

A close-up photograph of a stone face sculpture, likely a Buddha, with a focus on the nose and eye area. The lighting is dramatic, casting deep shadows and highlighting the texture of the stone.

# *The language of form*

Text and Photos by Helge Denker © (2007)





**V**isual art is music for the eyes. Like music, it reaches us and communicates to us in a language beyond words. It can be a more direct form of communication than our spoken languages, because it is not tied into the structured limits of words. And visual messages often come in very subtle shades and forms and colours, allowing them to slip quietly past our intellect to reach the greatest depths of our being.

Dörte Berner is a visual artist with a great gift for expression. She is a sculptor, speaking through the language of form. She uses the silence of stone to express her views and feelings. Even unworked, stone can speak of so much. And when it has been worked by Dörte's hands – and mind – it becomes a wonderful, powerful mode of communication.

Dörte Berner is Namibia's best-known sculptor. But that statement falls far short of the full spectrum of her achievements. Dörte has held over forty solo exhibitions on four continents over the last half-century. Her work has been exhibited in Germany, Canada and the United States, Australia, Botswana, South Africa and of course Namibia.

Growing up in Namibia, one grows up alongside the work of Dörte Berner. It permeates Namibian consciousness through its quiet presence in many public spaces. Her work has become part of the urban landscape of Windhoek and is registered only subconsciously by most residents. Such deep correlation with art in Namibia is difficult to put into words. It is perhaps best

expressed by the following small anecdote: When Dörte recently visited a private nature reserve in south-western Namibia, the local guide exclaimed: 'Are you THE Dörte Berner? I studied you at school!' Dörte's work is part of the Namibian school curriculum (as well as the syllabus of the University of Pretoria).

Dörte has spent 45 years engaged in formal sculpture. In that time, she has completed some 238 works (counting groups as one work, so the total number of individual pieces is actually much higher). And after almost half a century of hammering stone, she is still full of energy and enthusiasm, is still asking questions, still seeking and striving – striving to get lightness into the weight of the stone, to capture movement. 'How do I express time in a sculpture?' Dörte is especially fascinated by that theme. Stone, with its seemingly timeless solidity, may prove an ideal medium to explore it.

Dörte works on her sculptures for six hours a day. It is hard physical work – Dörte does not use power tools, but carves away at the stone with hammer and chisel, file and scraper. And many of her works are huge. Some weigh well over 500 kg. Such hard, manual labour is especially impressive for a woman of Dörte's slender build and graceful air. Dörte turns sixty-five this month, and talks about needing to slow down. Yet, there is so much energy in her. She possesses such intensity. The phone rings, and Dörte runs to the house to pick it up – with plenty of bounce in her step.

I have known Dörte and her husband Volker – also an artist – for many years, and have often visited the Berner family on their farm, Peperkorrel. But now, as a writer, I feel somehow daunted

by the task of trying to capture the magnitude of Dörte's artistic achievements. I am suddenly shy about asking the right questions. I deeply respect Dörte and Volker, as artists and as people – their warmth and hospitality, their unpretentiousness, their modesty in the face of their achievements. And their unity. The work of Dörte and Volker seems inextricably linked. The media they use are very different, as is the work (Volker creates powerful, abstract art, woven as *karakul* carpets). But together the works form a symbiosis of colour and form.

Much could be written about these two charismatic people. Dörte told me that she would prefer this article to be purely about her work. She prefers to see her work, rather than herself, in the foreground. It is her work through which she communicates, that is her mode of expression. And it has powerful messages. But while this article is obviously about Dörte's work, it seems impossible for me not to write about the artist who created it. Dörte's work is so much a part of her. It infuses all of Peperkorrel, just like it infuses the artistic landscape of Namibia.

Dörte Wunsch was born in Pozna in what is today a part of Poland. In 1945, displaced by the second World War, her family fled to Germany, using a single wagon to carry all of their belongings. They sought refuge in the home of Dörte's grandmother near Hamburg. Dörte was only two and a half at the time, but a feeling of fear, and with it a longing for shelter, for *Geborgenheit*, was deeply ingrained in her emotions and has found its way into much of her work.

