From the City to the Sea

Artist Jacki McInnes, this year's winner of the Kunstraum Sylt Artist's Residency, writes about her work for Classicfeel.

Since relocating to Johannesburg in 2006, I have worked from a studio in Doornfontein. Nowadays, Doornfontein awkwardly straddles the divide between the affluent areas of Killarney and Houghton and the chronically dodgy, mixed-use residential and light industrial areas of downtown.

Moving between these two disparate worlds on a daily basis has inevitably shaped my views and, by extension, my artistic production. I think my work could be described as a sort of 'binary interrogation' where I compare opposites such as migration versus xenophobia, material aspirations versus poverty and the survival strategies of newly urbanised populations.

Also central to my work are questions relating to the loss of our societal moral compass and to the binary opposing forces to which we are subjected: nature on nature; man on nature; man on man; and inevitably; nature on man.

Many of these ideas are evident in an on-going body of work I began in 2009: House 38: Hazardous Objects (juxtaposes photographs of the informal recyclers of Johannesburg (taken by the late photographer John Hodgkiss) with my own lead replicas of recyclable waste – coke cans, polystyrene punnets and the ubiquitous plastic soft-drink bottles found everywhere.

My objects, duplicating the trash recyclers collect, are intentionally crafted in lead, which, although a naturally-occurring metal, is also both toxic and completely non-degradable. The objects are intended as tokens: both to the positive environmental role played by recyclers, and to the permanence of man's devastating impact on the planet.

Lead has been a recurring material in my work since the 1990s. There are not many artists who work with it and people seem to be genuinely afraid of it, frequently asking me what safety precautions I take. The reason I work in lead is an unusual one. I trained in Radiotherapy before studying Fine Art and lead is, of course, used as a shield to protect the healthy parts of the body from the radiation used to treat cancerous cells.

From the outset I loved lead's malleability and the wealth of conceptual meaning attached to the material. Lead will never decompose or erode, whatever I create from it will remain until the end of time. Long
after I am gone. When one beats lead, it conforms to whatever shape it is beaten onto and once it has taken that shape, it can never be beaten flat and smooth again. Lead will always retain the memory of the shape it took.

In 2010 I was awarded the Sacatar – Spier Contemporary Fellowship Award for House 38: Hazardous Objects. The award offered me a twomonth artist’s residency to the Instituto Sacatar on the Island of Itaparica off the coast of Brazil. While there, I continued to work with beaten lead but now added natural objects such as seedpods to my repertoire. I installed these objects, site-specifically, along the ‘high water mark’ on the local beach. This beach was once pristine but the island is 16km off the coast of the huge city of Salvador and tons of rubbish wash up daily. In conversations with the locals, I learned that the off-shore coral reefs are under threat and the coastline mangrove forests are rapidly receding. Itaparica is home to subsistence fishermen and as the damage to their island continues, their catch and livelihoods dwindle.

Whilst on this residency, an interest in working conceptually with the movements and mysteries of the sea began to evolve. The sea offers enormous allegorical potential for an artist. It remains the last great barrier to man and in spite of all the technological advances in the last 100 years, we have only explored a fraction of its area. As a consequence of our ignorance of what lies below the surface, we have done untold harm. By virtue of its vastness and its seeming remoteness, we have come to regard the sea as a source of limitless bounty, while paradoxically using it as the burial place for any number of toxic pollutants.

I began to experiment with fishhooks a year ago, using them to trace the ripple and wave patterns of the sea. The dangerously sharp spines and cold steeliness of the hooks is equivocal – aggressive and menacing, yet strangely compelling. It often happens that the areas I choose to focus on in my art were damaged a long time ago and are now in a process of natural or unnatural rehabilitation to a new kind of beauty. In this there is both the inclination to mourn what is lost but also a sense of hope for the future.

Having just exhibited the solo, de Magneia, in June 2012, I find myself at a creative end of sorts, but also at a beginning. I’ve begun to work on new themes, attempting to capture the seascape’s beauty but simultaneously allude to latent environmental damage by imbuing my work with a sense of threat through my materials and creative processes. The 2012 Kunstraum Syt Residency could not have come at a better time. Sylt is unique in that it lies near densely populated, urbanised mainland Germany and yet retains an unspoilt remoteness. Its status as a World Heritage Site also marks it as an excellent location for my visual research towards a new body of work.

On previous residencies I have gained the greatest benefits when I have been open-minded – not only with respect to the artistic inspirations I was hoping to find but also to the vastly different geographical, cultural and social experiences I could gain. Residencies offer an artist the time to ‘escape’ from the day-to-day pressures that constantly nibble away at one’s creative endeavours. I’m thrilled that I will soon have the opportunity to immerse myself in Sylt’s very particular character of place.