



## J H Pierneef (1886-1957)

Jacob Hendrik Pierneef was born in Pretoria on 13 August 1886. He spent his early years in Pretoria and went to school with a number of friends who all became famous and prominent members of society. These included Fanie Eloff, the sculptor who exhibited on a number of occasions with Pierneef, and the architects Gordon Leith [who produced architectural designs for the Bank] and Gerard Moerdijk (who would later design the Voortrekker Monument). An appreciation for art, architecture, literature and music was fostered from an early age.

When the British forces occupied Pretoria in June 1900, his father, Gerrit Pierneef, opted to take his family to Holland to avoid being interned, since he was known to have close ties with the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. J H Pierneef was 14 years old at the time and the move to Holland gave him further opportunity to develop his interest in art. It was at this time that he received his first drawing lessons from an elderly architect in Hilversum.<sup>1</sup> He also took on a part-time job at a paint factory where he acquired a sound knowledge of paints. The family returned to Pretoria at the end of 1903 after the signing of the Peace of Vereeniging. Although the young Pierneef was not able to realise his ambition to study architecture, he was fortunate to receive painting lessons from Frans Oerder and Anton van Wouw (his godfather). He sold his first painting in 1910 to the distinguished art dealer Emil Schweickerdt. By 1912 Pierneef had started to work as a librarian at the State Library in Pretoria to supplement his income. He was fortunate to work there at night and was able to paint during the day. Most of Pierneef's works dating from the early part of his career were painted *in situ*. It was only later, especially when working on public commissions, that he began working more from a studio environment, basing his large-scale works in oil on sketches and watercolour studies.

Between 1920 and 1923 he taught art at the Heidelberg and Pretoria Normal Colleges. It was during this time that he made his first trips to the then South West Africa and began taking a serious interest in rock art. His first public commission for the Ficksburg High School hall dates from this period and was based on his initial rock art studies. In 1924 Pierneef was able to give up his job as a teacher and concentrate on his painting full time. His first major patron was Johan Schoeman, who was the owner of all the land in the vicinity of the recently developed Hartbeespoort Dam.<sup>2</sup> It was during this period that Pierneef met a 35-year-old woman whom he would marry six months later in November 1924. Her name was Mariane (May) Francis Schoep. Before he could marry May, he had to undergo a complicated divorce from his first wife, Agatha. Although this was a difficult time for Pierneef, he was now able to move into a very happy and productive part of his life. Over the next 20 years he created his most dynamic work, which would redefine every notion of landscape painting in South Africa.

With his architectural background it was inevitable that Pierneef would begin to simplify the structure of the landscape. This application of geometrical principles injected a profound sense of order, balance and harmony in his work. In this regard the theories of the Dutch artist Willem van Konijnenburg were very influential in the evolution of Pierneef's compositional and painterly technique. A number of Pierneef's greatest paintings were created at this time and include the seminal work *Study in Blue* (1928), not in this Collection, which broke up the tree-tops, clouds and mountain into geometrical rectangular facets.<sup>3</sup> Although they were some of the most advanced and avant-garde paintings of their day, these experiments pointed towards abstraction and did not meet with public approval. His exhibition of these modern and futuristic works, held in Pretoria in November 1928, was a financial disaster, and led to another important turning point in his career. Pierneef decided from this time on to curb his experimental urges and to continue capturing the beauty of the South African bushveld for which the public already loved and admired him.

