

ART PROFILE



Photography by Roland Groenenboom

# Best foot forward

Artist Laura Emsley's latest work is a study in human mobility, writes **Emma Jordan**



Clockwise from top left are inspirational snapshots for Laura Emsley's video work *Little Foot*: The Nieuwe Maas River, Rotterdam; Afrikaanderplein; Emsley at the Sterkfontein Caves with one of the sculptured skull pieces, which form part of a tableau related to her *Little Foot* video work

When London-based artist Laura Emsley was offered a month-long residency at Nirox, she accepted immediately. Her decision wasn't based on the peace and space the unique foundation offered — although these did allow her a welcome respite from the hectic pace of London life — but rather on Nirox's proximity to the Sterkfontein Caves and the Cradle of Humankind.

Emsley's latest work, *Little Foot*, named after the hominoid skeleton at Sterkfontein, is a study in human mobility in the age of globalisation. "I was looking at this ability we have to move," she says. "Starting with *Little Foot* and the spread of humans across the planet to end up in places such as the Netherlands and Europe."

The artist was approached by Roland Groenenboom, a freelance curator and writer who has worked with postpunk band Sonic Youth and in an independent capacity with galleries and institutions across Europe. Groenenboom's latest project, *LADUMA!*, will run for the duration of the Fifa 2010 World Cup in the Afrikaanderplein in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. This area is located south of the Nieuwe Maas River — that is, on "the wrong side of the tracks". Made up of a grid of streets named after historical Afrikaans figures (there's a Kruger Straat, a De La Rey Straat and a Van Riebeeck Straat, among others), it is inhabited by a largely Syrian and Turkish immigrant community.

Groenenboom says he was interested in the way Emsley's work presented the interplay between history, fact and fiction.

"I really liked her ideas for a piece in the context of the project *LADUMA!*," he says. "Her new installation brings together, in a challenging way, the finding of *Little Foot* in a cave at Sterkfontein, diaspora/migration, and football in the context of South Africa and the Afrikaanderplein in Rotterdam."

It's an incongruous interweave: an area in Rotterdam named after historical Afrikaans heroes, a hominoid skeleton at Sterkfontein and "the beautiful game" a.k.a. football.

"I'm not really a football person," says Emsley. "So I thought, what is football? It's a game that centres on the foot. It's about the skill of the foot; the notion of the foot. And I thought, this is a really good opportunity to centre on the human foot and what that has meant to us in the past, and what that means to us now, where we have come to, where it has brought us, this foot."

"I've always been interested in this little hominid called *Little Foot* who was found here at Sterkfontein. He displays how the thumb on the foot started to become a toe, which is much more suited to walking around on the ground than climbing in trees. It freed up the hands ... and from this tiny little change in one piece of the human anatomy you had incredibly important consequences, leading to the development of where we are now."

Emsley was born in South Africa, studied at Unisa and moved to the UK in the mid-1980s. She's familiar with a sense of migration and with the need to find and consolidate an identity within a familiar (she has Scottish ancestry) yet alien culture. In turn, this concept is one that is necessarily relevant to millions of people today. People moving for one reason or another — be it

trade, safety or personal prerogative — as they have done throughout history.

"I'm always trying to understand the origins or patterns of the bigger picture of movement," she says. "What is time and space and matter? One starts to get into these really big questions as it's all one has to orientate oneself as a human being. And I think that is really what comes through in my work. I'm trying to find integration through orientating myself. I would say it's been a very, very long and very, very, slow process. But I am making some progress, and certainly this project is an enormous leap for me in that direction — coming back here and being able to have this time here, and going out into this area to recover these parts of my past to try to integrate them into my being."

*Little Foot*, the artwork, is a double-screen video installation. Life in the Afrikaanderplein will be shown alongside footage of similar-named streets in South Africa. Emsley says she found the way that life is lived across the locations to be surprisingly similar.

However, filming in the Afrikaanderplein was not easy. The area's immigrant community is continually policed and monitored by CCTV cameras in operation on every corner. To say the community was reluctant to have an outsider filming them for art's sake is an understatement.

What finally broke the ice? Emsley approaching a group of boys playing football, of course. Perhaps the links created across time, history and culture by "the beautiful game" are not that incongruous after all.

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