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## Sharlene Khan – Imaging the South African cityscape

**Tubes of glue, oranges, nature medicine: Street trading adds colour to the South African cityscape. Artist Sharlene Khan narrates her multi cultural country on the basis of the every day lives of street vendors.**

**Your work is highly influenced by South African street life and urban environments, how did you to choose this theme?**

– In 1998, I was awarded the Abe Bailey Travel Bursary to London for a month, along with 13 other South African students. It was my first international trip and I was terribly surprised as I took the tube and walked the streets of London, what I missed most about home. It wasn't Bollywood movies, curry or any of my familiar Indian culture, but rather hearing Zulu and kwaito (a local form of hip-hop) on the streets, talking to strangers in the minibus taxis and buying just about anything on the street. The home that I missed was the multicultural South Africa that had sustained my consciousness and not the sense of 'Indianness' that the apartheid government had fed us. When I returned to my home city Durban, I began to really look at the streets and realised that the sense of chaos that people spoke about actually bustled with a variety of people from all races and cultures – people who really carried out the notions of 'ubuntu' (an African notion of my identity existing because of my interaction with others). I wanted to show that people who engaged with the streets were not only beggars and criminals, but normal everyday people who were trying to make an honest living. So I began drawing and painting people in whatever activities they were engaged in, waiting in line for taxis and buses, getting haircuts at roadside hair salons, chatting to friends, playing music for a few cents, selling mielies or sweets, sitting on a park bench on a hot Durban day....

**Has it followed you all through your career or is it something that developed over time?**

– I have been working on the theme of street trade since 1999. For the last 8 years my work has focused on various aspects of street life and trade in various

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South African cities. From depicting the multiracial community in Durban to the very 'African' community in Johannesburg to my engagement with the location of the fashion district in Johannesburg, my work has tried to over the years and through the different exhibitions, challenge perceptions and attitudes to street vendors and traders. Since 2004 my work has focused on Johannesburg city which has a strange complicated relationship to its urban tenants and especially foreigner street workers. It is not often a relationship that is fair to our African neighbours – people who have kept Johannesburg central alive and bustling in the 80s and 90s when the city centre was abandoned by the middle-class and the rich for protected outerlying suburbs. Over last year and this year, my work is increasingly dealing with foreign immigrants who work the cityscape, trying to sustain themselves and gain a bit extra money to send back home. My work tries to tell their stories, to keep portray them in a way that reminds people that above all, these are people – like you and me- who are trying to feed their families.

**Have you seen changes and developments in your country which have triggered your artistic choices?**

– Street trade has become proliferous in South Africa, due to various socio-economic as well as historical factors affecting our society. An extremely high unemployment rate has forced many South Africans, male and female, to live and work off these streets. The plight of these people are often overlooked, ignored or they are considered a nuisance to the sanitized utopia that many middle and upper class people would like to create in the city centers. Yet despite these attitudes, street trade continues to be a large unofficial trade in South Africa. In spite of their harsh economic circumstances, street vendors bring a sense of vibrancy, colour, smell, noise and humour to our streets. In fact, the characteristics they bring to each of the different cities in South Africa, help make each of the major cities unique and is a huge draw card for international tourists wanting to get a sense of 'Africa'. My work hopes to bring to the fore this sector of society that is so sadly ignored, to depict the 'humaness' of these people we pass by daily – their dreams, hopes, struggles, wit and dignity. As a young child, my brother and I went selling pillows from door to door in our neighbourhood. I hated in an never forgot how people treated us at times. But I also learnt that there is dignity in doing whatever you can to survive. And most people I speak to do not find it humiliating to be selling wares on the streets but look at it as an honest day's living.

– Over the last decade there has also been an influx of immigrants from countries like Nigeria, Rwanda, DRC, Eritrea, India, Pakistan, China, Zimbabweans, Somalians, Malawians. Due to the economic conditions in their home countries they come to South Africa hoping to change their fortunes and futures. But while South Africa may seem to be a land of gold on the continent, it is also a very xenophobic society and its treatments of foreigners, is at times nothing short of shocking. Our Department of Home Affairs is our first line of embarrassment in this regard, and unless we change our attitudes to our neighbours working and living within our borders, we will continue to deprive our own society and the continent as a whole. My work doesn't believe it can change mass opinion, but my own perceptions have been changed by engaging with street hawkers and I have had many people come to me after seeing an exhibition and saying that it changed the way they saw street trade or they reminded them, that people who approach their cars are trying to make a living like they are.

