

PREVIEWS

Shaped by the forces of nature

South African artist Chris Soal's latest works have been interpreted in many ways: people tell him they look like animal skins, viral formations, sea anemones or fields of wheat. Look closer, however, and you'll see that their fur-like undulations are actually made from thousands of toothpicks carefully glued on to black cloth, which together become an indistinguishable whole that almost looks alive. 'Within the mass, the toothpicks are lost,' he says, describing the thought process he had early on when working with the material. 'I started to think about them in terms of human relationships – the interplay between individual and communal, and the loss of personal identity in a group.'

Soal's work will be on show at PAD London art and design fair this September, where the Cape Town-based Southern Guild is exhibiting for the first time. Alongside his work, the gallery will also present pieces by a range of other South African artists, including ceramists

Andile Dyalvane and Zizipho Poswa and blacksmith Conrad Hicks.

Soal developed the philosophical side of his work while studying fine art at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand, known for its theoretical, conceptual approach, but he became frustrated over the relative neglect of the practical, physical dimensions of artistic practice. He began to gravitate towards the school's workshop in order to engage more directly with materials and with his hands – the sculptures he produced after graduating in 2017, for example, were made of discarded bottle tops, which from afar look like weavings.

His recent practice was defined by a throwaway gesture more than two years ago. 'I was having dinner and I reached over to grab a box of toothpicks, which fell and arranged themselves in a beautiful pattern,' he says. He took a photo, but dismissed it for more than a year. 'I thought, no one's going to care about toothpicks as an artistic material. I had to overcome that before I could engage with them in a way that would make them meaningful.'

Even then, making toothpicks 'meaningful' wasn't straightforward. 'They weren't behaving – they were falling however they wanted, taking on a life of their own.' It was only when he started treating them as a mass, rather than as individuals, that he learned to control them. 'I've realised that if I create the parameters for their existence, forces like gravity shape them in a way that makes them look as if they could have existed organically,' he says.

Soal's work sold out when Southern Guild took it to Salon New York last year, and almost did so again at the Investec Cape Town Art Fair in February, so the gallery will be hoping for a repeat performance in London this September. PAD London, Berkeley Square, 30 September – 6 October. pad-fairs.com

PHOTOS: MATTHEW BRADLEY



Left: Chris Soal, *Lament (We Thought the Good Times Would Never End)*, 2019, toothpicks in polyurethane sealant on industrial fabric, 170 x 230 x 60cm, and right: detail of Soal's *The Fourth Circle (The Demise of Frank Lucas)*, 2019, burnt and unburnt toothpicks in polyurethane sealant on industrial fabric, 145 x 190 x 30cm