

SOUTH AFRICAN

COUNTRY LIFE

JUNE
2020

THE REAL HEART OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

*A Taste of Heaven
at Maná*

Howdy,
Free State
Cowboy

*Algoa our
Bay of Hope*

7 Family
Stays

DIY
Workbench
for Dad

Lockdown Dreaming on
Bloukrans Pass

**Covid-19
and Beyond**

Of Battlefields
and *Birding*

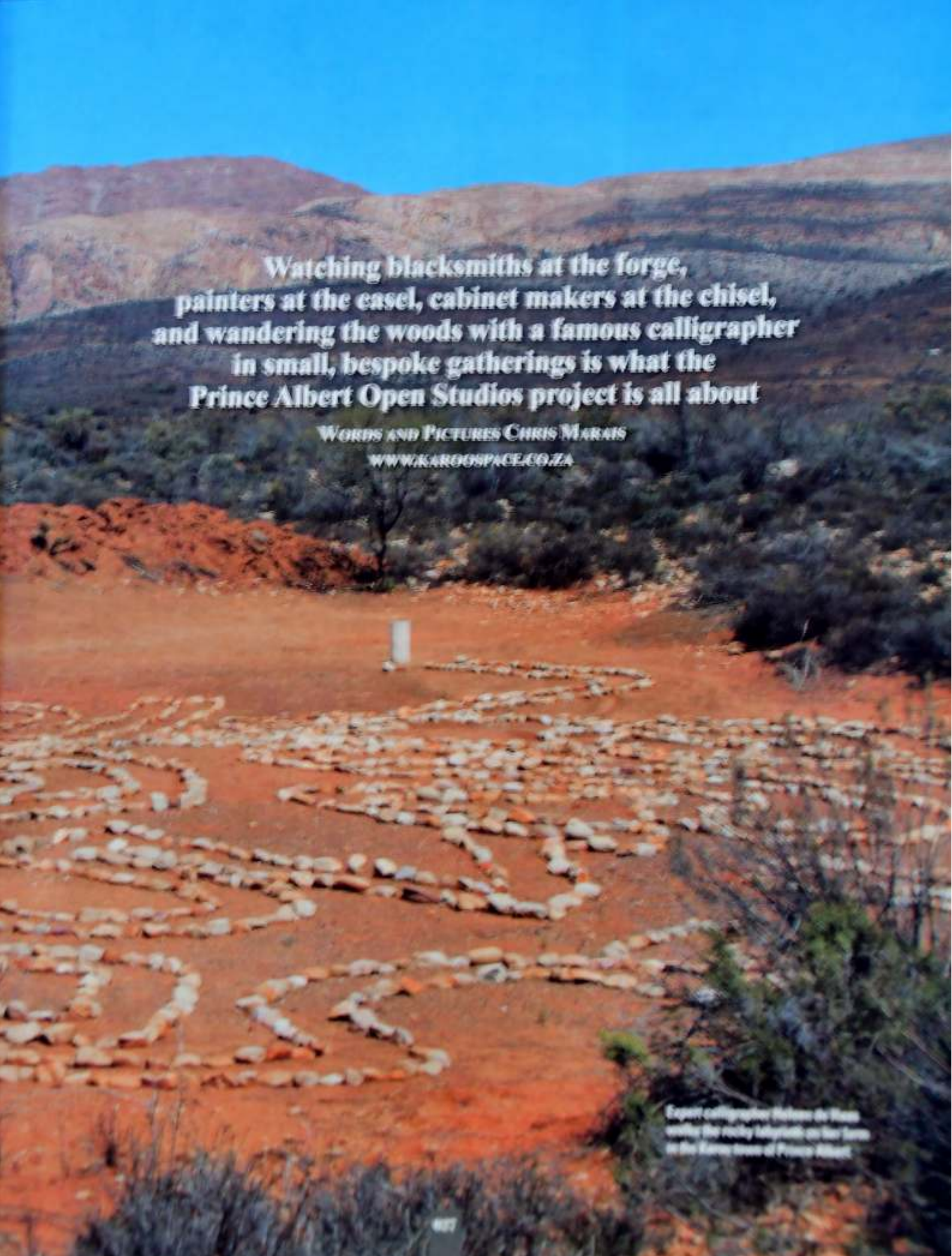
On the
Galpin Trail
in Fernkloof

*Follow the
Karoo's Art*
Prince Albert opens its studios



Art from the Heart



A landscape photograph showing a red dirt area in the foreground with a stone labyrinth. The labyrinth is made of light-colored stones arranged in a complex, winding pattern. In the background, there are low mountains and some sparse vegetation. The sky is clear and blue.

