



# You get what you give

*Creative Feel's* NonDumiso Msimanga spoke to Jaco van Schalkwyk, the first Barclays L'Atelier Merit Award winner to receive a residency from kunst:raum sylt quelle (home of the Sylt Foundation) on the island of Sylt, from where he recently returned.



**A** firm handshake and a look in the eye, Jaco van Schalkwyk is unafraid to peer into the soul; his own and the world's. With the telescopic iris of a camera, his latest exhibition *Eden* zooms into barren landscapes and leaves one with traces of life's impermanence. In *Eden*, there are disappearing figures, shadowy forests and footprints in the sand that document a sense of what is left behind when the seasons change in paradise. Schalkwyk states matter-of-factly, as though narrating a documentary on his life: 'I grew up in a very pastoral environment.' In Benoni, South Africa, he grew up in a missionary. At Jatniël, the Latter Rain Mission

International headquarters he was raised in a faith home – where people live and work without pay but, on faith. It is 'like a small town in Benoni; secluded and walled in' and it is where everyone became his father and mother when his father passed away when Schalkwyk was a young boy. It is where he learned that he was not rebellious when he went to school 'outside the walls'. Pictured in some of his landscapes as BNI (with a date and time) for a title, the work's precise processes of archiving and preservation are a sober and deep gaze into what is meant by paradise. Schalkwyk quips that his museum of different perspectives of Eden is not sentimental but a conversation and so the



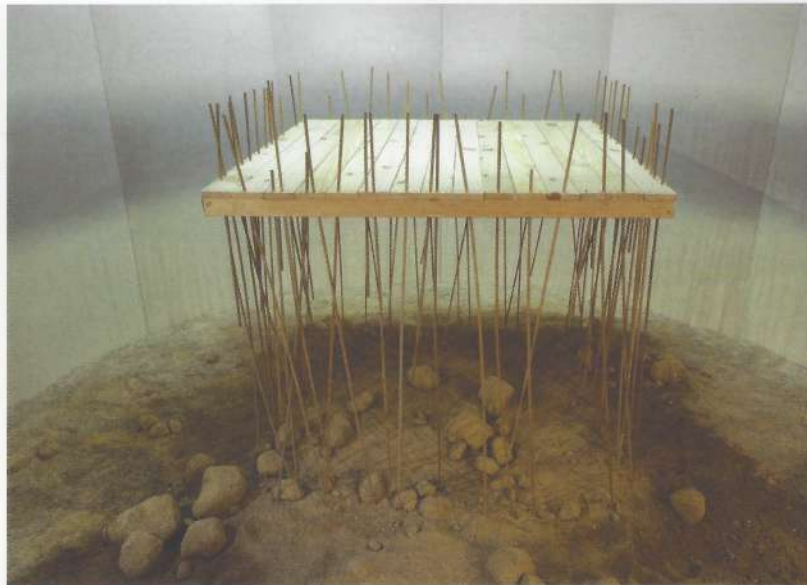


code of various landscapes speaks to a more symbolic sensibility that questions the ideal. He says, 'this is not Misty Mornings Benoni' as he stands in front of the large painting with a red dot at the Absa Gallery.

The categorised titling of the pieces is also stencilled onto the side of the pictures as though the creator were fixated on ensuring that the images were not lost. In a large piece depicting a forest scene from the Sylt Island in Germany, the words: *DU KRIEGST WAS DU GIBST* (*YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE*) appear through a haze of smoke. With a pun on the word *krieg* – which also means 'war' – it is like a lesson from the forefathers who once occupied that space and died when Sylt was a military

base in WWII. The mystic moral could also be the voice of the land that found itself blasted with holes that steamed from the unwelcome impact. Arriving for a residency on the Island alone during the winter, van Schalkwyk found himself confronted with the prophetic idea of an island. It was not the palm trees and languid picture of an idyllic paradise; it was 'a place of the unknown'. He walked through rough winds and shifting sands with a camera and photographed the ever-changing landscape. He found forests of trees planted to protect the people but which grew sideways due to the wind and whose roots lay exposed in loose soil. He saw people's perception of paradise as being at war with nature and he recalled that





in Benoni Jatniël was built in a valley and it would flood so measures had to be taken to change the landscape.

Exhibiting in the Absa Gallery in the Johannesburg central business district after returning from Sylt as the Merit Award Winner of the Barclays L'Atelier in 2013 it is as though the Gallery is an island where one could almost step into the painted scenery. Curated by Stephan Erasmus with whom van Schalkwyk collaborated on the exhibition's finale, the installation: *Hurnum*, the Gallery is transformed into an absorbing sanctum. The journey of the exhibition follows the meticulous journey of a soldier on a mission to capture memories and morals and retain them through 'a spiritual activity – painting.' On his most important day

at Sylt, van Schalkwyk travelled into restricted territory. Smiling he notes, 'Ah there's my rebellious side.' He saw human structures – built and rebuilt every winter – which held 'a threatening quiet there'. This and the image of roots revealed became his installation, a fragile refuge like an island on an island but whose roots are not strong enough.

In the place of the unknown, he had finally arrived from a long journey with Barclays/Absa. In 2010 he was in the Top 100 of the L'Atelier; in 2011, Top 10; and in 2013, won a Merit Award. A painting of his is now part of their collection and he proudly steps up the escalator to show it. He says, 'I was really glad I won *that* prize.' The conversation of his work continues to grow from himself, space and society. **CF**