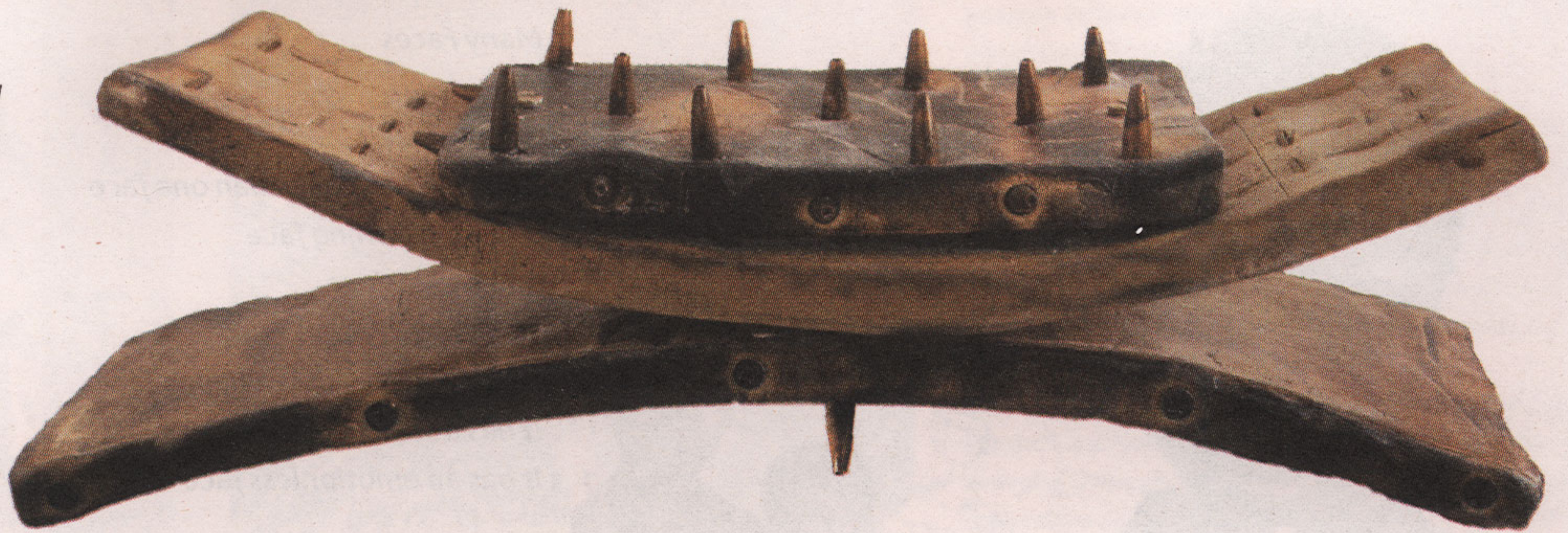


# An artist's life:

Artist-academic uses African headrests as a comment on colonialism and slavery

# KURT CAMPBELL

# Pillow talk



**A**T FIRST glance, there is nothing conventionally artistic or academic about Kurt Campbell — no paint-splattered garb, no grubby fingernails and not a hint of scholastic reserve or intellectual disquiet. He is suave, immaculately groomed and stylish in black, with the polished good looks of an actor or model. Yet, just a minute into conversation with him in his spacious office-studio at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town, and there is no mistaking the 29-year-old Capetonian is every bit the artist, as much the academic, and fervent about both roles.

"I feel really privileged to work in this environment," he says, gesturing towards the walls, built as part of the University of Cape Town's original site in 1925. "I am academically stimulated and not only are my fellow lecturers encouraging about my work as an artist, but they are also supportive in many practical ways. And being around the students is creatively hugely inspiring. In fact, one role feeds the other."

Juggling the responsibilities of lecturer and practising artist has been particularly demanding for Campbell of late. He recently completed work for his first solo exhibition, which took place in Cape Town last month and is showing in Johannesburg this month. Entitled *Fever Sleep — The Colonial Pillow Series*, the show comprises seven limited edition archival pigment prints on cotton, featuring seven intriguingly different interpretations of traditional African headrests.

Each image takes the basic form

of the typical small, wooden sculpture that has been used as a pillow throughout Africa for centuries. But Campbell's versions incorporate bullets, coins, spikes and nails, rendering them menacing and disconcertingly useless. What is he trying to say? "I don't want to be too prescriptive or risk framing the work with a tidy text because I would rather people had the space to experience their own emotions when they view the exhibition," he says. "But even so, it's important to me that the forms are understood both as headrests and as metaphors for colonisation."

Traditionally, headrests were used both as a medium through which to make contact with ancestral spirits and on which to sleep. The "fever" reference, says Campbell, suggests the distress, agitation and problematic legacy of colonialism. The use of "colonial materials" — the bullets, spikes, nails and coins — references "the colonial influence, and an uneasy relationship between the coloniser and the colonised". Rather than providing a smooth, appealing surface on which to rest, Campbell created a headrest that is guaranteed to provide an uneasy rest, a "fever sleep".

Building on the colonial theme, two of the headrests take on the shape of a galleon and a ship's hull. These, he says, allude to arrivals, departures, trade, slavery and war. In *Ordinance*, two bulls seem to strain to flee in opposite directions.

Although the headrests in the prints look as if they were sculptured from hardwood, they were formed from hobby clay. But viewers will never have the chance to verify this.

Once the headrests were sculpted, they were photographed and then destroyed or buried, leaving only the print to suggest they ever existed.

"The idea is that the remaining printed trace of the sculpture opens up more possibilities in the mind of the viewer than the physical object," he explains.

This notion came to Campbell when, after having long admired beautiful, glossy photographs of a particular Zulu headrest, he travelled to a museum to see the real thing: "I was terribly disappointed. It was dull and scuffed, and somehow my mental picture of it was spoiled. I was sorry that I had seen it. That is when I truly appreciated the prowess of an image. Reality can be limiting."

Having lived all his life in Cape Town, Campbell completed his undergraduate degree and postgraduate education studies at the University of Cape Town. He obtained his masters degree from Stellenbosch University, where he taught for four years before joining the Michaelis School of Fine Art. He was recently invited by the Fundament Foundation to participate in a residency programme in The Netherlands. His academic interests include design history, design theory and postcolonial theory, and he works in both digital and traditional media.

"I have particularly enjoyed working on *Fever Sleep*, where I have been sculptor, photographer and printer... I like the idea of working three-dimensionally towards the printed output," he says.

Penny Haw



## IF YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE ONE ...

CAMPBELL's exhibition of *Fever Sleep — The Colonial Pillow Series*, takes place at the new Worldart Gallery at 95 Commissioner Street in Johannesburg until June 29.

The seven 50cm x 50cm archival pigment prints on cotton will be released in editions of seven and are priced at R3 500 a print.

For more information, contact the Worldart Gallery on 082 901-5045.

Top: *Bullet Cushion*, from Kurt Campbell's *Fever Sleep — The Colonial Pillow Series*, 50cm x 50cm, archival pigment print on cotton.

Above: *Judas Headrest*, from Campbell's *Fever Sleep — The Colonial Pillow Series*. The sculpture is embedded with coins, 50cm x 50cm, archival pigment print on cotton.

Bottom right: *Ordinance*, 50cm x 50cm, archival pigment print on cotton.

Bottom left: *Safari Headrest*, 50cm x 50cm, archival pigment print on cotton.

