

Johan van Heerden

Biography

Johan van Heerden was born in Bethal in 1930. From the beginning of his career, he displayed a striking independence of spirit and a distinctively poetic point of view.

Johan became well known for his metal and stainless steel works and it is in this medium that he produced some of his most courageous and dramatic work. His work reflects his great originality and fine technical skill. He is known as the father of non-figurative sculpture in South Africa.

Johan van Heerden mistrusts words. They're elusive and they come hard on his lips. Which, perhaps, is why he took to his hands.

His work has been acclaimed in many parts of the world and he has represented South Africa on a number of international exhibitions.

Van Heerden's philosophy in life is the following

"I am more than ever amazed by the wonder of being. I try to render myself as open as possible a view of my surroundings, however and wherever I find myself. I am not geographically bound, neither physically nor mentally. I lament the fact that my personal time schedule is not compatible to time. I search!"

VAN HEERDEN Johan

(Source: Art and Artists of South Africa; Esmé Berman)

1930

Born in Bethal, Transvaal

STUDIED

1949-1951

Bloemfontein Tech Art School

1952

Grande Chamière, Paris

(Painting under Eduard Macevoy, sculpture under Ossip Zadkine)

École des Beaux Arts (graphic)

SUMMARY BIOGRAPHY

Exhibited sculpture and paintings in Europe. 1955: returned to South Africa; began to exhibit paintings, sculpture and graphic art. 1956: participated in Guggenheim International Art Prize – only South African artist represented. 1960-1961: taught at Pretoria Tech Art School; talented in use of most artistic media, began to design and execute jewellery of refined sculptural beauty (exhibiting in Washington and Florence); sculpture in wood, metal and ciment fondu. 1966: murals for Conservatorium of University of the Orange Free State; for the next year or two tended to concentrate on plastic media – jewellery and sculpture; exhibited few pictorial items. 1969: restated his abilities as a graphic artist in a fine exhibition in Johannesburg of monochrome and coloured pencil drawings; but sculpture began to assume precedence over other art-forms. 1974-: known primarily as a sculptor; particularly acclaimed for works in stainless steel; several major commissions. 1973: joint winner, Open Category, of first Metalart Award with Spiral. 1977: Guest artist at that year's Metalart exhibition. Lives in the Broederstroom district, near Pretoria; his wife, Jacqueline, is an accomplished weaver and has woven tapestries to his design.

EXHIBITIONS

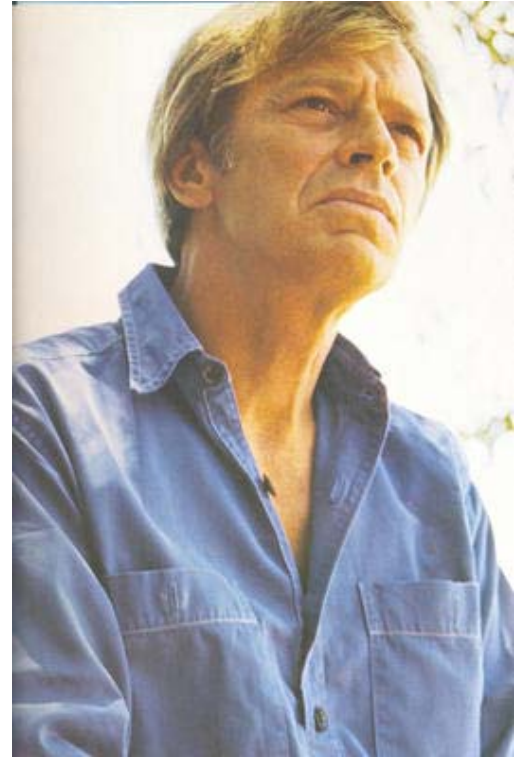
1956: first one-man exhibition, Johannesburg; First Quad of SA Art; Guggenheim International Exhibition, Paris and New York. 1957: Sao Paulo Biennale. 1958: Venice Biennale. 1959: Sao Paulo Biennale. 1960: "SA Graphic Art", Yugoslavia; Second Quad of SA Art. 1966: Rep Fest Exhibition, Pretoria. 1971: Rep Fest Exhibition, Cape Town. 1973: Sao Paulo Biennale. 1977: SA Art, National Gallery of Rhodesia, Salisbury (Harare, Zimbabwe). 1979: "SA Printmakers", SA National Gallery, Cape Town. 1981: Rep Fest Exhibition, Durban.

JOHAN VAN HEERDEN

From the beginning of his career, Johan VAN HEERDEN displayed a striking independence of spirit and a distinctively poetic point of view. He was never concerned with the translation of perceptual truths, nor did he abstract his themes from the objective images of nature. If anything, he shared superficial affinity with the informal-abstract artists who relied to some extent on chance effects inherent in the physical properties of their matière; but this affinity exists only in the sense that his forms were not subservient to arbitrary logic and he occasionally made use of the techniques of action-painting.

There was clear evidence of the operation of deliberate intelligence in the construction of his compositions: their substance however, was essentially intuitive – as though the artist were directed by some visionary experience to which he sought to give concrete reality.

It was in his graphic work that this intuitive poetry was most pronounced: his paintings then and subsequently did not often possess the inspirational qualities apparent in his drawings and etchings. His nervous intensity seemed to find its most expressive outlet in small-scale, concentrated statements. For this reason, too, his jewellery was often more significant as sculpture than were many of his larger, more ambitious carved and modeled items. All of the media in which Van Heerden has worked as closely integrated – the linear qualities of his graphics recur in his best works in wood and metal; the primordial landscapes symbolized in the fissured volumes of his ciment fondu sculptures were metaphorically restated in his drawn and painted



compositions.

Van Heerden deployed his obvious talents in too many directions to have achieved visionary profundity in all his work, but he hinted at in more than once.

In 1969, for instance, he drew attention with a collection of circular drawings which he referred to as his “visual reactions” to Teilhard de Chardin’s “The Phenomenon of Man”. Their strange and sensitive abstract imagery was assessed perceptively by poet Lionel Abrahams in “Artlook” No 30. Though he remarked upon the danger of limiting communication to viewers acquainted with Teilhard’s esoteric thought, he added “... but I value them less as containing a possible commentary on Teilhard’s philosophy than as in themselves exemplifying an aspect of existence illuminated by him: ... one of the ‘thresholds’ of cosmic becoming, where the distinction between living and unliving is blurred”.

Those drawings were the last two-dimensional works that he exhibited. From the beginning of the 1970s, there was no longer any doubt about the direction in which Johan van Heerden’s artistic career was moving. He had already begun to wrestle with the challenge of enlarging his jewellery conceptions to sculptural dimensions. Working in wood and stone and, for him, the untried medium of stainless steel, he now began to find the sculptural solutions that had eluded him before.

Initially, the sculpted forms were intricate and busy; but he moved progressively toward succinct and forceful abstract statement. The awards and widespread recognition of the Seventies confirmed the wisdom of his decision to concentrate his energies in sculptural expression.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Pretoria Art Museum
King George VI Gallery, Port Elizabeth
SA National Gallery, Cape Town
Ann Bryant Gallery, East London
UNISA
Johannesburg Art Gallery

SCULPTURAL COMMISSIONS

1966
University of Orange Free State

1971
Jan Smuts Airport
Norwich Union, Salisbury (Harare)

1972/1974
Civitas Building, Pretoria

1977
Trophies, Rand Afrikaans University
SABC “Artes”

1979
Volkskas Bank, Pretoria

1980
State Theatre, Pretoria

1981
Civic Centre, Cape Town