



**SEA WALL:** 4 Blind Mice's newest mural, beneath Settlers Way, Port Elizabeth, is on a site where the ocean meets the land and fishermen once spread their nets. With funding from environmental groups, the university and the city's development agency, the art collective is beautifying the city

Picture: RYAN FARRANT

**I**T is Saturday afternoon in Bird Street, Port Elizabeth, and Christo Booth is attempting to unburden the stoep of the ArtEC building of the detritus left by Friday-night revellers.

Booth is one of the five artists comprising 4 Blind Mice, a local collective involved in various beautification projects, most notably the creation of murals in the city centre. He leads me upstairs to meet Ryan Allan, the newest member of 4 Blind Mice, who is wearing his signature straw fedora while rehydrating a collection of pot plants on the balcony.

Their studio oozes colour, chaos, and creation. Fluid sketches on the walls, bright canvases propped against them.

**'A mural is the most honest thing you can get in a city'**

We are joined by Monde Goniwe, who says: "We've always been friends and that comes through in the collaboration."

The artists met at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, where they studied art and print-making. The collective has existed in various forms for eight years.

4 Blind Mice has become a familiar name in Port Elizabeth's creative circles. They have created public art for bodies such as the Mandela Bay Development Agency, the university and the Wildlife and Environment Society.

"A mural is the most honest thing you can get in a city," says Goniwe. "People worked on it, it fed people, and the end product is there for everyone to see."

"Art is for everyone," says Booth. "When I make something I make it

# CONCRETE CHANGE

The muralists of Port Elizabeth art collective 4 Blind Mice are transforming the city walls. By **Lisa Weideman**



**BEAUTIFICATION:** Four of the five 4 Blind Mice members, from left, Monde Goniwe, Christo Booth, Mawande Mase and Ryan Allan. The fifth member is Andy Higgins

Picture: ROSS CHARNOCK

for as many people as possible."

Their first mural, at Norwich Bus Station, is part of the Route 67 memorial walk, starting at the Campanile and ending in the Donkin Reserve. It is one of 67 public art pieces in memory of President Nelson Mandela's 67 years of service to South Africa. The initiative also forms part of the municipality's larger vision to

rejuvenate the city centre.

This mural depicts commuters' interactions with public transport: colourful paths swirl dreamily as vibrant lives converge and part. "People responded well to having this big grey wall painted with some colour," says Allan, even if they see it only momentarily during their commute.

Their latest and most visible

artwork is a mural beneath Settlers Way that depicts the bay's oceanic icons. Lively sea creatures float on a puddle of animated hues. It forms part of the Wildlife and Environmental Society's "Know Your Bay" campaign.

"It was a little celebration of those things that a lot of people don't have the opportunity to see; things like recreational diving, the

sharks in the area, the whales that visit and St Croix and Bird Islands," says Allan.

The mural's location is significant. "It's where the land and the ocean meet, where the Baakens River goes into the harbour," says Allan. In days gone by, fishermen would spread their nets in this spot.

Port Elizabeth, with its morbid stretches of concrete and brick, is ripe ground for murals. "We've got a huge amount of wall space in PE," says Goniwe, "but it shouldn't be just a certain group who does the murals." He has visions of the municipality hiring local artists to teach others, such as children from the townships, the skill of painting murals. 4 Blind Mice already host school

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children some afternoons to expose them to the concept of art as a career.

"We want people from outside the city to come here and look for public art. There's nothing wrong with something looking beautiful and just enjoying it for that," says Booth.

They would like to see public art initiatives extend beyond the centre and connect with the outskirts of town. Their dreams stretch to being able to make art for a living and take it to other cities. For now, though, these beautification projects are confined to the city centre, where not everyone goes. But their home town certainly benefits from the presence of this rare collection of souls who see the beauty in their environs and make it visible to others. **LS**