

Jo'burg's ghostly trail of Stones

Matthew Krouse (<https://mg.co.za/author/matthew-krouse>) 08 Aug 2013 00:00



Retrospective perspective: 100 paintings by Simon Stone are on display at the Standard Bank Gallery. (David Harrison)

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A good art exhibition becomes part of your life's journey. It transports you to places you didn't know existed, or it rekindles memories of things you may have forgotten with the passing of time.

That's what happened to me as I engaged with the paintings of Simon Stone, then considered his artistic trail in Jo'burg, the city of my existence. Okay, I must say right now that I didn't exactly go to extremes to discover who Stone is, or what it is about Jo'burg that influenced him. But I did try to retrieve the artist from my consciousness, given that his paintings have been widely exhibited and one passes his public works on so many of Johannesburg's arteries.

In search of a narrative, I took a drive through the suburbs to look at the many mosaics Stone turned out while living in Johannesburg until his move to Cape Town in 1996.

In Rivera (next to Killarney), there's a high wall hiding a mansion on which Stone's images, now crumbling, of a violin player and various friendly faces offer some relief from the impersonal relentlessness of the security barriers we've become accustomed to. The mosaic seems to say, to paraphrase playwright Athol Fugard, "people are living here".

In Illovo, on a traffic island in a genteel, upmarket office environment, Stone erected a tall white obelisk with every kind of object dotted on it, like hieroglyphs – a Zulu shield, a spanner, an electric guitar, an anchor, a horse shoe – signalling not so much that “people are working here” as “people are randomly passing here”.

In the Hyde Park shopping mall, there is a water feature portraying everything from magazine covers to cameras, vases and coffee cups, saying “people are shopping here”.

In conversation, one gets the feeling that Stone would rather forget the commissions that kept him in work over the difficult years when he was making the transition from wannabe artist to artist for real.

Thorough

In 1990, fashion designer Marianne Fassler gave him his first paid-for commission when he was a down-and-out painter, at the insistence of his friend Wayne Barker. He would walk to her mansion in Saxonwold each day to lay the tiles by hand in her lounge, piece by piece. Meanwhile, builders completing the renovation elsewhere in the house would laugh at his thorough handiwork. Against their judgment, he finished his artwork long before them.

His first mosaics were created in Troyeville, where he lived with his wife and muse (as he calls her) – the painter Giovanna Biallo – in the humble house legendary director Barney Simon grew up in. On a walkway to the front door, you can still see a dusty, now neglected depiction of seven indigenous birds and a key. A later commission came from the fabulously wealthy Oppenheimer family.

Frustrated with my harping on about his public works in our interview, Stone puts paid to the discussion. “The mosaics were design-orientated. I’m not ashamed of that,” he confesses. “But if you want to reach into the bottom of somebody’s soul, you don’t do a mosaic, you do a painting.” So in our conversation, at least, I find out why the painter paints.

Born in the Eastern Cape in Lady Grey in 1957, Stone grew up in Queenstown, where he attended the “highly reputable” Queen’s College. Critic Lloyd Pollack tells us this in his thorough catalogue *Collected Works*, published by Smac Art Gallery in time for the major retrospective currently running at the Standard Bank Gallery in Jo’burg.

In his first chapter on Stone’s early influences, Pollack goes through the unsurprising list of modern greats any student of painting would discover in the late 1970s. So, in the Michaelis Library while studying at the time, Stone admired everyone from the frighteningly sombre German realist Gerhard Richter to the photorealist-turned-expressionist Malcolm Morely and the pop artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Jim Dine.

Sandwiched

In the catalogue, Pollack writes: “Stone’s taste for creating dissonant, collage-like compositions in which wildly disparate objects are sandwiched together in unaccountable juxtapositions was fostered by the American artist James Rosenquist’s personal brand of pop.”

Looking at the work of Rosenquist, one discovers that, although the paintings had a monumental quality, unlike Stone's, there is evidence of the split frame so popular in those days.

This came about because of the craze for the work of the early avant-gardists such as filmmaker Dziga Vertov, who jumbled early Soviet technological and street culture into a documentary work called *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929).

The movie had considerable influence on the pioneers of *cinéma vérité* of the 1960s. And in the late 1970s, early 1980s, Stone's split-screen paintings also contained skyrockets, power stations, ships and trucks.

In popular American movies, the culmination of the split-screen effect is seen in Norman Jewison's movie of 1968, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, with Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway. The whole sordid plot about a millionaire who stages a bank robbery happens simultaneously in different places, showing that even in early low-brow crime thrillers, well-crafted plot elements could basically illustrate that A plus B equals C.

A decade or so later, I recall seeing South African artist Michael Goldberg's installations at the Market Theatre Gallery in Newtown, the important space he helped to found. Using photography, coupled with the placement of real objects – such as bull horns, text about a soldier paralysed in battle, and a chain and harness – in *Delta Bravo*, Goldberg managed to make a succinct statement about South African masculinity and the nationalists' dilemma when facing conscription.

