

**O**N the R43 to Baardskeedersbos, a cloudy sun low in the sky, I hit a bird with my car. All I see is a flash of red underbelly, then comes the muffled thud. I look in my rearview mirror expecting to see the remains on the road — feathers, stillness — but I don't see anything so I do that thing you do when you strike a bird and don't see it: convince yourself the little thing was only stunned, that it dropped onto the side of the road and stayed there for a while before flapping its wings and flying off. But, of course, it died.

Half an hour later I see the exact same species of (dead) bird suspended by fishing gut inside a bell jar. And next to that bell jar is another, this one with a dried-up lizard inside, hanging above a large red flower. Suddenly, the whole day reeks of Lynchian coincidence and juxtaposition.

"These are road-kill gifts," says Kali van der Merwe. "People bring them to me."

It's Van der Merwe's house that I'm standing in, and her bell jars of dead animals that I'm looking at. In an adjacent room there's a whole lot more — flowers, snake skins, beetles, bees, moths, butterflies, spiders, dragonflies, a cockroach, two sets of owl wings and the slightly charred, smoky-smelling bones of a baby buck that got caught in a veld fire.

Van der Merwe was not born Kali. She has chosen this name for herself. Kali — Hindu goddess of time, change, power, creation, preservation and destruction. Kali — the black one, the force of time and slayer of evil.

The Kali of Baardskeedersbos does not have four arms and a sword and has never, as far as we know, posed triumphantly while clutching the severed head of Evil. But what she does possess is a camera, a menagerie of dead plants and animalia, and an immense solitude. It is with these that she creates and changes, it is with these that she holds sway over time.

"What I found out when I was doing portraits of bees was that every one had a different face," she says. "A lot depends on how they die as well, with the tongue in or out. But each has its own little feature. I'm showing another aspect of its being, adding

**'There's the ecstasy of being in nature, to reach those places in myself'**

another dimension to it so that the next time you look at an insect you might look at it slightly differently."

She talks like this: Portraits of bees. Being. Dimension. She uses the word "awe" when she discusses the patterning on the abdomen of a bladder cricket.

Van der Merwe moved to Baardskeedersbos from Cape Town five years ago, retreating from a 15-year career as a documentary photographer and filmmaker. It's a village in the Overberg that was named after the *baardskeerder* (beard shaver), an insect that supposedly makes its nest from human hair. Legend has it that the first Dutch settlers laid down in a field here one day and woke up to find their beards gone.

Baardskeedersbos, or B-bos as the locals call it, is a good place to live if you want to disappear. There's not much to it but farmland and fynbos, an art gallery and Marietjie's pub/restaurant, which has a collection of caps hanging from its ceiling and makes excellent chicken schnitzel. You're encouraged to write messages and platitudes on the walls. "*Lekke man, Fokken lekke*" (sic) reads one.

Small towns like B-bos tend to attract the unconventional and the jaded, but even here Van der Merwe is somewhat of an enigma. You can safely call her a recluse because that's what she calls herself. She rarely ventures far from the farm that she rents from a friend. There are other artists here, there's even an art route twice a year, but Van der Merwe is an anomaly.

She tells me some people in B-bos think she's a real weirdo. They ask, "*Wat doen die vrou? Sy leef alleen op daai plaas. Wat doen sy met haar tyd?*" (What does that woman



MOTH MEDITATION: 'Night journey in sea of silence'

# World within a world

Through her ethereal images, Kali van der Merwe opens our awareness of the infinitesimal and explores the sentience of plants and insects.

By **Oliver Roberts**



CREATURES: 'Portrait', above; 'Unknowable nature of being', right

do? She lives alone on that farm. What does she do with her time?)

It was in this aloneness and weirdness that Van der Merwe began to develop the concepts and images that you see on this page. Using light painting and long exposures, she photographs plants and dead insects and they come out looking mythical and alive, sometimes divine, and certainly always entities demanding of that awe, of reverence, of a step-back and worship.

"Energy shapes, forms and patterns . . . it's a way to image energy," Van der Merwe says. "I couldn't get to that deep place in Cape Town.

There were too many distractions and there was too much consciousness holding onto me and dragging me. I needed to be away in a very isolated place. Also, there's the ecstasy of being in nature, it allows me to reach those places in myself. I need to be out of the city to make these images."

Darkness is her medium. She makes her images late at night, transforming her home into a pitch black studio and sometimes shooting until the early hours. It's a magical space where, à la the exploits of the goddess Kali, she has the power to resurrect things and alter time.

"The first time I photographed a bee, when I saw it on my camera's screen it was like it was alive, like it was looking back at me," she says. "There's so much you miss; its little eyes, its proboscis. Typically, I'll take 20 or 30 frames of a single insect or plant, and in some way I feel like I'm looking for the essence or soul of that being . . . almost trying to move beyond form into its energy field, trying to find some essential part of it. And by doing it in darkness I feel that as much as I'm revealing them, they're revealing themselves to me. But it takes time."

Some might find this a little hey-shoo-wow, the idea of a plant or insect — what's more a dead one — communicating and revealing itself, but Van der Merwe's work and philosophies are not so much about that; what she's really trying to show and tell is that all living things have some kind of consciousness, even a sentience (see the plant perception studies of Cleve Backster), and we should not only recognise this, but venerate it, connect with our inner hippie.

With her photographs, which may be composited but are not manipulated by Photoshop, Kali is simply suggesting that we should sometimes get in a little closer, surprise ourselves with what we're able to see and discover.

"[Living insects and plants] are communicating," she says. "They're aware of themselves . . . They're constantly aware of their fellow creatures. Absolutely. There's a world within a whole other world."

I'm a little jealous of her seclusion. I like the idea of outcasting yourself, falling into isolation for the sake of your art and the promise of a heightened consciousness among all that silence and rain.

"You go through a lot, being alone," she says. "You confront yourself very fairly and squarely. The first year I was so happy to be here that I didn't tell many people where I was because I didn't want anyone to visit me . . . At the end of the second year I felt myself start losing my mind. I never thought it was possible. I love isolation, I love my own company . . . but I saw how much we are social creatures and started losing touch with what was real."

• Kali van der Merwe's work can be viewed at [www.kali.co.za](http://www.kali.co.za), and at Prince Albert Gallery in Prince Albert until April 20.

