

NOTES FROM ACADEME *By Henk Rossouw*

# Love Letter to a University

SO THIS ART PROFESSOR walks into the office of a marine biologist. Her eyes rove over his desk and she spots a curved piece of bone—part of a whale's ear, a memento of his water-logged vocation. She asks to borrow the ear. Then she notices a wooden display cabinet in the corner. Perfect—she needs as many cabinets as she can find. As cheerful as a customer on a shopping spree, she asks the marine biologist, "Will you deliver?"

It's no joke. Many academics and administrators at the University of Cape Town had to deliver the likes of preserved frogs, hand-written poems, and athletics medals kept in a cookie tin to the resolute art professor, Pippa Skotnes, who is director of the university's Michaelis School of Fine Art.

"We carried a great many things out of people's offices," Ms. Skotnes says. "We scrounged through drawers, browsed bookshelves, waited while keys were found to long-locked storerooms, and we recovered treasures"—a stuffed orangutan, a mandolin decorated with ivory and snakeskin, a log-book recording the world's first heart transplant. Ms. Skotnes and her co-artists, Gwen van Embden and Fritha Langerman, gathered thousands of objects to create an exhibition celebrating the professional curiosity of academics. Open until April, it's called "Curiosity CLXXV," and it marks the university's 175th anniversary.

For each of those 175 years, Ms. Skotnes gathered a kind of cabinet. Placed in Hiding Hall, a gallery with a roof arching high above thick teakwood crossbeams, each one is filled with fascinating clutter. The effect is like stumbling into the back room of a museum and discovering the shelves full of objects that never go on display: One of Ms. Skotnes' most astonishing finds was a stiletto shoe with a bit of pierced skull attached to the sharp heel, evidence in a murder investigation courtesy of the forensics department. Astonishment is exactly what she intends—the exhibition catalog begins with a quote from Giambattista Marino, a 16th-century Italian poet: "Let him who does not know how to astonish go work in the stables!"

There is little chance of the professors she has met being sent to the stables just yet. Ms. Skotnes herself was amazed by their research output when she scissored out the titles of their papers from the past 10 years and sewed the long strips, like feathers, onto an academic gown. "All these academics want to know what everybody else is doing," she muses after having spent months chatting with them while raiding their offices for objets d'art. "They wish they could look over the edge of their fields, but they seldom do. So we took their objects and made the objects converse with each other."

Thus an incubator from the teaching hospital is filled with stones from the archaeology department that were used by ancient humans to weigh down their sticks while they dug for edible roots. A row of the delicate, papery skulls of the blue crane—South Africa's national bird—can be found among glittering pipettes and test tubes. Here and there the choice of objects reveals the artist's droll sense of humor: a 20-inch steel Truelove-Salt Biopsy Instrument (according to the manufacturer's box), once used in the medical school for anal probes; an administrative record book from 1917, stamped "Confidential" in red ink, lying open

to a page where a moth had been squashed. A tongue-in-cheek photograph, by Ms. Skotnes, of the usually austere novelist J.M. Coetzee dressed in a cassock, his hands clasped in prayer, alludes to the religious origins of the university.

As she wanders among the cabinets, Ms. Skotnes points out the more serious objects that she has collected in an effort to reveal the university's awkward role during the apartheid years. A black umbrella be-

great-uncle's rudimentary hunting lodge is preserved in a museum in Tromsø, Norway, along with his final legacy, found piled around his icy body in 1908: 15 geese, 23 blue foxes, 36 reindeer, and 22 polar bears.

Ms. Skotnes often exhibits her own artwork in museums. Her controversial 1997 exhibition "Miscast" focused on an infamous apartheid-era diorama of a nomadic Bushman family, cast in plaster, carrying bows and arrows and dressed in skins. (The casts had been made in the early 20th century from living Bushmen, who were supplied with straws so they could breathe when the plaster was wrapped around their faces, and jelly so it wouldn't stick to their hair.) Ms. Skotnes' exhibition included photographs that she unearthed from 19th-century archives showing how European settlers had hunted the Bushmen, collecting trophy heads of South Africa's first inhabitants. That native population, for the most part, no longer exists.

