Cape Town fires up its art engine

Global rock stars of art and design are showing their work this weekend in three inspired events that are part of the World Design Capital 2014 programme

Hilary Prendini Toffoli

The furniture created by bewildered Spaniard Nacho Carbonell is so radical that a chair can sometimes look more like a bush. His designs incorporate anything from gravel and ground corn to thorns, broken glass or a stretchy outer layer he calls skin. They’re highly experimental and provocative. No wonder Brad Pitt bought himself an entire Nacho Carbonell collection.

This ingenious Netherlands-based rebel is one of the high-octane designers whose work is on display in Cape Town this week during a 10-day international design fair. **GUILD** is part of Cape Town’s World Design Capital (WDC) 2014 programme, which also includes the Design Indaba and the Cape Town Art Fair.

It’s an event that promises refreshing exuberance, exemplified by the witty furniture designed by 29-year-old Los Angeles-based twins Simon and Nikolai Haas. Their work has featured in Maison Louis Vuitton in Shanghai and the Versace Home collection — 12 pieces commissioned by Donatella Versace.

Their zoomeorphic Beast Feast collection was a sellout at Design Miami, one-offs going for anything up to $75,000, including a reinder for sofa with bronze camel hooves, and a buffalo hide bench with metal cheetah feet.

The Haas brothers’ designs are here along with the work of other modernist stars of New York’s forward-thinking gallery 20th Century. These designers include the father of the art furniture movement in the United States, 81-year-old Wendell Castle, and the memorably innovative glass sculptor Thaddeus Wolfe.

With an exhibitor lineup that spans 17 countries, GUILD is the brainchild of Treyvn and Julian Mcgowan, the founders of South Guild. Powerful South African design marketers, they have been talking about the launch of the African Design Indaba for two decades ago at the Mount Nelson with only seven speakers. ‘We’d been closed to the world and were 30 years adrift in terms of true-blue design. We realised we desperately needed to be exposed to international debate and imaginative thinking... The challenge was to see whether we could fast-track progress. Since then Indaba has been the biggest design platform in the southern hemisphere, and one of the world’s leading design events. It celebrates all the creative sectors — graphic design, advertising, film, music, fashion design, industrial design, architecture, craft, visual art, new media, publishing, broadcasting and the performing arts — and contributes millions of rand to the country’s economy.’

Certainly it was in no small way that Indaba’s contribution to the South African design community helped to clinch the World Design Capital 2014 title for Cape Town, giving the Indaba significant status in this year’s WDC programme.

Its conference ends on February 28 but the Indaba expo, with its aisles of endlessly inspiring creativity, runs at the Cape Town International Convention Centre until Sunday.

From Treyvn’s view, **GUILD** is more than just a fair for beautiful objects. “When designers are deeply involved in what they make — hands-on, immersed — it’s a different experience. The distance becomes greater between what is a result of process, intimacy and narrative, and what is simply product, mass-produced or machine-led. Handmade pieces are what really contain meaning for society and for the people who own them.

“GUILD will introduce highly respected design authorities and work from Africa, the US, South America, Britain and Europe.”

Europe is represented by Milan’s promoter of emerging designers, the upwardly spiralling Rossaana Orlandi, Brazilian/Columbian gallery Coletivo Ame de Mafra that has worked from Latin America, and from Britain comes the Maker Library Network, a partnership project of the V&A Museum and the British Council.

Not surprisingly, South Africa’s creative input has an African voice. Objects that confirm human ingenuity — from modern times to the authentic wenders produced 110 000 years ago — are on display at Wits’s Origins Centre stand. As a counterpoint, the University of Johannesburg’s Agents of the 3D Revolution is showing how the most progressive international 3D print designers are changing technology.

With the generous backing of ABSA and Arreloch Mittal — recent recipients of the Business and Arts Award — GUILD is showing at the Lookout on the V&A Waterfront until March 9.

Of course, before 1994, design was not part of South Africa’s official cultural agenda. As Design Indaba’s visionary Ravi Naidoo puts it, discussing how he launched Indaba two decades ago at the Mount Nelson with only seven speakers: ‘We’d been closed to the world and were 30 years adrift in terms of true-blue design. We realised we desperately needed to be exposed to international debate and imaginative thinking... The challenge was to see whether we could fast-track progress. Since then Indaba has been the biggest design platform in the southern hemisphere, and one of the world’s leading design events. It celebrates all the creative sectors — graphic design, advertising, film, music, fashion design, industrial design, architecture, craft, visual art, new media, publishing, broadcasting and the performing arts — and contributes millions of rand to the country’s economy.’

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Other fresh inventive marvels await you this weekend at the Cape Town Art Fair at the Pavilion in the V&A Waterfront. Taking part are 24 South African galleries, including industry heavyweight Goodman, Stevenson and Everard Read.

Goodman is showing the work of, among others, two popular crowd-pleasers, David Goldblatt and William Kentridge, as well as the relentlessly unclassifiable maverick Mosheleka Langa, and Gerhard Marx, the master of mesmerising detail who won his battle against BMW for plagiarising his enigmatic road-map fragments in an ad.

Stevenson Gallery is doing a solo with the globally successful Zander Blom, a 35-year-old who has transformed his battered home in Britton, Johannesburg, into an abstract artwork, constantly changing.

Everard Read’s choice is Caryn Scrimgeour, the approachable still-life painter whose calm, ethereal bird-eye’s-view of table tops are deceptive, possessed of a curious magnetic power.

In all, as Cape Town’s World Design Capital programme gets under way, there’s an abundance of art and design riches on offer.

And there’s more to come further down the line, says Alayne Renberg, the chief executive of Cape Town Design, the organisation established to deliver on the WDC commitments.

Alayne, a Northern Cape dynamo who worked with Bill Gates at Microsoft for six years, is enthusiastic about what this biennial award, initiated a few years ago by the International Council of World Industrial Designers, aims to highlight.

“Six signature events will happen during a whole year of excitement and we will deliver them well. Other cities have delivered similar events [Torino the first in 2008, Seoul in 2010 and Helsinki in 2012],” says Alayne. “So we know how the standards are, but for me the trick is to thread all of these things together into creative set that doesn’t end when the whirl blows.

“The challenge is to sustain the attention, to sustain the dialogue throughout the year and beyond. “I would just ask Capetonians to participate,” says Alayne. “To achieve our aims, we need everyone to be involved.”

Langa shines on slick art

Visit the Cape Town Art Fair from February 28 to March 2 at the Pavilion, Dock Road, V&A Waterfront and you can board a shuttle to Langa and tour the Township Art Galleries (TAG) as well as all the art on show at the Fair.

The Langa TAG takes you through the streets of Langa to 10 home galleries. Langa is one of the oldest townships in South Africa, but who would have thought that it would one day boast alternative spaces for high-end art from prolific artists such as Zolani Siphumza, Patrick Hole, Velile Soha and Mpheli Gocini.

Shuttle departure times from V&A Waterfront are every hour from 12pm to 4pm; and shuttle departure times from Langa are every hour from 12.30pm to 4.30pm.

The whole experience, including the shuttle ticket, costs R200 and is payable either to the shuttle driver or through the Langa TAG booking section. — Hilary Prendini Toffoli

Buy tickets online via quicket.co.za