

Contemporary Portraiture through the Eyes of the Artist



Marie Stander is one of South Africa's most prominent portraitists. She lives in Jamestown, a small farming community outside of Stellenbosch. Here, she is inspired by the hopes and hardships of her neighbours – which she captures on paper with palpable empathetic. Mainly using charcoal and pastels, other-worldly lighting softens her subjects' gritty realism, and the affect is haunting. Marie Stander has exhibited broadly and prolifically in South Africa. Among her achievements, Sanlam published a book based on her work and held a retrospective exhibition for her in 2010. Five years later, the artist is still producing portraiture of a phenomenal standard and teaching others to do likewise.

AT: What is it about capturing people that fascinates you?

MS: I've been fascinated with faces since my childhood. I remember taking my grandmother's face in both my hands and looking at the purple under her eyes and her wrinkles. People fascinate me in general; their stories, characters and physical features. I think the face carries so much history and

emotion. My subject matter usually involves the people and stories that cross my path. I depict them in a 'warts and all' tradition. I often do multiple portraits of the same model to get to know him/her better. It takes time to understand who your sitter is. For me, the essence of portraiture is to capture the inner soul of the sitter. Drawing the outer shell – well, that's the easy part.

AT: How do your subjects respond to the idea of being drawn when originally asked, and what reactions do you get when they see the finished product?

MS: They are mostly very proud if I choose them as a model. When I invite them to come and look at the finished product they usually react with something along the lines of: "Mevrou het darem 'n mooi 'photo' van my geteken". I've lived in Jamestown for 16 years, so the community knows me and what I do. They visit my studio regularly and probably enjoy the process of creation as much as I do. Sanlam has published a book about my drawings of the people of Jamestown,

combined with South-African poetry. It is called "Onse Mense". For my models it has been a great privilege to feature in this book, because all their friends know and fuss over the book.

A beautiful story on this topic is about Dorie. She has had a difficult life, mostly on the street. I knew Dorie for four years before I had enough courage to ask to draw her because her face is often bruised and battered. When I eventually drew her, I was quite hesitant about what her reaction would be because of the scale and its heightened realism. When I invited her into my studio to look at the finished product, she took a while to study the drawing. Eventually she turned around to me and exclaimed: "Here, mevrou, maar ek is darem mooi!"

AT: Before the camera was invented, portrait artists were commissioned to record the existence of powerful individuals. Now, almost everyone has access to photography and so traditional portraits no longer serve to prove existence. Why do you think people still commission artists to draw or paint loved ones? What do you think hand-drawn or hand-painted depictions express that photographs do not?

MS: I think there is a certain timelessness and tactile permanence in a painted or drawn portrait that photography cannot match. The British painter Lucian Fr ud, once stated: "Painting and drawing absorb memory and association in ways photography, in its various forms, cannot". Often beautiful, intuitive elements of tactility, distortion and manipulation come into play when drawing or painting. The artist projects his/her own perspective of the sitter more easily than a photographer can from behind a lens.

AT: For what reasons do you think it is important or relevant for the tradition of portraiture to continue?

MS: I think there will always be a curiosity (maybe a type of voyeurism) inspiring humans to interpret their fellow-man through painting and drawing, no matter what century it is.

AT: Lastly, are there any local or international figurative artists who inspire you?

MS: I was very fortunate to do portraiture under the tutorage of Paul Emsley. He showed us a portrait by Lucian Freud of another artist, John Minton, wearing a green sweater. Wow, the work stirred up so much within me - the scale of his work, the tactility of his paint, his heightened use of colour and his incredible understanding and empathy with his sitter. All of these elements heightened the emotive qualities of his work.

I visited New York three years ago and saw the incredible work of Jenny Saville and Chuck Close. The reality of the scale and confrontation of the work overwhelmed me. What a privilege to stand in front of such masters. I'm always attracted to work that is confrontational, which is possibly why most of my work unintentionally ends up larger than life. The other element of attraction is the tactility of certain media, like applying charcoal using my fingers.



Top: Marie Stander.

Photo: Andre Visser

Far left: "Clayton", Charcoal on cotton rag, 1280x1020mm

Left: "Pepsi met Party Hat", Charcoal and dry pastel on paper, 1120x980mm

Right: "Tiffany kyk na Hemel", Charcoal on paper, 1002x1300mm

Far right: "Dorie", Charcoal on paper, 1000x1260mm

