

Art, Ecology and Mexican pink

By Liza Grobler

South African Artist Liza Grobler reflects on her residency at Guapamacátaro Center for Art and Ecology in Mexico and interviews Alicia Marván on issues of reconnecting with artistic traditions and reclaiming cultural heritage.

Cultural exchange between South Africa and Mexico is somewhat limited, but despite the vast geography between the two countries, there are many environmental and social intersections. Both countries abound with biodiverse habitats, spectacular scenery and a rich cultural heritage that stems from colourful indigenous populations. Both also suffer somewhat from the colonial hangover of low self-esteem. Due to substantial socio-economic challenges such as highly populated and impoverished local communities, income disparity and less than adequate education systems, both are gateways for drug trafficking. South Africa and Mexico are spaces of opulence and decay. We may not be at the economic centre of contemporary arts, but it's time we talked.

The trip from the airport to the historic district of Mexico City bears an uncanny resemblance to the centre of Johannesburg. The vendors, the aromas of food cooked on the sidewalk, the haphazard traffic flow and the endless range of merchandise on offer at the traffic lights are reminiscent of a typically South African city. After a three-and-a-half-hour bus journey into the lush green countryside, we arrived at the Guapamacátaro Center for Art and Ecology. The residency is situated in the municipality of Maravatio, a farming community in the state of Michoacán. This area is the breeding place of the

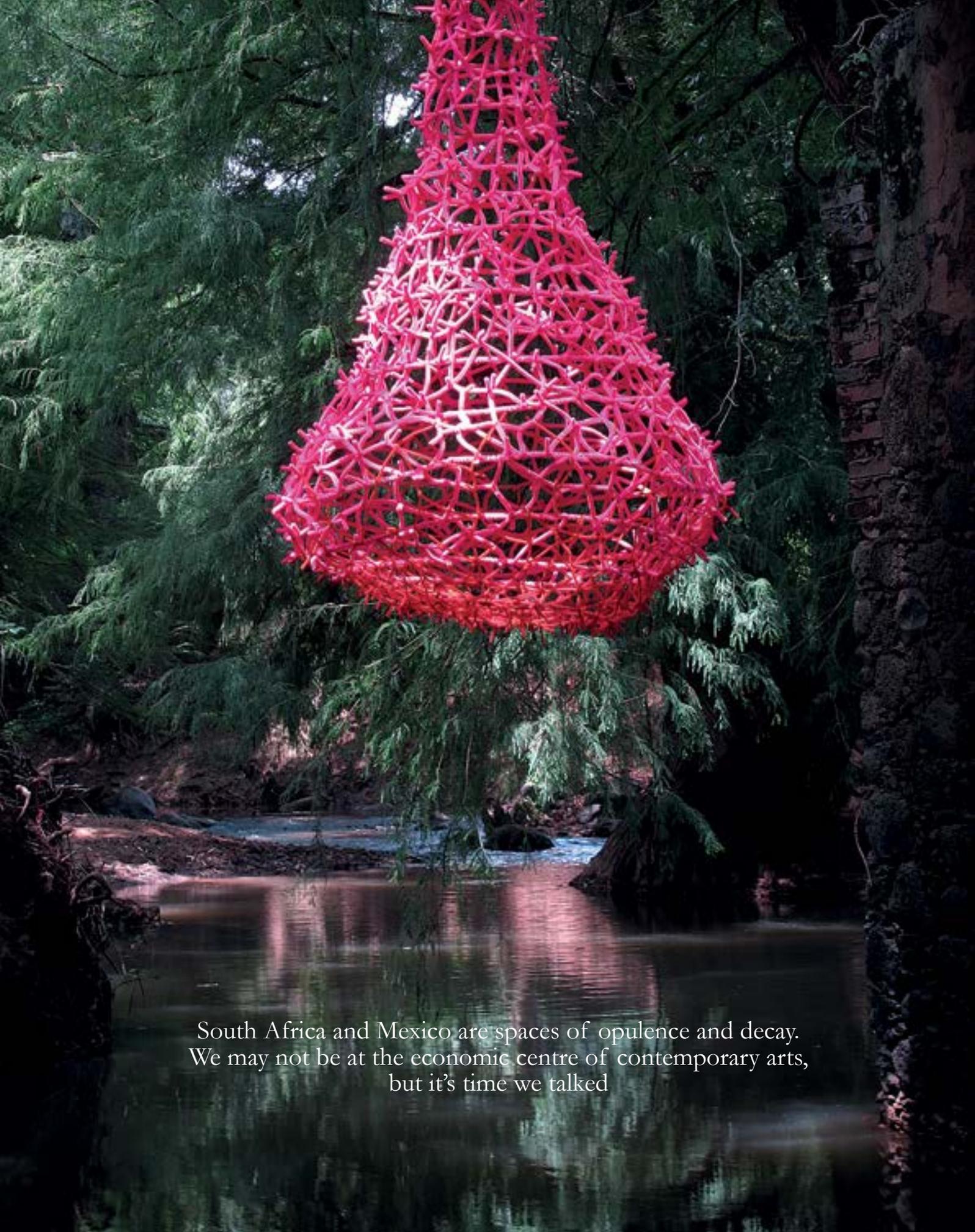
Monarch Butterfly and Guapa (as it is colloquially referred to) is an appeal to the sense best experienced first hand.

