

Deurdagte Reis – 'n viering van vrouekunstenaars Thoughtful Journey – a celebration of female artists

Higgs is op 28 Junie 1898 in die Thaba 'Nchu-distrik in die Vrystaat gebore. Dit is eertyd sy haar kinderjare op 'n verlate plaas op die grense van die oortydse Basoetoland deurgebring het. Sy het van 1916 tot 1917 aan Wesleyan Girls High School, Grahamstad skool gegaan en hier lesse in vryhand- en swartbord-tekenwerk ontvang van F.W. Armstrong, wat by die skool deelyds kunsklasse gegee het.

In 1918 is sy as eerstejaarstudent aan die Grahamstad Kunsskool ingeskryf. Weens die Spaanse griep-epidemie wat die dorp getref het, is die skool egter teen die einde van daardie jaar gesluit.

Higgs het na Engeland verhuis waar sy die volgende dertien jaar gebly het om haar kunstudies te voltooi. Studies oorsee het dié aan die Byam Shaw Kunsskool in Kensington, Londen en, vanaf 1924, aan die Goldsmith Kollege (deel van die Universiteit van Londen, by New Cross) ingesluit – hier was grafiese kuns, etswerk, gravering, litografie en illustrasie die voorkeur, met Dürer, Rembrandt, Méryon, Millet en Whistler se style as invloed op studente.

Higgs het haar teen die einde van 1926 aan die Royal Academy of Arts ingeskryf en in 1931 haar studies voltooi. Gedurende haar studies aan die die Royal Academy het sy gereeld treinritte na Parys onderneem om werke deur impressioniste en post impressioniste te besigtig en bestudeer. Sy was lewenslank 'n bewonderaar van Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Douanier, Rosseau en Sullivan. Tydens die somer het sy ook deelyds klasse by Bourdelle se skilderskool en Atelier de La Grande Chaumiére bygewoon.

Higgs het in 1934 na Suid-Afrika teruggekeer om na haar siek moeder om te sien. Sy was later woonagtig in Stellenbosch, by haar niggie Christina van Heyningen, en het in 1935 en 1936 haar eerste solo-uitstallings in die Huishoudelike Wetenskap-saal van die Universiteit van Stellenbosch gehou. Van Heyningen se beroep as lektrese in literatuur het ook 'n invloed op Higgs gehad en Higgs het die passie vir letterkunde met haar niggie gedeel. Omdat sy deel van die sosiale en kulturele lewe op Stellenbosch was, het Higgs met verskeie kunstenaars en skrywers bevriend geraak, onder andere **Maggie Laubser, Ruth Prowse, Maud Sumner, Mitford Barberton** en Francois en Uys Krige.

Wintervakansies en -naweke is by die kusoord Onrusrivier bestee. Dit was hier en met die verhuising na Seepunt, in 1946, en Mouille Punt, in 1961, waar die see 'n groot invloed op haar werk gehad het en as onderwerp gedien het. Tydens 1937 het sy die omslag vir Uys Krige se *Magdalena Retief* ontwerp en verskeie illustrasies vir die stuk gedoen. Dit was ook die jaar van haar solo-uitstalling in Kaapstad by die Ashbey Gallery, waar sy met Wolf Kibel en haar lewenslange vriend, die kunstenaar Lippy Lipshitz, kennis gemaak het. Die huis aan Dorpstraat – nommer 52 – het gou 'n gewilde uitstalruimte vir Higgs en haar vriende geraak en is tot en met 1942 so aangewend. Die huis het behoort aan Van Heyningen, wat Higgs deur haar moeilike jare as kunstenaar bygestaan en geborg het.

In Desember 1938 het Higgs na Europa gereis om vriende en verskeie uitstallings te besoek. Met haar terugkeer het sy 'n lid van die *Nuwe Groep* geword deur haar werk by die Stellenbosch-uitstalling van Augustus 1939 te vertoon. Weens verskille tussen lede het Higgs in 1943 as lid bedank.

