

## HALF ART

# Naked truth rendered with age-old beauty

**R**ecently I had the pleasure of visiting the Orient Hotel, a little piece of heaven in the Francolin Conservancy about 20km west of Pretoria.

In 2019 owners Mari Dartnall and Cobus du Plessis launched a spectacular new double-wing, double-volume gallery; it houses the Adriaan Boshoff Museum and a permanent collection of South African impressionists, with plenty of room to spare for temporary exhibitions.

But that will have to wait for another column. So, too, will other art forms cultivated at the Orient – the wizardry of chef Chantel Dartnall at Restaurant Mosaic, the unplumbed depths of a wine cellar boasting 75,000 bottles, furnishing that attests to centuries-long traditions of woodcraft and artisanship from countries across Asia. I must gloss over these delights, although they help to set the scene for my subject: the sculptures of Tienie Pritchard.

Pritchard's work has been incorporated into various interior and exterior spaces at the Orient, but it is in a dedicated museum that the scope of the artist's oeuvre is most impressively displayed. Like the hotel grounds into which so many of his sculptures have now been gathered, Pritchard might lazily be accused of a kind of orientalism.

In Edward Said's conception, orientalism is a Western fascination with the exotic non-Western "other": sensuous, delightfully distant, unknowable, generalisable, dangerous, dehumanised. Indeed, celebrating the cultural and aesthetic richness of east and southeast Asia, the Indian



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subcontinent, Persia and Arabia – and even "Moorish" North Africa – can all too easily reinscribe European colonial tropes. Doing so from an SA perspective risks reproducing that aspect of our own history.

Happily, however, the Orient Hotel's tribute to the art, architecture and philosophy of distinct geographies and cultures in Asia overcomes this hurdle through careful curation and an immersive aesthetic experience. In the same way, Pritchard's sculptures engage with mythological and historical figures from diverse African, Asian and European contexts not as exotic "others" but as poignant expressions of the human condition.

Here we have *The Rain Queen – Modjadji* of Limpopo, alongside *Morgan Le Fay* – the Celtic goddess recruited into Arthurian legend as a sorceress. *The African Queen (Mantatisi)* of the Batlokwa takes her place alongside *Lady Godiva*. These protofeminist icons of servant leadership and empathy

**THE SCULPTOR'S ANTI-MISOGYNISTIC CRITIQUE ALSO EMERGES IN 'THE MARRIAGE MARKET', WHERE SLAVES ARE BEING SOLD AS CONCUBINES**



(Godiva's naked horse ride was undertaken to persuade her husband to reduce his oppressive taxation of the people of Coventry) merge symbolically with Pritchard's ambiguous portrayal of Cleopatra.

Orientalism is standard in depictions of the Egyptian Queen by European writers and artists over the centuries. Pritchard's *Cleopatra* does not quite conform.

She is sultry but also pensive, with a royal bearing that belies the denigration of her as a hedonistic and whimsical narcissist.

The sculptor is enamoured of the female nude, but his subjects are not defined by their sexuality. If anything, Pritchard's work conveys a sustained critique of that patriarchal binary according to which women must either be attainable objects of desire or chaste abstractions of loyalty and piety.

