



NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Diane Victor, one of South Africa's most important contemporary artists, is the festival artist at the Absa KKNK in Oudtshoorn this year. Her work features in several international collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. In this candid interview, **Heather Dugmore** takes a look behind Diane's 12-foot wall.

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he releases the lock and loosens the chain as she opens the gates into her childhood and adult world. There's an old thatched farmhouse in a few acres of veld, and there are horses and dogs wandering around as if they are in the heart of the country. But look beyond the 12-foot wall and you'll see highways and end-to-end cluster homes erupting like a fungus over the land. This is Midrand: the industrial and domestic sprawl midway between Joburg and Pretoria. This is Diane's world.

"When I was a child it was all countryside with just a few farms. I grew up riding horses alone in the veld. It was wonderful, it taught me self-sufficiency at a very young age," says Diane as she clicks the lock back into place.

In November this year she'll be 49; that's almost half a century of opening and closing the gate and turning the same handle on the same front door of the old thatched farmhouse.

"Fortunately a couple of us have been able to hang on to our plots and our little piece of rural lifestyle here. It's my refuge. I've had the opportunity to relocate to London or New York but I need breathing space," she explains as we enter her home, where she lives alone. Her father died when she was a student, her mother died 10 years ago and her half sister is 20 years older than her; hence she grew up as an only child.

"At some point our plots will be rezoned and then the rates will get so high I won't be able to afford them, but for now I love living here, albeit behind my 12-foot-high concrete wall with motion sensors and a gun and my two Rottweilers," she smiles. There have been some bad attacks in the area so she tries to make sure her security is intact. "It's a vicious cycle of paranoia and a financial drain but you can't be the weakest link for your neighbours."

Listening to Diane is like wandering through her drawings. You're knee deep in reality, anxiety, parody and displacement before you can gather yourself sufficiently to decide whether you should bolt back out of that chained gate. But then you stay and you find yourself wanting to hear more. Her speaking voice, like her art, is soothing and seductive in its violence. She takes you to places where most people would rather not go; she takes you to the free market of slaughter, paranoia and greed when all you want to do is push your trolley around Woolworths. The funny thing is, you willingly allow her take you there and you start feeling it is quite normal to live behind 12-foot walls with a gun, two Rottweilers and an ever-vigilant ear.

"There is no place like home. I was recently in China and it was pretty amazing but I was so happy to come back!" she exclaims, chatting and packing an assortment of greens into the fridge. She eats as she lives — simply: mainly fruit and vegetables with a bit of tuna on occasion.

"I realised how culturally different I am from the Chinese in certain ways, particularly when it comes to food. The food there was a serious strain for me. Bullfrog tastes like chicken but it is hard to eat it when it still resembles the bullfrog. Bullfrog and coagulated blood are both delicacies in China and they were generously offered to me as gift meals, so I had to oblige."

The trip to China was for a six-week printmaking residency at the renowned Guanlan Original Printmaking Base, just outside Shenzhen.

"One thing I really enjoyed about being there is [that] there's no paranoia that you'll be robbed or attacked. People in China get executed for that. But there's lots of paranoia in other ways: political and psychological."

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The Guanlan Original Printmaking Base is a government-funded printmaking workshop for artists who specialise in woodblocks, woodcuts and etchings. The group provides all the materials and technical support and during Diane's residency there were 25 artists working there, mostly Chinese; eight were international artists.

"We didn't have much time for sightseeing because we all worked hectically hard; it was like being at an army base where we were fed three times a day." China today, along with India, she explains, is the "largest exploding art market in the world" with works ranging from traditional Chinese brush paintings and woodblocks to highly contemporary abstract paintings and photography.

"[In] Beijing there's an entire artists' village an hour to the east of the city where 30 000 artists live. China regards art as a production form and no country in the world can compete with the sheer quantity of Chinese artists trying to break into the global art market."

What the artists cannot do, though, is produce work that is critical of the Chinese government. "Social commentary art is not possible there, and people are paranoid about what they say about the government, which is why an unrepentant activist like Ai Weiwei who is highly critical of China's restrictive, censored society has been beaten up, detained, had his blog shut down by the Chinese authorities and his studio burnt down.

"Freedom is a pretty strange thing; once you've experienced it, it remains in your heart," says Ai Weiwei, who puts his life on the line for what he believes.

"I would not be able to make the work I do if I lived there," continues Diane who nevertheless produced a series of etchings about the slaughter of rhinos during her residency in China. "It's contentious but it was not an outright attack on the Chinese."

Her verdict on the fate of the rhino, having spent time in one of the two cultures that most covet rhino horn — Chinese and Vietnamese — is not encouraging. "The rhino has mythical status there, like a unicorn or a dragon. The stories about aphrodisiacs and cancer cures are only a small part of the mythology.

Rhinos existed across China thousands of years ago and from that time they believed that if you carved a drinking cup from rhino horn your drink could never be poisoned because the horn would show up the poison. Poisoning your enemy or opposition was a large part of life then and the mythical status of rhino horn has persisted. It is part of a belief system that is far deeper than we imagine and I don't think we are going to be able to stop the poaching."

She produced fine etchings in China but she found working there invasive because there are cameras on the artists 24 hours a day. "It's for security reasons because the printing equipment is expensive but it means you are never totally on your own and I find it difficult to get lost in my brain when you are constantly being filmed."

Diane habitually works deep into the night, going to bed at three or four in the morning. When she's at home she sometimes works at the farmhouse, but most times you'll find her in her studio in a four-storey building called August House in Doornfontein, on the perimeter of Joburg's inner city. Several artists work here in the large spaces once occupied by manufacturing firms.

