

# Freedom beckons as Bell rings the changes

In the '80s, she felt trapped — now Deborah Bell communes with gods. By Robyn Sassen

IT'S like a Deborah Bell festival — the work of the prolific artist is being featured in three exhibitions at the same time, in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Bell, 58, one of South Africa's most respected artists, speaks with fire about her work, but her personal life is private. And because she has achieved so much with the art she has made all her professional life, the least we can do is respect that privacy.

"In ancient times, art was used to rein in power to change the world. That is the kind of art I'm interested in," she says.

"I never know what I'm going to do before I start a piece and my coiled up personal energy becomes part of the work."

Four years in the making, her exhibition at the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg — *Dreams of Immortality* — is an important show, comprising more than 70 pieces. There is a smaller exhibition at Everard Read in Cape Town and an exhibition of her etchings at David Krut Projects in Johannesburg.

Educated at the University of the Witwatersrand in the '80s, Bell lives and works in a beautiful valley outside the town of Magaliesburg.

"We're all gods, she says. We've just forgotten that, because we've been so indoctrinated into the give and take and value judgments of our society.

Is this current focus of hers on immortality about acknowledging her own mortality?

Perhaps. She speaks of the loss of her brother some years ago as a catalyst for shifting values in her work.

"Immortality for me is being so much in the present, so much in the now, that you are outside of time," she says.

"I don't believe we're only here for one lifetime. In this society, we're so indoctrinated to believe we have to behave ... We go to heaven or hell. I

**“We can change our reality. I believe we all have incredible power**

don't accept that.”

Hindsight has given her perspective into her own thoughts. "I thought my early stuff in the 1980s was about being caught in South Africa. Being caught in that claustrophobia, that kind of desperate embrace; but looking at it all now, I realise it was about my fear of being trapped in the material," she says.

"In those works which I made in my 20s and early 30s, there were ladders that would go to the roof, with no opening. Or there were stairs that were so thickly painted that you couldn't have walked up them, or there were closed doors ...

"So I think even though everyone understood these works on a political level, when I look back at them they were about me feeling trapped — in heavy clothing, in an embrace, in an underground space.

"At the time I thought I was making political and sexual commentary. I thought that was what I was doing."

In the current material, the figure of a woman predominates. She doesn't look like Bell, but there she is, in prayer, in invocation, on a horse, in red shoes.

Bell grins. "In a sense, every figure I do is an aspect of myself. Even if she doesn't look like me."

This body of work is about who we really are as human beings. Bell speaks of the ancient belief recounted in mythology that the gods came down and mated with mortal women; it cleaves poetically with *The Return of the Gods*, a series of five larger-than-life cast figures.

"When I started these, I thought I was making much smaller figures. And they just grew in size and presence in a way that surprised even me. It is almost as if I don't know whether I called them forth or they called me forth, to make them."

These figures in a darkened room — arguably the central core of the exhibition, which comprises drawings, etchings, paintings and sculptures — feature a sound installation



OUTSIDE OF TIME: Deborah Bell with her work 'The Return of the Gods' at the Everard Read Gallery Picture: JAMES OATWAY

that is triggered by your movement as you approach. The music was composed by Philip Miller, with whom Bell collaborated in the '80s when she was developing material with William Kentridge and the late Robert Hodgins.

"Philip absolutely got what I meant: each figure has its own sound — from Xhosa singing to chords played on the ram's horn to Hebraic chanting, and the sound of a violin and a single-stringed instrument.

"For me to be able to do this is like magic," she says.

"We can change our thinking. If we do so, we can change our reality. I want to explore unknown realities. I believe we all have incredible power."

● Deborah Bell's *Dreams of Immortality* is at the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg until June 27. A smaller version of this exhibition is on show at the Everard Read Gallery in Cape Town from May 14 to June 15. *Renunciation*, featuring several etchings, is at the David Krut Projects gallery in Parkwood, Johannesburg, until June 12.