

# The world is a patchwork through a lens

Two diverse exhibitions are being held in Pretoria. **Diane de Beer** spoke to the photographers who capture their own and others' lives and discovers it's all about storytelling



"I've always taken the pictures I wasn't seeing out there... but wanted to," says Iris Dawn Parker currently showing her photographic journey *Quotidian Life: The Importance of Small Things* at the Pretoria Art Museum.

Her fascination began at a young age and it had to do with the way images could change society. "It teaches us about our world," she says as she leads a group of us through her exhibition on a quiet Saturday afternoon.

The exhibition is a series of more than 40 A2 photographs that show the intimacy and engagement Parker experiences with those she portrays. She is passionate about the role of a photographer – she regards it as a personal journey of reflection and growth whereby the person taking the pictures is influenced by those she comes into contact with. "People are sometimes so busy doing lives, their history is never told," says the artist who uses her work as a tool for advocacy and change.

Coming to South Africa for the first time in 1998 and then moving to Joburg which she calls her second home from Chicago in 2009, she was aware of how rapidly society was changing. "Everything seemed to be shifting and moving towards more Westernised lives," she explains. It's the same with her culture back home where the playing, the chores and the eating together was a strong cultural feature among certain people. "It's about how we nurture one another as a community," she notes.

Moving into a suburb in Joburg, she found that daily living had disappeared behind high walls. What she would do was to rent a car and do a road trip. A woman with camera roaming around the country is still a strange

## QUOTIDIAN LIFE: THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL THINGS BY IRIS DAWN PARKER

VENUE: Albert Werth Hall, Pretoria Art Museum  
UNTIL: July 3

thing and opens many doors. And Parker is an old hand at not intruding and waiting for the perfect moment to take the picture she wants. It's visible throughout the exhibition which is really about rural and township South Africa and daily lives, the small moments, as she explains.

Parker is someone who sees the beauty in the patchwork of colours of a township set against the hill, of catching a moment between a young couple whose colours incidentally make an arresting picture, horse riders at the only equestrian school in Soweto owned by a man who was an international showjumper for Britain during the apartheid years because he couldn't represent his own country. "It's about the pictures saying something when you can't articulate," says the photographer who is determined to get the images out into the world. "I want them to say something because the images can speak to anyone."

That's also why she has made a book of postcards with all the pictures on the exhibition included so that they can be sent across the world and reach as far and as wide as possible.

Her camera has wandered from



Above: Photographer Iris Dawn Parker in action. Right: An example of Parker's work.

KwaMashu to Richards Bay to Alex and Soweto, and the Drakensberg. It's about capturing life as we live it now, something to look back on when things change and drift away. "It's important to document these lives," says Parker who believes it will explain who we are and were. It's also about keeping a record of the people of the African diaspora who are so often ignored if not in an exotic context.

A picture titled *African elders*, captures three greying gentlemen in a most elegant fashion, but there's nothing spectacular



about the picture apart from the interaction between these three individuals, a moment in time and a memory of how she obtained this special shot.

In many instances it is about seeing someone, making lives matter and including everyone – gender, age, culture... and the list goes on. "We have been trained in gender-specific roles," and that is taken into other areas of our lives as well. But Parker makes her camera speak volumes.

It is the simplicity, the sparkle, the small things that make these images live. It's also

about storytelling, the dignity in poverty, the way we're reminded of things in our own lives when we watch those of others.

But before she takes her leave, she talks about the South African light. It's here 300 days of the year and the lighting is heavenly. And she points out we have TWO oceans!

Since 1998, she has been involved with and supported numerous visual and performing arts projects and programmes in South Africa. Most recently she worked as a voice coach for *A Raisin in the Sun*, a production at the Market Theatre and was programme

manager for the photo-journalism and documentary photography programme at the Market Photo Workshop. In addition, she has been involved in South African arts and culture through her residencies, exhibitions and curatorial projects at several major South African museums and universities.

● **The Pretoria Art Museum, cnr Francis Baard and Wessels streets, Arcadia Park, Arcadia is open from Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am, and is closed on Mondays and public holidays.**

## Lensman explores the intimate zones of home

WITH this current exhibition, the Pretoria-bred Abrie Fourie explores the familiar and intimate zones of home with the same interest and curiosity as he does the unknown. He states that this approach is "not so much defining a place, as circling the relationship between spaces, sign and self; it hints at that silent tension between absence and presence, abstraction and reality".

For this artist, taking pictures is like taking notes. It tells him what he was doing when, where his headspace was and where it has moved since, how others perceive a notion that he might have viewed in a specific manner and what other stories can emerge from something that comes from his perspective.

In illustration he points to an image taken in the Voortrekker Monument of a specific marble wall, the way the light plays with the texture. Depending on who you are, whether you have any connection to the monument or know the history, what side of any line you might fall, all of these will colour your stories if there are any to be made in this instance.

That is exactly what he hopes his pictures will achieve. "I'm not dogmatic or prescriptive about what I want people to do with the images," he says. But they need to think, decide for themselves, perhaps go into a meditative space, that's what he hopes for.

He has found himself in a world saturated with visual images and digital cameras, smart

## OBLIQUE: THE SO-CALLED FRUITS OF LIVES BY ABRIE FOURIE

VENUE: The Fried Gallery  
UNTIL: April 30

phones that replicate live images, and this is where he needs to establish a conversation.

This artist with his enquiring and wandering mind is nothing if not inventive and innovative about his career path. When he and his German wife moved to Berlin following break-ins, a car hijacking and constant dinner conversations about the state of the nation, ("her fear became overwhelming," he says), he was also one of the inaugural Spier Award winners which meant a cash prize but you had to tell them what you were going to do.

