

The essence of Arabella Caccia

Multimedia artist Arabella Caccia's art always find its way back to the traditional way of painting, with its foundation in drawing. For the St James-based artist and sculptor her work is an expression of her journey, to discover her essence, and that of being alive. By Nelia Vivier.

Arabella Caccia has a passion for life, "for all things sensual and delicious, whether it be scooping the thick foam off the top of a cappuccino and letting the bubbles pop in my mouth, leaving a rich creamy taste ... or breathing in the moist steam of hot bread straight out of the oven, or rubbing oil on my skin on a summer's day while lounging in the sun.

"Even tragic moments," she recalls, "such as when I tried to save a bird from being strangled by a piece of fishing line. Holding its tiny fragile feathered body in my hands as it took its last breath, made me aware that I'm alive, that life is a miracle."

The artist loves to make drawings on rough paper with a small stump of charcoal, sitting on the stool in her studio, mixing oil paint on her palette. "I squish the oil colours together, creating new ones

that nature creates so effortlessly," she explains, "while listening to my latest favourite song over and over again, my oil burner emitting wafts of frankincense that remind me of the churches of my childhood."

Her personality is a bit like one of her paintings: a little reserved, peaceful and somewhat solitary. "Beneath the surface," she professes, "there are deeper sides of myself, revealed to those who really know me. The intricate fantasy world of my imagination, the playground of my creativity is kept veiled, perhaps as a kind of protection."

Her ideal work of art is one that continues to fascinate, as the light moves and as time passes. "Any work that moves me, even to tears of joy, touches that deep emotional core." Art needs to have an Aha-moment. Not moved by political or social commentary in art, "conceptual art has impact beyond the literal," she explains.

"Some land art, for instance, can be extraordinary and powerful. Photographs

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of these pieces are often like fleeting reminders of magic moments. I admire the performance art Marina Abramović did at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010, where she sat in silence with direct eye contact one-on-one with visitors.



"My own artistic style varies from abstract to expressionism. My current work is somewhere between realism and classicism, overlaid with decorative elements. It defies being put in a box. It's the same reason that French is the language of love, Italian of passion, English of law and German of command. I use whatever style or medium is most appropriate to a particular artistic expression."

The journey

Arabella recalls "I have always loved to make things. Some of my earliest memories are of making magic potions as a little girl in the garden. I would feed spoonful of imaginary friends with the hope that they would manifest."

Art has always been part of her life. She made her first oil painting at age five. "I painted a pot of African violets on an easel next to my father who was a painter and a writer. As was my mother, who also was a passionate art historian," she remembers.

As a child she lived in Tuscany in Italy, didn't go to school until age nine. "My brother and I spent our days either playing in the olive groves with the neighbours' sons or visiting museums and churches," she recalls. "My mother considered this a better education. I often regret the education I inflicted on my daughters; perhaps it will make them better able to fit into conventional society."

The works of art first imprinted on her young mind were icons of madonnas, Christ figures, drawn suspended on crosses, frescos of saints being flayed or boiled in hot oil, ceilings of palaces painted with mythological figures of gods and nude women frolicking in the clouds amidst mythical beasts with two heads and angels' wings.

"Christianity, classical mythology and the stories of Dante all blurred into one, creating a world of metaphor and fantasy from which I fed my imagination. I think the paintings I loved most were the gold-trimmed madonnas hidden in the darkened alcoves of medieval churches. They were like secret treasures," she muses.

Her artwork has a strong feminine theme. "Perhaps it refers to the dreamy, lyrical quality of my work."

"I draw inspiration from nature and fantasy, love to nurture those close to me, bring stillness to those I connect with through my work. Living with my four daughters, our home is imbued with female energy.

"There is an added sense of vast space inhabited by a lone figure or the suggestion of one, spaces between figures, man's existence within this vast universe. The eternal search for a sense of belonging, a connection, ultimately with oneself or to the self – perhaps this is journey of my work."

As the light changes

The artist loves the fact that every day when she works, the light changes, the mood changes. "I paint slowly in a highly meditative state, drawing inspiration from a model who poses in my studio. First I draw in charcoal for up to 20 hours, only then do I begin to paint from life – working for up to 60 hours on a large painting, while simultaneously painting smaller studies.



