

Kemp, Grethe. "PICS: Nirox sculptors: Busting out of the gallery," *City Press*, 13 May 2018.

City Press



DISNEYFICATION: Kure likes to incorporate pop culture imagery into her work. (Photo: Supplied / City Press)

Nirox's artist residency is filled with light when I visit there on a Friday morning in May. There's an autumn chill in the air, but the grass that rolls languidly across this Kromdraai venue - watered by automated sprinklers - is still as lush and green as Irish clover.

Inside the roomy, concrete studio, Nigerian US-based artist Marcia Kure has carefully positioned bundles of synthetic hair on a long wooden table. Ordered from Amazon, they're all pastel pink and jet black, blood orange and honey blonde, chocolate brown and jungle green.

Kure is creating her latest installation, aptly called *Birds of Paradise*.

"I was inspired by the plant called bird of paradise [also called the strelitzia]," she tells me in between working. Her long braids are pulled back and she's dressed in a Tupac T-shirt and tights.

"I got interested in it when I was taking a walk with a friend of mine during another residency in the US, and she told me about this plant that scientists had discovered has the same substance recognisable in human beings.

"It's called bilirubin."

Some googling later tells me that bilirubin was once thought to exist only in humans and animals. The fact that an animal pigment had been found in a plant was a ground-breaking discovery.



A display at Nirox Foundation Sculpture Park. (Photo: Supplied / City Press)

"We always say we're all connected in the universe. But for the first time we have this scientific connection - so it was really a big moment," says Kure. "I've been interested in that

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idea ever since. For this project I wanted to introduce this plant as a connection between human beings and the land."

On the floor she's placed some of her creations, and picks one up. I see that the colourful hair has been attached to a stuffed Stitch doll.

"I normally play with popular imagery, so here we have Stitch from the Disney animation *Lilo & Stitch*. We're putting all these strands of hair that are used to make braids. In Nigeria we sometimes call braids Bob Marley," she laughs.

"There's that whole relationship to hair and beauty and the colours are used in such a way as to play with the line between sculpture and painting. And the third part of it will be the introduction of the idea of the multiverse."

She pauses at my questioning gaze about multiverse.



Marcia Kure working on her display at Nirox Foundation Sculpture Park. (Photo: Supplied / City Press)

"I don't know how to explain it, but I've been in the caves [in Kromdraai] a lot for my second project called *Land*. And being there you're consumed by the whole narrative of that space. There's a game reserve not far from here and, at night, you can hear the lions roaring. At the same time you can go to the mall and play arcade games with someone from Cuba. That's one thing that Africans have that they can share with the world outside. And I didn't realise that until I left the continent. I could relate to people there, but not on that level."

Kure's installation is just one of dozens that are currently on show at the Nirox Sculpture Park for their new exhibition called *Not a Single Story*.

On display until the end of July, the exhibition is a collaboration with Swedish sculpture park Wanås Konst and is dominated by women artists. Old and new work will be displayed, from the likes of Yoko Ono, Esther Mahlangu, Ayana V Jackson, Jane Alexander, Latifa Echakhch, Zanele Muholi, Mary Sibande, Lena Cronqvist and recent Turner Prize winner Lubaina Himid.

Women as agents

The exhibition has been a collaboration of sorts, with Swedish curators Elisabeth Millqvist and Mattias Givell from Wanås Konst working with South African co-curators Jessica Doucha and Khumo Sebambo to put it all together.

Before my chat with Kure, Sebambo had taken me on a leisurely tour through the park, guiding me around various sculptures. Some were already up, while others were being erected. A work called *Blush*, by Echakhch, a Moroccan-French visual artist, required Doucha

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to cement bricks in a circular pattern 6m in diameter - the type of hard graft people don't realise curators often do. Doucha later tells me about the challenges involved in setting up all these massive pieces.

"There's a lot of groundwork that needs to take place in terms of physical labour and conceptual labour - how the works read in relation to one another. There are some sound pieces that are challenging from a curatorial perspective as sound isn't that tangible, so we've thought very hard and concisely as to where to place these.