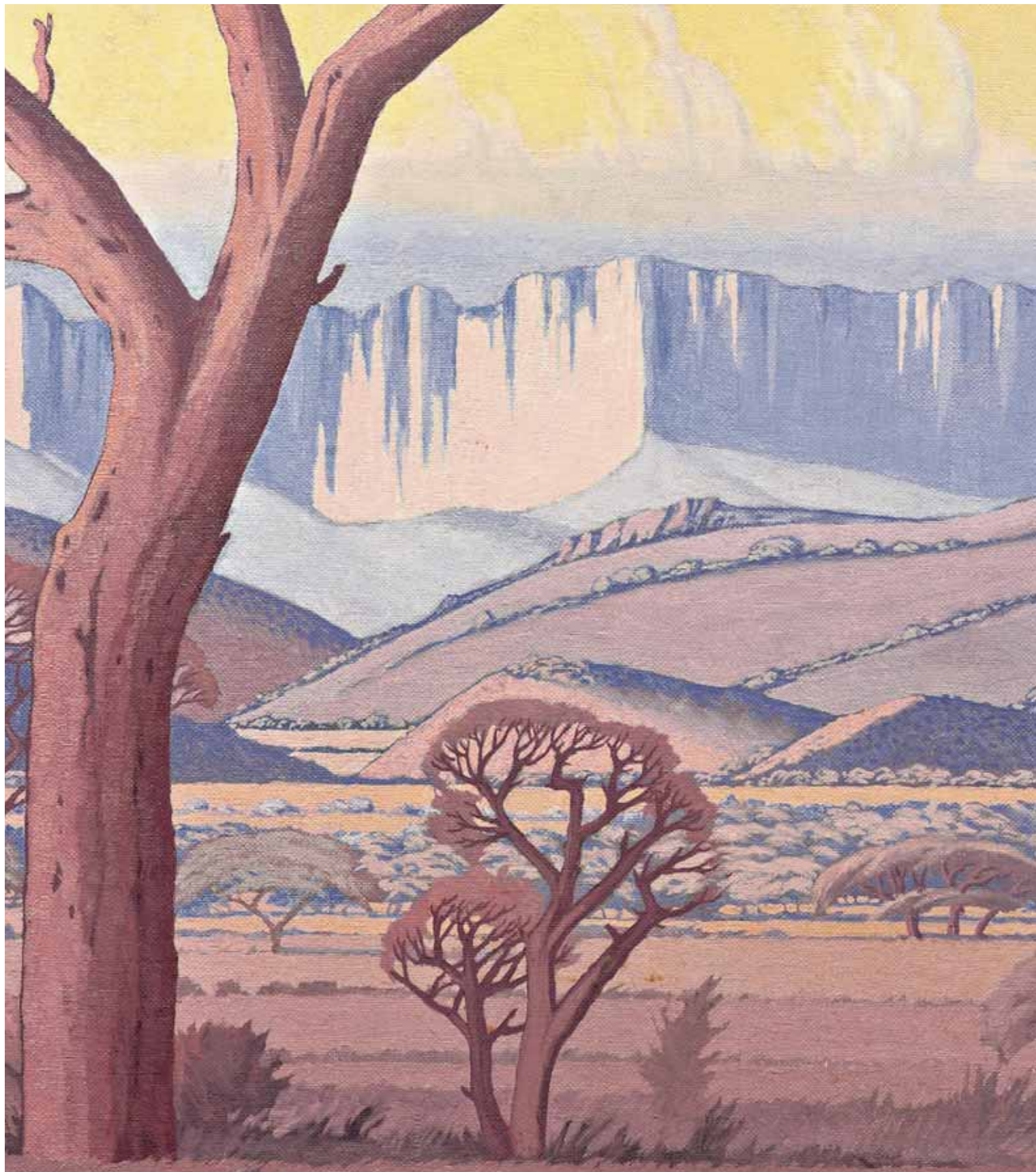
Pierneef was a prolific artist. Shortly after his death in 1957, it was estimated by his widow, May Pierneef, that her husband produced between two and three hundred prints (which include linocuts, woodcuts and etchings), between six and eight thousand watercolours and drawings, and between two and three thousand oil paintings. His love for the beauty of the South African landscape is best expressed by the prominent Pretoria architect and lifelong friend, Norman Eaton: "Pierneef's approach was never sophisticated or intellectual, but rather retained the wonder and perception of a child. His strength lay in intuitive action with the brush guided by a deep sense of personal understanding of the subject and things to be portrayed."<sup>4</sup>