Gedurende die veertigerjare was Higgs steeds 'n sukkelende kunstenaar – daar is wel opgemerk dat haar werk, wat komposisie en kleur betref, gevorderd was. In 1943 het sy haar eerste solo-uitstalling in Johannesburg gehou en deur die destydse Basoetoland, Barberton en Duiwelskloof (in die destydse Noord-Transvaal) gereis. In 1948 het sy 'n self-ekspressiewe tydperk beleef en met gemengde media begin werk – die werke was 'n abstrakte spieëling tussen donker en ligte kleure en haar seeskappe het 'n glansagtige voorkoms aangeneem. Dié werke is in 1972 weer uitgestal en is toe eers werklik deur die publiek gewaardeer.

Haar internasionale uitstallings, vanaf 1948, het die volgende ingesluit: die Suid-Afrikaanse Kunsuitstalling in die Tate wat deur Europa, Kanada en die VSA gereis het, die Internasionale Kunstklub-uitstalling en die 1950 Venice Biennale XXV (die eerste vir SA) saam met, onder andere, **Irma Stern, Maud Sumner** en **Elsa Dziomba**.

Die enigste keer dat Higgs in haar geboorteprovisie uitgestal het, was in 1953, met 'n solo-uitstalling by die Nasionale Museum in Bloemfontein. Van 1956 tot 1961 het sy 'n reeks seeskappe geskep en dit was eers teen dié tyd dat sy as 'n ware Suid-Afrikaanse kunstenaar gereken is. In 1963 het Higgs die Erepennig vir Skilderkuns van die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns ontvang. In 1964 het sy in haar huis op Vermont naby Hermanus ingetrek, waar die bekende *Spring* werke geskep is. Die volgende jaar was haar Suid-Afrikaanse Kunsvereniging-uitstalling so suksesvol dat sy haar huis kon afbetaal en vir ses weke na Parys kon reis. In 1969 en 1972 het sy twee solo-uitstallings by die Pieter Wenning Gallery gehou, waar al haar werke by albei hierdie uitstallings verkoop is.

Vanaf 1972 het Higgs haar styl en die rigting van haar werke verander – die invloed van mikroskopiese studies in opmerklik. Die nuwe werke staan bekend as "close-ups", wat die gevoel van verkenning en ontdekking as fokuspunt het. Vanaf 1978 het Higgs stadig in haar eie wêreld versink begin raak en is sy op 6 Junie 1986 oorlede.

Higgs was born in the Thaba 'Nchu District in the Free State on 28 June 1898. This is also where she spent her childhood years on a remote farm situated on the border of the former Basutoland. During 1916 and 1917 she attended school at the Wesleyan Girls High School, Grahamstown, where she received free-hand and blackboard drawing lessons from F.W. Armstrong, who taught art at the school on a part-time basis.

In 1918 she enrolled as a first-year student at the Grahamstown School of Art. Due to the Spanish flu epidemic that hit the town, the school was closed towards the end of that year.

Higgs moved to England, where she spent thirteen years to pursue her art studies. Studies abroad included attendance of the Byam Shaw School of Art in Kensington, London and, from 1924, the Goldsmiths' College (part of the University of London at New Cross) – here graphics, etching, engraving, lithography and illustration were preferences, while the styles of Dürer, Rembrandt, Méryon, Millet and Whistler were influential on the students.

By the end of 1926, Higgs enrolled at the Royal Academy of Arts, where she completed her studies in 1931. During her years at the Academy she used to take the train to Paris to view and study works by impressionists and post-impressionists. Higgs was a life-time admirer of Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Douanier, Rosseau and Sullivan. She also attended part-time summer classes at Bourdelle's painting school and Atelier de La Grande Chaumiére.

Higgs returned to South Africa in 1934, to take care of her mother, who was ill. While residing in Stellenbosch, with her cousin Christina van Heyningen, she held her first solo exhibitions in the Domestic Science Hall of Stellenbosch University, in 1935 and 1936. Van Heyningen's profession as a lecturer in literature also had an influence on Higgs, who shared the passion for literature with her cousin. Being part of the social and cultural life of Stellenbosch, Higgs soon befriended various artists and writers, such as **Maggie Laubser, Ruth Prowse, Maud Sumner, Mitford Barberton** and Francois and Uys Krige.