A kilometre up the road is the ultra-trendy Arts on Main, a contemporary creative space that emerged from a derelict building under the highway on the east side of town. "I think it's amazing how Arts on Main has brought the northern suburbs back to the city," says Diane; but she prefers August House. For her, it's more real. There are no fashionable restaurants and design stores, just squatter buildings and mining era memories. "Artists often move into areas on the fringes of collapse," she explains. Her life partner, sculptor Gordon Froud, also has a studio here where he lives and works.

"We sometimes don't see each other for weeks because we both run semi-hectic separate lives, but when we get together we share what we have done and it's wonderful. It's the best way to run a relationship, living parallel lives without any feelings of restriction or guilt and then to really enjoy each other's company when you're together." They have been together since their fourth year as students at Wits University but they never married. "Why ruin a good relationship?" she smiles.

Diane and Gordon share a love of travel and are hoping to go to Turkey this year. "We travel well together; he's a good companion — easygoing and gregarious. Whenever we've got the money we take five weeks off, put on our backpacks and go. After Turkey I'd like to go to Patagonia," says Diane, who rates New Zealand's South Island and Iceland as two of the most "devastatingly beautiful" landscapes in the world.

As a couple they took a conscious decision not to have children. "We have no regrets and we both teach so we are constantly interacting with hundreds of young people who are like an extended family," she explains. "Students are very trusting and they invite you to explore the inside of their heads with a torch. It's quite scary at times because you are exposed to their vulnerability."

Diane has been teaching at the University of Pretoria for the past 20 years. She also teaches at Rhodes University and the University of Stellenbosch. Gordon runs the sculpture department at the University of Johannesburg.

"I love teaching and even if I made a fortune I wouldn't give it up. Teaching has also given me a living, which was difficult in the first 15 years when I had no money and would train horses to make ends meet," says Diane, who used to ride competitively. "Now I just hack about. If you're going to do something you do it properly and I don't have enough time to dedicate to riding. I put that time into my work now."

That work is included in some of the world's top collections, among them the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She regards it as a "huge compliment" to be there and says: "It's great to know that a broader audience gets to see my work" but she personally hasn't gone to see her own work. "I'm generally not happy with anything I make, which is why I don't hang any of my own work in my home. It would drive me insane and I would want to take them apart and fix them all the time."

She prefers the walls that surround her to be bare. "I need walls to be non-invasive. When there are things on the wall it's visual interference for me." She also doesn't collect art and has 10 paintings to her name, mostly works that were owned by her parents. "They weren't big on the arts. My father was a miner and they had a few relatively competent traditional landscape paintings — art in the park kind of paintings. The paintings are of grasslands and koppies, big, open South African spaces, the kind of spaces that make me happy," says Diane pointing out the window on to the veld beyond.

As an artist she's most certainly "made it". Despite her modest taste she must surely be a wealthy woman. "Not at all," she responds. "The

imagery I produce is not comfortable so it's not popular stuff that a whole lot of people want to buy. And for those who do want to buy it, I want it to be affordable. Artworks often outstep themselves and then they become the preserve of the elite. I understand the economics of it but I am trying to make images that make a difference, and selling to an elite group doesn't change anything.

"One of things that really disappointed me in China was that most of the top artists sold for millions and those works could only go to trophy buyers. While it's great that people who have this kind of wealth are not just spending their money on yachts and cars, for me that is not what art is about. For me it's about reaching a far wider audience; it's about selling to someone who really wants to buy my art and to talk about the ideas, concepts and social conditions that freak them out or cause them discomfort. It pisses off a lot of galleries and small wars break out, but I don't believe in limiting my work to a specific collection or to trophy buyers. I've many times been told that I have an idealistic streak about half-a-metre long down my back, but so be it."

Diane is highly critical of the South African government and President Zuma. "He's an embarrassment. How can a person of his influence in a country rife with social and HIV issues have 21 or more children? Our only consolation is that he is an

improvement on what we had in the past, which is why I remain an optimist. I have to be; I couldn't stay here if I wasn't, but we have to be vigilant as South African citizens. We have to fight for a free press, a credible justice system and a population that can think critically."

Her series "The disasters of peace" addresses the violence and abuse in everyday South Africa, where murder and rape is commonplace.

"South Africa has an uncomfortable energy; it's like scratching a scab. But at the same time it is also an incredible energy that fills us with the sense that we can do anything we dream about here. It's the opposite of Europe where there is a sense of stagnation, of a society set in stone."

What Diane dreams about is having more time. "Time goes too fast. I work round the clock but I just don't get done what I need to. More time. That's what I want. Other than that I've been lucky to be able to do what has made me happiest since I was child — to make art, every day, all day. I wish more people could do what matters to them for a living. I love going to my studio to see what I did the night before; it excites me and motivates me to see if I have managed to achieve what I wanted. But our society doesn't work like this.

"Our society encourages people to aspire to excessive financial wealth, which is equated with 'making it'. I don't understand it. It robs people of the ability to exercise free will and more than anything I believe in free will. My father was determined I was going to be a dentist but look what happened to that. As for marrying the boy next door, that also wasn't going to happen. It was clear from an early age that I was more likely to shoot the boy next door than hold his hand."



"STUDENTS ARE VERY TRUSTING AND THEY INVITE YOU TO EXPLORE THE INSIDE OF THEIR HEADS WITH A TORCH."