

Understanding the world through tactile art

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By Diane De Beer

"I WANT to understand my world by creating the immediate world around me," says artist Gerhard Marx.

The Clover Aardklop Festival artist for 2014 explains that he uses plant material which he finds in his garden or on walks and which is then drastically reworked in his paintings.

"I am focused on the material and work in a tactile way when making art," he says.

The plant material, often the roots, is worked into the canvas, pressed and ground into the image that eventually emerges. It is a long and slow process, an accumulation of fragments that have been layered to create the eventual image.

"My head space has always been very important," says the artist. "It's all about the thinking and then the making of the object. "It's almost like a private performance."

And as someone who has often worked in theatre – he designed the sets for the award-winning play, *Tshepang*, for example – Marx values that performance because it is a process of discovery and where much of his work is created.

"It is a dialogue between you and the material and it's all about your intentions and what is possible."

As he starts to work, he has no idea what it will look like.

"It's not something I can see," he explains. "It is something I wonder about. And the communication is on a metaphorical rather than a pedagogic level."

Talking about his work, entitled *The Garden at Night*, Marx expresses his love of plants. He often works with the roots, material which can be found underground, unsighted to the eye at first. One of his common themes is night, which means the visibility is further impaired.

That's also why he uses medical material like X-rays, which allow us to peer inside the body. He toys with the concept of something that is known but not visible – always underneath. "It's just beneath the surface, not visible to the naked eye," he says, "or not clearly so."

"Primarily a garden is a visible thing," he says, "but once it is dark, that visibility fades and you have to use other senses to experience the space. But it is a contained space, often fenced and something that stands apart from the rest of the environment."

It is about understanding the world, his world. His physical environment becomes the object and the subject as he tries to capture that world. "It's all about my immediate world but drastically changed and reworked."

Some of the work is based on garden carpets, something that has been used in the East, which is designed like a garden but recreated from a personal perspective. He uses Google Earth maps, usually of familiar places like Joburg, his former hometown, and now Cape Town, where he lives currently. All of this creates an illusion of depth.

Listening to Marx speak, opens up his work in a way that's exciting as it guides you in and brings clarity to something that might have been invisible if you had just walked through the gallery.

This is the way he works.

He is a thinking man and the process involved in creating the material that eventually emerges plays a part in telling the full story. And he hasn't even touched on the sculptures and many of the other incorporated pieces.

While we're not part of the process, it's a wonderful privilege to hear him explain just some of what you might see.

This is something he does easily and will do again during the Aardklop Festival (October 7 to 11 in Potchefstroom) as he moves between Joburg, where he is working on a number of art projects, and Potchefstroom where he will meet viewers and talk to them about his work and creative process.