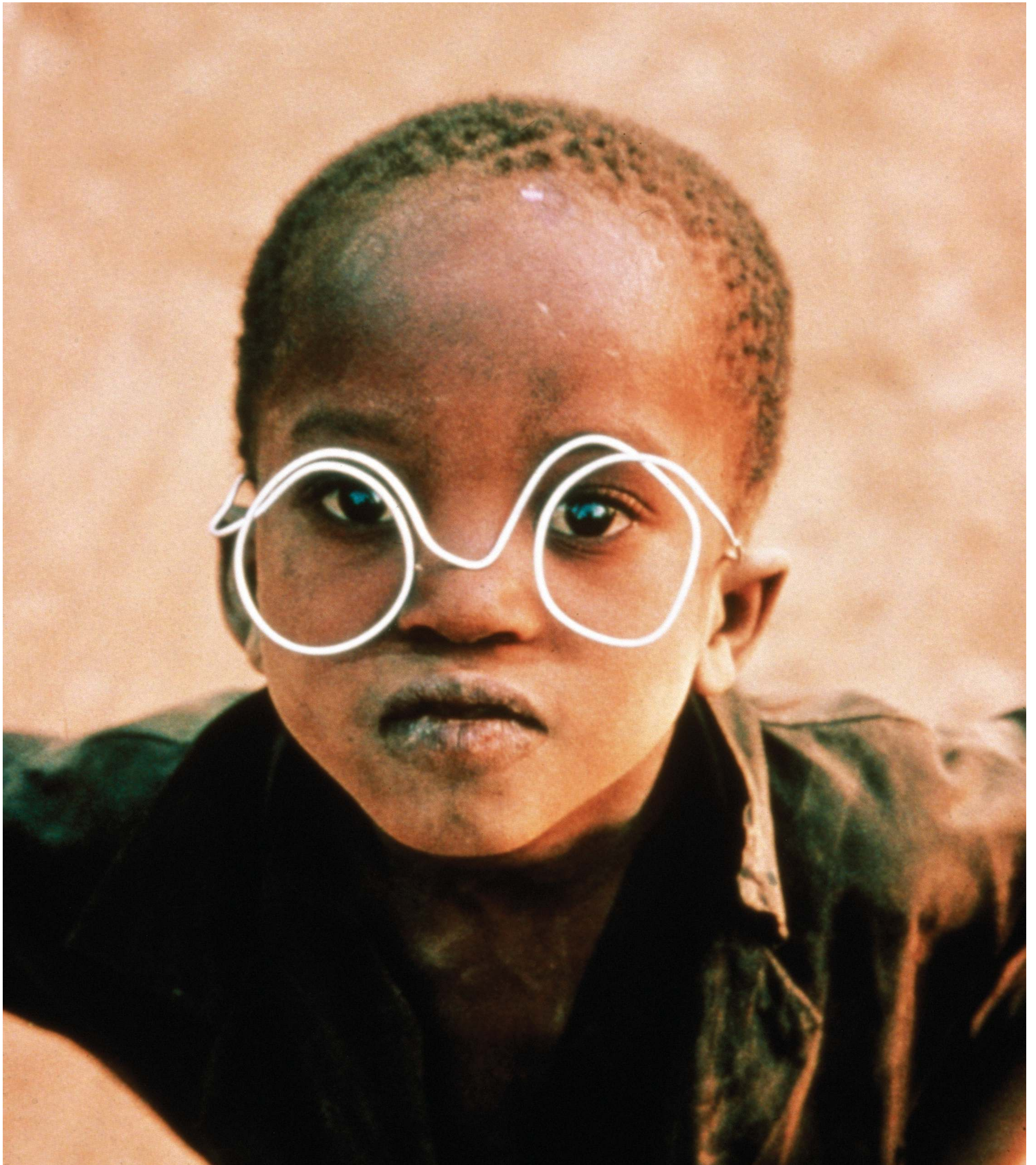


THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





AFRICAN PLANES

Sculptor Ann Carrington's search for creatively recycled objects in Southern Africa led her to a remote village in Natal Here, a flight of salvaged aeroplanes by 17-year-old Punch Mbhele made her spirits soar, as she relates in words and photographs

Previous page: A little girl waves from a scaled-down Audi saloon made from scrap metal by Punch Mbhele.

This page, top: Punch's mother and family beside Punch's most ambitious work to date, a huge fish home - its tail yet to be completed. Originally built as an aeroplane, it then became a helicopter before ending up as a fish. Its skeleton is of scrap wood and telegraph poles, with transit vans for belly and a skin of sunflower oil tins. The planes on poles (below), also by Punch, stand outside the village's stores, while the plane held aloft and the one furthest right are from Zimbabwe

The spirit with which the African Continent assimilates Western junk into new forms is the spirit I wish to capture in my sculpture. Seduced by salvage, last July I found myself on an African pilgrimage in search of the creatively recycled. Criss crossing Southern Africa I sought out the ingenious and charmed improvisations of Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia and the Transvaal - necklaces of bottle tops (Zimbabwe); suitcases from syrup cans (Botswana); wine cork toggles (Zambia); and oil lamps teased from coffee tins (Transvaal). Through deserts and deltas I photographed my prey in countries where the humdrum is treated as rare and special and each and every object has five, six, seven lives.