Dörte and her sister grew up very simply, as refugees in a small house. Dörte's father was an architect and did not have an easy task in supporting his family in the post-war turmoil. Dörte speaks particularly fondly of her mother, of how she managed to create things out of nothing. Dörte remembers always being in a beautiful living environment – an environment that nurtured her creative expression.

At the age of 14, Dörte often walked past the workshop of a mason on her way to the cemetery to visit family graves. She was intrigued by the idea of working with stone and asked the mason for a piece to take home. This she worked with a simple hammer and screw driver – and knew that she had found her calling, that she would become a sculptor.

Her parents did not want her to be a sculptor, but Dörte's determination won. She completed a ceramics apprenticeship to secure a place at art school. She also worked as a graphic artist, painting signs and posters for shops and did a variety of odd jobs ranging from painting houses to selling cheese. She spent time in Switzerland and the USA studying drawing. As a sculptor, she studied under the supervision of Hans Wimmer, an artist from Munich. But Dörte says she learned many of the techniques of sculpture from other students.

During her studies in Germany, she met Volker Berner, and in 1966, after completing their studies, they moved to Namibia together and began to establish themselves as artists. Both Dörte and Volker achieved international recognition and by the mid eighties were able to exhibit widely. 'They have founded a small artist's village and produce work of stunning beauty and deeply-rooted thought' wrote Howard Mozel in a review published in Canada in 1988.

The long list of Dörte's exhibitions begins in Windhoek in 1969, followed by Pretoria and Johannesburg in the early seventies and then by a long string of international exhibitions in many parts of the world over the next 35 years, many of them joint exhibitions with her husband. Dörte has also taken part in numerous group exhibitions, many together with well-known Namibian contemporaries such as John Muafangejo, Trudi Dicks, Francois de Necker and Hercules Viljoen.

Dörte tells of early lucky breaks that allowed her to become established, of her works being noticed and bought by important galleries. While there may have been some luck involved, it was the quality of her work that captured the attention and imagination of people. 'To follow up your exceptional exhibition "Five Namibian Artists", I would like to invite you on behalf of the South African Association of Arts to hold an exhibition in Pretoria' wrote South African Gallery Director, Roena Griesel, in 1987.

Dörte often emphasises the importance of a dialogue between her work and the viewer. It is a longing to share her vision and her messages. In Namibia, and especially on a farm in Namibia, such dialogue is sparse. Distances are great and roads are dusty and so visitors are sporadic. Farmstudio Peperkorrel welcomes visitors, who receive a personal tour of the sculpture studio as well as the weaving production, but such exposure is obviously not sufficient for an ambitious artist.

The longing for dialogue, for true interaction, explains Dörte's willingness to again and again take on that daunting task of organising international exhibitions. For, even though the exhibitions have always been successful, they are a huge financial and logistical burden, due to the difficulty and cost of transporting the heavy sculptures. On the other hand, Dörte feels that her isolation in rural Namibia has helped her to develop her own, very distinct, vision and style. 'I can be thankful that I worked in such isolation. It allowed me to build up my own world. I didn't follow trends.'

In the early years of her career in Namibia, Dörte did a lot of sketching amongst the rural worker communities. Later, she began working mainly from the images stored in her mind. Dörte's often very powerful sketches emphasise form in a very distinct style. They are created quickly using strong lines – lines that appear like topographical contours – and are the starting point for her stone sculptures. While Dörte has tried sculpting in wood, she has always known that stone is her medium. She uses a wide range of natural stone, including serpentine, marble and sandstone. Most of the raw materials come from Namibia, but sometimes also from neighbouring countries. Many of her works have been cast as limited editions in bronze.

