



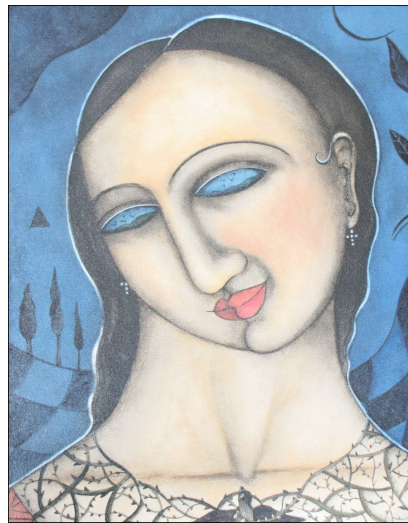
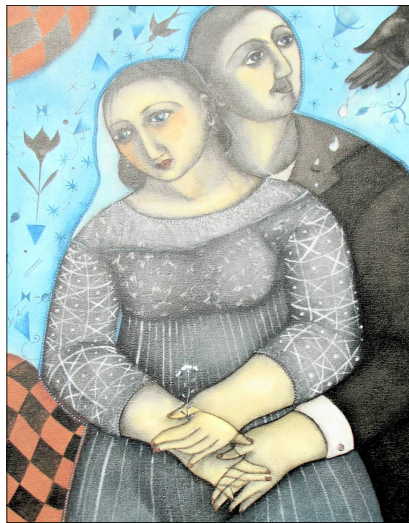
What the back garden looked like when Hanneltjie de Clercq bought the cottage several years ago.



The garden after De Clercq and her partner, Lood Erasmus, fixed it up.



A corner of garden, which is carefully tended to appear rambling and casual.



Hanneltjie De Clercq will be exhibiting in Joburg next year. For an invitation, e-mail her on info@hdeclercq.co.za

I AM driving through the wheatfields of the Swartland to visit my friend Hanneltjie de Clercq, the artist. I have such a longing to visit her, to relax in the generosity of her beautiful home, to look at her paintings.

So begins a book on artist Hanneltjie de Clercq, written by her friend Riana Scheepers and illustrated with sumptuous paintings and anecdotes from De Clercq.

Titled *Purper en Kaneel Komyn en Smarag* (in English, "Purple and cinnamon, cumin and emerald"), it was published last year and you don't need to understand Afrikaans to appreciate it. Its opulent texture and mystique carries you across the pages and across the kilometres to Hanneltjie's home in Riebeeck Kasteel in the Western Cape.

She's lived in this olive and wine town for many years, long before it became a haven for the Cape Town weekenders. Her first home here, which is up the road from her current one, was a self-built Moorish mansion with high walls, gargoyles and tumbling wisteria. She sold it several years ago when she and her partner, Lood Erasmus, decided to downsize and restore a humble cottage, which, when they purchased it, was little more than a crumbling wreck.

"Downsizing and fixing up this cottage was really about sorting out priorities," Hanneltjie explains. "About creating time for possibility and for beautiful things, even if it's something as simple as making home-made lemonade or marinating Kalahari truffles in wine."

On the chopping board in her open plan kitchen-dining room-lounge is a clutch of truffles. She explains that a friend of theirs has a farm in the Kalahari and whenever he visits he always brings her a basketful. "I love them, they have the smell and feel of the desert earth and they are not as pungent as European truffles."

Hanneltjie and her paintings are like Kalahari truffles. They offer the strength and vulnerability of something that can survive in the desert. At the same time they remind us of both Africa and Europe. Living at the southern end of Africa, Hanneltjie inhabits a landscape somewhere between here and the rest of the world.

Both she and Erasmus are country people. He's a bushveld boy who grew up in Zeerust and the stark splendour of Herman Charles Bosman country persists in his soul. A chemical engineer by training, he runs his building business in the village.