Although painted just four years before his death, *Bushveld near Thabazimbi* (1953) is a magnificent example of Pierneef's skill as a landscape painter. All the classic elements of his work are present, including majestic trees, mountains and clouds. In this work Pierneef's unique sense of composition and simplification of form perfectly captures the distinctive qualities of the South African landscape. **Warren Siebrits**

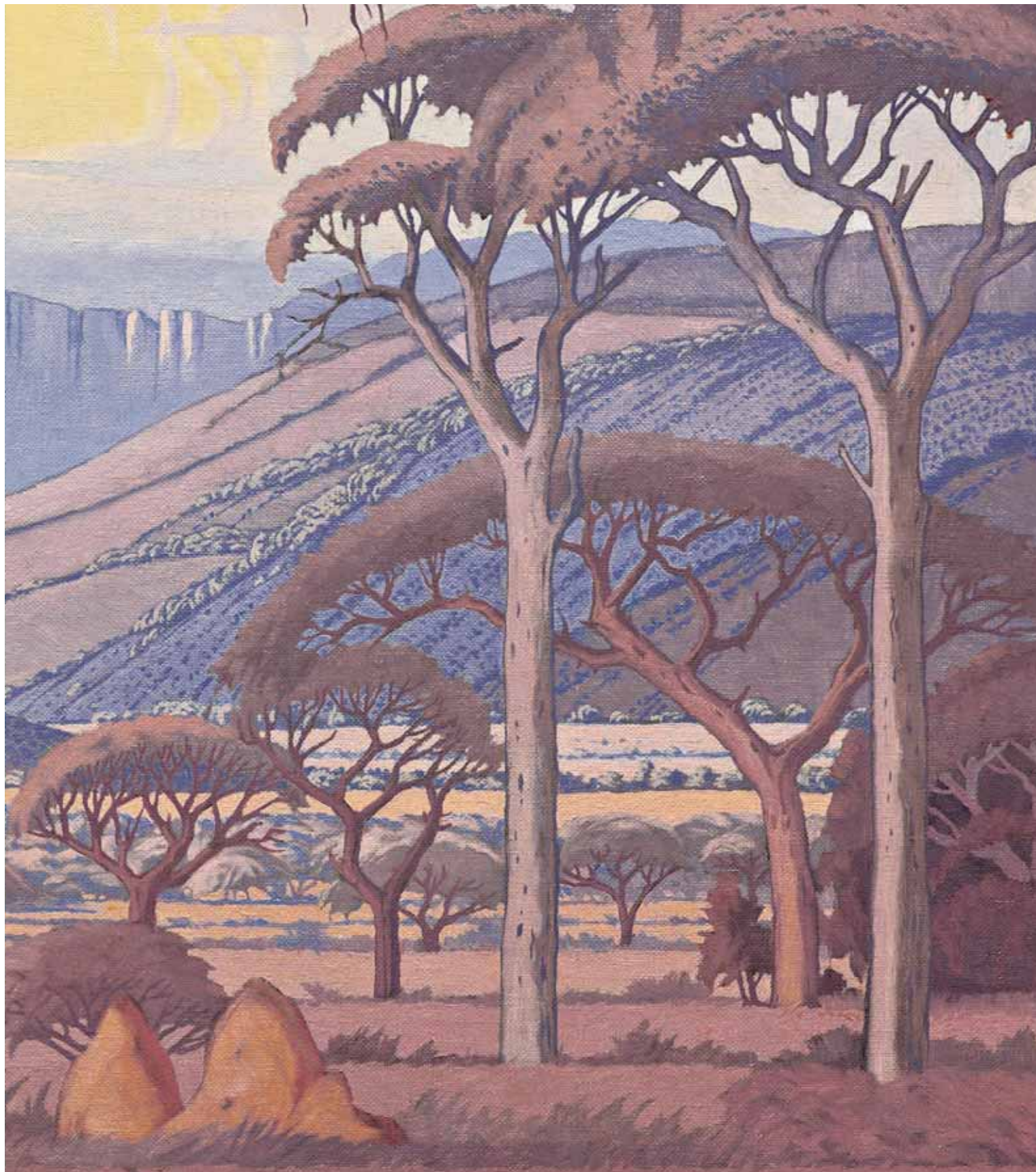
Opposite and detail overleaf:  
Pierneef, Jacob Hendrik (1886-1957)  
*Bushveld near Thabazimbi* 1953  
Oil on canvas, 102 x 170.5 cm