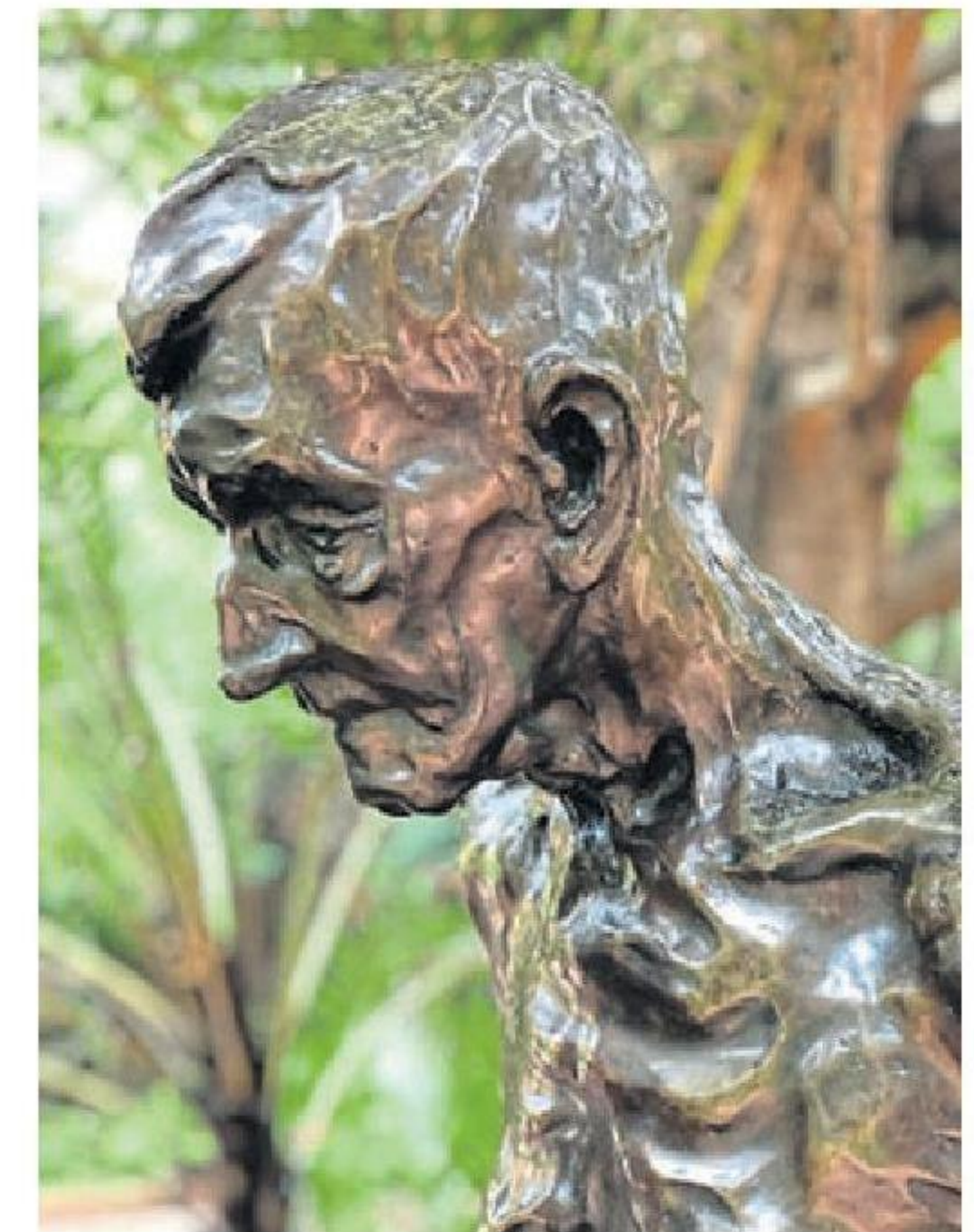
Above, Tienie Pritchard, *The Marriage Market*, 2008. Above, right, Tienie Pritchard, *Life Cycle* (detail), 1971. Tienie Pritchard has challenged the puritanical distaste for nudity since the 1970s. /SUPPLIED

The sculptor's anti-misogynistic critique also emerges in *The Marriage Market*, where slaves are being sold as concubines, and in *Resistance*, which invokes Lysistrata and the Athenian women's "sex strike".

From the 1970s, when he first upset the Calvinist Afrikaner establishment with the naked figures in his sculpture *Life Cycle*, Pritchard challenged the puritanical distaste for nudity – a dissidence that extended beyond sexual taboos into a wider confrontation with apartheid proscriptions.

Yet he also built a reputation on public commissions from the government and corporations that were in cahoots with the segregationist politics and economics of the state.

After three years of prudish controversy, *Life Cycle* was eventually erected in the Civitas Building – home to the public



works department (and subsequently the post-apartheid department of health). In 1978, the "Broederbond banks", Volkskas and Saambou, commissioned *Discovery of Gold* for their headquarters in Pietersburg (now Polokwane).

Relocated to the Orient, however, these works are redeemed from such associations. And the monumental pieces that remain in situ – George Harrison holding a nugget aloft in the south of Joburg, water nymphs presiding over Bela Bela, a wall panel at the war memorial in Delville Wood – have acquired a different historical significance over time.

As I wandered through the Tienie Pritchard Museum, the sculptures surrounding me insisted on an alternative perspective to the "political" and "ideological" approaches that I usually adopt. Their polished bronze surfaces lure the viewer into older formulations about truth and beauty, while the exquisitely detailed faces and the carefully studied postures render archetypal figures – expressing pain, sorrow, pride, dignity, fortitude – in unique and individuated forms.