A crucial part of the 1997 exhibition were the notebooks of the linguist Lucy Lloyd, who at first received little recognition for her work in the late 19th century on what is today recognized as an important collection of folklore in the /Xam and !Kung dialects. The stories she collected, writing them down phonetically and translating them into English, are now housed at the university. They are the only complete record of Bushman dialects, and some tell of their people's annihilation.

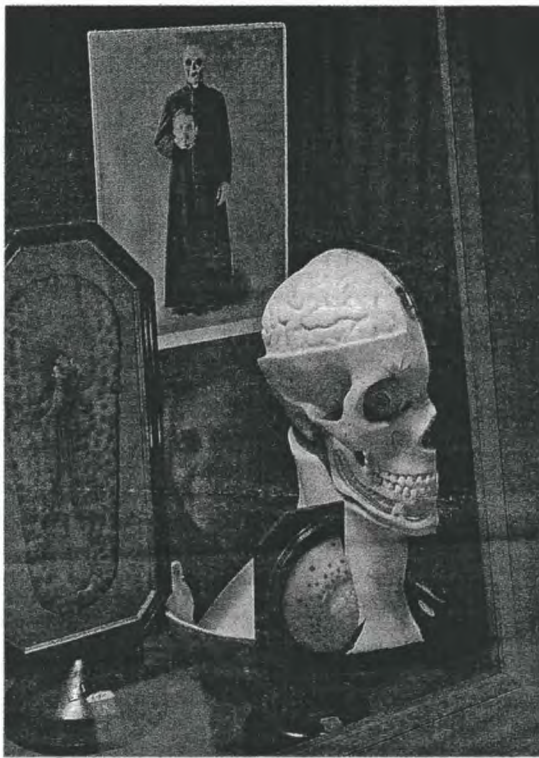
Ms. Skotnes pays for the upkeep of Lloyd's grave (she died in 1914), not far from the university, and outbid everybody else at an auction for a cabinet belonging to Lloyd. It has pride of place at the "Curiosity" exhibition, and Ms. Skotnes has returned to it the musical instruments, such as rattles made of springboks' ears, that the Bushmen gave to the linguist.

In a way the "Curiosity" exhibition is a vast love letter to the university. "I love this institution," Ms. Skotnes says, "for the opportunities it offers for looking at things in a broader perspective."

A walk with Ms. Skotnes among the 175 cabinets makes clear that she also treasures what others might consider junk. "I want what doesn't get seen," she says, "what gets thrown away." An essay by Stephen J. Greenblatt, a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, on a 16th-century debate about whether a holy wafer remains the body of Christ if it is nibbled by a rat fueled her interest in humanity's leftovers.

For example, the stuffed orangutan. It had been clutching a tree branch inside the zoology department since the 1920s—but no one can remember why. "When does meaning leave it?" Ms. Skotnes asks. "What becomes of it when its meaning is gone?"

Ms. Skotnes, who is 39, firmly believes that relics, leftovers, have a pathos all their own. Looking deep into the glass eyes of the orangutan, its fur brittle and falling out, you begin to understand her point. She touches a pile of old notebooks scrawled in shorthand. Ms. Skotnes attended a convent high school, where she learned to write in shorthand, but hardly anyone knows how to read it anymore. She smiles wanly. "Maybe I am a relic," she says.



The art professor Pippa Skotnes (reflected in glass, above) gathered objects from colleagues' offices at the U. of Cape Town—including a shoe impaling a piece of skull (below right)—to celebrate academic curiosity.

longing to a former vice chancellor in the 1980s is accompanied by his handwritten note describing how he wielded it to fend off police officers when they attacked students protesting apartheid on the campus. A newspaper clipping from the 1960s notes that when a black academic was offered a teaching position, the university's governing board vetoed the decision for fear of angering South Africa's government. Still, even serious statements, like a plaque engraved with the words, "88.5% of full professors at UCT are men," are accompanied by playful objects, like a gold-leafed replica of the foot of the first woman to head a local museum.

Museums have always haunted Ms. Skotnes. Her