Since Guapamacátaro was founded (in 2006) over one hundred pioneers have been in residency. Participants have included artists, scientists, educators and activists from Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, the United States, Canada, Germany, England, Ireland, Holland, France, Spain, Russia, Norway, India, Sri Lanka, Korea, Japan and South Africa.

Our group comprised seven artists; Andrea López-Portillo (Mexico/Costa Rica), Liz Lessner (US), René Espinosa (Mexico), Lydia Campis (Puerto Rico/US), César Damián (Mexico), Alyssa Crane (US) and myself, representing South Africa.

During our residency, we explored the physical as well as the inner landscape – the vast bodies of water, natural dyes, language, migration, memory and the subconscious.

There are several bodies of water in the vicinity: To the north, the calm and extended El Bordo, nestled amongst desert hills. To the south, the bright and open El Fresno lagoon, where locals fish for carp with long nets. To the east, El Ojo de Agua natural springs, which irrigate



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THESE PAGES:

- 01 René Espinosa installing his site-based installation, *Migrations*, 2015. Photograph: César Damián.
- 02 Alyssa Crane, *Untitled (Bougainvillea)*, 2015. Installation view (detail). Photograph: Liza Grobler.
- 03 Alyssa Crane, *Untitled (Bougainvillea)*, 2015. Photograph: Liza Grobler.
- 04 César Damián, *Naufrajos*, 2015. Installation view. Photograph: César Damián.
- 05 René Espinosa, *Migrations*, 2015. Installation view. Photograph: René Espinosa.

PREVIOUS PAGES:

Liza Grobler, *Mexican Pink*, 2015.
 Photograph: Liza Grobler.

crops in the whole valley. To the West, the Cuitzeo lake, the second largest freshwater body in Mexico, with a four hundred square kilometre extension. The first three are within walking distance, and Cuitzeo is an hour away by car. Larger rivers such as Lerma, Tlalpujahua and Chincua also pass through the Maravatío municipality.

Lydia Campis’ multi-media installation *Guapa macát aro | Aro macát guapa* (“The Place Surrounded by Water | The Water Surrounded by Place”) combined audio recordings with water and earth samples to reexamine human-nature relationships. According to Campis, “This sound installation asks the audience to reconsider their perception of the major bodies of water surrounding the area through deep listening and spatial augmentation. The installation envelops its audience in a symphony of sound and introspection.”

César Damián literally suspended bodies *in* water. Says Damián, “I am working on an active experimental basis using photography as my platform of expression. Water has

been a catalyst in my work for years. Topics of migration and memory have been a vehicle of my creative projects and a promoter of personal transfiguration. Using water as a medium, I submerge myself in memory to reach the subconscious of my own experiences and those of others who, like me, store in their organism the distortion of past events. I seek poetic responses to retrieve from oblivion the migrant, the shipwrecked.”

Michoacán is one of the states in Mexico with the highest number of migrants to the United States. “During my residency, I discovered the extensive impact migration has on the local community. There are many broken homes as people migrate in an attempt to provide for their families,” says René Espinosa. He worked in the studio of a local ceramicist to create a site-based installation that alludes to this exodus with empty feet, footprints and maguey leaves – a traditional plant from Mexico.

Responding to the children in the community’s desire to learn English, Andrea



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López-Portillo developed *¿Cómo se dice?* (“How do you say...?”) She worked closely with the children to label objects around them in both English and Spanish. “This would motivate them and other people in the community to learn and practice English, and encourage resident artists to learn Spanish. It provides an opportunity for further interaction.”

While López-Portillo approached the verbal form of communication, Liz Lessner’s sculptures explore non-verbal communication. She visually captured intimate personal spaces, such as the space bounded by two peoples’ bodies as they engage in iconic gestures like whispering. Her sonic sculpture ‘reacts’ to the physical presence of people in the space. It incorporates ultrasonic sensors, micro-controllers, and a Pure Data patch that distorts a soundscape as the viewer approaches the speaker.

Mexico is the land of colour – the national identity is Mexican Pink; a deep hue of hot pink, similar to that of the bougainvillea

flower, used in traditional clothing and crafts. Alyssa Crane extracted the natural colour from these flowers and filled the well at the *hacienda* with a pool of deep pink water. Likewise, I made reference to the colour by installing an outsized pink pipecleaner drop under the pedestrian bridge.

Handcraft is an integral part of the culture and each region has its own craft specialty ranging from ceramics, to delicate glass Christmas decorations, to intricate embroidery. With a nod to this tradition, I fashioned an amorph growth from cheese curls (the local variant would be Cheetos) and crocheted an organic form from the leaves of Cat Tail – an invasive plant that threatens to take over the bodies of water.

The afternoons are filled with thunderstorms. The days are overripe. At night, the fireflies send Morse code to the cartels.

