

The loss of someone close to her triggered painter Bronwyn Bruce's underwater studies featuring her daughters in motion through a watery landscape

GIVEN THAT REALITY is based on perception, we all have our own unique version of the world around us. Perhaps this is what makes realism in art so intriguing. Does that intimate experience of seeing what an artist sees create an emotional response in the viewer?

'People enjoy things they can relate to, and in my work there is a sense of déjà vu, of recognition,' replies Peter Bonney. His hyperrealistic paintings of sparse Karoo landscapes evoke half-remembered scenes of big skies, distant mountains and the peace of empty countryside. 'It does have an emotional impact; it's what people grew up with and think of as South Africa. That's why people take my paintings with them when they emigrate.'

But, in fact, those scenes never really existed. 'I compose elements from different places – it's an imagined scene that looks real,' Bonney continues. While he is defined as a hyperrealist, in reference to a movement that began in the '70s in France and the US and has its roots in photography, Bonney regards himself as more of an impressionist. 'A lot of what looks like intimate detail is painting technique.' He creates images from the photographs he takes on trips through the Karoo, then manipulates them on a computer and uses the result as reference for his paintings in acrylic. He defends his use of modern technology, saying that if Leonardo da Vinci were alive today he probably would have invested in the latest Canon or Nikon.

Bonney left the corporate world in '83 for his childhood passion of painting, and after a long association with Crake Gallery he now exhibits with Chérie de Villiers Fine Art Gallery. Married to Janis, with three grown children, Bonney lives in Clarens in the Free State, a town he describes as 'the best place to have your being.'



Between the Idea and Reality

Private Edition features three South African artists who interpret their vision of 'real' on canvas and in concrete and ceramic.

Words MARIANNE HERON



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Perhaps part of Bonney’s narrative is to capture what a viewer misses in a hurried world. ‘People’s journeys today are usually destination-orientated. Mine are the opposite: process-orientated. I just love wandering about, I love the silence and the sense of the bigness of the landscape.’

A very different kind of landscape – the lush orchard country of the Elgin Valley – is the area in the Overberg that sculptor Marieke Prinsloo-Rowe shares with her husband, Alex Rowe, who is a vet, and their family. The place has an almost dream-like quality. Two graceful female figures dance on the grass near the driveway and a row of statues lines a terrace beside a weeping pepper tree. These life-size female sculptures bear a resemblance to Prinsloo-Rowe’s long-limbed grace. Beside their home, a forester’s cottage dating back to the 1850s, rises a newly built studio and workshop dressed with local stone.

Inside that studio, reality is brought poignantly into focus. Prinsloo-Rowe’s work-in-progress is a monument commissioned by Unisa for children affected by HIV/Aids. The six life-size figures are modelled on children in the area, each living with the virus. In the finished work, the group will stand on a plinth with a flock of pigeons flying around them, decorated in colourful designs by the children themselves. The figures are cast in resin, mixed with marble dust, something new to Prinsloo-Rowe, who generally works in cast concrete. ‘I mostly work from models, but if I don’t have a model I use myself – I’m the one person who is never *not* here.’

Evocative female forms dominate in her work, drawn from her own perspective on life. ‘It’s a way of making sense of reality, of answering back to life. There are so many moments with which one is presented. For me, getting married was a big one that brought a whole stream of ideas about this young woman who becomes a partner with an alter ego – a male figure.’

Growing up with her younger sister, Hanli, was another source of inspiration. ‘The other body you always see is another young woman. The sculpture of a swimmer on the Sea Point promenade was inspired by her. And her moving through water like a modern mermaid was a whole revelation sculpting-wise: Hanli, a champion freediver who dives with whales,



Peter Bonney’s large, hyper-real Karoo landscapes are recreated from composite series of images he gathers on his travels. Each work evokes the sense of space and light typical of the terrain. (Opposite) Sculptor Marieke Prinsloo-Rowe’s long-limbed figures may echo her own physical form but represent the plight of children with HIV/Aids

To contact or find out more about these artists, visit peterbonney.co.za, mariekeprinsloo-rowe.com and bronwynbruce.com.

founded the ‘I am Water’ Ocean Conservation Trust to raise awareness of marine life.

‘I suppose that’s something that you try to do with art as well, if you can arrest someone’s attention for long enough to look at the world differently... My sculptures choose to set in stone a different way of looking at life and make *that* reality.’

Prinsloo-Rowe grew up in Cullinan, where her mother, Naomi, was a ceramicist. ‘Some of my earliest memories are of sitting on the floor of her studio, modelling clay. I fell in love with it. That continued until college, where we were taught to weld. It was like learning another language. The moment you could weld, you could put together an armature and start applying the clay. That magic has never worn off.’

Her concern is not that the magic might fade but that she won’t live long enough to complete all her ideas.

Like Prinsloo-Rowe, Bronwyn Bruce finds a unique reality through art – and there are parallels in the themes of their work too. In the case of Bruce, who grew up in the then Eastern Transvaal, it was her father, Billy, a builder and sculptor, who inspired her love of creativity, which only ignited after she left a corporate career at the age of 32. After her marriage and

the arrival of two daughters, Bruce began to experiment with different media and found her passion in painting.

The loss of her father earlier this year triggered a series of underwater paintings that, like Prinsloo-Rowe’s sculptures, are based on familiar female figures – in Bruce’s case, those of her daughters. As Bonney does with his paintings, Bruce initially captures reality with photographs. ‘Then I become obsessed with the realism and want to zoom in, possess it and make it my own.’

Painting the bubbles in her underwater studies is a case in point: ‘I want to make them look as though you could pop them with your finger.’ Her daughters, caught for a moment when they pirouetted in tutus in bright sunlight, were also the inspiration for her dancing figures. ‘My other obsession is with light. If you put light in a painting it comes to life.’

Part of Bruce’s own reality is the way her art becomes a never-ending journey, of ‘always discovering new things. I feel as if I am a child.’ In his poem ‘The Hollow Men’, TS Elliot wrote: *Between the idea/ And the reality/ Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the shadow.*

But, in the case of artists, what falls between idea and reality is creation. □