



Lifestyle

Art

Marlene Steyn is proving to be an artist worth watching

24 October 2017 - 12:55 By SEAN O'TOOLE



'Her in Her Voices (Elbow Exhaler)', 2017, Marlene Steyn.
Image: Supplied

Cape Town painter and sculptor Marlene Steyn is rapidly ticking off the boxes that define early artistic success.

Last week the artist, whose work is characterised by her idiosyncratic love affair with the human figure, launched *Knot I: I Knot* in Johannesburg.

Steyn's new solo exhibition presents large paintings - tropical psycho-surrealist evocations of leisure - juxtaposed with ceramic sculptures portraying women in various athletic poses.

A week before the opening, art dealer Baylon Sandri successfully exhibited examples of Steyn's new work on SMAC's booth at 1:54, a contemporary African art fair in London.

Steyn's work is also included in *All Things Being Equal* ., the centrepiece exhibition at Cape Town's Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa. Three paintings and a painted bronze sculpture depicting an arching, hollowed-out female form, are in that show.

She's also featured in the latest instalment in publisher Phaidon's influential Vitamin coffee table series, which summarises global artistic trends in particular media. Steyn is the only African artist profiled in *Vitamin C: Clay + Ceramic*.

"I still have to pinch myself," said Steyn, whose work features alongside heavy hitters like Edmund de Waal and Grayson Perry.



'Birders at Beak-ends', 2017, oil and mixed media on canvas
Image: Supplied

In 2012 Steyn enrolled in a master's degree in painting at London's prestigious Royal College of Art. She credits the school with introducing her to sculpture.

"I was encouraged to work with bronze and ceramics by my lecturers when they saw that I had an interest in, what I call 'making the flat fatter' - having the object in a painting become real in a space."

Steyn's debut solo exhibition, *How Cannibals Cuddle*, London 2014, introduced viewers to her cartoonish character with yellow hair. A constant of her paintings and sculptures, Steyn views this figure as equal parts lookalike and mythological character.

"Some days I see these figures as self-portraits, on other days as doppelgängers, or even as friends and sisters," she said.

It's not just their ambiguity that interests her, but also their feminist meaning: "It's very rare that you see paintings that portray relationships between sisters or female friends."

- *'Knot I: I Knot' is on at SMAC Gallery, Trumpet Building on Keyes Avenue, Rosebank, Joburg, until November 11.*
- *This article was originally published in The Times.*

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