

ARTIST  
**Jacki  
McInnes'**

ABSA EXHIBITION –  
XENOPHOBIA ON CANVAS

By Sam Mathe

Derelict high-rise buildings occupied by homing pigeons and decaying inner-city flats inhabited by homeless immigrants, are the inspiration behind artist and art writer Jacki McInnes' latest exhibition at ABSA Gallery in downtown Johannesburg. McInnes works in her own studio in Doornfontein, an ancient four-storey building that stands between abandoned factories, warehouses and flats. Sharing space with these gentle and intelligent birds on one hand, and hundreds of illegal immigrants on the other hand, led to "Strutting, Flying & Dying", a monochromatic body of work that depicts the plight of city pigeons in the skies of the concrete jungle that is Johannesburg.

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**W**hile "Strutting, Flying & Dying" eloquently captures the real lives of these urban birds, it is in essence a powerful metaphor for the daily alienation and homelessness of foreign nationals, for like city pigeons the immigrants strive to survive and thrive in a largely hostile environment populated by xenophobes or citizens who are simply indifferent to their existence. Following the tragic xenophobic attacks in May last year that claimed several lives of African immigrants across the Reef, there is no doubt that this is a work which resonates with relevance about our present. But what is more remarkable is that its conception predates these xenophobic attacks.

"The idea developed some eighteen months ago", says McInnes. "It would have appeared opportunistic on my part to mount such a work based on the May events. As a white middle-aged woman I would never claim to be knowledgeable regarding the plight of African immigrants. I didn't interact with them. This work is merely a result of being an eyewitness from a distance. Through this exhibition I have attempted to understand what it may mean to be a foreign African in Johannesburg. Living space is highly contested, forcing people to cram themselves into rotting buildings in the inner city".

"They have very little recourse – many of them being here illegally or without legitimate papers. They are highly vulnerable and likely to be the first scapegoats when local tensions boil over, as was the case earlier this year. And yet they persist and survive and sometimes even thrive. Like the ever-changing cycle of the pigeons, foreigners will come and go as the situations in their home countries change but as a phenomenon they, like city pigeons, will always be around. Whatever our attitude towards them, they are a permanent part of the city".

Before starting with the actual paint-

ings, McInnes went around photographing the pigeons, a practice which she says is a usual prelude to her paintings. This is an artist whose expressive works always evoke strong emotions. People's response to her art is never indifferent. Sombre and eerie are two words that perhaps capture most of her works. She seems to create in order to shock. Paradoxically, there is an extraordinary aesthetics behind these disturbing images. Perhaps the reasons for her ability to produce such signature, in-your-face grotesque images lies in the fact that McInnes is a remarkably unconventional artist with an unusual touch where medium is concerned. Her unconventional material include stone, salt, lead, copper, pewter, Vaseline and soot extracted from burnt tyre. To this effect, McInnes is not really a painter. Her integrated and idiosyncratic approach coupled with the fact that she prefers such unusual tools makes her a unique practitioner indeed.

As art expert and journalist, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen observed in her excellent appraisal of McInnes' "Strutting, Flying & Dying" exhibition, "These are heavy materials, carboniferous, toxic, unyielding, demanding despite their inertness. McInnes does not choose her media for

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their softness and malleability; she seems deliberately to choose what will offer only resistance to an aesthetic language. In some cases, she seems compelled to make her materials 'speak' by punching letters into their surfaces, as she has done in the works *Cocoon* and *Aerial*, painstakingly making them yield to language so that they become, through the process of her work, articulate.

But again maybe an artist has to deal with disturbing themes of social injustices such as women abuse and xenophobia to create the work of McInnes' calibre. "People who are marginalised by society are those who strongly identify with my works", she notes. "I am instinctively drawn to particular images simply because I prefer to communicate certain issues". One of those issues is the role and rank of women in society – particularly in relation to their traditional subordinate status to their male counterparts; their reproductive rights as mothers and spousal violence they are exposed to in households.

Her first one-person exhibition staged in Cape Town in 2002 and titled "Salt In The Wound" had abortion as its major theme. It was inspired by a traumatic personal experience. Her abusive ex-husband has threatened to divorce her unless she aborted their unborn child. When she did comply with his demands, he went ahead and divorced her regardless. As the title of the exhibition indicated, she used the highly metaphorical materials of salt and lead in her creations. Like in her latest work, "Strutting, Flying & Dying"

– in which she used materials associated with our violent history; burnt tyres and stones – her chosen media in "Salt In The Wound" dovetail so exquisitely with her theme of domestic violence.

Salt and lead, her primary materials used in "Salt In The Wound" are an articulate metaphor for pain, abjection and grimness in her depiction of abortion. "Salt and lead have chemical properties", she explains. "I am interested in the idea of art as a process – something that is ever-changing. So these elements have this changing effect on other materials. For instance, salt has both healing and destructive properties. It can corrode other materials and is therefore perfect for an artist who constantly grapples with themes of decay and survival. On the other hand, lead is malleable, yet indestructible at the same time. It is also toxic but can be used protectively on paints".

McInnes later extended this poignant message – that a woman has a right to decide whether to abort a pregnancy or not – in her Masters degree which she obtained at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art in 2004. The following year she exhibited the same Masters' work – titled "The Vocabulary of Ambiguity" – in Johannesburg's Gordart Gallery. Since then she has staged several high profile exhibitions, notably "Patterns In Silence", mounted in Constitution Hill's The Women's Jail. The exhibition explored the relationship between women, the law and domestic violence.

Born in Amanzimtoti, Natal, in 1966 her father was a landscape painter and she

studied art at school. She later did a BSc degree and later qualified as a radiotherapist at Johannesburg's General Hospital. She says it was a job which enabled her to pay her bills but was hardly spiritually fulfilling, hence her decision to study art at UNISA where she later obtained an arts degree cum laude in 2001. Her academic prowess and consistently high standards in both Fine Art Practice and Art History also earned her the UNISA medal for Top Fine Art Student and paved her way to the household name in arts circles and a rising star on the international art scene (She has already exhibited in Switzerland and Slovakia to critical acclaim).

And having lectured on a part-time basis at her alma mater, Michaelis, she says she enjoys working with young artists. Her next exhibition in Braamfontein in March will be a group effort between established and young artists. She is revisiting her favourite theme under a in August 2009 during an exhibition to be titled "Women In Society". But for now it is her morbid portrayal of the plight of foreigners that resonates with the South African psyche. Bronwyn Law-Viljoen once again eloquently captures this plight and flight in moving prose. "It would seem now that if you once begin to flee, you will continue to do so in a foreign land. You will not, in fact, rest from flight in a foreign land. Instead you will be chased to the very edge of the land, to the point of death. You may well be killed and your death will not be homicide, but the death of a foreigner, xenocide, if I may be so bold as to coin a word". 🐱