**Watching blacksmiths at the forge,
painters at the easel, cabinet makers at the chisel,
and wandering the woods with a famous calligrapher
in small, bespoke gatherings is what the
Prince Albert Open Studios project is all about**

WORDS AND PICTURES CHRIS MARAIS
WWW.KAROOSPACE.CO.ZA

Expert calligrapher Nelson de Vries
works the rocky labyrinth on her farm
in the Karoo town of Prince Albert



LEFT: Traditionally a blacksmith forged swords, horse-shoes and ploughshares. These days a blacksmith like Prince Albert's Kashief Booley turns his hand to fine-crafted home accessories and, sometimes, pure art. ABOVE: A blend of art, craft, machine and muscle – that's Kashief at work. BELOW LEFT: Sue Hoppe's El Gecko studio next to the family home. BELOW RIGHT: Sue, adventurer, traveller, writer, photographer and artist.

Everything about Kashief Booley, the Blacksmith of Prince Albert in the Western Cape Karoo, says Old School. And watching him work in the Striking Metal smithy on a rise overlooking the village, with the majestic Swartberg range sweeping across the Prince Albert Valley and westwards all along the Klein Karoo, is to segue back a few centuries.

There's a flaming forge, rows of handmade tools, hulking anvil, hissing water bucket and the all-important hammer. But then there are signs of the times – T-shirt and blue-denim jeans with the Bruce Springsteen cut, gas burners and angle grinders.

When I was a kid, it was, of course,

all about being a cowboy one day when I grew up. Maybe a fireman. Now I'm a *ballie*, and all I really want to be is the village blacksmith. This guy. In this place.

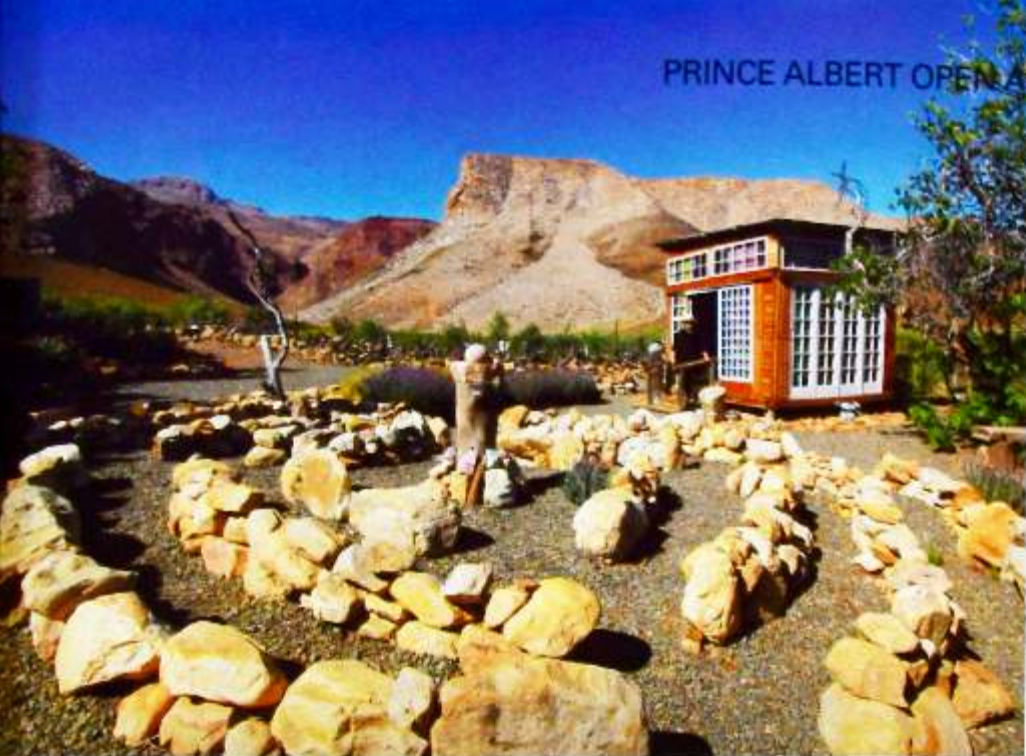
The relatively well-heeled citizenry of Prince Albert and distant Cape Town fancy their custom-made goods, so there's always a commission available for Kashief – a beautiful hand-forged set of hooks, door knockers, gates, balustrades, tables, stools and decor items of whimsy that look perfect somewhere in the cottage. He'll tell you, "When that forge is lit, I go into another place." It's a place where an ancient craft meets a modern creative mind and together they make something special.

