

DESIGNS OF NATURE

In a world of technological advances, industrial production and business, it is difficult to imagine something as abstract as art fitting into it all.

Christine Grové speaks to Jenna Burchell about her progressive interactive artworks >





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When Burchell completed high school her entire life changed as she uprooted herself from Pietermaritzburg to study at the University of Pretoria, and at the same time her parents moved to Qatar for work. This sudden split from family and home caused Burchell to begin exploring the intricate workings of communication technology and the human need to stay in touch.

After a few short years Burchell's work has developed into something far beyond traditional art. She strives to make art accessible to the viewer, which is a very delicate operation. Burchell says, "Art isn't about pictures on the wall anymore — it's about connecting; communicating a message via interaction".

Burchell speaks about her role in the art industry as someone who is progressing and trying to change the way people approach, buy and invest in art. As all Burchell's works are investment pieces, they bear special significance to the business world, constantly developing technologically and economically. "People are flooded with visual imagery all day long, so I believe that visual art needs to recreate itself to be able to distinguish itself within the times."


All of Burchell's pieces are made with industrial materials and all works are a result of collaboration with industrial production houses, engineers and programmers. As interactive art installations usually need computers and electrical equipment to work, Burchell explains that

in order for an artwork such as hers to be accessible for buyers, very unique and sophisticated planning and programming lies behind it to transform it from a nifty display at a gallery into a serious investment artwork.

Burchell's two new works portray her interest in the parodies of how natural things become mechanised, as well as her fascination with creating portraits of people with non-representative visual elements.

Her piece, "Lilies", is a mysteriously organic work, despite its industrial components. This work, created to be touched, is an interactive installation of thick wires sprouting out of a solid white frame and the story is communicated through whispering voices that play when the wire stems are touched. The electrical circuit that controls the stems is arranged in organic patterns inside the frame. The gentle flow of the stems together with the grounding electrical circuit, mimic the physical nature of a Lily plant and its roots.

"Portrait of Anderson" is a series of marble cement mouths cast from South African artist Audrey Anderson's mouth. Each fragment is an isolated characteristic of a syllable of an unnamed sentence spoken by Anderson. These mouths capture character traits specific to Anderson, the small natural mannerisms that make her unique. The mouths are mounted on steel poles and displayed as heritage objects inside a frame. Like people do with heritage items, they will stand before them and try and extract meaning. The mouths sit in sequence, grouping the syllables together to form words, and the viewer can attempt to extract >



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the sentence. The first of her mute works, these strange fragments of a mouth are talking with no sound, yet actively communicating.

Both of these works follow the philosophical theory that all natural phenomena, including human behaviour, can be broken down into mechanical processes. Burchell's works are personal and honest and intend to bring about an experience, not a comment on the world. Her art does not aim to shock or inform – it is about a single, universal feeling of discovery; for everyone to be able to access, connect and draw a unique, personal experience from it.

All Burchell's works are visually minimalist. Although, visually, they are compelling and beautiful to look at, they are subtle and pure – void of any unnecessary plumage. "I always ask myself, what does it need? Lip colour on the mouths will not add anything other than aesthetics to the work. To me it's all about that sublime essence of a work, the deeper meaning," she says. Certainly Burchell's work needs closer inspection, like a double take. This is all part of the interaction and extraction of meaning.

Burchell's two new pieces will be exhibited at Fried Contemporary Art Gallery in Pretoria, together with three other established artists – Rina Stutzer, Frikkie Eksteen and Christiaan Hattingh, opening on 5 May 2011. This exhibition, "Designs of Nature," is one of four collaborative exhibitions curated by Elfriede Dreyer. To see more of Jenna's work visit www.art.co.za/jennaburchell. ●

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