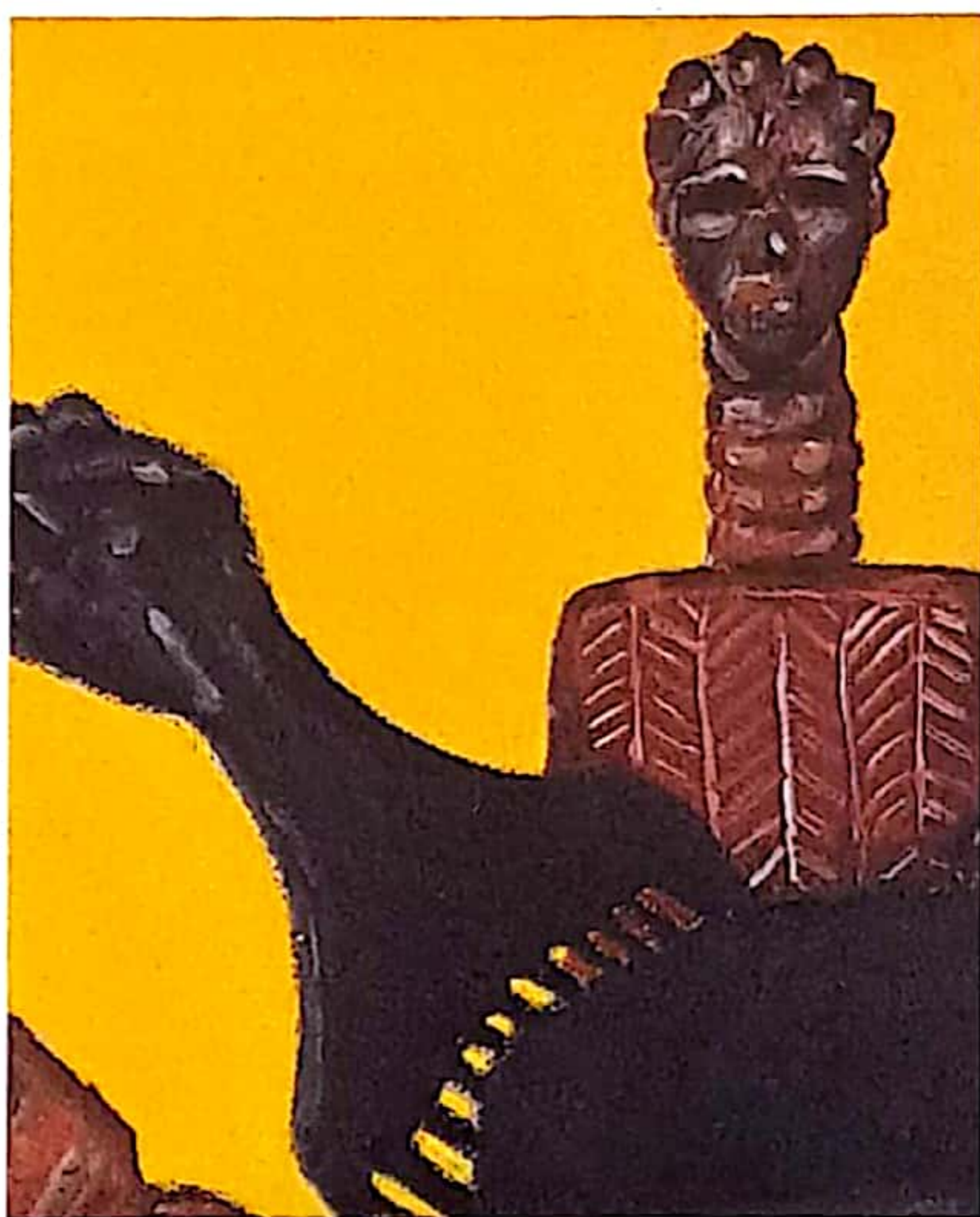


WHEN LOVE CHOOSES US



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It is a yet another cold rainy day in London and I've agreed to leave my flat to go and meet someone for tea at the University of Arts London. This is someone I've only met twice before in person: once in 2002 when I was on a residency in Johannesburg at the Bag Factory and she came with her two young toddler children and her mum to my studio and purchased some paintings, and then in 2012 when we were visiting NY and her children were now teenagers. Alessandra was the kind of person you fell in love with immediately — kindness and goodness radiated from her and her mum and they clearly so dearly loved visual arts (not to mention they were clearly Italian beauties). I was curious, too, how the two young South African Black children she adopted would fair culturally. Following her on Facebook over the years and then meeting them in NY it was clear — brilliantly.

