

# Sharlene's eye for detail reveals slice of life often overlooked

By Sashni Pather

"SHARLENE Khan takes the most ordinary of things and turns them into poetry. She makes us notice people and incident, landscape and pattern which we otherwise might miss."

These are the inspirational words by renowned artist Andrew Verster which aptly delineates the work created by aspiring artist Sharlene, who has made it her life's work to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Still reeling from the euphoria of having her first solo exhibition entitled *Durban at Work* at the Kwa Muhle Museum last week where 14 of her works were exhibited, Sharlene hasn't had a moment to catch her breath and has already thrown herself into her next project.

Ethwekeni (the Zulu name for Durban) an exhibition of multimedia works produced during an interactive workshop by artists Gabi Ngcobo, Langa Magwa, Thando Mama, Zamaxolo Dunywa, David Haigh and Sharlene, will be on show at the BAT Centre's Democratic Gallery and in its mezzanine space from May 10 to June 4.

## NEW VISION

Graduates from the University of Durban-Westville and the Technikon Natal, have formed a collective called Third Eye Vision.

During the month-long workshop phase, which ends on Friday, May 10 members of the public are invited to watch the artists at work and view the progress of the artists' works in painting, printing, sculpture, collage and other disciplines/media.

The exhibitions focus is Durban and its environment, and how artists can use the items they pick up around Durban to make art.

"Over the past two years my research has revolved around the street vendors, beggars and homeless people of Durban. Our city has so much character and whilst tourists visit the upmarket malls and even West Street, a trip to the heart of Durban, Victoria Street and Warwick Avenue, reveals the real treasures of our city.

"The lives of the street traders are quite inspiring, and while they may be economically disadvantaged, their lives are not poor and neither are they poor in spirit which is indestructible.

## SELF-WORTH

"While we mope about the smallest of problems, here are people who don't even have a place to sleep, doing their utmost to uplift their social conditions, all the while exuding warmth and generosity as they go about realising this," Sharlene imparts.

Moved by the plight faced by street vendors Sharlene relates



Multi-talented artist Sharlene Khan poses in front of one of her works that captures the true spirit of Durban via her depiction of street vendors and the homeless.

an incident that took place in Johannesburg about two years ago where the traders were forcefully removed by police, and all their fruit and vegetable thrown away.

"This is definitely not the way to treat people trying to make a livelihood. We have to find solutions and educate traders on how to keep the streets clean and about the importance of recycling.

"It's inhuman to take away what little people have, but what this shows is a celebration of the human spirit which triumphs, lives and laughs, no matter what the circumstances are" says Sharlene with a caring and knowledge well beyond her 24 years.

After completing her matric at New West Secondary where Sharlene excelled and obtained an A aggregate, she enrolled at UPW's Fine Arts department where she is completing her Masters.

A recipient of the Abe Bailey Travel Bursary to England, Sharlene describes the time spent there as a once in a lifetime experience.

"The selectors choose 14 representatives from all over the country for this cultural bursary.

Whilst in London and Scotland we toured museums, galleries, trade unions, Parliament and visited monuments from British history. We were treated like

royalty, staying in the finest hotels imaginable and eating the best foods. But the true value of the trip was the relationships forged between the participants who were from different cultural and academic backgrounds" she recalls.

In between her busy work schedule Sharlene immerses herself in volunteer community work.

"I feel I need to give back to the community for all the opportunities that I have had. I don't come from a wealthy background and see myself as being truly blessed and if I don't give back then I would be completely selfish."

Having completed several murals around the province, Sharlene confesses that she's become "hooked" on doing them and has painted murals as far afield as Ladysmith.

"Working in such far flung areas has given me a better understanding of living with people of other race groups. People who didn't even know us opened up their hearts and homes to us. They would feed us and transport us to our work site.

"It and was a real eye-opener for me. It was so amazing because even though these people may never even set foot in a gallery by the time we left they were familiar with terms like subject matter" Sharlene laughs.

She maintains that working on

a mural as opposed to canvas was technically different.

"When you're working on a mural, you're working at an accelerated pace as the acrylics/PVA dries much faster than oil paint does. You're also limited in respect of time, whereas with a painting you could complete in within days or months.

"With murals you're also not too particular about detail whereas when you're painting on canvas you can spend hours on one minute detail," she explains.

Sharlene who has exhibited extensively, including at the Durban Art Gallery, works as a post graduate assistant at the university.

She credits her art teacher in school Mr AC Nair for developing and nurturing her innate creativity as he put his students needs before his own.

## SELFLESS ATTENTION

"He's the kind of teacher who will not hesitate to spend money from his own pocket just to ensure that his students have the materials required.

"My lecturer at university Ms Lallitha Jawahirilal took up from where Mr Nair left off and apart from admiring them as artists, they are also incredible human beings who give so much of themselves and ask for nothing in return".

"When you choose art, it becomes your life and it's not a regular 9 - 5 job. You have to make huge sacrifices and it's not an easy road. You meet a few good people, but there's also lots of hardship and disappointment. It's also a very fickle world and you have to establish exactly where you want to be in that world" she says level-headedly.

She believes every piece of art that's initially produced is a selfish endeavour, as its a reflection of something in one's mind.

## SUBJECTIVE VIEW

"How people interpret your work in a public space is totally out of your hands as they bring with them their own experiences and perceptions.

"While my painted nude figure could be my way of questioning the masculine assumption of women and the ownership of the bodies and images themselves, someone viewing it can perceive it to be pornographic or whatever their fetish may be."

This talented artist has been awarded the prestigious Andrew Mellon Scholarship allowing Sharlene will complete her doctorate at Rhodes University.

"I leave for Rhodes in July this year and am hoping to establish myself as an artist in Grahamstown and follow the path that God has chosen for me."

Having climbed up another rung on the ladder to success, Sharlene's ascendancy is assured!