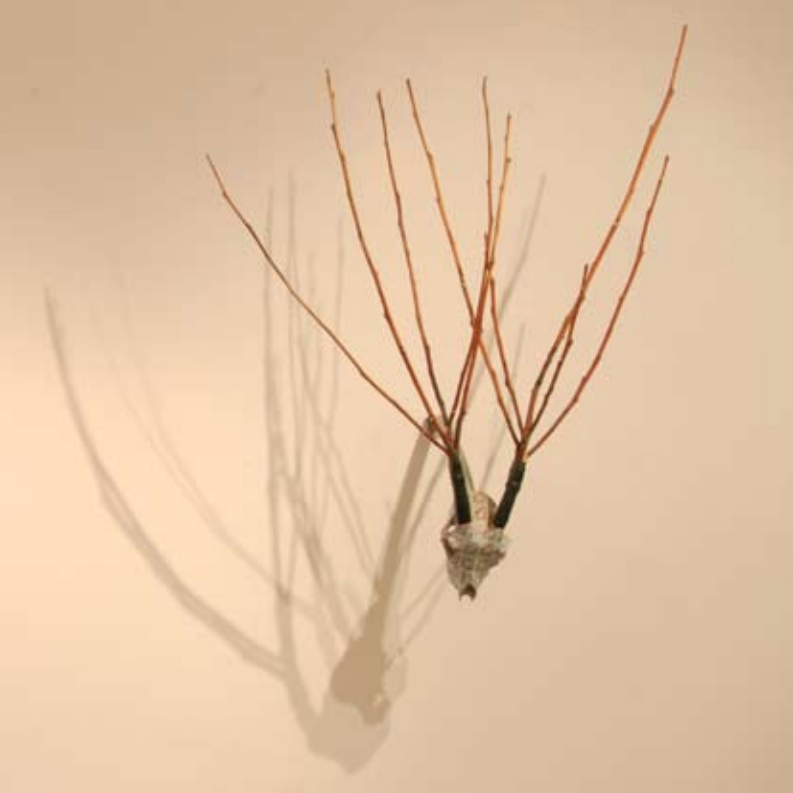


**Sarel Petrus**



**Found cavities: on finding, keeping and arranging things -  
the art of Sarel Petrus**

by Maja Marx

*There is something unsettling in the way things simply survive, through and beyond meaningful human signification, by continual deferral and deference. This is the strange life of things, animated and constrained by invisible relations and yet defiantly autonomous in their discrete physicality. The allure of the thing lies in the way in which it can never be completed, never be fully or perfectly discovered; and it is always set in motion, propelled by human relations. In this way, the thing always exceeds its own narration. And such authority in contingency, indeterminacy, and excess reveals an extra-semantic function of the magical object as the disclosure of powerful force in encounters of meaning and matter, life and death.*

Carolyn Nakamura 2005: 23.

It is no coincidence that the artist Sarel Petrus is also a devoted rock climber, with his second name already implying a proximity to stone, he is squarely positioned within a world of tactile materiality. He is an individual



entrenched in an embodied relationship to his world: as an artist, an explorer of landscapes and as a passionate collector of the seemingly valueless and ordinary. Through the simple act of stumbling upon small treasures in the veld – skulls, bones, tortoise shells and feathers – Sarel Petrus' collection of ordinary things take on the tongue of the eminent found object, described as art created from commonplace objects not normally considered to be art. By definition, the found object obtains connotation through artistic designation, from the context into which it is transposed and the degree of interpretation, modification or adaptation to the object itself.

One could argue that any artist is a collector, congregating parts into a whole whether by composition, aesthetic decision or assemblage. Sarel Petrus' selection of objects are made beyond any conceptual or intellectual decision or impulse, and have instead been chosen based on simple aesthetic or associative selection, collected over a long period and set aside to be assembled into compositions in due time.

