



GRAFFITI GRADUATE: Some of Dion Cupido's earliest works were created on the walls of the Cape Flats with cans of spraypaint

## HIGH CANDY

Beyoncé snapped up one of Dion Cupido's alluring confections. It figures, writes **Ashraf Jamal**. Photograph by **HALDEN KROG**

LAST year I was strolling through Joburg's Everard Read gallery and was directed proudly to a miniature pink Jeff Koons poodle encased in glass. Much pride came with the hushed direction of my attention to the art world's premier prankster — whose *Balloon Dog (Orange)* sold for a world record \$8.4-million last November.

Witness the allure of art as the ultimate commodity — the uber fetish object — in this craven world.

Art historian Julian Stallabrass coined the phrase "high art lite" to describe the phenomenon. His term — which he applied to the Young British Artists such as Tracy Emin and Damien Hirst, none of whom are that young anymore — was intended as a criticism. But it back-fired, becoming an apt moniker for the current flavour in global taste.

Whether or not we want our art to be reflective or socially contentious, we definitely want it to look pretty. Which means that Matisse was right when he suggested that he was making art for the tired businessman to admire on his wall when he returned home and donned his fluffy slippers, the better to unwind in his armchair with whisky in hand.

Which brings me to Dion Cupido. Asked what he thinks of the painterly baubles he generates at a rate of knots, the artist visibly balks — which is understandable, given that very few artists like to be told that they trade in pretty things.

"I don't think people want to hang up issues on their wall," he says. "I'm trying to escape my own issues." Here I must respect the man's honesty. If Cupido's turnover is intensive, it's not just because he likes to flex his profit margin.

"I can't work on something forever," he says. It's all about "instant art... instant satisfaction".

And here I'm reminded of one of our ad world's best-known taglines: After action, satisfaction.

For Cupido, working at great speed is not just about the fear of boredom, it's about moving on. A former member of the hip-hop group Zulu Nation, Cupido started out by tagging walls in Mitchells Plain, and perhaps his current spate of paintings of women — which he reads as "self-portraits" — is just another variation on tagging.

"We are still writing on walls," he says. "We need to say something on the back of a bathroom door."

Yes... and no. In JM Coetzee's early novella *The Vietnam Project*, he noted that we write on toilet walls to abase ourselves before them.

But Cupido's "writing" is anything but debased. It's clear that the man loves himself, in the best sense of the phrase.

He displays no anger, no self-abasing cringe. His art is not counter-cultural and cannot be jammed into a resistant or even post-resistant box. Instead, what Cupido represents is the very newly minted post-transitional moment in SA art; a moment in which our dark history and its democratic afterglow are both beside the point.

Cupido's studio is on Albert Road in



38. Oil, acrylic, spray paint and pencil crayon on canvas, 180cm x 160cm



Then she said. Oil, acrylic, spray paint and pencil crayon on canvas, 160cm x 140cm

Woodstock, one of Cape Town's cool addresses (as cool, and as toxic, as Joburg's Maboneng Precinct — and very different to the down-at-heel neighbourhood of Brooklyn, where the artist lives with his wife and two children).

I find myself loving what I'm seeing: massive paintings angled against the wall. The portraits are alluring — obsessive-compulsive depictions of women who could have stepped out of Gauguin's brain.

True to his background as a graffiti artist, Cupido has stuck to a tried-and-tested medium: mixing the splatter effect of spray paint with an unobtrusive modernist blocking that's easy on the eye.

One can understand why Beyoncé Knowles bought one of Cupido's works while on walkabout in Cape Town. The women in Cupido's paintings are not too far from Beyoncé herself: beguiling doe eyes, luscious mouths, gorgeous hair.

Rendered in muted tones — unlike Gauguin's bling queens — Cupido's models are just what the doctor ordered. I'm told that German buyers in particular are huge fans, which explains why Cupido's dealership, Worldart, is about to open up shop in Berlin. **LS**