A display at Nirox Foundation Sculpture Park. (Photo: Supplied / City Press)

"But it's been a relatively smooth process. It's just about remaining on your toes and thinking laterally and being able to adapt and monkey proof work [Nirox has many monkeys in the area] and knowing that the elements will eventually take hold of the work."

Afterwards we visit the residency. Nirox founder and director Benji Liebmann is busy meeting the heads of Ethnikids - a local organisation that provides black children with books that feature black characters. Meetings like this are part of Nirox's commitment to incorporate education into the exhibition.

Over filter coffee inside, Sebambo catches me up on the concept for Not a Single Story.

"The title is inspired by a TED talk that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave in 2009, which basically posits that diversity strengthens people rather than separates them."

She says Millqvist and Givell came up with the concept as a way of counteracting the white, male-dominated field of art history.

"The way we wanted to do that was to present a show dominated by women, but also present women artists of a range of ages. So we have the grandmother of conceptual art Yoko Ono and the grandmother of Swedish art Lena Cronqvist.

"Then we have younger emerging artists from South Africa and abroad, including Caroline Mårtensson, Sethembile Msezane, Lungiswa Gqunta and Bronwyn Katz. It's about presenting an art show that presents different types of voices. Sculpture is also not a space that a lot of women have worked in."

Sebambo mentions the relevance of the exhibition in light of the #MeToo hashtag.

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A display at Nirox Foundation Sculpture Park. (Photo: Supplied / City Press)

"In this exhibition, women are the agents and not the victims. The women dominating this show are phenomenal artists with phenomenal practices. It's so important to bring forth our victories and celebrate them." She says Himid is 63 and last year became the first black woman to win the Turner Prize. Mahlangu got her honorary doctorate this year. The legendary artist speaks mainly isiNdebele and Afrikaans.

"She's managed to reach the world and do the most amazing things without speaking English. That's why I can think about #MeToo, because it's a story about the world where women are victims, but Not A Single Story is a story about women who are agents."

Art that lives

Sebambo says sculpture is fast becoming one of her favourite forms of art.

"The ability to interact with the work on a tactile level has become so important to me. Looking at art in galleries is also an amazing and beautiful experience, but often there might be an implicit or personal feeling that the environment is intimidating."

Nirox encourages people to interact with the works differently. They're big, out in the open and people can touch them.

"When children come to the park they climb on everything, and that's great."

Kenyan artist Mwangi Hutter's installation, *Travels of Rememberers*, consists of massive steel boxes on to which figures have been etched with acetic acid. She has created moving images and figures and their bleeding, watercolour-like motifs in rust fit organically into the environment. It is interesting to think that this work will look radically different in the icy woods of a Swedish winter when compared with a Joburg autumn.

Alexander's installation features a patch of planted wheat that will grow as the weeks go by, while in Sibande's *Let Slip The Dogs of War*, the vultures will become dynamic as they sway from trees.



Marcia Kure adding hair extensions to a Stitch doll as part of her display at Nirox Foundation Sculpture Park. (Photo: Supplied / City Press)

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It is this interaction with the outside world that makes these sculptures so wonderful, and which will most appeal to audiences. The works change and grow as they weather the elements. They look different from dawn to dusk, change colour depending on whether the sky is Delft blue or steel grey and get surprising new dimensions with the addition of leaves and rain.

Our temperate climate almost impels art to break out of galleries and plant itself in fields. At the end of my visit to Nirox, Sebambo hands me a cardboard tag to write down a wish on.

It is part of Ono's famous installation series Wish Tree, which she started sometime after 1981. The artist was inspired by her upbringing in Japan, when she used to go to a temple, write her wish on a piece of paper and tie it around the branch of a tree.

Her series has seen people from all over the world tie their wishes to trees. Ono takes them and buries them at the Imagine Peace Tower in Iceland. The tower consists of mirrors that project a beam of light up into the sky and is a memorial to Ono's husband John Lennon and his song Imagine. To date, Ono has buried a million wishes at the base of the Imagine Tower.

Now, mine will be one of them. And yours can be too.

- **Not a Single Story is on until July 27. The sculpture park is open for free to the public on weekends and public holidays, from 10am to 5pm. Gates close at 4pm during an exhibition, except if there's a concert or other special event announced on Nirox Foundation.**