

Green art of Kai Lossgott

A plant perceives in the same way human skin does. It scars, it heals. It remembers. In doing so, it also lends vision to the incredible living art of contemporary artist Kai Lossgott of Rosebank. By Nelia Viver.

Only visible against the light, the transparent engravings in Kai Lossgott's works of art gleam, some powerful and stark in the simplicity of their message. Other are deeply expressive in their fragile intricacy. 'Shoot,' reads one, 'in spring his heart is open as a gun.'

Using an etching needle, a typewriter or laser-engraver the artist uses leaves – those of a poplar, sycamore or spruce tree, perhaps foxglove or Japanese maple, even a Cape Stock Rose leaf – as his canvas, to express an inner image or a poem.

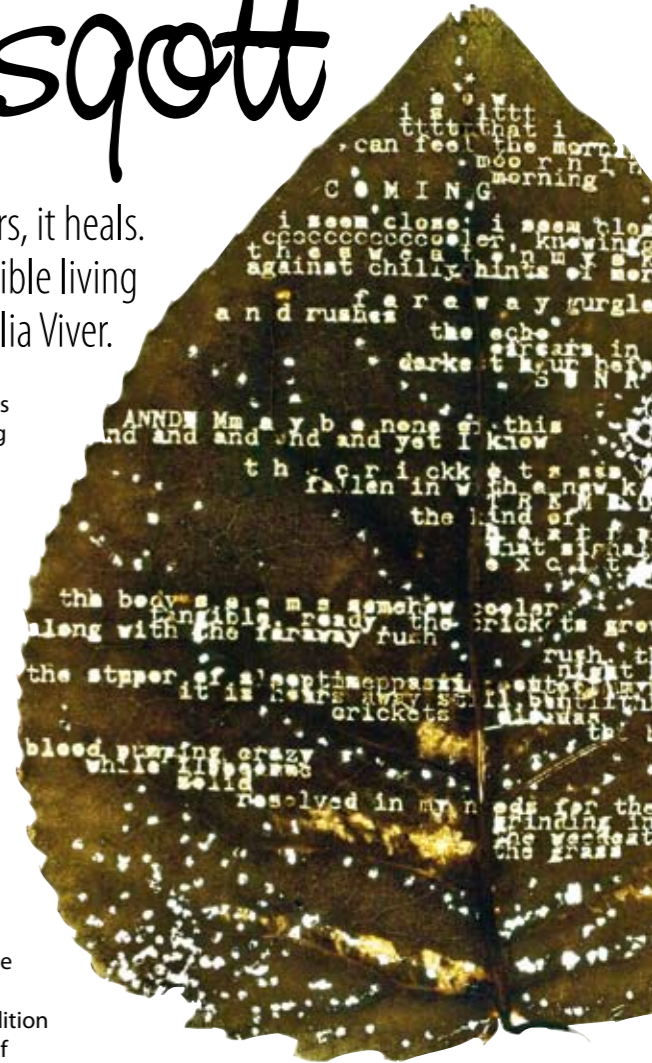
Drawing on the philosophy of Deep Ecology for raw inspiration, in search of the connections between human, cultural and natural worlds, he creates his unique art by making minute incisions, punctures and impressions into the living tissue of plants, the very cells and veins of the leaf. Rather than seeking perfection, he finds beauty in incorporating natural elements, such as weather damage and insect bites.

"I'm fascinated by the links between ecology, neurology and language," he explains. "The act of engraving highlights the fragility of my material and the brittle connection between human and environment. In my work, I seek contact with the surface of the leaf, often close to the point of its complete destruction opening space for the light to come through."

Four years ago, he began with this current body of work, titled 'nothing with skin is blind'. "I've always had a connection with leaves," he remembers, "even back in my childhood, when I would play by 'writing' on them with a pin. And it goes even deeper than that, as I grew my own herb garden as a teenager, years before it became fashionable."

Typical of much of Kai's creative work, exploring unconventional materials, he had to start from scratch. "Using the same methods as museums, once engraved and pressed, I preserve the final treated leaves between two sheets of glass, allowing for minimal contact with oxygen and preventing moisture," he explains.

Paradoxically, while his limited edition line-drawing prints fly off the wall of art galleries and he can't keep up with



'The act of engraving highlights the fragility of my material and the brittle connection between human and environment'

the demand, mainstream commercial galleries find it challenging to give space to the fragile eco-art they see captured in Kai's light-boxes. "The problem with

experimental contemporary art in mainstream galleries is that collectors are often concerned about how long the materials are going to last. I just tell them about my archival methods and the dried Roman laurel wreath in the British Museum in London that is over 2000 years old." Kai recently sold 31 works of his art within three days, after being invited to exhibit at Design Indaba 2011 by the Absa Gallery.

Photos by Nicklas Zimmer.

"My own creative journey has taught me that passion and integrity are more important than quick money in the long run," he states soberly, "and more importantly for me, each medium that I work in, adds another dimension to my own evolution."

"On a deeper level, when I began this journey, I was dealing with a very dark period in my life, filled with existential angst, battling debilitating depression and a yearning for renewal and connection."

"Engaging with the simplicity of the natural world was very different from the academic world I was caught up in, where one is always immersed in assimilating other people's theories and philosophies, writing essays in which you often do not argue for your own beliefs but aim at top marks. Academia does not easily cultivate self-reflection."

"Once I decided to leave lecturing and my intellectual obsessions, I started the long journey to learning to focus on the simple things which had always eluded me in life, although I never knew it."

"I hope my artworks connect people to the powerful conversation between nature and us, so that each, in turn, can enter into a reflection on where they find silence and rest."

"It's has been a very affirming journey to realise that I can make something so very small, so very simple, yet with a far greater impact than the huge, laborious 2 x 2 metre paintings I did at art school. I've also reached a point in my career where somehow people who collect and commission my work, find me."

An artist's journey

Kai Lossgott is a contemporary artist, one for whom the idea or impulse behind his creative work is more important than medium or technique. He comfortably crosses disciplines, inspired to push the boundaries and breed new forms of expression.

The son of a German sculptor and an Afrikaans artist, **he has graduated from three different universities, each time cum laude** in documentary filmmaking and dance theatre, advanced visual arts and lastly, with a masters in creative writing.

Over the years, his **poems have regularly been published** in respected journals, his **visual art scooped up** for top corporate collections, his **experimental films** shown at avant garde festivals on



Kai during one of his performance pieces.

five continents, his **site-specific theatre pieces** performed in the streets of the Mother City, and last year he was **curator** of the innovative 2010 City Breath Festival of Video Poetry and Performance.



Talking to trees...

Although we are intrinsically part of the natural world, we are losing our relationship with it. By disregarding the living systems of the planet, we are disregarding ourselves by no longer recognising our own need for silence, space and sensitivity.

We have certain features in common with plants. Both develop in symmetry, with a form of skin, branches and capillaries containing blood or sap, and perceive a daily and seasonal progression in the body.

I'm drawn to Buddhist and Taoist meditation, which offer an embodied and integrated approach to cognition, outside the workings of the conscious mind. It facilitates a natural 'language' of perception, an unconscious rhythm of silence and sound that runs through every living thing. I often attempt to depict this **state of crossing from wakefulness into sleep** in which both mind and body are at rest.

My newly published book of plant leaf engravings and poems, **Talking to the trees outside my window while I sleep** evolved from sleep and the sense of touch, but also from being silent in nature and experiencing its living presence.

View more of Kai's work and order his book from www.kailossgott.com