Winter holidays and weekends were spent at the coastal resort of Onrus River. Here, and upon her relocation in Sea Point, in 1946, and Mouille Point, in 1961, the sea was influential in her work and served as subject matter. During 1937 Higgs designed a cover and did various illustrations for Uys Krige's play *Magdalena Retief*. This year also marked her solo exhibition in Cape Town at the Ashbey Gallery, where she met Wolf Kibel and her life-long friend, artist Lippy Lipshitz. Until 1942 the house at 52 Dorp Street served as a popular exhibition venue for Higgs and her friends. The house belonged to Van Heyningen, who supported and sponsored Higgs through the years when she was struggling as an artist.

In December 1938 Higgs travelled to Europe to visit friends and view various exhibitions. Upon her return she became a member of the *New Group* by exhibiting at the August 1939 exhibition in Stellenbosch. As a result of differences amongst members of the group, Higgs resigned as member in 1943.

During the 1940's Higgs was still a struggling artist. It was noticed, though, that her work was advanced with regard to composition and colour. She held her first exhibition in Johannesburg in 1943 and travelled through the former Basutoland, Barberton and Duiwelskloof in the former Northern Transvaal. During 1948 Higgs went through a period of self-expression, starting to work in mixed media. These works portrayed an abstract play between dark and light fragmented colours and her seascapes adopted a shimmering effect. She exhibited the works in 1972 and it was only then that these works gained the public's appreciation.

International exhibitions, from 1948, included the South African Art exhibition in the Tate, that travelled Europe, Canada and the USA, the International Art Club exhibition and the 1950 Venice Biennale XXV (a first for SA) with, amongst others, **Irma Stern, Maud Sumner** and **Elsa Dziomba**.

The only time Higgs exhibited in her birth province was in 1953 – a solo exhibition at the National Museum in Bloemfontein. From 1956 to 1961 she painted a series of seascapes and it was only by now that she was regarded as a truly South African artist. In 1963 she received the Medal of Honour for Painting from the South African Academy of Science and Arts. In 1964 Higgs moved into her own house at Vermont near Hermanus, where she created the famed *Spring* series of works. The following year her South African Association of Arts exhibition was so successful that she was able to pay off her house and visit Paris on a six-week travel holiday. In 1969 and 1972 she held two solo exhibitions at the Pieter Wenning Gallery, where all her works at both exhibitions were sold out.

From 1972 a change in style and direction became visible in her works – the influence of microscopic studies was clearly observed – and the new works became known as "Close-Ups", with the feeling of exploration and discovery as focal point. Since 1978 Higgs progressively descended into her own world. She passed away on 6 June 1986.

(Nogmaals vir Cecil Higgs)

” Jy het my werkvertrek die ene see laat word met kleur en klank en rots van Onrussee nog kleur van see en rots en nog en nog en langs die seekant voorjaarspienkengael jy is 'n begenadigde jy vul my huis met rykdom vir die oog en vir die hart genot wat elke dag opnuut begin. ”

23 Mei 1965 – Boerneef

Cecil Higgs (1898 – 1986)

Bronne / Sources:

Bertram, D. 1994. *Cecil Higgs: Close Up*. William Waterman Publications: Rivonia.
Berman, E. 1983. *Art & Artists of South Africa*. AA Balkema: Cape Town.

Photo: Cecil Higgs with her cat at home in Vermont. Courtesy of the JS Gerike Library – Special Collections, Stellenbosch University, Amanda Botha collection no. 318



Higgs, Cecil (1898 – 1986)
Spring, 1963
Olieverf op doek / Oil on board

Versameling / Collection:
Universiteitsmuseum / University Museum, Stellenbosch



Higgs, Cecil (1898 – 1986)
Cut Melon, 1963
Olieverf op bord / Oil on board

Versameling / Collection:
Universiteitsmuseum / University Museum, Stellenbosch