He decided to begin by digitalising his work which at that stage was 99.9 percent analogue and is still the way he works. He arrives (cash and plan in hand) in Berlin in December 2007 with his eldest son, his wife and their twin boys had left already in October of the same year. What follows in the next hour of his conversation is how someone navigates his way in a new country. It started with a compulsory course of German where he meets many fellow artists who are still part

of his life and network. And the journey catches a flying start.

That's the thing with Fourie, he seems to roll with the flow and allows those sideshows and walkways to determine the images that follow. He is telling his own story but because there's nothing planned, it becomes the story of everyman – and anything you want to do with it.

If you think all of this is seemingly meaningless, think again. The title word *oblique* has become a kind of umbrella for future directions. "I like the word," he says which first emerged with an exhibition he was invited to do at Berlin's Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt which he describes as the name suggests, as a Berlin lab for foreign artists. He was tasked with bringing a foreign curator in for his own work and he invited local boy Storm Janse van Vuuren (previously with the Goodman) who had just moved to the German city and thus gave him an instant entree into the Berlin art world.

One of the things Janse van Vuuren did was a slideshow of the pictures of a book that went with the exhibition also titled *Oblique* in which lauded local writer Ivan Vladislavic wrote a few short stories. "I didn't want dreary academic-type descriptions of the work featured, so I sent him the pictures and asked him to write," explains Fourie. For the slideshow, he then asked local actor Marcel van Heerden, (still my favourite voice," says

Fourie) to narrate one of the stories, and like in the book which has some blank pages and the stories featured on their own, when the story is narrated, the slideshow is a blank space. "I didn't want the words battling the images," he notes and it makes sense in this kind of artistic space.

"It's fascinating how Vladislavic's words create visuals," says the artist, but that's exactly why he invited him in particular to write. The Berlin show had other components as well like posters because that's how exhibitions are announced in this world city. To create a buzz, Fourie used a quote from one of the last sentences in Vladislavic's stories, Google him... and then added his name at the bottom of the poster in small print.

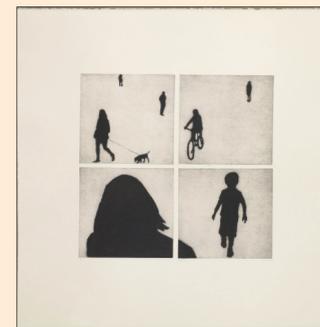
Words like images have always played a role in his art. He has different slogans mounted on the outside wall facing onto Justice Mohammad Street, as well as some in-between the photographs.

It's all about provoking, prodding and urging those around him to participate. The images on the gallery wall are personal to him, because they act as reminders, mementoes. He hopes others will discover something new, a different pathway to his own. "Exhibitions are spaces for thoughts and ideas."

● **Fried Gallery, Justice Mahomed Street, Brooklyn, Pretoria.**



## A quietly unnerving show...



MARY CORRIGALL

IT IS hard to miss the recurring pre-occupations that have held Fiona Pole captive for her 15-odd year art practice, which is on display in a mini-retrospective at Gallery Art on Paper. Birds, airplanes, suitcases and the dark silhouettes of figures evoke themes of separation, distance and alienation.

This fixation may well have been a result of her leaving her homeland for France in the noughties – she lived in Paris for a decade. This turning point in her life is registered via literal symbols she seems to have returned to over and over, as if almost pathologically fixated with a permanent state of limbo. It is not that she found pleasure in these motifs – her grainy prints in mostly black make for a broody aesthetic.

Most telling of this state of limbo is the manner in which her work is defined by symbols presented without any surrounding context. In this way her prints – her main medium is printmaking – are characterised by isolated objects and subjects. A bird, a nest without a tree is a good example of this. At first you might perceive her small artworks (the scale is always confined) as offering simple figurative renderings, decorative even and pleasing – birds and silhouetted figures are after all popular motifs for decorative objects and such. However, if you consider her artworks en masse and the fact that objects and subjects are all suspended in nothingness, a sense of quiet unease sets in. Her work is subtly unnerving.

There is nothing to hold onto, no information to ground her images. Her human subjects are presented up against blank backgrounds, and rendered in black, they loom as shadows. They have no faces, no details, they are anonymous people that are placed either together or are composed in such a way as to suggest a pregnant

distance. This evokes the theme of separation, which she initially experienced and translated as geographic, but appears to be one which she expanded into exploring as something that occurs between people. Closeness is not only negotiated, but might also be out of reach.

She draws attention to the human condition as one that does not allow complete intimacy – physical or psychic. This is best illustrated with *Heartland*, a collection of small works featuring figures. Displayed together the series appears to depict a happy-go-lucky park scene, a public space filled with a diverse group of people. However, as each figure is confined to their own small canvas (paper) there is an unbridgeable gap between them. Existing, it seems, entails making peace with being permanently separated from others.

Perhaps this is why she has been so focused on depicting such a range of seemingly banal objects; they somehow work as anchors for memory and connections with people once they are broken. The foundation for this could be traced to an early body of work, where she documents and packages responses from famous SA political figures to a request for them to outline an early childhood memory.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu recalls the story of a white man who in the apartheid era showed respect to a black man by doffing his cap. Pole encapsulates or distills these memories and packages them into decorative boxes, where the original letter is contained. She dispensed with the letter, the stories and was left with objects that could be triggers for memories, real or imagined.

– Sponsored text

● **À la recherche du temps perdu will show at the Gallery Art on Paper in Joburg until April 30**