The thread

My recent body of work is an expression of where I am now. There is a solitary quality to the work – an inward search for a sense of "being", in relation to the earth and the world around us.

We are born alone and die alone, need to learn to navigate the path between these two points with self-reflection and meditation in order to grow and find peace, be responsible for our own happiness and destiny. To this end, single, mostly female figures inhabit vast empty spaces, in quiet meditative moods.

May they bring a measure of silence to those who allow themselves the time to contemplate them.

Photos by Nelia Vivier

“To try and capture this aspect of nature is a life-long challenge,” she says. “I’m committed to making the perfect work, which is certainly impossible. Each one somehow remains unresolved. Which spurs me on, to do the next one, as if changing just one small aspect, perhaps that will do it!”

She knows it’s a process, inevitably one without an achievable end, one “that will keep me busy for the rest of my life. To create a truly great painting or work is very difficult and strangely ephemeral. I’ll certainly never get bored because there is always space for improvement.”



Away from the studio

Come Friday eve, I go to a kundalini yoga class taught by Patwant, a wonderful teacher whose portrait I’ve recently painted, then take whichever of my children are around to the Blue Bird market in Muizenberg for supper.

On Saturdays, I swim as I do every morning, in Dalebrook tidal pool, a five-minute walk down the hill through the park. Sometimes I walk up the mountain behind my house with a friend. If the children sleep late, I bring them back bagels or croissants from the local bakeries in Kalk Bay.

We fire up the pizza oven or cook a huge lunch. We drink delicious wine and hang around the pool in the summer or the fire in winter, chatting, teasing one another, doing homework or just reading. One of my daughters will invariably bake something. It seems to be very therapeutic and makes the house smell delicious, despite the appalling mess!

I love to walk in Kirstenbosch, often on my own, or on the beach, I need time to myself doing very little as that is when I come up with new ideas. We all love to go away as a family, to the Karoo, especially in the winter, to feel the crisp air and soak up the vast spaces – we do very little and sleep a lot, which seems to restore a kind of sanity to the family. I also try to go back to Italy at least once a year if I can, to immerse myself in European culture and wander again through the corridors of my childhood.



Artist’s notes

The materials I now work with **reflect the influence of paintings and sculptures I was exposed to as a child** in the Early Renaissance churches in Tuscany ... and also my life before I became a mum of four beautiful daughters and settled down for a decade in Hemel-en-Aarde Valley and on Hamilton Russell Vineyards in Hermanus.

Conceived in South America on the banks of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, born in London, I was nurtured and loved in Italy as a little girl and raised to adulthood in Joburg in the 80s. From 18 to 26 years old, I lived in Florence, London, Edinburgh and New York, a city life of the fast and affluent.

A great work of art should be like piece of music that lives on, plucking at your heart strings as you grow. As one’s life experience changes, its impact must grow and change too. Like a great love affair, in the beginning it should be fresh and enticing, inviting you to dance with it, then gradually revealing its depth, grow in fascination, to sustain one’s interest for a lifetime.

I’m fascinated by colour and its mercurial nature. I have a cupboard full of pure pigments from which I make my own paints. I love the physical process of mixing paint. It is a kind of alchemy, always producing beautiful and often strange surprises.

The greatest master in my opinion is Rembrandt, as an all-round artist it is Matisse,

as a philosopher artist, Rothko, as a woman, Frida Kahlo, as a performer, Marina Abramović, as a land artist/ sculptor, Antony Gormley and Richard Long.

Currently Arabella is planning an exhibition at Everard Read Johannesburg come 2014, and has also been approached to do an exhibition in Moscow.

See and buy her work at *The Everard Read Gallery, Portwood Road, Cape Town* ☎ 021-418-4527 and visit www.everard-read-capetown. In London she’s represented by *Sara Pearce Fine Art*. For more info, contact Arabella on info@arabellacaccia.com. Visit www.arabellacaccia.com *Watch Marina’s ‘The artist is present’ at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZrttwe6ls