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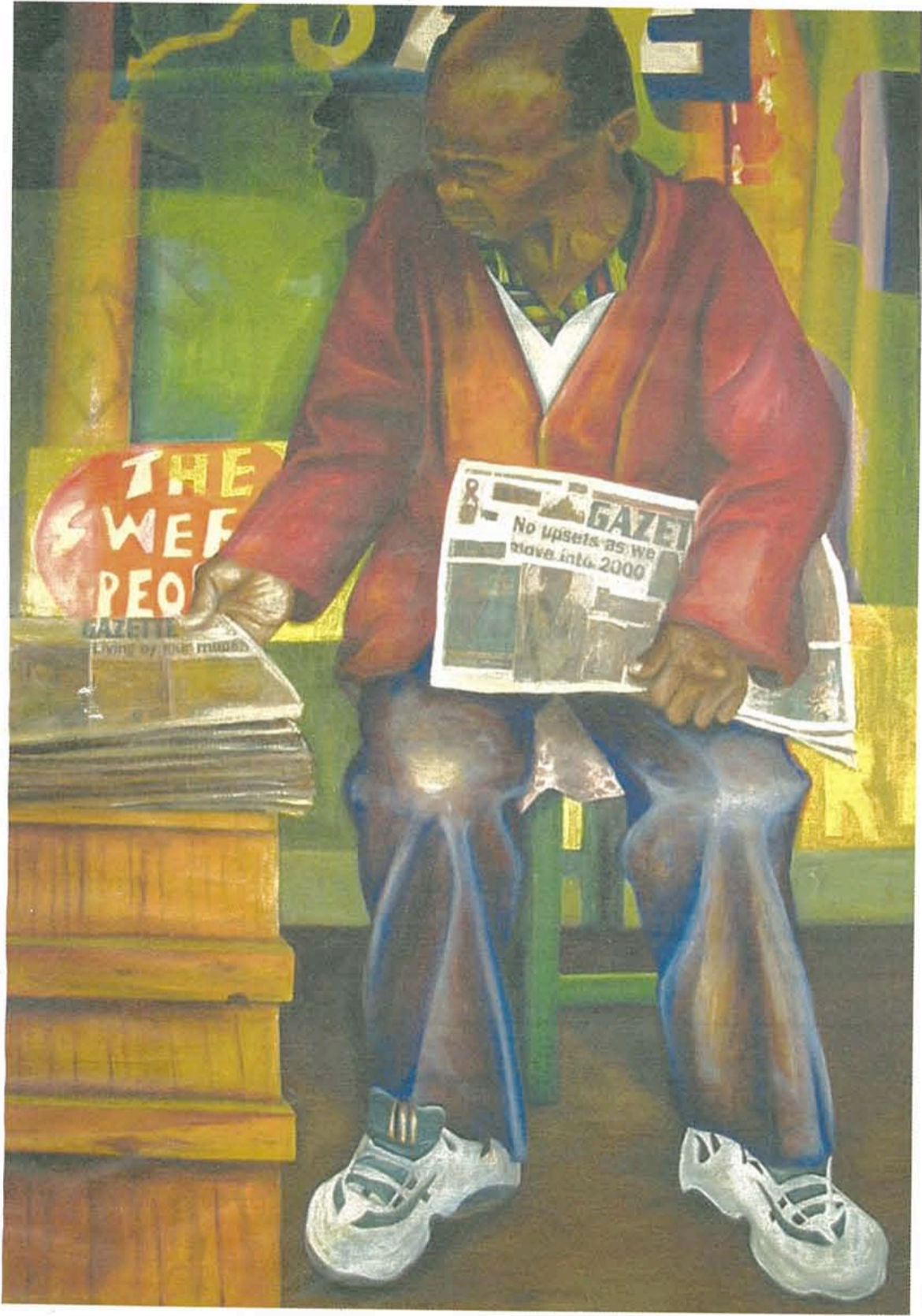
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Khan: the colour of Jozi's streets

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Left: Sharlene Khan, Dotcoza (2001)

ARTISTS ON RENAULT'S SHOWROOM FLOOR

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Madi Phala is one of the artists featured in the car maker's arts and culture programme



BACK YARD GALLERY IN KAGISO

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Kgosi Khumalo creates an outlet for aspirant township youngsters



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Picking up the pace of the art world

Local scene still racially based, says Jo'burg artist Sharlene Khan, and change isn't happening fast enough

SUPER-energised Johannesburg artist Sharlene Khan is on a fast-paced mission. And that's not just because she's wrapping up her second MA at Wits (having completed her first at UKN-Durban). And it's not because she might easily be packaged as an emerging voice for the voiceless: specifically, street traders, the subject of much of her work. Rather, her unofficial mission — though she'd probably be the last to admit it — is to raise the profile of South African art and artists, particularly those outside the established "insider-trading" circuit. Make no mistake, the pursuit of her academic and professional career is Khan's primary focus, but she's well aware that it's useless being a great chef without a restaurant in which to practise. And, in that sense, she's in a hurry.