**Having read some interviews with you, I get the feeling that you are involved with issues of inclusion and exclusion, where do one belong in a society with so many different identities? Am I interpreting you correctly?**

– The problem is not the many different identities and finding a place for it. This world and our society is large enough to encompass as many manifestations of identities as there could ever be. The problem is when we think our identity is more important, more superior, more better or so much more different that it cannot live alongside others, that we have to be separated. It is a sad thing about the human condition that even if there was only two of us on the planet, we would find something to distinguish one from the other and deem one 'better' than the other. Even worse is when we try to contain the Other, to build borders or organized markets or limit entry to our utopias. Being open-minded has become a catch-phrase, but it should mean so much more than just being aware that Others have a different life-style to you. It is about accepting differences, it is about opening up 'your' spaces to Others, it is about recognizing that people have a right to get about their lives and their living in whatever way they can. It is about pissing on the idea of our modern utopias and clean streets, and helping people who sit the whole day under the hot sun selling a few wares for a few cents, not playing gatekeepers to society. It is about recognizing that there is no such thing as a foreigner, but that person is my African/Asian brother or sister.

**I have a feeling that your discourse is very related to your location, South Africa, to the extent that it might be impossible to develop somewhere else (definitely in Sweden), do you share that view?**

– Hmm, I've never been to Sweden as yet so I'm not sure about comparing the two. But there really has not been a single place that I've been to yet that does not have some form of street life – be it by day or by night. Cairo, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, Mozambique and Bordeaux were all easy to relate to as they have vibrant street cultures even if they are in the form of flea markets or proper shops that spill onto the street. The cities of Basel, Kassel and Venice seemed a bit more on the sparse side but certainly not completely devoid of street trade at all. Actually last year, when visiting the Venice Biennale, I noticed people with mobile street tables, that they would place on their heads and run with when policeman came to fine/arrest them. So no, I have yet to visit a city that has absolutely no informal economy. But I am supposed to exhibit at the BildMuseet in Sweden in January 2008, so we will have to see...!

– And besides, I have yet to meet people who have not been able to relate to the work. I once read this quote that goes, 'I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay attention to the specific. Universality, I think, emerges from the truthful identity of what is' (Lorraine Hansberry). I really do believe in investing and researching the particular, that people come to recognise elements that are similar to something in their lives and relate to or at least sympathise with it. In paying attention to the particular, I think it also combats generalising about groups of people and a continent that have come to characterise large-scale shows on 'Africa'.

**Your work is very "documentary", in the sense that you even use actual objects that you buy in the street in your exhibitions? Is being documentary an important part of what you do?**

– In a way, yes, if the word 'documentary' is used as a way of reflecting a slice of someone's real existence. But the word 'documentary', especially when used to reflect something on Africa, can be used in way that separates producer from product i.e. the objective, sometimes distant researcher uncovering some sordid piece of story. And I have never been distant from my work. I am constantly aware of how much I am implicated in my work, for my work speaks not only about Others but about myself - my experiences, my perceptions, my beliefs, my identity. Over the years I have put biblical text, Indian mehndi designs and sewn into the paintings to also reveal my own identity within the artwork – that the images you were seeing were reflective of an Indian, Christian, South African woman's views on street trade.

– Also, street life is also not something that is hidden from society and something that I am uncovering through my visual research, but rather in South African city centres it is everywhere, claiming spaces but it is just the more economically well-off part of society that tries to ignore it as if it doesn't exist, or it will go away. My work is often just a visual reminder in these 'high art' places of the people we pretend not to see, but who form an integral part of our society and economy.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

– My most recent exhibition, (B)lack, shown in October 2007 in my home city of Durban (where I hadn't exhibited since 2001), focused on the language of urban regenerative projects. The multimedia works in (B)lack tried to make the audience aware that language can be used in various ways to sell anything – be it property, ideology or perceptions of persons – at times to the detriment of Others. Language can be used as a destructive weapon, to hurt both local and other African workers who are trying to earn a living daily on the streets. By exposing how language can be manipulated to stereotype people, these works hope to sensitize audience members to this manipulative terminology, while also imaging the people they are most affecting. This show is due to be exhibited at the BildMuseet in Sweden between January and early March 2008 and will then move to the AVAGallery in Cape Town for the rest of March 2008.

– New work that I am currently engaged with focuses on images and stories of immigrant street traders that one encounters everyday at the traffic lights all over Johannesburg. From blind beggars with accompanying partners, to Zimbabwean teachers forced to make extra money during the holidays by selling wares on South African streets, these works also 'document' visually the stories of these workers from interviews I had with them.

– A show that I will have in September 2008 at Gallery MOMO in Johannesburg, will differ from my street trader themes, as I focus my research on my own identity more. The show is entitled 'What I look like, What I feel like' and will present dualistic staged photographs of perceptions of myself by

other people, alongside very personal renditions of what I feel like. This is not a break completely with the street vendor issues. I believe our identities are created as we look at Others, and that as we look at our own identity, we create views of Others. The one does not negate the other - it is a process of symbiosis and reflection that we exist in society.

**Interviewer: Mårten Janson**

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