Get rid of these elephants

City commissions top local artist, but then an ANC bigwig throws a tantrum – they’re an IFP symbol

GREG ARDÉ

A WORLD-renowned artist has been ordered to stop work on three elephant sculptures near to the main highway into Durban after complaints from the ANC led council that the animals are a symbol of the rival Inkhatha Freedom Party.

The political spat erupted in the city after ANC demands that work be stopped on the sculptures, located beside the new Warwick Avenue interchange, which has been redeveloped for the World Cup.

The drama started on Monday when sculptor Andrea Botha, at his studio in North Coast Road, received a call from his apprentices, Siya Madiala and Sibu Mazibuko, who were putting the finishing touches to the massive metal and rock art works.

A man driving a black SUV pulled up, jumped out of the car and demanded they stop working.

Madiala told the Tribune: “He said: ‘Get down, stop working now’.

“He said the elephant was the symbol of the IFP and this is an ANC city.”

Maxibalo added: “The man demanded to speak to their boss. When he got Botha on the phone, he ordered that the elephants be moved immediately.”

Botha was flabbergasted. “Apart from anything else, I can’t just move them, they each weigh about six tons.”

Botha said at first he didn’t believe the order was for real, but the next day he received a letter from Ruimveld Construction (which has the lead contract on the road redevelopments). It said: “You are to cease all activities concerning and related to the elephant construction on the Warwick Viaduct site until further notice.”

Botha had agreed to do the work, despite considerable time constraints, because it would advance the cause of the Human Elephant Foundation. He started the foundation and it had a global following because his life-size elephant sculptures, made of recycled wood, metal and rubber, had been placed in 17 countries.

“I was invited by Eric Applegreen (eThekwini Municipality head, international and governance relations) after the first elephant was erected at the wildlife summit in Mexico. I briefed a committee headed by Eric and they were very excited about it. “The elephant is the biggest land-based mammal... It’s a quintessential African symbol and it represents power and the vulnerability of the environment.”

When he got the letter Botha phoned his partner in the not-for-profit foundation, Durban-based advertising guru John Charter, who said he had had a “peculiar” conversation with City Manager Michael Suncliffe the night before at a cocktail party.

Charter told the Tribune that when he saw Suncliffe he expressed his enthusiasm for how the sculptures were coming along. “Michael said: ‘We’re going to take them down immediately. It’s not your fault. It’s just not politically expedient. Don’t talk about it.’”

Botha said he was stumped by Suncliffe’s response, but when he spoke to Botha it all made sense.

“This is pure politics. It is an artwork of global significance. Art offers a solution to the problem of human greed, which leads to environmental degradation. Those elephants have a kinship with the global herd and the sculptor is world renowned and comes from Durban.”

“Now can the IFP own an elephant because it appears in their logo? It’s bizarre,” Charter said.

Contacted in Vancouver, Canada, where he attended the opening of the Winter Olympics, Suncliffe said: “People over-dramatise these things. To my understanding, and I might have been proved wrong, this thing didn’t go to committee.”

Suncliffe said he didn’t want to go into his conversation with Charter or address “corridor gossip”.

“This is the principle of where artworks are placed. Some people have asked why we haven’t put up statues of Nelson Mandela in the city... I think this (the elephant) is a great work, but... it must come before committee and be debated.”

Deputy chairman of the Wilderness Action Group, Sheila Berry, said: “To turn the elephants into a political football detracts from the seriousness of the problems facing the environment.”

“This is pathetic,” said IFP member of the KZN legislature Alex Hamilton. “The ANC is obviously very insecure. What a balls-up. The ANC wants to be the arbiter of all things, including the definition of art.”

Botha said yesterday: “I’m very confused. I was invited by the city, they contracted me to do this, it’s almost finished and they’ve made a progress payment. I was under the impression they loved it. I would not be able to build a sculpture on the side of the freeway coming into the centre of town if they hadn’t given me permission to do so. Right now I’m most concerned about the damage this will do to the international brand of the elephant.”

Motorists are not able to see the elephants from the roadside because they are under a frame cover in green shade cloth. This week construction workers put up black plastic sheeting to hide them.