THE DESIGN EDIT

FOR COLLECTORS
AND DREAMERS

TDE

Driaan Claassen

Mapping the subconscious through materials - TDE interviews the South African designer whose work is on show this week at the Investec Cape Town Art Fair.

By Adrian Madlener / 8th February 2022



Driaan Claassen, 'I Believe in God (Calcified Thought Form)', 2021
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

SOUTH AFRICAN AUTODIDACT Driaan Claassen seeks to materialise the subconscious. Through his diverse geometric, organic and crystalline sculptures, he seeks to map and record the workings of the mind. Whether intertwined vertebrates, concave and convex totems, or coral-like vessels, his work is characterised by property-defying biomorphic structures.

Claassen's meditative and process-driven approach affords him the time and space to prod, contort and push traditional materials to their limits and yet deftly implement visual devices like juxtaposition to distil these metaphysical explorations into decipherable forms.



Driaan Claassen, 'Tell the Truth (Conscience)', 2021
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

A Southern Guild Gallery staple since 2016, the young talent has garnered success at major fairs the world over. *The Design Edit* recently caught up with the Cape Town-based designer, who runs the Reticence design studio, to learn more about his unique practice.



Driaan Claassen
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

The Design Edit (TDE): Talk about your background. How did you begin experimenting with different materials? Where does your interest in metaphysics come from?

Driaan Claassen: Though I'm self-taught, I was lucky enough to have guidance from incredible mentors. Bronze Age foundry's Jan Otto Du Plessis was perhaps the most significant as he offered me a year-long apprenticeship in which I learned how to cast bronze. Before that, I did a diploma course in animation which was my first foray into playing around with different material combinations within digital space. However, It was only when I began working with my hands, that I was able to fully appreciate the subtle degrees of difference one can achieve with physical matter.



Studio view
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

My interest in philosophy and metaphysics stemmed from both my exploration of psychedelics and various religious practices. Ultimately, I was in search of the meaning of life. I have since stopped using psychedelics but my passion for the mind and its limitless capabilities is more fervent than ever. The more I know about consciousness, the more I seem to be able to deal with the strangeness of simply being alive and hyper-aware of my mortality.



Driaan Claassen, ‘Trust your gut (Conscience)’, 2021
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

TDE: What are the challenges in trying to render the seemingly intangible nature of the subconscious in objects? Describe what you mean by mapping the mind?

Driaan Claassen: It’s a conceptual, visual and material endeavour. At first, I concern myself with creating a framework in which the mind operates. I explore the different stages and mechanisms that give rise to pure consciousness and the journey it goes through from birth to decay. Second, I carefully choose a visual vocabulary that can capture and articulate the subtle and abstracted nature of the mind; one that is both rigid and fluid. This interchangeable property gives rise to the contrast in my work which is most evident in the ‘Neural Pathway’ series, where strict geometric exteriors give way to liquid biomorphic interiors.



Driaan Claassen, ‘Look to the Light (Neural Path)’, 2021
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

Finally, I’m faced with the problem of finding the right materials and processes. For example, I often use bronze to denote ethereality as it has the unique ability to hold weight beyond its visual appearance. I grow crystals to imbue my pieces with organic textures that speak to the infinite richness of the internal landscape that I find within my mind.

“The process I’ve honed and enjoy the most is the growing



Driaan Claassen, ‘His voice (Calcified Vessel)’, 2021
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

and controlling of dendritic copper crystals”

Driaan Claasen

“These crystals imbue my pieces with organic textures that speak to the infinite richness of the mind’s internal landscape”

Driaan Claasen



Driaan Claassen, ‘My first time (Calcified Vessel)’, 2021
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

Mapping the subconscious allows me to identify where I stand in relation to myself. This process charts where I’ve been and where I still need to go. Over time, I come to realise that what I see in front of me is not perceived by my eye but by my mind. It has to go through multiple filters before I understand it as reality. A lot of what I do is a celebration of this complexity and ambiguity. I never seek to present my work as some type of resolution but rather as hypotheses.



Driaan Claassen, ‘a Moment of intimacy (Fragmented Memories)’, 2021
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

TDE: Talk us through your process. What innovations have you arrived at in your craft-led practice?
Driaan Claassen: As evocations of my ongoing explorations on both a macro and micro scale, the pieces I create are intended to elicit emotions and reflect human experience. But they are only the start of a language I’m developing to convey my overall message. The primary materials I use are wood and different types of metals – copper, bronze, spring steel and aluminium. Whether working with casting, lost wax, cold-rolled or extrusion techniques, I enjoy manipulating these materials into unexpected compositions.



Driaan Claassen, ‘a Moment of intimacy (Fragmented Memories)’, 2021 (detail)
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

The process I’ve honed and enjoy the most is the growing and controlling of dendritic copper crystals. It’s an intensive chemical and electrical procedure that I’ve mastered over time. By isolating a small set of variables and seeing their influence on the final form, I can isolate and extrapolate knowledge that informs me how different combinations might look.

TDE: Where are you located and how are you involved in the Cape Town design scene?
Driaan Claassen: My studio is located in the heart of Woodstock, Cape Town, which is the city’s artistic soul. Situated on the 3rd floor of a repurposed industrial building, the space has sweeping views of downtown but serves as a kind of retreat from the outside world. It functions as both a personal gallery and workshop, a playground where I get to experiment without any constraints.



Studio view
COURTESY: Driaan Claassen

I have a fantastic relationship with Southern Guild founders Trevyn and Julian McGowan. They've afforded me many opportunities, including exhibiting my work at Design Miami/, PAD London, and Design Days Dubai. The McGowans have played a significant role in shaping my appreciation of the industry and setting a high standard for beauty and artistry, inspiring me to go above and beyond in my own practice. Through them, I've met some of my heroes – namely the Haas Brothers and The Massouds – and brushed shoulders with some local legends that I now call family and friends.

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Southern Guild (https://southernguild.co.za/artist/driaan-claassen/), Cape Town.

Investec (https://investeccapetownartfair.co.za/), the Cape Town Art Fair runs from the 18th – 20th February 2022.

