

15 MINUTES WITH KAI LOSSGOTT

Contemporary artist Kai Lossgott holds a Bachelors in Journalism from Rhodes University (specialising in documentary filmmaking and dance theatre), an Advanced Diploma in Visual Arts from UNISA, and an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town, all three cum laude.



THAT'S QUITE AN UNUSUAL NAME YOU HAVE. WHAT'S THE ORIGIN?

It might sound very exotic, but it is actually just the German form of the English or French name Guy. My father is German; my mother Afrikaans. In the old languages of Europe, Kai means variously 'keeper of the keys or earth', or 'quay', referring to a safe harbour. In both Japanese and Hawaiian it means 'ocean'. It was the name of one of King Arthur's knights, as well as of a famous samurai. In Burmese, it means 'unbreakable'. In the Yoruba language of Nigeria, it means 'love'.

YOU MOVED FROM FILM-MAKING TO BEING AN ARTIST. WHY THE SHIFT?

When I was painting as a teenager at the National School of the Arts, I had this vision of moving paintings, which is how I ended up in film. Both my parents are artists and, really, my film-making was always a continuation of that. Being stuck in an editing suite for hours, days and months really opened my eyes to the fact that I had to make a choice about what I wanted in life. The shift was really one away from the industrial film context, which is a factory where I burnt out with chronic fatigue and depression, to a personal context, which is

more entrepreneurial and through which I can express my authenticity. I took a big pay cut at a very early age by going solo and deciding I was not going to wake up when I was 60 and realise I hadn't lived. The TV industry taught me I could produce quickly in a short space of time; art taught me that the work I am proud of takes longer.

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YOU ARE A POET TOO. WHEN DOES THAT SIDE EMERGE?

At the moment, mostly in insomniac moments around 3am. Writers are brilliant at avoiding and procrastinating. I have this computer program called *Write or Die* – when I turn it on it freezes the screen for however long you ask it to, so that you can't do

anything else on your computer except type. Then I am forced to write for 10 to 20 minutes. If you stop typing for longer than 10 seconds, the screen goes blood red. It's very funny. I use my poems in my drawings and plant-leaf engravings, and publish them in journals.

DO ALL THE HATS YOU WEAR COME TOGETHER WHEN YOU'RE CREATING SOMETHING?

Sometimes; sometimes not. They're less like hats that I take on and off, and more like extra arms that I use to do different things, or even extra fingers on hands, all of them are busy all the time when I am making something. It's about what the artwork needs at that moment.

HOW DOES NATURE INSPIRE YOU?

I am inspired by the experience of being silent in nature and realising that it has a living presence. Through spending time in nature, one comes to realise that, although we have removed nature from our urban lives, we are inextricably linked to it. My leaf engravings are simple but powerful statements trying to re-establish a connection with the natural world. In protecting nature, we protect ourselves.

TAKE US THROUGH THE PROCESS OF ENGRAVING LEAVES.

I engrave green leaves by hand with a pin or an etching needle, or put them in a typewriter and type on them, or I press and dry them and burn the images on with a laser engraver. Then I freeze them to kill off insect contamination and sandwich them between two sheets of glass to protect them from moisture. They are then presented in a light box, as this is the only way you can see the images.

WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THE WAVE OF DISASTERS THAT HAS PLUNGED MANY PEOPLE INTO INTROSPECTION?

The earth is changing. A Chinese proverb says: 'He who knows what was, knows what will come again.' The activity of the physical forces that shape our earth has varied over