

Going solo in New York



wave walking

Former Durbanite Michelle Benjamin made South Africans proud this week when her digital art was showcased at a solo exhibition at one of the most popular art galleries in New York, the Agora Gallery. **Veruschka Mungroo** spoke to her on the eve of the opening (on until May 15)

How are you feeling?

To have made South Africa proud by representing our country artistically in New York is one of the greatest moments of my life.

I am proud to be sharing with New Yorkers, and the world, the beauty of my country, especially since the five pieces exhibited here were all created in South Africa, and are of South African landscapes. I believe that with God all things are possible. That is my ethos and I stick to it.

Tell us about your work?

It blends traditional and digital art to create work that resonates on multiple levels, occupying a unique space in the art world.

I am drawn to silhouettes. I use limited palettes in each piece, often involving complementary colours, which adds a shimmering quality. My photographs and sketches undergo digital evolution. I use digital design techniques to make a dynamic melting pot of traditional and modern art methods.

I am drawn to trees without leaves, and silhouettes, which feature prominently in my artworks. My favourite traditional medium is charcoal. This comes across strongly in my digital works, as I blend the humble charcoal sketch with digital photography and graphic design.

My favourite modern medium is Adobe Photoshop, which to me is more than just a photo-editing software for retouching pictures. I use Photoshop to transform my photographs and sketches into beautiful works of art.

What inspires you?

People, animals and trees without leaves inspire me most. The most famous person that I have ever depicted in an artwork is the beloved first president of our democracy. That piece is called *Mandela? Smile* and an edition of it is now owned by a prominent woman who was in exile during the years of the struggle.

How did you get into digital art?

My first experience of digital art was working as a desktop publisher/graphic artist in my father's graphic design business.

I am self-taught - there were no schools available in South Africa when I got into this field over 20 years ago.

I was always artistically inclined and by experimenting with different types of software I began to combine traditional media such as oil and charcoal with digital.

If you were forced to choose a favourite...

This is difficult! I consider them all favourites. But if I had to choose, *Girl from Durban* stands out for me.

Firstly, the muse is someone close to my heart, and she lives in Durban. Just like the Beach Boys sang about the California girls and Billy Joel sang about the uptown girl of New York, the *Girl from Durban* describes the typical Durban girl. No matter where I am in the world, Durban will always occupy a special place in my heart, and this series of artworks is my ode to Durban.

How did your art work end up at the Agora?

My portfolio was accepted for review by the director of Agora Gallery in August 2011. Six weeks later I was informed that my work had been selected for exhibition and representation by Agora Gallery.

What has been the reaction to your work in New York?

My first question to all the people I meet here, from the taxi driver to the shop assistant and the hurried young professional, is: "Do you like art?" The answer is always "Yes, I love art."

They love my work. My form of art is received better here than in South Africa, perhaps because digital art is more widely accepted here. I have even been contacted by other galleries in New York to show my work, but in South Africa many galleries have declined to show my work.

Why do you think digital art isn't so big in SA, and what are your hopes for it?

Digital art is not popular in South African galleries, but the concept is popular among a talented and fast-growing group of digital artists and graphic designers in the country.

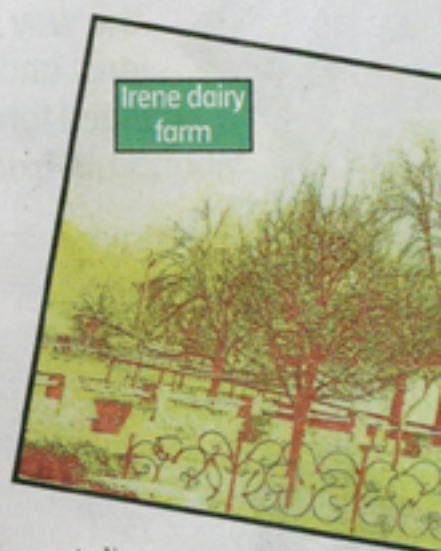
I hope that my exhibition in the world's greatest art centre will encourage other digital artists to pursue this field and not just restrict themselves to commercial graphic art.

How do you get around the challenge of SA galleries not being open to digital art?

The first challenge was trying to convince the galleries that digital art can be valued in the same way as traditional art. My works sell for the equivalent of many thousands of rands each.

Also, it was about getting people acquainted with my art and creating an audience, especially since I was not getting any support to show my work through local galleries.

However, I have since overcome these challenges, by having my



Irene dairy farm

own studio exhibitions, which have proved to be very popular. I am also showing on various web galleries.

Who is your idol in art and why?

I admire many artists. My favourites include Rembrandt (I was fortunate to attend a Grand Masters exhibition at the New York Metropolitan in 2008) and Picasso. In South Africa I really admire and love the works of Gerard Sekoto.

However, the artist who influenced my life artistically is my late uncle, Indran Naicker, who was never known for his artistic genius because he was born at the wrong time in our country, a time when the arts were strictly not for people of colour.

Nonetheless, my uncle painted and sketched brilliantly, just because he loved art passionately. His works are unknown in galleries and he never exhibited, but his legacy lives through what I am doing now.

He taught me that art is not about money; it is about expressing how you see the world, through your heart first and then on to your canvas.

Apart from landing such a prestigious break in the art world, can you name another life-changing moment for you?

When I met my soul mate, who is now my husband. He began to see and understand the artist in me. When others misunderstood why I do what I do, he chose to give it a prominent place in his heart.

Lastly, what's the Big Apple been like?

It has been an amazing experience. My husband and I have assimilated ourselves in New York culture.

This is a vibey city that never sleeps and it is true that you either love it or hate it. We absolutely love it. I especially love using the efficient public transport.