Hanneltjie grew up on a smallholding in an isolated part of what is now Polokwane, where her father was a train driver. "I've always lived in rural areas. I'm not good in cities. I need tranquillity and silence to be creative," she says.

Her studio in the garden of their home offers just this. Part seminary and part glasshouse in atmosphere, it has a strong sense of spirituality and peace, with light playing on the walls

ART OF LIVING COLOURFULLY

Her work is instantly recognisable but Hanneltjie de Clercq is so private that she seldom discusses her art or even titles it. Heather Dugmore got a rare glimpse into the artist's life



Hanneltjie de Clercq is flanked by her daughter Naomi Wessels, left, and long-time friend, writer Riana Scheepers. They both worked on a book about De Clercq.

"We recycled bricks, wood and wine vat slats and hunted for beautiful old fixtures, basins, tiles, stoves, copper pots, light switches," Hanneltjie continues.

"If you have tons of money, then you can just go into any number of incredible shops and buy whatever you like; but if you don't, you need to hunt. It takes a lot of energy, especially if you like things done immediately, which is how I am."

The garden enforces patience on Hanneltjie. "I like it to look like everything grows spontaneously but actually it is extremely carefully tended. Fortunately there were mature guava and fig trees when we moved in that gave the garden a rambling, old world feel."

She invested so much of herself in her previous garden at the Moorish home that she couldn't believe she would ever sell it.

"But I did. You have to walk away sometimes, from gardens, from relationships and from outdated social modes that insist women should be 'nice'."

One of her favourite books is Polly Young-Eisendrath's *Women and Desire: Beyond Wanting to Be Wanted*.

"Women are bred to be 'nice' so if you speak your mind you are labelled 'difficult'," she explains. "Women often feel stretched between their desire to be loved and their desire to fulfil their own personal identity. Too often it requires the sacrificing of one for the other."

"Put it this way," she continues, "What many women desire above all else is the power of sovereignty; the right to exercise their own free will. But the woman who does this is precisely the woman who is labelled 'difficult' and difficult women are to be dreaded, avoided or subdued!"

Hanneltjie believes in clearly and directly communicating her needs, in speaking boldly from the heart, irrespective of the outcome. It doesn't make for cloudless skies but what would the sky be without storms?

"I am a difficult woman!" she proclaims. "But being difficult doesn't mean you're not soft or vulnerable or nostalgic. I think our home more than spells out this side."

from transparent panes fashioned into a cross.

"When I paint, an otherworldliness comes through; it's the essence of the dream world and you can never predict what it is going to be. As an artist I just keep on striving for cohesion in my work while going through all the deep feelings so that these emotions can be caught on canvas. The nicest side is when you surprise yourself with something unexpected that really works. Then you do a little dance."

Hanneltjie's life is art. Not just her paintings, but also her garden, her cooking, her sense of style, her choice of music, her preoccupations and her home. Life as art is not always pretty, as she well knows. It's as much about watching plants die because they can't withstand the heat as finding a ruin and imagining what it might be – then setting about creating it, brick by brick, stone by stone.

In truth I thought Hanneltjie and Lood were inviting disaster when I visited them several years back and they excitedly showed me the ruin of a cottage they had bought.

Damp walls, sloping floors and dingy little rooms is all I could see. But brick by brick, stone by stone they brought it back to life and today it is what Scheepers describes as a beautiful, generous home.

Creating a home together from scratch requires compromise on both sides. "Lood's not mad about my Madonna statues and I'm not mad about his braais. Fortunately we both like African reed ceilings," smiles Hanneltjie.

The inside of their home took several months to rebuild. "We turned four rooms into one and the old bathroom into a pantry. Then we built a bathroom and a stoep with a reed ceiling, and a bedroom leading on to the stoep."

Hanneltjie de Clercq in the lounge shortly after she and her partner restored their cottage in Riebeeck Kasteel, a beautiful old town about 80km north-east of Cape Town. They moved into the crumbling cottage after downsizing from a Moorish-type mansion in the town.



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