Kashief is one of more than 30 Prince

Albert artists on the local Open Studios Route. They work in many media and sell across the world. There must be something magical in the mountain water that flows into the village, because the creative capital of this place is astounding.

An old friend of ours, author-artist Sue Hoppe, moved to Prince Albert relatively recently with her husband Max. They bought





the first building you find (coming from the Swartberg Pass side of life) on the left, which used to be a restaurant before it partially burned down. They put some serious sweat equity into renovating the place, upcycling and recycling wherever possible, turning it into a wondrous dwelling.

Part of the Hoppe spread is Sue's studio, which bears the name of their company, El Gecko. It's a former wagon house full of her mixed-media works, exuberant pieces that would go very well with something striking by, say, Mr Booley up the hill.

Sue and Max did considerable Karoo road time in compiling *The Climax Collection* and *Travels (Troubles) with Koos*, two popular armchair reads that heralded a number of other publications via El Gecko Publishing. But now they are well-rooted in Prince Albert, and Sue in particular is one of the key supporters of the Open Studios concept.

And so, on a succession of days, while Max launches a vicious attack on spiky, alien, invasive plants in the backyard, Sue guides my wife Jules and me around Prince Albert to meet some of the artists on the route.

First stop is with psychologist and Jungian analyst Louisa Punt-Fouché who, with her husband Ian, owns the Kredouw Olive Estate near the pass of the same name. You'd think she was busy enough, but Louisa finds time to write books, build art installations and mandalas, play the piano and paint. She also assembles art from

bones, feldspars and crystals gleaned from the Swartberg mountains that loom over the farm. We note that the slopes look grey and bare. "There was a huge fire that raged through the area," she says. "It was like an incinerator. So many olive trees were lost, and so many animals."

In 2007, while the couple was still living in the Port Elizabeth area, Louisa was bitten by a mosquito that carried the West Nile virus, which she contracted. The event nearly took her life. On a visit to Prince Albert, Louisa and Ian, who was a vascular surgeon, discovered that the olive estate was for sale. They bought it and are well set in their new country lives.

She takes us on a tour of her elegant art gallery, the farm shop and an installation dedicated to the memory of the recent fire. And then Louisa sits down at her home piano and plays a Bach piece while two large poodles, Bella and Yoda, gather faithfully about her.

A cup of coffee later and we are in the company of Heleen de Haas of Aswater farm. She is an accomplished calligrapher, practising an art that "interprets sound, goes beyond legibility or meaning. It combines the senses. It is writing with the heart. You think visually, but interpret what you hear in the strokes."

She asks Jules, "Give me a word."

Jules replies (of course), "Karoo."

"What does 'Karoo' mean to you?"

ABOVE LEFT: Louisa Punt-Fouché at one of her art installations on Kredouw Olive Estate, with the Swartberg looming behind. ABOVE RIGHT: Louisa is multi-talented in many media. BELOW: An art installation on the Punt-Fouché spread.



she asks. "Hospitality, kindness, a joining, intimacy, space," says Jules.

"Then I must use a soft tool," says Heleen. "And walnut ink. The text must show freedom, and space to walk between. It must feel safe and legible, understandable and ordered, not confused. It is a head-and-heart approach."

Everywhere on the farm, there is art. The family house is full of examples of her exquisite calligraphy. The poplar forest



ABOVE: Locally made and proudly Karoo – cloth patterns on sale at Louisa Liebenberg's shop.

BELOW: Some of Cobus van Bosch's knife-handles are made from the antlers of fallow deer. BELOW RIGHT: Cobus and his extremely atmospheric artwork.



nearby is marked throughout by displays of land art and fine writing on stone. There is a labyrinth and Die Letterhuis, a gallery and guest accommodation.

Heleen holds workshop-retreats on the farm, where visitors can learn the basics of her interesting art form, and stay for a while, far from busy lives. "And here, especially with the land art, you see how Nature picks up the paint brush after humans have had their turn."