People form the core of her subject matter. While Dörte does sculpt wildlife, she sees her animal sculptures as playful works, in a way like taking her work on a vacation in nature, away from all the complexities of the human condition. And they do stand in somewhat decorative contrast to her human figures and abstract expressions. Dörte tends to depict people in very solid, rounded forms, stylised and reduced to essential postures and expressions, uncluttered by detail. It is within this simplicity that they find their strength of expression. While many of Dörte's sculptures initially impress with their size, it is the feelings they emanate which gives them their real power.

The sculptures capture emotions, states of the human condition, which language only skirts around. They focus on universal themes, on some of the overarching states of our existence: Joy and fear and pain, suffering and contentment, decay and death, struggle and tranquillity, curiosity and stoicism. Dörte has a very strong emotional engagement with social issues. She is naturally inquisitive, very well read and has a clear sense of right and wrong. 'She understands her work as a contribution to the awareness-creation of the problems of her new home country.' wrote an unnamed critic in a German newspaper.

Dörte often uses cultural symbolism in her work and delves into mythology and religion. She sometimes uses text, carved into the stone, to give the viewer easier access to a work or to underline particular themes. The texts create a link between the spoken and visual languages. They are often written in both German and



English, but the dual texts are not necessarily translations of each other and sometimes have quite different meanings. The titles that Dörte gives to her works may also differ between languages. Many only hint at the depth of the work and some almost appear arbitrary, seeming to serve mainly as labels to identify the works.

Over the years, Dörte's work shows distinct changes in her approach and style. Many works have moved towards abstraction and are composed of more complex installations rather than one sculpted stone. There is an increased use of wood in combination with stone, with the wood mostly being incorporated unaltered. A much greater emphasis is placed on texture and there is a powerful use of negative shapes. The works have become much more complex in their treatment of the themes Dörte is working with, and are often visually abstract as a result. They are not as easy to access as earlier works, but encompass great depths within them. Many of Dörte's works emanate an intuitive understanding of the larger forces of life, whispering of a meaning and balance in all things.

Dörte is now passing her skills and her vision on to a new generation of artists by offering workshops to small groups of four to six people. The workshops run for a minimum of 10 days and are held at Farmstudio Peperkorrel. Peperkorrel has all the needed facilities, both for creative expression and feeling at home. Like her mother, Dörte possesses that talent, that skill of style. Art infuses her home and her life. Both Dörte and Volker are artisans, always working with their hands, building their own furniture and sculpting their own world. Sitting together with them, amongst sculptures under the thatched lapa, eating good food or drinking beer, it is easy to relax into genuine hospitality and talk freely about art and life.

Here, during a quiet, unguarded moment, Dörte reveals a sense of wonderment at her own creations. This is in no way a sign of vanity. It is a keen awareness of the power of creative expression, of the creative process itself. Dörte relates the example of her work, '*Alte Laura*' (Old Laura): Fascinated by the powerful features of an old woman living at Dorka, Dörte asked her to her studio for a sitting and produced a quick clay bust, from which she later made an abstracted steatite sculpture. Without knowing the old woman or having seen the clay bust, a South African doctor was able to diagnose from the stone sculpture that the subject had suffered a stroke and was half blind. He was so impressed by the work that he immediately bought it. The clay bust was later turned into Dörte's first bronze cast, of which only two copies were made. The original had been no more than a sketch, a quick rendition, done in 15 minutes. But it captured the essence of its subject so well. 'What is released in that process?' Dörte sometimes seems surprised by the power of this language she uses so freely.

It is a language to which some of us may need to become attuned; a language which needs time and silence to be understood. It is a complex, yet subtle mode of communication and there is no better place than the tranquillity of Peperkorrel to perceive and understand the messages that are expressed. Dörte Berner's sculptures touch us and move us somewhere within those unfathomable parts of our being that are beyond words. They may comfort, or they may disturb us. They may perhaps even open new realms within us. Yet they offer a silent, timeless dignity in the face of all hardship. A stoic resistance to the negative forces that are a part of our lives. They speak of humanity; they speak of ourselves. And they speak in the universal language of sculpture – the language of form.

