

Small wonders

If plants could talk, what would they say? Johannesburg-born artist Kali van der Merwe explores “flora consciousness” in her latest exhibition, running from October 8 to November 8.

Having focused on rare and endemic fynbos and insects in the Overberg, Van der Merwe says she’s noticed a plant language of sorts. We spoke to her about her experiences, and about the importance of preserving our country’s botanical treasures.

Describe your connection with the Overberg and its plants.

The Overberg is a heaven on earth... The fynbos is so remarkable; it’s only once you live among it that you truly experience the astounding varieties of the plant life and all their subtle differences from one small area to another. Tragically, paradise is under serious threat, with more than 1 000 species close to extinction. This place that is recognised as a world botanical ‘hot spot’ has been earmarked for a nuclear power station roll-out. The Bantamsklip Organisation [www.bantamsklip.org] is actively educating people on what a horrific ecological disaster this would be.

Tell us more about flora consciousness.

Plants can communicate with each other through the release of pheromones [chemicals that trigger a change in behaviour]. They have been shown to do this to warn other plants about the dangers of, say, being eaten. Plants that have been ‘warned’ then release certain chemicals to become bitter to taste. We often think of plants as being mute because we are unaware of this ‘language’ they are using. Realising this has expanded my own human consciousness – to realise everything has a consciousness, even the universe.

What do you hope people will experience when they view your art?

I am in search of what I can best describe as the elusive soul of the plant or animal that I am photographing, and may take

up to 30 slow images in the attempt... If anyone viewing my creations comes away with a sense of marvel, mystery, deeper connection, greater affection or empathy for the creatures and plants we share our greater context with, then I feel I have made a tiny contribution to a hopefully expanding awareness of our mutual interconnectedness... We are all essentially differing versions of spiralling DNA.

How do you capture these images?

I use a slow photographic process, which involves long exposures – from a minute to about five minutes. I photograph at night, using a technique called light painting, which involves a moveable light source slowly drawing or painting the subject. Points of light progressively accumulate during the long exposure, to create a composite image. The backgrounds for my creations come from the Hubble telescope, situating my micro-tableaux in the largest context for which we have images.

Where did the name of the exhibition [Beyond beyond] come from?

The full title of the exhibition is *beyond Beyond, infinite and infinitesimal*. It comes from a part of the last line in the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*, translated as “gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond” – poetic words pointing to the path of awakening.

How did you end up in the Overberg?

To create these images I needed to dig deep into myself, my psyche, my soul and found I was unable to do it in the city. I began to go on a series of mini-retreats to a friend’s beautiful house in the fynbos, until one day she said she needed to be back in the city. We arranged a house swap, which worked out remarkably well for both of us. I feel like I am doing my life’s work and I will continue growing each series until I die.

*See Van der Merwe’s solo exhibition, curated by Jackie Ruth Murray, at Cameraland Gallery & Café (68 Long Street).