In Zimbabwe, tin cans unravel like orange peel to create cattle fences for the Batonga of Siabuwa - their n'anga healing men spook up wind chimes of ketchup-bottle talismans. Cola-can building blocks sealed with mud daga form the Pop Art villages of rural Botswana, while their township neighbours in South Africa take the junk of wealthier sections and transform it into new merchandise for the poor.

But from Zaire to Zimbabwe, Swaziland to Namaland, it is the children who excel in the reinventions of scrap they find on their doorsteps. Across the continent, jumbles of wire, cans, lids and bottles are magically changed into lorries, cars and guitars, the playthings of children with no access to manufactured toys. Born through necessity, these toys are often technical feats of amazing complexity. Spidery wire mechanisms are crank-started into action, sending wheels whirring, legs kicking and propellers propelling in a flurry of hilarious activity. The appeal of these whimsical wonders translates into hard cash at the hands of mini-entrepreneurs at hot spots like Victoria Falls - seduced tourists exchanging Zim Dollars for mass-produced wire bicycles and motorbikes; modern-day junk souvenirs now more in demand than boot-polished tribal masks and wooden hippo trios.

Nonetheless, the wirework of one young talent eclipsed everything else I saw on my travels. Like any other scrap toy-maker, Punch Mbhele makes trains and planes and lorries from bits of tin and wire - but the volume and scale of his pieces and his passion for what he is doing make his work exceptional. In short, 17 year-old Punch performs miracles with salvages materials.

I first heard of him at the Botswana/Transvaal border crossing. Luness Machinga, a Zulu lady from Natal Province, stood behind me in the queue. We began talking and I showed her some photographs of my sculptures. Amazed at their resemblance to some in her home town, Luness invited me to join her on the long journey southwards, to see for myself the work of Punch Mbhele.

A day later we were descending the snowy Drakensburg Mountains to the remote town of Bergville in the Zulu heartland of Natal. Even from a distance, Punch's work was much in evidence. High above the thatched Zulu homesteads was a staggering display of tin aeronautics. Jumbos, Concorde and bi-planes punctuated the mountainous horizon from the totem-like poles that supported them. A rocket of Seven-Up cans with ring-pull controls hung precariously from a baobab tree; across the road, a junk South African Airliner swivelled in the wind above the Zungu general store. Inside the shop, Lloyd Zungu, the plane's proud owner, explained that Punch's chief clients were local store-owners who commissioned or swapped -



Top right: A colleague of Punch Mbhele perches on one of Punch's planes in his outdoor studio. Below, from left to right: Ann Carrington outside her studio in Tengenenge, Zimbabwe, with one of her sculptures hanging in the porch; glasses Southern-African-Children-style - of cow bone and string in Zimbabwe; of pushed back tinfoil in Botswana, and of simple - but effective - wire in Zimbabwe

sought after scrap materials in return for the tin inventions which attracted attention to their wares. Next door, we met Welcome Ncobo of the Fuze Coal Supplies. Echoing his neighbours, he spoke of the community's pride in their young prodigy and the art which had become his town's signature. His main concern was for Punch's welfare - that he should be supported and encouraged in every way possible, which was why he had just clubbed together 400 Rand with his fellow workers to buy his second tin airliner.

Luness directed me, ever more curious to meet Punch, up a wiggly bush path littered with his raw materials and discarded inventions - transit vans, car bonnets, bed springs and aeroplane shells. Suddenly, a magnificent metallic fish straddled the path in front of us. This, Luness said, was Punch's house. Unfortunately, as luck would have it, Punch had left town that morning to find work in Johannesburg. However, his mum and an army of brothers, sisters and cousins were more than happy to talk about their talented kinsman, fetching a stack of his sketchbooks. Within these pages were Punch's colourful perspective drawings, obsessively recording details of his creations, including such minutiae as propellers and door handles with accompanying lists of appropriate scrap ingredients. There was also a thicker book reserved for his completed works, which were carefully documented by a local photographer who had exchanged his services in return for original artworks.

Leafing through, I found the blueprints for the Mbhele fish home, the corresponding notes revealing that his labour of love was under constant transition. Having originally been built as an aeroplane in 1989, it then became a helicopter, and finally metamorphosed into its present fishy form in 1992. The fish skeleton had been constructed from scrap wood and telegraph poles to which two defunct transit vans were added to make the chassis belly (which was where Punch slept). Over this, a scaly skin of sunflower-oil cans was stretched to form gills, eyes and gulping mouth, and, as a finishing flourish, a trademark aeroplane was erected on a pole outside.

Next, we were taken on a conducted tour of the open-air workshop. There was a strange box contraption - an old wardrobe on wheels which, I was told, Punch used to deliver his inventions to clients; a beautiful Audi saloon, a perfectly scaled-down model with foot holes where the engine might have been; and a rusty old Jumbo in a make-shift hanger.

Punch's mother remembered this as an early experiment. Having excelled at wire toy-making since he was a young child, her shy and awkward son saw the local Insukangihlale high school as a boring distraction from his true mission - to invent. In 1989 his wish was fulfilled, as the apartheid school boycotts and political turmoil meant that at last he could immerse himself in the Jumbo project he was working on back home; it became the first of a long line of fantastical sculptures.

And yet a sculptor is the last thing Punch would describe himself as. He thinks of himself as an engineer - his ambition to fly real people to real places in aeroplanes manufactured by his own company, his dreams, for the meantime, manifested in his beautiful inventions ■

Ann Carrington's trip to Africa was sponsored by Olympus Cameras. Her photographs and sculpture will be on show at Cassian de Vere Cole Fine Art.

