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The New Norval

Inside the Cape Town museum that's democratising the world of high art

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The place

The just-opened Norval Foundation is a fantastic and differentiated addition to the Cape Town cultural landscape, confirming the city's position as South Africa's pre-eminent arts hub. Located opposite the American embassy in Steenberg, the space consists of three 2 700-square-metre floor plates tucked within a quiet modernist box that lets the art do the talking – no dominating starchitecture here. It is surrounded by a beautiful, Keith Kirsten-landscaped sculpture garden, including water features.

EDOARDO VILLA'S *AFRICA* STANDS AMONG HIS OTHER SCULPTURES IN THE NORVAL FOUNDATION'S BIGGEST GALLERY SPACE

BELOW RIGHT THE SERGE ALAIN NITEGEKA *STRUCTURAL RESPONSE III* INSTALLATION

The architecture and interiors

Although the exterior, by dhk Architects, is deliberately bland, the fun starts outside the entrance with a major Edoardo Villa black sculpture - *The Last to Arrive* - greeting visitors. Once inside, patrons are lured forward by beautifully textured concrete surfaces and op-art-inspired striped curving walls into nine separate galleries. The architects have also maximised the mountainside views and there is a vast outdoor terrace that will be hugely popular come summer.

The art

The foundation has opened with a series of exhibitions that illustrate the range of its ambitions as well as its emphasis on sculpture. The first room is focused on recently fabricated art, entitled 'Pulling at Threads', and curated by Owen Martin, and features

extraordinary wall pieces by artists such as William Kentridge. The atrium has a monumental site-specific labyrinthine construction by Serge Alain Nitegeka, a comment on the blockages and hurdles facing the less privileged in Africa. Next comes a series of beautifully curated rooms focused on the so-called Polly Street sculptors, curated by Karel Nel and called 'Re/discovery and Memory', with multiple galleries dedicated to the first global retrospectives of Sydney Kumalo and Ezrom Legae. With their grey-green-painted walls, these works recall postwar modern sculptures by Joan Miró and Henry Moore, with a unique African twist. And finally, bathed in sunlight, is the pièce de résistance, a grand space dedicated to Edoardo Villa, South Africa's greatest postwar sculptor, in all his glory for the first time in the Cape. The foundation has his iconic 1959 sculpture *Africa* on loan from Exxaro, as well as some fantastic pieces from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, illustrating ▶





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT GROOVED WALLS MARK THE ENTRANCE TO THE BATHROOMS; THE EXTERIOR OF THE NORVAL FOUNDATION FROM THE SCULPTURE GARDEN; A CECIL SKOTNES PANEL IN THE BAR; BRETT MURRAY'S *AGAIN* IN THE SCULPTURE GARDEN; THE FOUNDATION'S GIFT SHOP

The philosophy behind the foundation is to preserve



his progression from the abstract to the figurative.

The ethos

Louis Norval believes in the spiritual quality of art and its ability to improve the lives of others. To that end, the philosophy behind the foundation is to preserve and make accessible historic collections to the public in a way that the public sector in South Africa used to but no longer seems able to do. Many other private museums are vanity projects designed to display the collections of their owners to public acclaim. That is decidedly not the case here and much of the art is loaned from other collections, with not much from Louis himself. With his business background, Louis has also brought a focused discipline to the museum and expects the foundation to be largely self-sustaining, with income generated from

multiple business lines. Ultimately he sees this as a permanent contribution to enhancing the cultural life and spirit of the country.

The man

Louis made his fortune in property development and started collecting roughly 20 years ago, piece by piece. His eureka moment, however, came when he witnessed a carefully assembled art collection being dispersed at auction and understood that a collection is more than just the sum of its parts. He has subsequently focused on preserving the heritage of important collections. Among other acquisitions have been the 1 500-piece Homestead Collection, which includes the Campbell collection of late 20th-century South African resistance art and is currently on display in one of the galleries.



and make accessible historic collections to the public

The food

There are multiple food and beverage options at the foundation, the flagship being the Skotnes Restaurant and Bar (decorated with huge Skotnes panels, part of a series of 11 that Louis owns). With its bespoke light fittings and marble finishes, it will be a welcome new addition to dining in the area and is open from breakfast to dinner. The chef is Phil de Villiers of the award-winning Primal Eatery and the food is a delicious combination of South African flavours and foods - think calamari with mieliepap, kudu done multiple ways and complemented by extraordinary vegetable side dishes, such as grilled cauliflower with agrodolce sauce served on beautifully selected porcelain and pottery. There is also a much more casual deli- and picnic-style offering for those with less time.

The business model

The Norval Foundation also intends to be a hub for the South African art community, offering paid-for services such as state-of-the-art painting and sculpture storage, document preservation and gallery rental. There is also a gorgeously curated apartment for artists in residence. All of these, along with the beautifully merchandised retail offering with its bespoke prints, should help the operation run smoothly.

The other details

Do visit the bathrooms, which channel James Turrell's light and perception sculptures in a charming way. The museum is also uber-child-friendly, with an organic play area and a meandering sculpture garden with amphitheatre for performances. norvalfoundation.org ■

