





## Jardins d'amis – The Gate in Ruin (SAN)

Seeing the garden as a "rhetorical landscape" I transform my findings into paintings, garden-models, wall-installations, but also into works with real plants. The process is documented in an extended garden-photo-archive. An important link between these worlds and media is the "Gardener". As a metaphorical and real figure he/she embodies the human participation in the arranged nature. One of my long-lasting investigations is about the very meaning of that embodiment. I call it "Jardins d'Amis" ("Gardens of Friendship"). In the "Jardins d' Amis", a variety of different projects are developed. The "amicable" in the title "Jardins d' Amis" refers, among other things, to a network of relationships that was spun for years in the reference frame of the "Garden". It is represented in a series of gouaches containing over 100 portraits as a multi-faceted mesh. The technique is miniature painting influenced by the German Romantic friendship-paintings of the early 19th Century. People portrayed are not represented with hair and skin, but through their silhouettes a site is appearing and becomes the actual "physiognomy". The profile thus fulfils the function of a keyhole through which the represented becomes recognizable with "his" or "her" site. This site is established in outer or inner dialogs. The collection of all these portraits creates an image of lived and sensed congeniality, in which not only friends and artist colleagues find their place, but also the profiles of historical personalities such as Charles Darwin or Jean-Jaques Rousseau.

Invited to the Nirox-Foundation working in the foundation's garden that stand as the perfect artificial "paradise" in the middle of the bush and the "Cradle of Humankind" that one could metaphorically consider as a "Scientific Garden of Eden" is fascinating to me. Therefore following the dialogic principle in my work, I have started conversations with the gardeners working for the foundation, but also with rangers, an anthropologist, a palaeontologist, a sociologist, a violence-specialist, a geneticist and a rock-painting-specialist. Along this process I am painting the portraits of some of these dialog-partners.

As I have also been working with the idea of the historical English Landscape Garden, where ruins often had critical political impacts expressing the rebellious opinion of the garden-owners through architectural representations of a "better past", I now have constructed an artificial ruin on the ground of the Nirox-Foundation calling the project "Jardins d'amis – The Gate in Ruin (SAN)". The ruin refers among other things to a historical discourse from the 18<sup>th</sup> century when nature was playing the role of the "artist" and gave architecture the touch of something vivid by destroying its clear linearity. It also expresses, through what is hidden, its former possible "heroic" function. This discourse has its origin in Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire and "Cradle of Western Culture" and is visible through its ruins still today 2000 years later. Referring to the past through real and artificial ruins is a method I have used here, taking a wider perspective for "The Gate in Ruin" and going back to our origin, not only to the Western World's origin, but to the "Cradle of Humankind", in particular to our DNA and in consequence to the San people.

Not only are the San people interesting because of their rock paintings linked to spiritual rituals and dances, their hunting methods, their adaptability to nature, their knowledge about plants and animals, their egalitarian society, but because of their genetics. They are supposed to be the first branch of the human genealogical tree from which all other races have spread over the globe. "San" can mean "people", but also "stranger" and "criminal" in their language, that is one of the eldest, extremely complex, but unfortunately dying languages in the world. My research on the San has led to a deepened understanding of the contradiction of their meaning as our genetic origin and the racist treatment of the few surviving San groups pushed to the Kalahari-Desert into Tent-Cities where they cannot live according to their cultural heritage any longer.

"Writing" the word SAN in two different ways on the ground of the Nirox Foundation between the lush gardens and the wilderness I remind of these contradictions and of how much we can learn from the San, especially as we all continue to suffer from the consequences of the ever faster changing climate. The three letters are built on a special site, well hidden near a split tree: a bench, a pyramid and columns, made out of used construction-material, natural stones from the bush-land around and plants chosen by the gardeners of the foundation, who are supposed to use and take care of the piece and the growing processes after I have left South-Africa. The visitor is obliged to walk through the word and live the spatial experience of each letter differently. The work oscillates between a sculpture, a garden-architecture and text written on the ground. This text gains and loses its readability as the visitor and the sunlight are moving on.

Caroline Bittermann, Johannesburg, Januar 2012