

"Sarah sculpts a piece of the good life in the Midlands"

By Garth Johnstone

Well-known Midlands sculptor Sarah Richards draws inspiration from her studies and places she's worked around the world, but mostly gets her mojo "from what I come into contact with directly in my life or guided by the flow my life takes".

Sarah, who studied fine art at then Natal Tech in Durban (1985-90), completed her Masters in fine art (cum laude) in 2008 (focus on painting and mixed-media 2D artworks), and produces sought-after bronzes in her studio in Balgowan. An art all-rounder, she says practical demands require that she focuses mostly on bronzes, for now.

Examples of her gorgeous bronzes can be seen at Fordoun Hotel and Spa in the Nottingham Road area, for example, or on her website.

Sarah's been based in the Midlands for about 15 years.

"My husband and I decided after living in Durban to sell up and move to where the foundries are and get out of the city. My parents had moved to the Midlands more than 25 years ago to a farm in Nottingham Road. I found I could work more intensely here, with less distractions."

They lived for years in a small cottage on her parents' farm and borrowed studio space from farms nearby, until they finished building in Balgowan. "Now I have a beautiful studio space, peaceful and surrounded by views and natural bush ... Daily inspiration, so I am very lucky."

Pretoria-born Sarah also paints and draws, but bronzes are her primary medium: "I make the sculpture in the studio in wax/homemade plasticine. These are then taken to the bronze foundries in the Midlands.

"I love to experiment with different materials," she says. "So, yes, I paint and draw when I have time, mosaics, concrete and wall relief, I would do it all if I had the time. But I have specialised in bronze, for now, because of time and opportunity. I have had exhibitions in the past which explored different mediums and subjects. My frustration daily is that time is limited and I have to be selective."

She says there's no doubt that bronze is the best sculpture medium, due to its durability, quality and that it allows for a variety of finishes and expressions. "It is expensive ... But I believe good value for money. It fares well indoors or outdoors. and has a good investment value."

Going back to her student days, Sarah says her years at Tech were an inspiring, fun time when she was surrounded by creativity: "I had fantastic fun studying fine art,

and put in many hours of hard work in studio time with friends, exploring new ideas and expanding my mind.”

After her degree, it was time to get stuck into the “real world” and learning how the business side of art worked.

“Mostly I learnt from experience – becoming a businesswoman – to market my works, manage my accounts and tax, create websites and communicate with clients. Not to mention working with the foundries and making the works. I wasn’t really prepared for any of this when I started out as an artist after my studies and travelling overseas.”

On inspiration and what spurs her on to create her eye-catching, moving and powerful works, which include portrait busts, wildlife, monuments and abstract pieces, she said: “My studies and years of travelling and working in different places around the world formed my early inspiration and drive. There are too many artists to mention and it all merges in my mind. I have really tried to work from what I come into contact with directly in my life or guided by the flow my life takes.

“Trying to force a direction and creating too many expectations through my imagination and other people’s expectations causes too much pressure and then little happens. So I try to see what comes along. The commissions I receive or the animal or bird I ‘bump’ into that interests me.”

I ask about the influence of the natural environment.

“Yes, (I am influenced by) the natural environment and how we as humans interact within it. I find shape and textures interesting. I am inspired by the natural world, ideas and experimenting. It is important to me to observe closely details, but also to try to give the works a feeling of animation through textures, mark making and the bounce of light on the surfaces.”

She mentions the Bates family of Fordoun and their support since she relocated to the Midlands.

“Jon Bates at Fordoun welcomed my work as part of the Fordoun décor, where I can showcase my work in a superior setting. He and the family have been incredibly supportive over the years and I am immensely grateful to them. When I first moved to the Midlands they allowed me to exhibit my works at Fordoun and they are still there.”

Sarah is not sitting back on her formula for success and is intent on pushing her boundaries and comfort zones in art, through a focus on contemporary works.

“I am making it a goal to make each work a challenge, but contemporary art challenges the unknown in the self and connection to nature. I have a new body

of work and a new website which focuses on these works – my more experimental side needs to have a place to explore and play without being too influenced by others."

These works, which can be seen at www.sarahrichardscontemporary.com, push ideas and boundaries and are more playful. "Figures and nature textures, and an interaction between them."

One of these projects which is proving particularly interesting to the artist at the moment is titled: 'Hold gently what you wish to grow old with'.

"I have started a larger version of this and it is in the casting process. The skirt is made of wax panels made from moulds taken from the earth and the forest floor."

The art bug clearly struck at a young age.

I asked what her personal favourite sculpture was.

"I couldn't say, as each one has its importance to me. I enjoy the portrait busts, as I get to 'know' and connect with people as I work. The animals force me to explore their world and habits, learning all the time. Doing commissions for a client adds a bit of a challenge to a work to make sure the client is happy and yet retaining the uniqueness that I bring to the work. As a culmination, there are my own personal explorations which link it all together, all my experiences and life questions."

How has she enjoyed living in the Midlands, this hub for arts and crafts?

"I have really enjoyed living here. It is a very supportive community. I love that people come from such a diversity of cultural and financial backgrounds, and yet there is generally a feeling of goodwill and acceptance. Most people are here because they want to live outside the city chaos as much as possible, in a beautiful environment with their families."

"I came from the city where one can be anonymous and acceptably ignore those around you. When I moved here I found everyone to be friendly, waving and greeting, chatting in shops. No matter who they are. I find my most sociable time is leaving my studio and heading to the shops.

"Now I go to the city and wonder why everyone is so closed down. My husband and I have taken up trail running and this has helped us explore our landscape at home and around SA, helping us to appreciate this beautiful place daily."

I asked about a project she is currently involved with at Thembelihle Primary School in Howick, in which a 3D tree mural was created, where the bronze leaves and birds will be sold to raise funds for the school.

"This has been a very special project. We are still finishing the tree and any

donations or purchasing of the leaves and flowers will be greatly appreciated. The funds go to sponsoring children to attend the primary school. The story about how this school came about and continues is very special and the people who run and fund it are very dedicated to the education and support of these disadvantaged children, now getting a superior education."

She said while time was an issue, she loved to work on such projects.

"Giving back through my skills is very valuable to me."