

Case Study: “Oupa Carlos, Our Wise Old Madala”
Location: Somerset West, South Africa

Project Description

Architect Jean Louw of 2AD Space Architects Inc. was so inspired by the use of metal mesh in the architectural realm, she decided to use the material as a creative outlet for her artwork on the side. In 2009, the South African architect contacted the nearest GKD factory asking for off cuts left over from projects in the area. GKD obliged and over the next three years sent bits of the material as it was available.

What emerged from this collaborative effort is “Oupa Carlos, Our Wise Old Madala” a life size sculpture. Oupa, Afrikaans for grandfather, depicts an older gentleman sitting in the sun, reading a book. Jean was inspired by the “seemingly” peaceful elderly sitting on the park benches of the world.

Often overlooked in sculptures, Jean feels the negative spaces are just as important as the positives, which was part of the appeal in using metal mesh as her medium.

“I have always loved the added dynamism of sculptures and furniture that you can see into and through. The varying transparency of the different meshes gives us the opportunity to entice the eye of the viewer through and into the sculpture making the viewer part of the inner space of the work. The mesh not only allows us this dynamic, but also has varying patterns, textures and colours allowing for the creation of wonderfully rich pieces of work. The fact that I have created a life size sculpture using only “off-cuts” of a product which will outlast us all is also a gratifying achievement.”

In working with the industrial material, Jean says her hands took a beating and she found it impossible to find welding gloves in size extra small. Fortunately her sister in England came to her aid with a pair of gloves that were made in China, imported from the United States to England, where they were purchased and then mailed them to South Africa. “Such a sustainable travel plan for gloves!” Jean quips.

The bronze-colored aluminium mesh, which was used for Oupa Carlos’ head and arms was woven together with pliers and bits of galvanized wire. The stainless steel mesh, a highly durable and tough product, proved to be more difficult for these more intricate details. Jean roughly built the sculpture’s initial shape with chicken wire, removing it as she progressed with sections of the mesh. The stainless steel sections were welded together. Jean found the jersey to be the most difficult, recalling that she once spent an entire morning on a jersey cuff and then discarding it. Oupa also had more than one pair of shoes as the project continued.

The project will form part of a group of works that Jean is working on for an exhibition called: “Water War” – The Source and Grave of Everything. The delicate transparent thread of life.” The purpose of the work is to awaken a consciousness of our interconnectivity within the planet as a whole, questioning the viewer on how he or she impacts the planet.

Oupa Carlos serves as a reminder to people who have lived life on earth and questions what that person did or did not do to benefit the earth. Jean hopes to “draw the viewer into a moment of self reflection, soul searching for what it is that makes us truly human.”



The poem “Hieroglyphic Stairway” by Drew Dellinger is inserted into the book that that “Oupa Carlos” is reading:

It's 3.23 in the morning
and I'm awake
because my grandchildren
won't let me sleep
my great great grandchildren
ask me in dreams
what did you do while the planet was plundered?
what did you do when the earth was unravelling?

surely you did something
when the seasons started failing?

as the mammals, reptiles, birds were all dying?
did you fill the streets
when democracy was stolen
what did you do
once
you
knew?