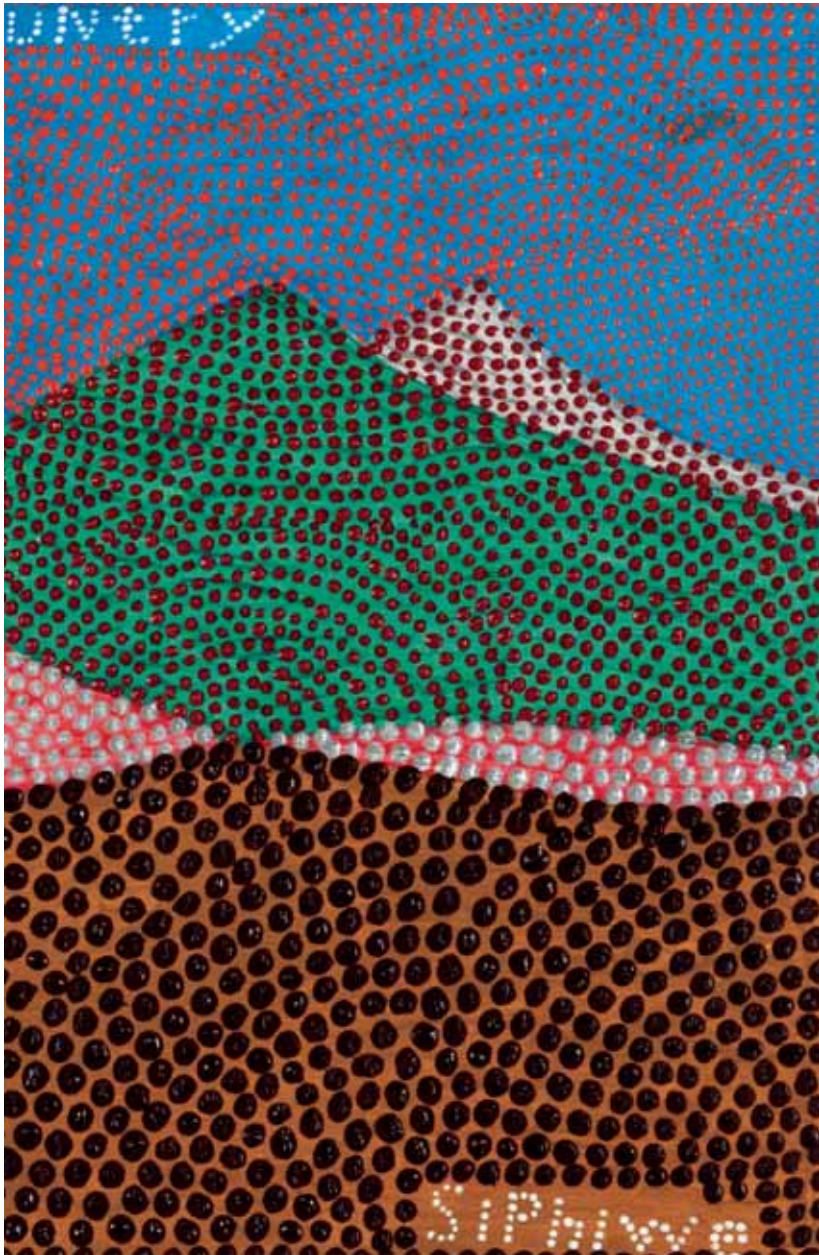


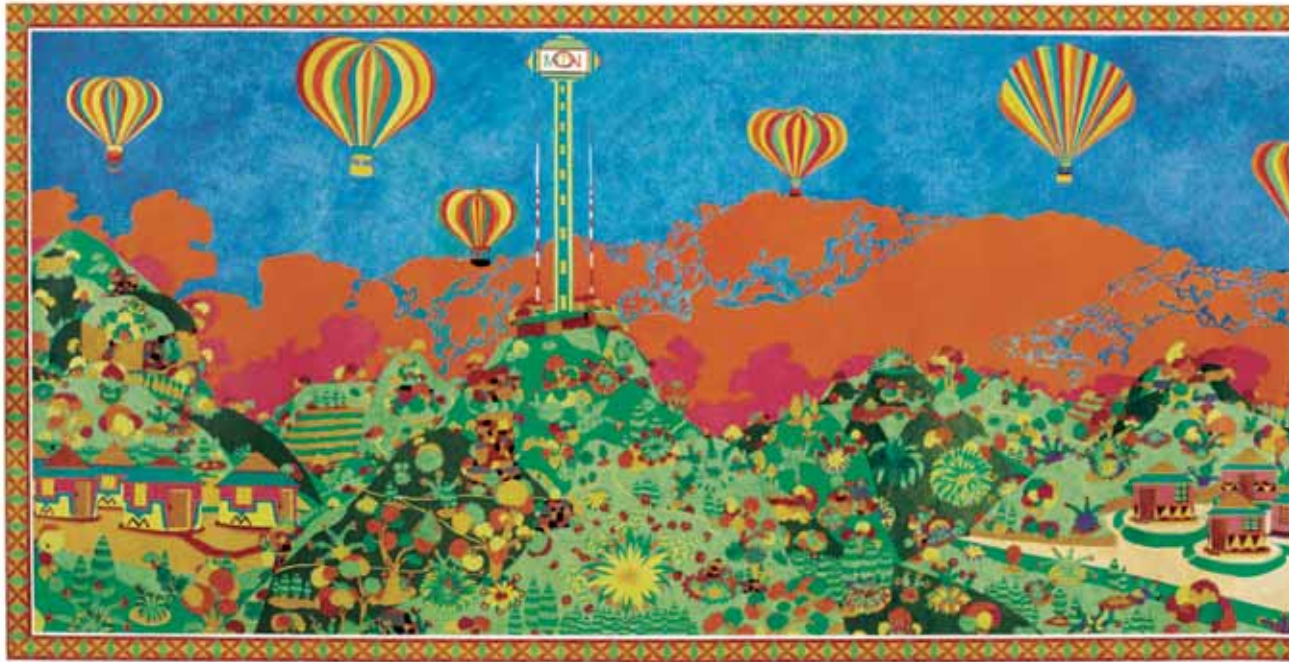


Right:  
Zulu, Siphiwe (b.1961)  
*Feminine Country* 2005  
Enamel paint on paper, 50.5 x 69 cm









### *Idealisation and fantasy*

J H Pierneef's idealisation of South African geography forms part of a visual tradition that imagines the future through the present. Curiously, an interest in or preoccupation with the future is not something that has engaged many South African artists working since 1994. It is for this reason that the following two works in the Bank's Collection, which form part of this tradition, are noteworthy: Derrick Nxumalo's *KwaZulu-Natal Landscape* (1997) and Sphiwe Zulu's *Feminine Country* (2005). Unlike Sthembiso Sibisi's *Welcome to KwaZulu* (1997, p.56), which is attentive to the (admittedly abbreviated) realism of rural geographies, Nxumalo's landscape is a surrealistic composition in the tradition of the fantasies and utopias of Walter Battiss's *Fook Island*. For the entire length of Nxumalo's narrow landscape, the hills are crammed with brightly coloured plants that vary between the exotic and the make-believe. The thatched rondavels are painted with a palette that bears little resemblance to indigenous tradition, and a combination of multitudinous hot-air balloons and a swarming flock of birds dominate the sky. It is only the MTN cellular phone tower perched atop a hill that tugs the composition back to ordinary reality. Sphiwe Zulu's *Feminine Country*, a dot-covered canvas of flat colours that makes little distinction between geography, sun and sky, is overt in its reference to traditional beadwork. In this and other works in the series, Zulu establishes a tension between the constitutional entrenchment of gender rights and its implications for long-standing traditions of patriarchal authority. But where positive activity, movement and abundant productivity enliven Nxumalo's equally flat social vision, Zulu's formal stylisation empties the 'feminine' landscape of human presence and output. **Rory Bester**

