

Dubai launch pad for Durbanite

Artworks with rich Middle Eastern flavour win diplomat's heart. By Vivian Attwood

A 20-YEAR odyssey in the Middle East has culminated in Durban artist Hendrik Stroebel securing an invitation to stage a major exhibition of his work in the world-ranking Art Dubai Gallery in 2013.

Stroebel's extraordinary silk thread pictures won the heart of a retired, Dubai-based businessman and diplomat at a specially arranged private viewing during COP17.

The tycoon, who prefers not to be named, did not hesitate to snap up an entire collection representing the largest single sale chalked up by the KZNSA Gallery in its 100-year existence, and worth three quarters of a million rand.

This followed closely on the heels of Stroebel's exhibition, "Recollect" at the gallery, which saw a record number of visitors and achieved stellar sales of around R800 000. The show was the culmination of 15 years of work.

Stroebel's love affair with antiquities of bygone civilisations has seen him travel extensively in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Iran and Uzbekistan, where he gathers photographs and mementos to inspire his intricate embroideries and ceramics. This year he plans to visit Syria and Lebanon.

"I have drawn inspiration from the rich antiquity of these countries for most of my adult life," said Stroebel, who lectures fine art at the Durban University of Technology.

"I love the journey, the unexpected encounters, and I relive the experiences when I embroider. The images and photographs come alive as the works are completed as a journey stitched, or painted if you like, with thread."

While the artist's work is represented in private and public collections in South Africa, the forthcoming Dubai exhibi-



HENDRIK STROEBEL

tion is expected to catapult him into the international realm.

In typically unassuming fashion, the soft-spoken artist laid all the credit for his newfound status at the door of his patron.

"I feel overwhelmed by his generosity in offering me the show and I am very excited that his private collection of my work will form the core of the exhibition," he said. "I am immensely grateful to the curator of the KZNSA, Bren Brophy, for forging the relationship with the collector that has opened this avenue for me."

Brophy said that the relationship was "born out of synchronicity and passion, not an aggressive marketing strategy. Hennie's work resonates with the heartstrings of those rooted in their Middle Eastern cultural heritage."

The curator said that the KZNSA was moving into uncharted territory as it explored the possibility of becoming not just a showcase for local art, but an international art agency that would promote the careers of Southern African artists in the global arena.

"There are a lot more artists than there are galleries, and we want to be in the forefront of brokering relationships between artists and collectors in

the global market."

Stroebel's work has just been featured in a four-page spread in a major Turkish arts magazine based in Istanbul. Brophy said this is merely the beginning of his ascendancy on the international art scene.

"There is no question in my mind that Hennie does not quite realise how famous he is going to be, and not just in Dubai, but in London, New York and Tokyo," he said.

"Due to the exchange rate, South African art is hugely attractive to the international market. Serious collectors realise they can add enormous value to their collections by purchasing top contemporary South African art."

Alluding to the fact that South Africans have often differentiated between "art" and "craft", Brophy said in the context of embroidery this perception had its roots in the fact that we have no history of art-making using thread.

"A standard measure of the value we attach to art and artefacts is a significant generality of response. If many people appreciate the same thing, then we deem it praiseworthy. We now have the affirmation from an independent, international eye that this work is worthy of the international stage. In the Middle East this kind of work is revered because of the cultural heritage it represents. For many generations sewing and weaving have been practised at the highest level there."

There is a sense of poetry in the fact that Stroebel's work will return to his creative well-



Silhouette with Tiles – ceramic tile framed embroidery.



Between the Euphrates and the Tigris – a mixed media piece comprising embroidery and Turkish tiles with a screen frame.

spring, and be treasured by the people who inhabit the environments that inspire him.

"I feel a strong need to get back there and renew my creative inspiration at the source," he said.

Stroebel is left-handed, and most books on embroidery are designed for right-handed people. Accordingly, he has developed his own stitches over the years.

"I have no knowledge of formal stitching, although both

my mother and grandmother were superb embroiderers," he said. "I approach embroidery as a painter. I buy commercial DMC threads, the strands and sometimes the balls. I love the rich sheen of embroidery cottons.

"To achieve the correct colour I blend strands, taking one of a certain colour and threading it through the needle with strands of other shades to create my own palette. I build the layers of colour to create special effects. The different directions of the stitches also create varied hues."

Stroebel's patron has far-reaching plans for his new protégée, and the spin-off for other artists will be considerable. Brophy said that the collector intended to establish an international residency programme that would focus on emerging artists from all over Africa.

Selected representatives would be given the opportunity



Basilica, Bergama, Turkey – embroidery with ceramic frame. Such works are about to win Stroebel fame abroad.

to work and exhibit in Dubai, and in turn, showcase their work in African galleries such as the KZNSA. Brophy and Trevor Moore, CEO of the gallery, will travel to Dubai in March to establish the logistics of Stroebel's exhibition and discuss plans for collaborations.

"We see it as an opportunity to develop a pipeline to the international market," said the curator. "One of the things that prompted Hennie's patron to suggest our countries collaborate on art is that the century-old KZNSA has a constitution and a representative democracy. Our modus operandi is designed to be of maximum

benefit to the artist. We believe strongly that public benefit arts organisations have a role to play in nurturing relationships that will grow the pool of talent and enable artists to make art, not have to hold down other jobs and 'steal' time for their real passion because they have to pay the rent."