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# Robin Rhode's artistic journey in Johannesburg's abandoned spaces

By Lesego Chopape



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Ephemeral: Robin Rhode's outdoors, large-scale works, such as *Portrait with Keys*, *Nine Holes* and *Garden Service*, are often brought to life by performance. (Photos supplied)

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**I**t is a gloomy Saturday morning, and I am making my way to Florida, west of Johannesburg, to meet South African contemporary artist Robin Rhode, who is based in Berlin, Germany.

The 48-year-old award-winning multidisciplinary artist has been working here for about two months.

My visit coincides with a significant moment in Rhode's career.

The Circa Gallery in Johannesburg is set to showcase archival videos highlighting the pivotal role of movement in his practice, while the Stevenson gallery will serve as the venue for *Stillness*, featuring his photos and paintings. The show opens at Circa on 15 August and at the Stevenson on 17 August.

In addition, there is his much-anticipated surprise performance at this year's Joburg Art Fair.

Nervousness tugs at me, as I've never ventured to this side of the city before. As my regular readers know, my exploration of Johannesburg has been limited, leaving many corners unknown to me.

On arrival, I am greeted by Rhode's head of security, an imposing white man whose presence is initially intimidating. Sensing my unease, he quickly reassures me that I am safe, promising to watch over me.

Our meeting place is what seems to be an abandoned park, a space thick with the echoes of its past visitors. The energy here is palpable, as if the park is imbued with the spirits of those who once roamed its paths.

To break the ice, I strike up a conversation with the security man, asking him about his work.

He recounts his experiences in Afghanistan and Israel, sharing poignant stories about how those places have shaped him.



Rhode has a heavy security contingent because of the areas in which he works. His head of security tells me the artist has been robbed before and they do not take lightly him working in areas where gangs and drugs are prevalent.



Garden Service

As he speaks, a car hooter blares behind us and I see a grey SUV speeding towards the entrance in the park's green palisade fence.

"He's here," the guard says. The SUV parks a few metres away and Rhode steps out, dressed all in black and layered up against the chilly Johannesburg morning.

"I didn't know you'd be here so early," he says, quickly approaching.



“Welcome to the biggest art studio in Johannesburg,” he declares, gesturing to the vast, overgrown park.

Wasting no time, Rhode begins showing me some of his latest works.

On site, in addition to the security, he has a photographer and videographer as well as assistants who help him clean up the site, making it easier for him to work.

It is orderly and the assistants wait for his call to start working.

He mentions he tries his best to have local guys helping. That has backfired on him many times, however, it does not stop him from fostering a creative environment for people to learn from him.

We move onto a tennis court that has been cleaned up, its cracked floor now a canvas for his creations.

Rhode is known for his wall art, so I am curious.

“I’ve been developing an idea to shift away from walls and work on the ground,” he explains. “I figured that, if I could work on the ground and take that back up onto the wall, it could be more interesting. The ground also allows me to explore scale even more and the possibility of painting and drawing even further.”

His works are massive, combining bold and subtle elements, and he often interacts with his art, bringing it to life through performances.

This dynamic aspect of Rhode’s work means it resonates both with and without him.

“My work is investing in drawings, the mechanisation of drawing, the organic mark-making of drawing —the potential of drawing is what I am playing with. Coming here made me realise that I could use this surface as my canvas and these grounds as my paper,” he says.

As Rhode describes his practice, I suddenly realise I am standing on one of his pieces. I gasp, worried I might have ruined it.



He laughs, “Art should be something that is unexpected. Art should be a surprise, a magical situation. It should not be an obvious thing.”

The piece he shows me is called *Rainstorm*. It features raindrops drawn with chalk and charcoal.

“This is a piece where the character is playing padel with the raindrops,” he explains. “I’m trying to tap into a lot of cultural practices in Jozi, and one of them is playing padel, so I played with that idea.”

I ask him if he worries about his pieces being vandalised, washed away by the rain — or stepped on by a clumsy journalist.

“We are too infatuated with ownership, too infatuated with the object. We project these objects with value.

“I am not trying to build monuments; I am here to tear them down.

“I am willing to create and then let it go. If it is that amazing, it will stay. If not, it will get washed away.”



Nine Holes

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Rhode's perspective is both refreshing and profound. His willingness to let go, to allow his art to exist temporarily and then disappear, reflects a peaceful way of living.

It's a philosophy that embraces the transient nature of life and art, acknowledging that everything has its time and that letting go is a natural part of the creative process.

"There is an interesting Japanese manifesto called the Gutai Manifesto," he continues. "It is all about time and materials and mediums of art.

"The artist finds the materials, and the artist shapes and uses the material, then he presents the material.

"The material that he finds is dead but, through the artist's artistic spirit, he or she moulds the material and projects a life and spirit into the material so it is reactivated.

"That's what I am trying to do — to elevate the decay."

As we continue to explore the park, Rhode points out more of his works scattered across the grounds.

Each piece seems to blend seamlessly with the environment, as if it has always belonged there.

His art transforms the abandoned park into a living, breathing gallery, where each step reveals a new surprise.

We stop at an indoor soccer field where Rhode has created a series of intricate chalk drawings.

The court, once a place of competition and camaraderie, now serves as a backdrop for his artistic expression.

The drawings are vibrant and dynamic, capturing moments of movement and energy.

"This court has a history," Rhode says, tracing the lines of one of his drawings with his finger. "It's seen countless games, countless stories. I wanted to tap into that energy and add my own layer to it.



“Art is about connecting with the past, present, and future.”

Rhode’s work is a testament to the power of art to transform spaces and evoke emotions.

His ability to see beauty in the mundane, to create something extraordinary out of the ordinary, is inspiring.

“Why I come back home is because I feel I need to contribute to South African art. I feel I have a social commitment, which is something I don’t feel in Germany.

“Even in the decay we are standing in, I feel motivated to throw myself around and do something,” he says.

As we walk through the park, I have a deep sense of appreciation for his vision and creativity.

The morning passes quickly, filled with laughter, conversation and moments of quiet reflection.

Rhode’s passion for his work is infectious and I find myself immersed in the experience.

By the time we part ways, I feel as though I have gained a new perspective on art and life.

As I drive away from the park, the gloom of the morning lifts to a sense of warmth and hope. Rhode’s art, with its emphasis on impermanence and letting go, has left a lasting impression on me.

Rhode’s art studio, the abandoned park, shows the transformative power of creativity.

It’s a space where the past and present collide, where art and life intertwine, and where the ephemeral nature of existence is celebrated.

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