

ART & DESIGN

GEORGINA GRATRIX BALANCES ERUDITION WITH CHUTZPAH

GRATRIX'S FIRST SOLO EXHIBITION WITH JOBURG'S STEVENSON GALLERY BRINGS A SPECIAL ENERGY TO THE CITY

11 June 2024

Words: Robyn Sassen



Georgina Gratrix, Painters' Lunch, 182 x 215cm oil on linen

Image: Supplied

LATEST ARTICLES

Mo's Crib: Eco-conscious craft and design
ART & DESIGN

Teresa Firmino's healing women
ART & DESIGN

Playful design that uplifts
ART & DESIGN


Designing tomorrow
ART & DESIGN

Room with a view in Lisbon
ART & DESIGN

Very occasionally, you may be privileged enough to experience a moment in art that will turn your understanding of the world upside down. Maybe it will make you believe in colour in a way you've never allowed yourself to, before. This is what you can expect to experience in the exhibition of paintings by Cape Town-based painter, Georgina Gratrix, entitled *Between Two Palms: New Works from Durban*, on at the Stevenson Gallery in Parktown North, Johannesburg.

When you think of the genre of still lives and portraits, you may cast your mind in the direction of old Dutch painters who took the approach to a level akin with prayer, with devastatingly fine detail and muted sombreness. You may also think of hum-drum Sunday painters, who opt for the demure in their subject matter, while they are learning the basic skills. Mexico-born Gratrix ramps up both genres as far as they can go and yields a body of work that will set your heart on fire and leave you changed forever.

This body of paintings is about home for Gratrix, who was raised in KwaZulu-Natal. All well and good. When you think of that, you may think of the lush greenness of Durban's landscape, the blueness of the sea and sky. Only, Gratrix paints like a lion.



Bespoke new art venue in Jozi shows museum-quality work
Wanted spoke to the founder of 54 The Valley, Briget Grosskopf, about the space and its projects
ART & DESIGN 3 months ago

She takes the genres and throws the book of modernism at them, sprinkles them with in-jokes about the politics of the contemporary art establishment in SA, and fills them with fictional and real characters, people alive and dead. She's not afraid to use glitter. She uses impasto sculpturally and allows her subjects to be distorted to the whim of the medium and the strength of the joy she wields in her brush.

Above all, these works are wild and liberating in ways that abstract expressionist artist Cy Twombly engaged. With the kind of unabated and rude energy espoused by Irma Stern in her still lives, which, rather than sedate were sexual and noisy, Gratrix imbibes the headiness of oil paint so thick it has a life of its own, with erudition balanced by chutzpah, embracing everything from Durban's Art Deco architecture to the glorious face of SA artist Penny Siopis, in the front row of an idiosyncratic group portrait.

This portrait, structured like a school class photograph, comprises heroes past and current, ones that are direct references to works by other artists of the ilk of Robert Hodgins and Maud Sumner. But as you look, you see artists such as Andrew Verster and Marlene Dumas. Gratrix is there, herself, with a massive bouquet obscuring her face.



Georgina Gratrix, Mom with Clasped Hands, 50 x 40 cm oil on linen

Image: Supplied

This exhibition is one of those moments in contemporary SA art that rips the self-contained seriousness of the discipline away and allows you, the viewer, to run with joy between the rooms of the space, gasping with delight at her use of undiluted colour and her patent courage in embracing art for art's sake, while she gets under the skin of her subjects and renders likenesses more itchy and palatable than if they were photorealistic.

The painting of Gratrix's mom celebrates her loose jowls and cat-eye specs without becoming slavish. There's a little girl in the green mask of a monster, and a portrait of a bloke in a Welsh hat that offers a nod to Vincent van Gogh's portrait of the postman, which he made in 1889. There's even a travel agent with deadish eyes behind square-framed spectacles, and a face alive with colour. To say nothing of the neighbours, complete with the lush background of their property, their evening drink and her painted nails, adorning his shoulders.

But above all of that are the flower compositions. Relentlessly robust, these anthuriums, babies' breath, roses and ice cream cones, hollyhocks and lobsters that blend and glisten together against backgrounds evocative of the sea and of Henri Matisse, of being in a world that is not deadened and rendered pale because of bad news and insufferable politics, but is audaciously bright and bold. Drawn with a hand that shows a middle finger to quiet platitudes and self-deprecating manoeuvres with concept, Gratrix is a shot in the arm to the ideas restraining contemporary painting.



Georgina Gratrix, The Green Studio, 182 x 215cm oil on linen

Image: Supplied

And while her saucy use of colour and likeness might dominate your senses, Gratrix's understanding of scale is also rich and wise. Her large-scale works embrace the universe with their presence, obviously, but the small works are no less — in fact just as — monumental. There is a portrait of SA expressionist artist Gladys Mgudlandlu on one wall of the gallery. It's a small work, measuring 50cm x 40cm and yet it has a presence that fills the universe, becoming a volume of celebration to Mgudlandlu's legacy, as a woman as well as an artist.

Gratrix is no stranger to the international gallery circuit. With her first solo exhibition at this gallery, she brings a special energy to the city which needs to be experienced in the round and with a full heart. It's a 10 out of 10 experience and one that won't leave you wanting.

Between Two Palms: New Works from Durban is on at the Stevenson Gallery in Parktown North, Johannesburg, until June 29.