And perhaps that was part of why I wanted to meet with Alessandra that day. As someone who was nearing 40 myself, I had always considered adoption and wanted to know her experience of it as she had gone through the South African system. I wanted to ask her what it felt like to have the experience of choosing your own children (crude as that might sound). Alessandra is wonderfully warm and open, and one has this feeling that you can ask her and share anything without embarrassment. And so we sat in a cafe in yet another cold rainy day in London talking about possibilities — mine and hers — she was bored with the projects she was doing in London and had always been interested in visual arts but didn't know how to take the first step. I suggested taking an afternoon or Saturday class as London had some great part-time classes (despite being there to do my PhD I often looked longingly at these and wished I had the time to take them). We then went on with our lives — I went back to my life, back to Johannesburg, South Africa and Alessandra took her first classes.

Just a few short weeks later, I would lose my father and within the next four years, my mother, and both my in-laws and brother-in-law, and be responsible for clearing up two households of more than 30 years (my partner joked that we were the 'ancestors clearing team'). In this time, I forget ideas about adoption and pour all of my feelings into a nine-year artwork dedicated to my mum — I don't know if art heals, but sometimes it feels like the only language in which my soul can talk, like I didn't choose art, but it chose me. On Facebook I watched how Alessandra posted pictures of her drawings and paintings from class and was amazed at her natural talent from the beginning. I saw Alessandra's mum battling cancer yet again with a quiet graceful dignity and finally succumb to it. As pictures were posted of her mum from her youth, I was shocked at how closely they resembled each other — it was like seeing a reflection in the mirror. Having lost both my parents by then and knowing that nothing you can say can really truly comfort a person at losing the people that have loved them from before they were born, all you do is send some meaningless words that says "sending you condolences on your loss".

And yet, in the space of that loss, Thandi and Sandile come into their age as young adults ready to enter the world. In the space of deep personal loss, Alessandra's works went searching and found incredible proof of life. Yes, what we see are gorgeously painted representations of two incredibly beautiful Black youngsters of South African ancestry. The works are loaded with symbolism with could be read against both South African and African histories, colonial legacies of portrayals of blackness, the new dawn of age that sees a defiance of woke proud millennials like Thandi and Sandile, who, in years to come, with their cosmopolitan upbringing will defy many categorisations of 'European', 'Africanness' and 'blackness'. But, portraiture painting was never just about the sitter. It was always about the relationship between the sitter and the painter and can be quite revealing about the

choices the artist makes in their composition of the portrait. We live in an age where we can accept that none of these choices are natural. So, Alessandra chose each of these 'moods' of her children to portray because something about them seem to convey what she considers iconic about her children, or her relationship with them, or what they/she feels their fixed stylised representation to the world should be. This is important as it means that each is aware of the importance of signification, of what representation of skin, history, symbols mean and how they want to intervene in it. And yet, when we see Thandi and Sandile's melancholies — a beautiful broodiness we associate with young adults on the cusp of becoming, unsure of which way the paths lead — we might perhaps miss that it is also Alessandra's melancholy too that infuses these works. For it is in the quiet moments, when we are faced with just our canvas and our paints and our hearts, that that which lies within is allowed to journey out in through our brush. And so, like with the pictures I saw on Facebook of Alessandra and her mum, in which I saw Alessandra in her mum all those years ago, in these paintings of Thandi and Sandile, I see, yet again, Alessandra reflected in the faces of her loved ones. Alessandra, herself, having lost her mum, like any child has to recentre herself. Alessandra, too, is starting a new artistic career. As her children, step out into adulthood, Alessandra will be reshaping her identity too. If we have these two amazing strong confident young adults ready to face the world, no doubt it is due to Alessandra and her husband Michele, but having to redefine oneself at every stage of life is a journey, and it is necessary and terrifying and exciting, even more so for women creatives. And so, where others might step back and see 'African art', Alessandra's work on looking deeper reveals pain, joy, fusions, cartographies, fragility, vulnerability and a journey where love choose.