

Opening Speech for Gert Swart's 2025 Exhibition at the Tatham Gallery

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Thank you all for coming to this major exhibition.

A Group of Friends

I was driving back from church with my brother when we stopped and picked up a hitchhiker. He was a big rough-looking guy with close-cropped hair, if I remember correctly (this was many years ago, it was near Bulwer Park in Durban). It turned out that he too was coming from church, and that he was an artist, and as you might have guessed he was the creator of this exhibition, Gert Swart.

A friendship developed and over the next few years a group of five or six artists and musicians coalesced and became a tight-knit group. The church brought this group together, but these were people that wanted to go much deeper than the platitudes and petty prejudices prevalent in the church.

A Way of Being

I was an engineer at the time, but I learned something from this group of friends about what it means to be an artist or, more specifically, what it means to be a certain kind of artist. I learned that an artist is

a way of seeing the world,
a way of being in the world, and
a way of creating the world.

This way of being strongly appealed to me -- it's a life of dedication beyond the daily grind, and these artists made a place for the sublime, something bigger than themselves.

And then there's the intervention of the divine. I use slightly religious terminology because of the nature of the exhibition and because of who Gert is -- but call it the collective unconscious, or the mystical, or the muse if you will. The muse is there, and may or may not smile on you today but you have to keep¹ working.

These artists cultivated a sense of the transcendental as a daily discipline. In the Drakensberg Mountains, we find enigmatic paintings on cave walls. The spirit world is just the other side of the cave wall, and the paintings on the wall are portals to that world. So that idea in some form was honored by the group of artists that I'm referring to.

So when I started making art full time in my late thirties I had the good fortune of having been exposed to good mentorship and I knew what I was going into -- the highs and the lows -- and the commitment it requires, and the daily discipline of making art.

A Room of Mysterious Beings

Okay -- so much for history -- let's turn now to the current exhibition. This exhibition is a continuation of Gert's 1997 "Contemplation" exhibition in this same space. Gert has made a number of commissioned works in the intervening years, but what you are seeing here was not commissioned -- these works are a direct result of his own vision. They result from a huge amount of hard work, inspiration, sweat and commitment.

We see a room full of enigmatic "beings". They are mysterious and compelling. Each of them seems to be full of meaning, and there seems to be some common communication going on between them. There's no easy key, but I'd like to suggest you keep an eye out for some repeated symbols. You have to spend time with the work and look for common elements and how they relate to each other. Some of the repeated symbols are:

- boats,
- cruciform shapes,
- chairs,
- hands,
- horns,
- oars,
- propellers,
- and trees.

For example, that Pollard Tree sculpture over there. Its branches have been cut off for it to grow more fruitful in the future, whatever that future may be.

I have used the word "symbol" but the symbols don't have a precise, defined meaning -- they affect the subconscious of each of us in different ways. But they give you a foothold into what these sculptures may be saying.

A Pieta

As an example, I'd like to say something about the "Pieta: Ground Zero" piece at the entrance to the exhibition. In art history, a "Pieta" is a work of art depicting Mary holding the dead body of Christ in her lap. Here instead we have a coffin boat on a chair with a hieratic form above it. (*Hieratic* means *priestly* but I didn't use the word *priestly* because I don't want to assume a gender for the form.) The boat seems to be in an irresolvable condition of stalemate, with rudders locked in opposite directions, and with some unusable oars on top. It's kind of stuck there.

As an aside, I'll just say that more details of this interpretation can be found in the essay in the online exhibition catalog by Prof Jorella Andrews. So, I encourage you to do a Google search for the catalog where you'll find information about this and the other sculptures. Gert mentioned to me that Jorella said that that among other things this piece is a commentary on the racist and wounded body of South Africa. Jorella also talks about a fascinating reference to a double-exposed photograph (you know back in the old days with 35mm film photos could be double-exposed by mistake). The photograph has a dead body, with a superimposed image of people sitting around the body drinking. She has some commentary as to what that means, particularly in the history of South Africa. (It is a photograph that Gert's father took when he was a young policeman.)

A Personal Interpretation

The interpretation that we have just discussed has a strong sense of the negative -- it's a kind of homage to our personal pain and to the pain in South African history.

But personally, I see something more positive in the sculpture. The horns above the coffin are confrontative, yes, but only to those that would trifle with the coffin. (This is just my interpretation -- take it with a pinch of salt.) The horns say this is a valuable object that we are watching over and protecting. The body is protected until something or someone comes and takes the oars and rows the boat to the other side of the river and so we escape the deadlock. What river am I referring

to? I don't really know exactly -- perhaps the River Styx from Greek mythology, but maybe it's a passage to a better land.

Something Hopeful

Anyway, I encourage you to spend time among these sculptures, as individual works and as works resonating with each other. I hope you can come back when there are less people and you can enter this space, this mysterious space -- like going to Stonehenge, which I have never been to, but I imagine you go there and there's a vibe created by the force of the objects with all their hidden meaning.

We as South Africans have lived through tremendous changes, and we have seen a lot of good and bad. There's a lot to infuriate you in this country. These sculptures comment on that, but they also point in some sense to something transcendent -- something hopeful.

So, I hope you can come back and just spend time with the work.

Thank you.