As such, the artist's studio doubles as his living quarters and becomes an Everyman's 'wonder cabinet' of sorts – reminiscent of the 17th century notion of the

*Wunderkammer* as a private museum, housing specimens arranged in a manner that appeared scientific but which was in fact primarily theatrical, and served "to stun, more than to order or systematize" (Gould 1992). Sarel Petrus is always surrounded by his chosen objects. In his case, the selection almost always rests with the remains of things that were, with the transient vehicles of the natural processes of life and decay, with objects inherently prone to gradual diminishing, such as bone, paper, feather and hair. It is specifically due to their evanescence that we are lured to them, as never completed, never fully or perfectly discovered. In this way, the ordinary thing always exceeds its own narration; it is set in motion and propelled by human relations, with the artist – as self-styled geologist, forensic pathologist, archaeologist, interpreter and poet – providing value to the seemingly valueless through aesthetic narration. In this way, when seeing his work in gallery context for the first time, a large part of his process is omitted for most viewers.

Unadorned, yet commanding references are hinted at in his assemblages. Postage stamps collected over years are used to cover the skulls of antelope, merging the language of currency, obsession, and decorative pattern into a

striking visual signature. With this, the trophy partly acts as witness to domestication and ownership, and to mortality and memorialisation. In the same way, the commonplace use of the stamp in facilitating conversations across distances, converses its position in developing a currency of longing. As Sarel Petrus explains, "the stamp stands for the cost of a conversation, the capitalisation of the poetic, a seemingly dead symbol". Similarly, tortoise shells, discarded bicycle seats, letters written by family members, bits of cloth and grass mat are congregated to form a strange but wonderfully textured conversation between inanimate things. This is found in the simple beauty of the hollow within a tortoise shell, whose previous life can only be imagined, in the quiet application of the reversed stamps onto the inner surface of the shell. Consider how the image of a skull is tonally drawn onto the object of the skull: soft pink stamps filling the shadowed cavities of the eye sockets and mouth, white stamps with the image of a small Protea highlighting the banks and protrusions of the skull. How *Syringa Vulgaris* twigs become horns, or how the application of white Titanium Oxide to the white skull of an antelope translates as a double affirmation of its materiality, of its stone, bone whiteness.

The artist once told me a pertinent story about an unexpected find. He tells the story of going for a walk in the veld on a trip to the small Karoo mountain village of Nieu Bethesda in the Kompassberg valley. There, he came upon a piece of paper lying in the veld and realised, upon closer inspection, that it was in fact a letter, addressed to his own mother. Now, I should acknowledge at this point that his mother did stay in the village three years prior, and that it is quite possible that a letter could be sent to an address years after the occupant's departure. What confounds me is the simple magic of a landscape of objects talking back to its rambler, a landscape saying: yes, your mother was here, yes, she has moved on, and yes, the cavity of her past (and yours) is still here, like a tortoise shell.

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**Images:** (page 3) UNTITLED, 2002

**Medium:** Syringa twigs, goat skull, aluminium, used stamps & insulation tape

**Dimensions:** 80cm x 65cm x 48cm

**Images:** (page 5) TIME OUT OF MIND, 2003

**Medium:** Kudu skull, wood, bovine vertebra & used stamps

**Dimensions:** 80cm x 80cm x 57cm

**Image:** (pages 10 & 11) EEN RAND, 2003

**Medium:** Springbok hide, springbok horns, fabric, bicycle seat, wood, tape measure & steel

**Dimensions:** 114cm x 117cm x 45cm

**Images:** (pages 12 & 13) FROM THIS WORLD, 2007

**Medium:** Tortoise shell, wood, springbok horns, grass mat & used stamps

**Dimensions:** 125cm x 290cm x 35cm

**Image:** (page 14 & 15) CONVEYOR, 2007

**Medium:** Found object(traditional drum), wood, hyrax skulls, used stamps & PVA

**Dimensions:** 111cm x 58cm x 42cm

**Images:** (page 16 ) HOLE I, 2006

**Medium:** Wood, bicycle seat, lead & PVA

**Dimensions:** 118cm x 55cm x 22cm

**Image:** (page 17) HOLE II, 2006

**Medium:** Wood, springbok horns, lead & PVA

**Dimensions:** 117.5cm x 54cm x 17cm

**Images:** (pages 18 & 19) FUTURE SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE, 2007

**Medium:** Bronze & wood

**Dimensions:** 48cm x 69cm x 8cm

**Image:** (page 20 & 21) Installation view Map South Africa -

Graskop, The Graskop Hotel, 2008

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⊕ - Graskop

⊕ - Dullstroom

⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane

⊕ - Irene - Tshwane

⊕ - Richmond

⊕ - Cape Town