Neutrality

In her seminal *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1990) Sue Williamson wrote, and it can be applied to Stone, that “it is the balance between blandness and high emotion that makes the piece so strong. The neutrality of the work is its essence.”

All this provides some context for what Stone ended up doing, over and over, in his paintings. But the neutrality, so much a part of what struggle art had to offer, left Stone's work relatively early. By the mid-1980s, his depictions of objects in still life, such as fruit and pieces of equipment, floated amid scrawls of nothing in particular.

One of the earliest works on exhibition is his 1978 painting *Reserve Bank*. It's a cold image of a staircase rising to the bank's marble and granite entrance. In a reflection on the building, a woman with a shopping bag is seen going nowhere, lost in space, where so many of Stone's characters would eventually land up.

“There was very little of myself in it,” Stone remarked to Pollack about *Reserve Bank*, and he tells me the same thing in our interview.

This, and the artist's rather corny claim that he tries to reach into people's souls, goes some way towards explaining the eerie sense of timelessness, of familiar characters trapped in an endless drama that one experiences when looking at his work.

One wonders whether he really knows what he is doing or whether he is just immersed in "doing" without knowing. That's the riddle his retrospective asks.

Sample

He tells me that the 100 paintings on display represent a sample of the 600 works he knows he has painted in his professional life. These are the works he has photographs of, but then there are the small things he has painted and long forgotten.

In a gallery walkabout after the opening of the show last month, Pollack referred to 20 volumes of sketch books Stone had turned out as references for the still lifes and character studies he specialises in. These have not found their way into the gallery, but if interest in his oeuvre grows, they may well see the light of day.

Pollack spoke about Stone's wilful freedom of association, "combining seemingly unrelated images". The artist, he said, "uses juxtaposition to escape the tyranny of logic, to free up his mind, to transcend all sorts of traditional patterns of thought – and association.

"But his use of juxtaposition as a compositional method explains some of the difficulties his paintings present. If you try and find the logical thread between all of the different elements, it can prove very difficult.

"Of course, this makes interpretation complex and it explains why many viewers will say to you that Stone's paintings rely completely on their visual impact. They are very glamorous, they are very good-looking, but in fact, they have nothing to say."

In response, Stone told me in an almost defeatist tone, bearing in mind that he has probably spent many hours resisting easy interpretation of his work: "I have never tried to have a style, ever. So whatever came out just came out."

Structure

He credits Pollack with having put some structure to his development. Reading Pollack's analysis of his paintings made him realise: "I wasn't even aware that I was changing so radically. I didn't think 'Oh, look at those things, oh those ones are very realistic and now I'm doing these things that are semi-abstract'."

Conversation with Stone turns into a friendly sparring in which he claims never to have painted what actually exists in his work. At some stage, he claims never to have painted nude males, although female nudes are ubiquitous. But when I pointed out the existence of a large work titled *Bend in the Road* (1990), which portrays a naked couple in the throes of some sort of sexual game, he claimed that, indeed, it was a commission for an erotic painting. "I mean, that is an erotic painting, there's no two ways about it," Stone said.

Meaningful representation of the human form, though, is at the top Stone's hierarchy. "When you paint people, you are automatically forced to relate to them. It's not so much that they do things, but that you owe them something when you paint them."

But giving a clue to his ever-contrary position as a painter, he confesses that, as the Aids pandemic took its toll, so he moved away from representation of the erotic female form lest he be seen to be making a statement.

"I'm not somebody who paints issues. I don't have problems with identity. I don't have problems with all the things that young artists seem to have problems with."

Flash in the pan

Back to Johannesburg. Pollack says that Stone has portrayed the city as a ghost town. And it seems true. Human interaction happens in bedrooms, but the urban landscape "is seen through the windows of the car as it flashes past us, reducing our experience of it to a mere flash in the pan, emphasising the relentless pressure and rush of a town where time is money and people are forever on the go".

Herein lies yet another contradiction. Who would have expected a fear of the city from an evergreen bohemian who cut his teeth in the hard-living 1970s?

Mind you, this is also the artist who has dotted effete white mosaics around the city's upmarket suburbs, whose sensitive portrayals of intense human dramas grace the lounges of the rich.

As a final challenge, Stone orders me to "look through the book and see if there are some nice pictures you can talk about".

That's the challenge, of course: to find something definitive to say about the mysteries he creates.

Simon Stone: A Retrospective Exhibition runs at the Standard Bank Gallery, Harrison Street, Johannesburg, until September 14. Info: www.standardbankarts.co.za



Matthew Krouse

Matthew Krouse is the arts editor of the Mail & Guardian, a position he has held since 1999. He has edited two anthologies: Positions (Steidl, Jacana Media 2010) about artists engaging with politics in South Africa today, and The Invisible Ghetto (GMP, 1994) a compilation of creative writing about gender. His essays have appeared in collected works about arts and culture here and abroad. He has worked in the theatre for over a decade as an actor, writer and senior publicist at the Market Theatre.

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