

 Sharlene Khan

## Sharlene Khan at Gallery Momo

by Siphos Manda

Sharlene Khan has staged arguably the most provocative and challenging photographic exhibition of her short career thus far. As the title 'What I look like, what I feel like' succinctly puts it, she challenges various stereotypes, some directed at women in general and others at herself personally, as a hardworking young artist living in South Africa. The exhibition comprises 24 colour photographs featuring herself in various costumes, portraying a number of characters. She juxtaposes what seems to be her publicly-perceived image with what she thinks she is. Khan challenges and confronts her nemeses in this role-defining show, in a manner that is in keeping with her forthright nature as person.

Sharlene Khan  
What I look like, What I feel like

Despite South Africa's smooth transition to democracy, 'black' or 'non-white' artists still find it very difficult to enter and be acceptable in the mainstream art scene. This is especially true when said artists do not conform to the canons of gallery directors. For a very long time, black artists have been dictated to by the market forces.

Since 1994, a number of galleries have mushroomed in Johannesburg often without fanfare and often with limited success. Gallery Momo, owned by Monna Mokoena, is one of the exceptions, and has proved to be a highly successful and important space. It has been instrumental in showing contemporary art from a wide range of prominent and young artists. It has also introduced South Africans to a wide array of international artists that mainstream galleries have often ignored. Gallery Momo stands out against a backdrop of gallerists' increasing reliance on tried-and-tested formulas, as profits appear to drive the curatorial imperative.

Khan, a University of Durban Westville graduate who left Durban to seek better opportunities in Gauteng, has established her place on the art scene by tackling serious socio-political issues. She was, and remains, difficult to 'ghettoize', as she has resisted pressure to deal with only her Indian identity. Instead, she has explored a wide range of subject matter including street vendors, who endure environmental hardships and marginalising at the hands of municipal authorities, women's suffering under a patriarchal system and, crucially, the failed utopian dreams heralded by a new South Africa. Arguably, she has not received enough media attention for these achievements.

In this show she makes a daring statement that the racist world of art condemns women artist to menial roles. Khan asserts her authority by using herself as the persecuted individual in all the many roles she interrogates. Khan has cleverly produced photographs in two different roles - casting her perceived and real characters to illustrate the false over the truth. In *Westernised. Educated. Bitch*. Khan has embroidered her outlined image in black cotton on a white background, rendering herself invisible to her accusers because they do not know who she really is. In this image, she refuses to have her identity reduced to the stereotype.

Another image explores the identity question by listing all the labels (derogatory as well as complimentary) that have been thrown her way: Indian, Muslim, Christian, Tertiary-Educated, Working Class, Middle Class, Non-White, Black and Woman. Ironically all these labels are nullified by the halo-like ring around her head, thus denoting that all these labels are man-made and insult her true sovereign identity.

The question that Khan effectively asks is: What do her race and religion have to do with her art production in contemporary South Africa? We live in globalised world where artists have the right to engage issues as they deem fit. She yearns for a world that can engage her work without bringing race, religion and social status to bear. The issues of identity she deals with are all learned after one has been born and social mores have been inculcated. They should not limit one from engaging with and taking a stand for or against them.

Khan also challenges notions that colour or gender determine the person. She seems to

suggest that these are mere biological and aesthetic attributes that impact insignificantly on the art production. It is the person using skills and talent to comment on social issues affecting him/her that should be the focus of critical engagement. The anonymity of the outline of a female figure drives home the point that any woman can take on any role she sets herself.

In another work, Khan demonstrates to the world that she has paid her dues to claim her rightful place among artists, not only in South Africa but the world. She shows us her graduation photographs, including the number of qualifications and experience she has amassed as a professional, but still has to beg. Having acquired tertiary education from institutions designated by apartheid government as 'black' (inferior) and 'white' (superior), why is she still not recognised as capable and normal? The question she asks is: to what extent should she go seeking intellectual growth before she is accepted?

In *Warrior Princess* Khan denounces the notion that to be taken seriously as an artist, she should do drastic and sadistic things. She is shown as a heroine in army gear with a 'Rambo'- knife dripping with blood. She holds a woman's severed head, alluding to the dark side that some frustrated artists engage to draw attention. Contrasted with this image, Khan is in a bathroom sitting on a toilet seat, crying. She shows her vulnerability as a frustrated, fragile person who is not capable of what the image on the left portrays.

Khan summarizes her conclusion after engaging all the issues that affect women artists and especially her, by producing a work, confrontationally titled *Fuck the World*. This is a bold yet warranted statement to all those who undermine, detract and intend to relegate her young career to the abyss. It suggests to all those people who are stuck stereotyping women artists to roles formulated by patriarchal societies and religious misunderstanding, that they can go to the nearest hell. Acculturation is on the rise and the easiest way forward is to embrace and enjoy the fruits of democracy.

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Opens: September 4  
Closes: September 29

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Hours: Mon - Fri 9am - 6pm, Sat 9am - 5pm

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