We stay over at Casa Milorca, a guest house that could, appropriately enough, easily double as an art gallery. It's owned by Spanish-South African photographer Salvilio Meyer and Eastern Cape media personality Louise Liebenberg. They're at home, we *kuier* happily that evening and, in the morning, Sue meets us for our next day of artist encounters.

Here's Cobus van Bosch, a burly chap with a love for bonsais and the backstory of South Africa. A former arts journalist from Cape Town, Cobus brings incredible atmosphere and presence to his paintings, working from a treasure trove of visual historical material sourced from the Cape Archives.

I photograph him standing in front of a riveting piece that portrays Boer prisoners and their captors. Other paintings are part of his *Forgotten Freedom Fighters* collection, depicting various South African minority groups.

Cobus is also a knife maker of repute. In his neat workroom, an arrangement of ancient sheep shears waits to be turned into brand-new blades. "Those who buy these from me are mostly farmers wanting a good skinning knife and those who appreciate something both functional and beautiful," he says. "For handles, I normally use warthog tusks, or the antlers of fallow deer."

Around the corner and up the road from Cobus lives Joshua Miles, an artist with an impish grin and a constant urge to play table tennis. The last time I encountered such ping-pong fiendishness was about 50 years ago as part of a university residence cabal that would rather chase flighty little white balls over a net than finish assignments on time. I completely understand the man.

Jules and I are supposed to be interviewing and photographing Joshua and his Scottish cabinet-making wife Angela. Instead, there are certain formalities to be observed, such as one furious game of outdoor table tennis on a very quirky surface that only its owner could love. Joshua hands me my ping-pong ass in no time. You had home-ground advantage, dude.

Back to the story. Joshua makes these very distinctive prints, painting directly onto linoleum in a process called reduction block print-making. "The chances of messing up are massive," he says. "Picasso called it 'suicide printing'."





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Joshua and Angela Miles in their Prince Albert home, a place of laughter, creativity and ping-pong. • One of Joshua's favourite prints is a portrait of his artist-aunt Elsa Miles. • Marieke Prinsloo-Rowe with her sculpture of a woman that she hopes will portray the simplicity of the Karoo that she loves so much.

Angela once ran a mobile hairdressing salon in Scotland, then studied cabinet-making at the Glasgow School of Art. In fact, the couple own a studio-home in Scotland, where they plan to spend part of their year. "The crisp light tones of Scotland and the Karoo – those are my biggest inspirations," says Joshua.

One devastating bout of ping-pong later, we find Marieke Prinsloo-Rowe in mid-artistic flow in one of Prince Albert's oldest houses, where she and veterinarian husband Alex (both from Grabouw) recently took up part-time residence. Two of their children, Beatrice (9) and Alexandra (8) are at school. The eldest, Samuel (10), is at home in bed with a bad cold. Fluttering around and begging for food are four more babies – recently fledged, orphaned weavers that

the family rescued from certain death.

The children had the responsibility of naming them, and took a great deal of care over the exercise. They named the wisest-looking one Encyclopaedia, the most beautiful one Imagination, the one that sings in short bursts Sonnet, and the most talkative one Dictionary. The birdies have just fledged and flutter between the house and the wilder delights of a nearby reed bed.

Sculptor Marieke is intoxicated by the Karoo's simplicity and is currently trying to capture it via a beautiful woman lost in thought, her hair swept by mountain winds, her dreaming face looking out across the horizons. "I love to create in this air, this light and these mountains," she says. "I'm translating these elements, so new to me, into sculptural form. Her eyes are open in

wonder and peace. She's slender but strong."

Marieke is aware that there's a worldwide trend to show the body in a distorted form, reflecting fragmentation and abuse. But her vision is different. "I want to take the human body back, into a landscape, into its narrative, as a carrier of stories. If we are wanting to be healed from abuse and distortion, what do we aim for when we seek to be healed? This beauty, this is still us."

Before we leave, young Samuel calls to Marieke and she darts inside. She emerges with a very good drawing of an aeroplane and hands it to me. "My son said to tell you, 'This is for the man'."

I am beyond chuffed, and we take the precious memento back home with us, where it is proudly displayed on a wall. Art for art's sake. ■

Map reference F4 see inside back cover

Prince Albert Open Studios

Twice a year (usually June and January) the artists welcome visitors to their studios. For more info see their website www.princealbertopenstudios.co.za