has an epic mass of facial hair that seems to hinder the flow of his speech. Some words

push their way out of his mouth as if they were wading through half-melted toffee. It's the kind of beard into which cornflakes disappear and are never found again.

"I've had a beard since 1984," he says. "I grew it to make myself look a bit more attractive."

Boshoff is an intriguing mix of reluctant genius and cerebral raconteur. A few days after this interview I attended the press gathering for the opening of his exhibition. Once again Siebrits did all the talking, while Boshoff stood apart from the crowd, almost invisible. Get him alone, however, and he talks for hours, heading off on tangents about art, society and life.

So, if a picture can paint a 1 000 words, can a word paint a 1 000 pictures? "Words are ambiguous and they become loaded like guns; they can kill a 1 000 people or make a 1 000 people happy. Words are like a massive piece of cloth that covers us all. Language exists because we exist. We only relate to words because we are human."

To walk through Boshoff's latest exhibition is to take a peek inside an obsessed mind. His work has an exacting quality to it, and the rush of large crosswords, poems and walls full of words is what I imagine would happen inside my own brain just as I was on the brink of madness. Words, of all shapes, sizes and colours, move in and out of the hallways like the inner whispers that drive rational people to suicide or murder.

Perhaps, then, the exhibition's throbbing sense of connected disconnection is entirely appropriate. Boshoff is such a hushed being, but the work he produces is like linguistic possession.

"In the hands of a skilful person, words can be the most dangerous things on Earth," he says, perhaps trying to rationalise his silence. "The old saying about sticks and stones is an



HARDSCRABBLE: Clockwise from far left: Negotiating the English Labyrinth; The writing That fell off the Wall and Abamfusa Lawula — The Purple shall Govern

Pictures: BOB CHOOFS

In the hands of a skilful person, words can be the most dangerous things on Earth

absolute lie. Words, if they have an ear, are the cause of terrible upset. Books ... books are prisons. While they can be fantastic, organic things, they can also be destructive because they are unequivocally what they are. Their words cannot be erased."

Maybe the months alone in hospital made Boshoff realise even then that it's not necessary to speak to commu-

nicate. Maybe it's those bullies who make him compile dictionaries full of thousands of incomprehensible words. Maybe that is why he cannot stop turning language into something that requires another language to be understood.

● Willem Boshoff — *Words and Language Shapes 1975-2007* is at the Standard Bank Gallery until December 1.