Above:  
Nxumalo, Vusumuzi Derrick (b.1963)  
*KwaZulu-Natal Landscape* 1997  
Pen and acrylic on canvas-covered board, 71.5 x 288 cm





## *Caversham Press: Pursuing the relevance of art in communities*

Caversham Press, better known today as the Caversham Centre for Artists and Writers (CCAW), is a creative centre located in the rural isolation of the Natal Midlands. Without diminishing the excellent work of a substantial number of other organisations that have effectively contributed towards nourishing creativity in different communities, it can be said that Caversham has made an immeasurable contribution to the South African art landscape. Among its numerous community-based activities, the CCAW runs an art residency programme where individuals from different creative backgrounds are invited to participate in thematic workshops that foster the production of remarkable artworks. These artworks serve as a visual trace of the intellectual underpinning of those participants. Since its establishment in 1985, and as a result of such programmes, the CCAW has had the honour of working with a wide range of local and international artists. Helen Sebidi, Thami Jali, Ezrom Legae, Eric Mbatha, Robert Hodgins and Vusi Nxumalo are just a few of the local artists.

In recent years the CCAW has been preoccupied with gradually extending its role beyond being a creative arts centre to include leadership and capacity-building functions. The shift is informed by the CCAW's desire to see creative arts have a positive impact on its immediate community and the wider communities from which the participants come. Residencies are still the model used by the CCAW to pursue this aim, but participants are no longer just visual artists and writers. The CCAW now invites people from different professional and community backgrounds to partake in creative workshops, aimed at collaboratively cultivating principles of effective community leadership. The CCAW's current preoccupation, one of a very few initiatives by South African art-based organisations, is to accept the challenge posed by the question: What is the significance of art in society? In the context of South Africa, the question's relevance is tied to being a developing country where poverty is a striking reality of everyday life.

Through extensive commitment to their art practice in this country, the six artists mentioned above have become household names in South African fine arts. Even though Legae has since died, his work has great significance in contemporary South Africa, no less so than that of his living counterparts. Legae's work comments on social issues, often pertaining to the ill conditions marked with pain and suffering under which people lived during apartheid. In pursuit of this theme Legae depicted overlapping human and animal features, which have a visual effect reminiscent of parables of pain and suffering. This trait extends to his post-apartheid period where, as a result of the legacy of apartheid, living conditions of the masses are still undignified in nature. The fact that all six of the aforementioned artists have dynamic and individualistic backgrounds, and that the CCAW has maintained a productive working relationship with all of them, illustrates an encompassing attitude towards creativity. Of course, these artists are just a drop in the ocean when compared to the actual number of artists with whom the CCAW has collaborated.

Individual creativity is a distinct trait of these artists' work. A comparison between Mbatha's *Walking and Talking* (1992, p.76) and Hodgins's *Encounter* (1986, p.77), for instance, shows how they have completely different senses of visual expression. On the one hand Mbatha, whose subject matter is best described by the title of his work, has figuratively rendered his subject wherein people are depicted performing different acts in the middleground of the picture plain. These acts appear to be arbitrary in nature, except that they have one thing in common – the physical interaction of people through dialogue and conversation. Mbatha's inclusion of two types of domestic animals, chickens in the foreground and a horse ridden by a man in the top right-hand corner, seems to imply that when composing the image he had a clear narrative entrenched in his mind, but consciously created space for the viewer to be active in constructing meaning from what is depicted. In doing so, he negates didactic interpretation of the work.

Opposite:  
Jali, Thami (b.1955)  
*View from the Caversham Press* 1994  
Silkscreen on paper 24/30, 41.5 x 60 cm