

CONVERSATION WITH A CARVER

Andries Visser Giving Life to Wood

Inspired by a passion for conjuring all things held deep in the imagination, Namibian-born artist and woodworker Andries Visser magically transforms solid wood into exquisite sculptures that exude fluidity and motion.

Andries Visser's sublime skill, as well as his workmanship, and handcrafted originality is a natural self-honed gift, discovered later in his life after a serendipitous opportunity presented itself, making it impossible to ignore his passion and calling in life.

This is his inspiring story.

How did growing up in Namibia shape you as a person, and creative?

Growing up in Namibia was a real blessing. Life was simple and honest.

I grew up in a family of humble means but rich in the qualities that mattered. I had two caring and present parents with an unwavering moral compass, and an older sister whom I loved dearly.

My parents were outdoorsy folks, and we spent many weekends camping in the desert or by the ocean. Namibia is a vast, sparsely populated country, and camping did not mean that we were at a

neatly organised campsite with ablution and a tuckshop. We usually just gathered up some friends and headed into the desert or up the coast until we found an interesting geological feature and then set up camp. My Mom was a lady and not one to be associated with a bunch of ruffians, so "setting up camp" usually meant that a small, tented town with all the amenities sprung up like a Bedouin Oasis in the middle of nowhere. And then we were set free to roam, explore, play, or be bored in Nature. And there is nothing to stimulate your imagination like being bored or playing without toys. This crucially developed the skill of vivid visualisation that I find so invaluable in sculpting.

What prompted you to study law and move to South Africa?

In the early 1980s, Namibia received its first broadcast television, and it was a wonderfully enticing view of the world outside of my bubble. A popular television series at the time was LA Law. It portrayed

such an exciting, romantic, and prosperous picture of the profession that I was left with no choice - I was going to study law. My parents were supportive of this as they wished for me a life of means and prosperity and, supported by my uncanny knack to debate myself out of chores and sticky situations, it seemed a logical choice.

Namibia did not have a University at the time, and the best law faculty was in our neighbouring country, South Africa.

So, I packed my bags and headed off over the horizon to find my destiny.

I was in for a rude awakening, however. After spending some time doing my articles, I became convinced that this was not where or how I planned to spend my life.

I completely turned my back on it.

This left me quite destitute and searching for my purpose. For a time, I was searching aimlessly, not knowing what that "thing" was that I was supposed to do. As a student, I started doing rock climbing and soon qualified as a rock-climbing instructor. Harking back to my



LEFT: *Tree of time*

adventurous childhood, I spent time working as an adventure guide while I also played in a rock band.

But I had an education, and I had ambition, and the life of a rock-climbing musician, albeit tremendous fun, was not promising the life of means myself or my folks had in mind for me. It was also at this time that I met my lovely wife-to-be and, knowing that I wanted a stable family environment, I “put away childish things” and embarked on a corporate career.

When did the shift away from the corporate world happen? And why? When did the artist inside of you decide to reveal himself?

Fast forward 20 years. I had very successfully climbed the corporate ladder and had an excellent income. But corporate was all-consuming; I was absent a lot, even when I was at home, my relationship with my wife was taking strain, and I felt like a spectator watching my kids grow up. There was just so much on my plate,



and it all felt a little empty, always pulling me away from the things that mattered. When I asked my company, “How much do you want?” all they ever said was, “More, more, more...” The security of the golden handcuffs was starting to chafe.

Then came a catalyst in the form of a terrible motorcycle accident. For three months, I was stuck in a hospital bed, staring at the ceiling and letting all the voices in my head have their say. That little whisper of “purpose” and “time flying by” grew louder and more adamant. I had always been creative, and by now, I knew that this was probably my biggest strength and my strongest desire, but I did not know what that would look like. I loved working with wood. I had done several innovative and singular furniture pieces as a hobby over the years, and I was allowing myself a cheeky dream of making a life with furniture design.

Sometime after returning to work, not being able to quiet the whisper, a corporate restructure presented an opportunity. The cage door was open, and all that was needed was courage and a leap of faith.

With the all-important support of my family, I decided to give it a go.

Tell us about your first experiment with the medium? How did it feel?

I had a century-old glass Japanese fishing net float, about 40cm in diameter, that washed up on the Namibian coast, and I always envisioned this ball cupped in a big wooden hand, demonstrating our ownership and control over such a seemingly fragile and innocent yet terrifyingly destructive object. I knew the only way to realise this vision was to attempt it myself, and while I had never sculpted before, I decided to be brave. I

OPPOSITE: *Angel in the wall*
 RIGHT: *Defiance*
 BELOW: *Distraught Destroyer*

could not find a piece of wood big enough, so I made a block from laminated wood and went at it with a grinder and reckless abandon. Nothing to lose, right?

And there it was, in an instant, it all made sense. I understood it immediately, I could visualise the hand, and I just needed to take away the bits that were not part of it. It felt right, it was like an unnoticed tension was released within me, and I felt an indescribable joy and fulfilment bubble to the surface. The result echoed the satisfaction, and I immediately afterwards decided to try something bigger and more complex. Using laminated wood meant that I was not limited by size or shape, and I could source from sustainable sources –



being environmentally conscious, this is particularly important to me.

And thus, at the ripe age of 46, I stumbled upon my purpose, I was to be a sculptor.

The road is not an easy one, the learning curve is steep, but the reward and the possibilities are endless. Because I get energy from what I do, instead of just giving energy to the “have to do’s”, I have so much more to give my family, and life truly has acquired a flavour that I would never have known.

What inspires your designs?

I am fascinated with the human form, the expression of emotion and capturing meaningful moments in time that evoke, communicate, and express. I want my work to have meaning and to express an opinion. They all have a story; I do not sculpt for purely decorative purposes. Wood as a medium is singular, meaning that the original cannot be recreated. You can never have an exact copy made, not by myself or by technology.

Parting words of wisdom?

I would encourage anyone and everyone to risk continuing the search for their purpose and their passion. It truly never is too late. Even if you do not make it your livelihood, it is an inexhaustible energy source and joy. It is the way we were meant to live our lives.

Visser's work can be viewed at Art @ Clocktower Gallery at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town, Art @ Hermanus Gallery at the Courtyard in Hermanus Western Cape, International Sculpture Festival, and the Sculpture Garden in Franschhoek. For more information, visit www.visserdesign.net.

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