Liza Grobler is a visual artist and freelance writer based in Cape Town, South Africa.

THESE PAGES:

- 01 Liza Grobler, *Cat Tail*, 2015. A crochet performance with invasive plants. Photograph: Liza Grobler.
- 02 Liza Grobler, *Cheetos (cheese curls)*, 2015. Photograph: César Damián.
- 03 Andrea López-Portillo, *¿Cómo se dice?*, 2015. Photograph: Andrea López-Portillo
- 04 Lydia Campis, *Guapa-macát-aro | Aro-macát-guape*, (detail: *El Bordo*), 2015. Photograph: Lydia Campis.
- 05 Andrea López-Portillo, *¿Cómo se dice?* (Detail), 2015. Photograph: Andrea López-Portillo
- 06 Liz Lessner, *Guape*, 2015. Photograph: Liz Lessner.



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During a recent residency Liza Grobler spoke to Alicia Marván, founder and director of Guapamacátaro Center for Art and Ecology about her programme



Alicia Marván,
founder and director of
Guapamacátaro Center for Art
and Ecology, Mexico

Liza Grobler: What led you to establish a residency in this specific part of Mexico?

Alicia Marván: As a Mexican artist living in New York City, I felt a need to reconnect with the artistic traditions and people of my country; to reclaim my cultural heritage. This, combined with concerns over the socio-economic and ecological situation in Mexico, led me to return home and establish a presence at an almost-abandoned family farm in the state of Michoacán. For nearly two hundred years, the generations before me had taken care of the land and its people. I felt it was my turn to do the same.

What is the significance of the name, ‘Guapamacátaro’?

Guapamacátaro is the indigenous name of the valley and *hacienda*. Derived from the Purhépecha culture, it means ‘Place Surrounded by Water.’ Originally it was written *Huapamacátaro*, but my family changed the name—because when shortened, Guapa (as we call it) is a colloquial Mexican expression meaning ‘beautiful woman.’ The property is, in fact, surrounded by water in all four directions; and the heavy summer rain envelops it in water from above.

What is the current social and economic situation in the area?

The local population is of low socio-economic status, subsisting primarily on small-scale agriculture and livestock farming. Although historically rich (both culturally and economically), the region presents a deficiency in both sectors – partly due to forty years of migration to the United States. This extensive migration in search of opportunity and income means that the majority of the population is comprised of women and children.

The drug trade in Michoacán has been in the news a lot lately. How does this impact on the region, specifically on the local community?

Fortunately, the drug cartel activities are not anchored near Guapamacátaro. Trafficking is a problem in the state capital, the center of production is south of the state. However, cartels may pass through Maravatío, and on occasion (about once or twice a year), cause some havoc – but never involving civilians. What saddens me is the public’s general attitude of fear and distrust, which has increased considerably since the so-called ‘war on drugs’ started, almost ten years ago.

Could you elaborate on the relationship between art and ecology? How is it relevant to this region?

In Mexico, many rural zones (like Guapamacátaro) lack cultural and artistic opportunities. This phenomenon is due to a complex web of factors, such as the priority to fulfill basic needs, migration, globalisation and governmental ignorance and disinterest. Many of these regions have rich artisanal and popular culture traditions, but unfortunately they are stagnating or disappearing entirely. Lack of cultural incentives contribute to severe social problems such as alcoholism,

violence, depression and learning disabilities. If self-expression was more widely fostered, self-esteem would increase. In addition, many rural zones in Mexico exhibit a high level of ecological degradation – primarily due to poor education.

In an attempt to address these problems and to foster socially and ecologically conscious cultural development, I founded the Guapamacátaro Center for Art and Ecology. The conceptual and artistic framework includes ecology in a broad sense – not limited to the common association with the preservation of the natural environment. The human, natural and artificial components of the local ecosystem – and their relationship to each other – are subjects of inquiry.

You clearly value the importance of international dialogue in the arts – but if funding is limited, why bring in artists from outside Mexico?

Inviting professionals from diverse cultures and geographical regions has played a very positive role in the project. The local community, especially the youth, are very open and eager to meet new people and exchange ideas. Foreigners marvel at the landscape, biodiversity, customs, and Mexican culture in general. It’s very empowering for the locals, and definitely builds collective self-esteem. Unfortunately, many people in Mexico grew up ashamed of their culture, as they’ve been told by society and mainstream media that they’re not worthy.

What’s next for Guapamacátaro Center for Art and Ecology?

After ten years of sailing this ship alone, I’m ready to expand the project by delegating and collaborating with additional administrative personnel and most importantly, with the community in the Guapamacátaro village. I want to emphasise the importance of agency, community building and regional planning. I have also been working on a capital campaign to renovate the *hacienda*, so that we can offer income-generating programmes, such as eco-tourism and a cooperative of local goods to benefit the local economy.

THESE PAGES:

- 01 Fishing with the community. Photograph: César Damián.
- 02 Lydia Campis, *Guapa-macát-aro | Aro-macát-guapa*, (detail: *Ojode Agua*), 2015. Photograph: Lydia Campis.
- 03 Alicia Marván. Photograph: René Espinosa