"I've heard I'm known for my 'non-sense academic' reputation, but I think I'm also developing a bad reputation for speaking out," she chuckles, without a hint of irony or bitterness. Khan has a peaceful, well-paced energy. It's an energy defined by its contrast, like a pacemaker, so the rapid-fire tick-tick-tick of her mind is reassuring rather than off-putting. And, while she takes art, the art world and its transformation seriously, she doesn't take herself too seriously — using an innate sense of humour as the sugarcoding on an admittedly painfully bitter pill.

Since bitter pills are often difficult to swallow, it's sometimes best to get them out of the way upfront: "Quite frankly," she says, "the South African art scene is still racially based, especially its curatorship. People love to say, 'give it time,' or 'things are changing,' but if you really look at things statistically, we've got a long way to go, and not much has really changed. And you don't really have to look much further than the faculty at the art department at Wits, which ironically packages itself as a great champion of transformation. I mean, universities are meant to be cutting-edge, and if universities can't get it right, it doesn't bode well for greater society."

Not that Khan wants to tear down

the system — she wants the system to look after others by looking at itself: "Government seriously needs to address the educational system, to take arts and culture seriously. It must be recognised that the arts — whether music, visual or performing — should be a viable career."

Much of Khan's work explores the existence of street traders — capturing, on foot, the details and nuances of street life. The pavement hawker mess that far too many suburban South Africans see at 120km/h whizzing past in their German sedans, is what Khan celebrates as a sacred blessing in minute detail.

"Our street trade should be one of



The artist in her studio at Wits University. Picture: MARTIN RHODES

our big draw cards," she says, "because it's about the way we interact."

She pauses before cautioning, "And I'm certainly not romanticising street trade, I'm well aware it's driven by hardship. Still, I'm completely amazed by its symbolism of resilience. It represents dignity and humour and that people are doing the best they can — street trade shows how people can survive under economic hardship. To me, street trade became symbolic of the new SA."

"If you walk the streets, you'll find there's a strategy that goes into trading. People just don't throw their



Man Down (2002-03)

“It must be recognised that the arts — performing or visual — should be a viable career”



Left, It started as them and ended as me (2000)

iKhaya — the long walk (2001), below

wares down onto the pavement. There's a sense of immense pride in what they do, how they arrange their goods to their best advantage."

Her exploration of the theme is through hands-on experiential intimacy, not academic distance: "I tend to work by drawing or painting right on the streets. At first, people are often curious, wondering what I'm doing. But I take the time to interact.



I sometimes go back with colour photostats of my finished portraits as a keepsake, so that they can see how they've turned out. I really enjoy their reactions. I will say, as an outsider among the traders, it's much harder to get into the galleries."

On some levels, her work is light years away from her modest beginnings in a Durban township. On others, it's the logical conclusion of a journey that's taken her full circle. "When I was young, I always wanted to be white when I grew up as Miss SA was always white," she laughs.

Khan re-embraced her South African identity while in London on an Abe Bailely bursary. "It's funny," she says, "I was raised as an Indian in SA, where that identity was virtually rammed down my throat. When I got to London it was the sounds of Zulu and kwaito I most missed, along with the friendliness and warmth of SA's streets. It surprised

me, redefining my concept of identity and home."

She moved to Johannesburg two-and-a-half-years ago. "When I was finishing my MA in Durban a lecturer recommended an international residency programme at The Bag Factory, as the Fordsburg Artists Studios are known. I was really excited to come up here because it's always housed top South African artists like David Koloane and Pat Mautloa.

"I lived in Parktown and used to take the taxis down to Bree Street and walk down to The Bag Factory.

"The Jo'burg CBD made a big impact on me. There's a different dynamic walking through the city. In



Newtown you'll get people selling huge balls of steel wool. Joburg's a much more African city, with Nigerian, Congolese and Zambian influences. I think the council still sees it as a negative activity, where in Durban the city's been much better at packaging street trade."

Still, Khan is relatively enthusiastic about the South African art scene and her place in it: "One of the best things about the South African art world is that local people like buying local art. They know it, appreciate it and invest in it by choice."

That's not to dismiss the fact that there's still work to be done, hurdles to be jumped: "Like elsewhere, the art scene's a bit incestuous in SA — it's who you know, not what you

know. I don't think our gallerists are visionaries. There's a tendency here to package the nearly arrived. But that's fine, as a serious artist will always make his or her own way to sell their work."

Ultimately, Khan prefers to let her work speak: "My work mixes fashion and art. The works are multilayered, literally and figuratively. So I've tried to show that the street seller is not just a mere street seller, but also a mother, a church member, a wife.... There are multiple narratives in the work. Interestingly, I've also used embroidery as it's so nonvalued. My apartheid education ensured I did needlework from Standard One and did I ever hate it! So it's funny that I'm using it now," she winks, "I suppose it's my personal therapy!"

Joseph Talotta



Khan mixes fashion and art ... A series of 2004 works, above left to right: Downtown Johannesburg, Journey and Marriage (detail).

