

# Cradle of creativity

Benji Liebmann has transformed a desolate trout farm into a tranquil country retreat for artists and writers

TEXT DIANE COETZER PHOTOGRAPHY KARL ROGERS



ON ONE OF THOSE HIGHVELD WINTER mornings that holds the promise of spring in the slow heating-up of the day, Benji Liebmann turns off his buggy and leaps out to greet us.

He's just driven down the hill from his weekend home in the heart of the NIROX Foundation — 15 hectares of land set in a private nature reserve in the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site and the reason for our visit today. Liebmann doesn't know it yet but he's been named the second ever winner of the Art Champion Award at the 14th Annual *Business Dzy* BASA Awards for his pioneering combination of an international artists' residency programme and a sculpture park.

At his side is Phoenix — “as in rising from the ashes,” he confirms — an American bulldog whose natural colouring echoes that of his owner's clothes.

Liebmann is dressed in the kind of casual chic getup (jeans, T-shirt, two light natural fabric scarves, Ray-Ban Aviators) that wouldn't be out of place on the deck of a yacht moored in Cannes. Or Camps Bay. Most likely, in fact, the latter as Liebmann confesses he's not dead-set on travel. “My wife loves it though,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders.

Liebmann was born and bred in Joburg's Florida region (“We were wild children. Wild”). Increasingly a connector for outsiders into SA and its art world, one senses that this man, unmistakably of the world, is most at home here in NIROX. He is clearly in his element as he strides through its grasslands and pathways, shooing away the warthogs who have wandered too close to Phoenix for comfort, stopping to talk to the artists who are in residence at the Johan Bergenthuin-renovated main house and cottage. He takes uncharacteristic pride in the way NIROX was transformed from a “hellhole” into a pretty stunning natural environment, even in the dry grip of winter.

Before Liebmann began turning it into a now globally-recognised art complex, NIROX was an industrial trout farm, overrun with concrete pools and dams, with no natural vegetation to speak of. These days, with its sweeping green vistas, tranquil pools, and indigenous plants, the only connection left to its previous incarnation is the name. “The trout farm had been registered in the name of NIROX Pty Ltd and when we were working on it in the early days, I kept referring to the project as NIROX so it stuck,” he tells me. Actually, the bare bones of the main

house on the property are also still to be found. The residence for visiting artists — but only if the house was Southfork,” Liebmann says in reference to the overblown ranch in *Dallas*. “We transformed it.”

Still, Liebmann says the fact that there are so many large houses and not several smaller ones did not deter the eventual scale of the artist residency programme which, since 2007, has seen a maximum of 10 artists at Nirox at any given time. Among those who have spent time there are South Africans Willie Leroy and Strijdom van der Merwe, Congolese visual artist Steve Bandoma and British land artist Richard Long. During each artist's residency, Liebmann ensures their entry into the arts and paleontology community through a number of latter including trips with Professor Lee and other local artists. Liebmann also ensures artists and students have access to Joburg-based Artist Proof Studios (with which he has an ongoing relationship) and the University of Witwatersrand's Fine Arts Department through his actions with the visiting artist.

It's a far cry from Liebmann's years as a lawyer and then a businessman (he was a director of a Corpcapital) but he says he doesn't miss the fast pace and tumble of either worlds. Not a bit, he explains, as he over our late breakfast of fresh fruit salad, cheese, biscuits, salami and hot coffee, maps out the kitchen of the artist residence.

“When I left business, I left it for good. I had taken my lot out of society and I wanted to find a way to make a contribution to society. I dabbled in social work but I had no real sense of fulfillment. I found that someone money and you walk away from it with no connection. I think that the best way to go to do it through something you enjoy. I'm sharing something that I am sharing in.”

Actually, 58-year-old Liebmann has so much to say about the unfolding of NIROX that he's growing it — it costs himself. “The aim is to make NIROX self-sufficient and able to continue long after I'm gone,” Liebmann says. “At the moment the resource going directly into the running of NIROX is our share of the sale of artworks and exhibitions that are staged here.”

On the cards is more focus on the Sculpture Park with planned permanent works by world

## CHAMPION



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house on the property are also still to be found in the residence for visiting artists — but only just. “The house was Southfork,” Liebmann says in reference to the overblown ranch in *Dallas*. “We totally transformed it.”

Still, Liebmann says the fact that there was one large house and not several smaller ones dictated the eventual scale of the artist residency programme, which, since 2007, has seen a maximum of two artists at Nirox at any given time. Among those who have spent time there are South Africans Willem Boshoff and Strijdom van der Merwe, Congolese visual artist Steve Bandoma and British land artist Richard Long. During each artist's residency, Liebmann facilitates entry into the arts and paleontology communities (the latter including trips with Professor Lee Berger). Liebmann also ensures artists and students at the Joburg-based Artist Proof Studios (with which he has an ongoing relationship) and the University of the Witwatersrand's Fine Arts Department have interactions with the visiting artist.

It's a far cry from Liebmann's years as first a lawyer and then a businessman (he was a director at CorpCapital) but he says he doesn't miss the rough and tumble of either worlds. Not a bit, he emphasises over our late breakfast of fresh fruit salad, yogurt, cheese, biscuits, salami and hot coffee, made in the kitchen of the artist residence.

“When I left business, I left it for good. I did feel that I had taken my lot out of society and the world and I wanted to find a way to make a broad contribution to society. I dabbled in social projects but I had no real sense of fulfillment. I found that you give someone money and you walk away from it. There is no connection. I think that the best way to give back is to do it through something you enjoy. NIROX is something that I am sharing in.”

Actually, 58-year-old Liebmann has so enjoyed the unfolding of NIROX that he's growing it — no small feat when he still almost wholly funds the running costs himself. “The aim is to make NIROX self-sufficient and able to continue long after I am not around,” Liebmann says. “At the moment the only resource going directly into the running costs of NIROX is our share of the sale of artworks out of exhibitions that are staged here.”

On the cards is more focus on the Sculpture Park with planned permanent works by world renowned

artists — a curated exhibition space that will hold a collection accessible (by arrangement) to the public and which will extend NIROX's footprint a little deeper into the surrounding nature reserve. NIROX Projects at Arts On Main is also now in the mix as a space available for hire for exhibitions by outsiders.

“NIROX is evolving all the time,” Liebmann says, acknowledging that it's also gaining a reputation globally as an arts centre, not just for artists, but for writers, musicians and curators. Just recently, in a collaboration between NIROX, Wits and the Liverpool Biennial, Lorenzo Fusi, curator of the Liverpool Biennial was in residence at NIROX. The aim of Fusi's visit is to include “a very substantial South African presence” at the Biennial, as well as identifying two South African curators who will intern at next year's event. NIROX has been working with the Sovereign Art Foundation in facilitating the first-ever Sovereign African Art Prize and has also recently been invited to become a long-run member of The Zeist Foundation.

For Liebmann the satisfaction in knowing his vision for making a societal contribution that is also personally pleasing and unique in the global art world is immense.

“We can't compete with the much bigger scale residencies overseas,” Liebmann says of this aspect of NIROX. “They are such big institutions and are in another league. Ours is much smaller, more intimate residency. But being in the Cradle is a big, big attracting force for artists like Richard Long and Chris Drury, another major UK land artist who is coming for a residency in October. Chris has also wanted to visit the Vredefort Dome for ages and so I am going to go there with him when he's here.” Unlike that of Liebmann in a boardroom or court, it's an easy picture to conjure up: the retired businessman turned philanthropist out exploring and journeying — all in the name of art.

NIROX Foundation, 083 625 6761, [www.niroxarts.com](http://www.niroxarts.com)

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