



# Revered land

The Karoo plays host to an exuberant outdoor festival and becomes the subject of a solemn one-man protest.

**I**N APRIL, THE KAROO, ICON OF SOUTH AFRICAN landscapes, was the inspiration for two creative events that seemed to differ like chalk and cheese. The one was a noisy, collaborative and organic creative festival; the other a formal solo exhibition in a Johannesburg gallery.

One was seemingly inspired by the need to create a utopian existence for a few days, the other by a need for quiet protest.

AfrikaBurn is a four-day creative happening that literally lights up part of the Tankwa Karoo National Park once a year. Each year, AfrikaBurn is attended by a crowd who build a temporary city where everyone wears outfits that seem to have been inspired by the fables and fairy tales we all grew up with, decorates their vehicles, and makes and exchanges gifts. The burning of a large object forms the highlight of the feast (hence the name).

An enormous amount of emphasis is placed on creative participation, so, according to my friends who were there, a lot of creative thought and planning happens before the event. The multitude of independent creative efforts that culminate during this time contribute to the outcome having a magical and serendipitous air to it. Perhaps that is why their official website ([www.afrikaburn.com](http://www.afrikaburn.com)) calls it a "spectacular result of the creative expression of participants". A result.

Once it's over, everyone leaves, taking with them everything they brought, returning the Karoo to its own silent rhythm.

By all accounts this year's event/festival/result seems to have been a great success. The theme was Mirage – "a naturally occurring optical phenomenon in which light rays are bent to produce an illusion of water, people or objects. A shimmering reflection. Temporary, transient." Like the festival.

The AfrikaBurn concept is based on the famous Burning Man event held once a year in Black Rock Desert, Nevada. The idea for Burning Man started life as an intimate ritual bonfire on Baker Beach, San Francisco, when a small group of friends erected and burned an effigy of a wooden man to celebrate the summer solstice of 1986.

Since then it has migrated and mutated, and the number of participants has multiplied. In 1986, 20



STU SHAPIRO PHOTOGRAPHY

friends saw a 2.4-metre effigy burn. Last year, 53 963 people helped to build the temporary town where, on the Saturday night, the fire consumed the straw man, which reached a total height of 32 metres.

It has also had time to develop a set of 10 principles by which the "town" is governed. These are the ideals of "radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, the principle of 'leave no trace', participation and immediacy" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning\\_Man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_Man)). >>





IAN LANDSBERG

>> Burning Man has spawned a number of similar events all over the world; AfrikaBurn is just one of them.

### Hammering the point

AT THE SAME TIME THAT AFRIKABURN GAVE pleasure to a crowd of creative souls, land artist Strijdom van der Merwe had a solo exhibition at the Circa on Jellicoe Gallery, Everard Read's contemporary exhibition space in Rosebank, Johannesburg.

The show was called *Drawing Clouds in the Karoo* and included an installation piece that filled the entire floor of this supermodern urban space. *Imagine the Unthinkable* was inspired by the lurking threat of hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking", in the Karoo.

Fracking is a process whereby millions of litres of chemically enhanced water are forced into shafts drilled kilometres down into the earth. The purpose is to collect natural gas trapped in the shale found at between one and five kilometres below ground.

Those who love the Karoo are vehemently opposed to this prospect. Their fear that the process will poison the precious underground water is grounded in the sometimes disastrous effects fracking has had in other such projects around the globe.

To the artist, the inevitable defacing that fracking will bring to this vast landscape is another pressing concern. In *Imagine the Unthinkable*, Van der Merwe

used the floor to lay out a "roadmap" in white stripes that connected the various points in the Karoo where these enormous alien drilling machines could potentially be put up. Each place is marked with a map of the area lit with a bare electric bulb and a small mechanised apparatus that hammers down on a wooden board. Everything happens very low down on the floor. The effect is one of an aerial photograph, with the visitor both an out-of-place giant walking the tracts and an observer forced to bend down slightly in order to read the information on the maps.

The 20 hammers bang down with irregular beats, each time attracting attention and confusing the viewer/listener as to the particular source. The random, hard, cold noise has a disconcerting and irritating effect, something one has to get away from after a while.

The rest of the show consists of a series of photographs of land art that Van der Merwe has made and captured on film. The photographs in the end are the only evidence that is left.

The Karoo has been his source of inspiration and his canvas for decades. His work is conceived and executed in a lonely contemplation of that harsh, desolate, demanding, sacred landscape.

The differences between AfrikaBurn and Van der Merwe's exhibition seem immense, yet there are similarities. Both the revellers at AfrikaBurn and Van der Merwe respect the Karoo, leave nothing behind and take away only images.

And both try, in their own ways, to sensitise us to a different way of seeing and experiencing reality, to experience different possible futures.

It reminds me of the road signs that were posted all over our national parks when I was a child in the 1970s: "Leave only footprints, take only photographs."

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STRIJDOM VAN DER MERWE