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## CULTURAL EXCHANGE: CHRISTOFF WOLMARANS' FANCIFUL DESIGN WORK FINDS ARTISTIC OUTLET

The South African tinkerer turns artist William Kentridge's whimsical visions into mechanical curios that follow their own grand designs.

By Robyn Dixox

Reporting from Johannesburg, South Africa —

His grandfather's metal flying machine was perched on the roof, like a prehistoric skeletal bird. To the boy, Christoff Wolmarans, it was strange and inspiring, even if it never flew. Then there was his grandfather's homemade pistol, an exciting invention, even if the South African police ordered him to get rid of it.

From the age of 4, Wolmarans was copying his grandfather, tinkering in the garage building go-carts, wooden rifles, robots and stilts so high they would wobble and he would nearly fall off.

Like his grandfather, who escaped from his day job of fixing trains by building fanciful inventions, Wolmarans is a throwback from a quainter generation. Eager to create things, the shy, practical tinkerer wasn't suited to modern industrial design with its focus on consumerism, computer-aided design and mass production.

He has ended up building fanciful objects without practical consumer application: machines, devices and sculptures dreamed up by the prolific South African artist William Kentridge.

Kentridge is co-creator of huge sculptures made of multiple steel fragments that appear to be layered on air, seeming to deconstruct and re-form as one walks around them. He collaborated with Gerhard Marx on "Fire Walker," displayed in [Johannesburg](#) — a woman carrying a brazier of fire on her head — and "World on Its Hind Legs," a creation conveying a teetering, fragile Earth.

Kentridge has also directed, staged and designed [operas](#), including a well-received production of Shostakovich's "The Nose" at the Met in March last year, and he is well known for his charcoal drawings and animated films.

If Kentridge is the grand-ideas man, Wolmarans is often the one who brings Kentridge's vision into being. Wolmarans helped make the model nose for the Shostakovich opera, based on a short story by Gogol about a civil servant who wakes up to find his nose gone and has to track it down.

He is assisting Kentridge on a project called "Refusal of Time" for the "Documenta 13" exhibition in Kassel, Germany, which starts in June. The embryo of the project was a two-week festival of Kentridge's work at

Johannesburg's Market Theatre in September called "Refuse the Hour."

The creations that Wolmarans constructs for Kentridge often use elegant old hand drills, pieces of Kentridge's boyhood metal construction set and random items like bellows, bicycle wheels, brass instruments and egg beaters salvaged from Johannesburg antique shops. The pieces have a crude, old-fashioned, homemade quality yet are vaguely surrealistic: mechanical curios with whimsical functions.

Kentridge's instructions for Wolmarans might be simple: Create a spinning object that causes a flag to rise. Or they may involve complex tasks such as reconceiving a semaphore machine or building a sinister multi-megaphone on wheels that swivels its array of loud speakers in unison.

"Things like that excite me," says the soft-spoken builder. "It's about creating a visual symphony."

Sometimes it means tracing small cardboard models of sculptures created by Kentridge, expanding them and having them laser-cut in metal.

An introverted teenager who used to tag along behind two dominant bosom buddies, he was forced to be independent in his two years' compulsory military service from 1988. He stuck to himself, tinkering and fixing things around the military base, avoiding those who swore a lot, drank and went out with girls.

"I was very glad I never got to kill anyone."

Afterward his industrial design study course was full of interesting engineering problems, but the career openings at the end were depressingly banal. "I was put off by the mass production, plastic and consumerism," he says.

He wanted to build things that were unique, beautiful and practical, not make mass market products, so he started his own business building custom-made objects from steel and wood like caravans, trolleys and folding trailers.

He found himself asked to build near-impossible objects, such as a tower surrounded by a moat of burning fire for an amateur theater set that took a month.

"I tried to be an entrepreneur," says the pale and serious Wolmarans, who carries a thick briefcase stuffed with papers and has an air of quiet stillness about him. "If somebody came to me and asked me to do something I would never turn it down because I needed the work. Anything was possible. To me it was just a matter of solving the problem."

Wolmarans did some work for Marx, Kentridge's collaborator, and six years ago he was commissioned to help out Kentridge from time to time. Three years ago, Kentridge brought him on full time.

"William designs in cardboard and wood. I need to make it durable, in steel or wood," he says. "You have to incorporate extra bracing in hidden places or the whole thing can become wobbly."

After years of searching, it turned out the job was a perfect fit. "Working for William is like doing exactly what I was trained to do, because William has got some interesting and weird concepts, things that need to be figured out. It's that thing of anything's possible. You make a plan."