

# Off the Wall

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Wedged in a niche between graffiti and classic portraiture, Kilmany-Jo Liversage paints visages in a style as dichotomous as human nature itself. Her saturated canvasses exhibit control and abandon in equal measure, all wrapped up with pop sensibility.

Artist and mother Kilmany-Jo isn't just making beautiful portraits. While they are instantly eye-catching, there's also an ever-present element of naughtiness. Despite being loosely affiliated to a very masculine, urban art form, there's also a strong element of the feminine in her use of colour and subject matter.

It all started when Kilmany-Jo was a school teacher of eight years. Instead of finding inspiration in textbooks, she found creative inspiration in the graffiti-style Tipp-Ex marks and scratches the children made on their desks. So she left the academic world to become an artist. Today, she has exhibited in Singapore and America and will soon be off to Venice.

We caught up with her in her paint-splattered studio to find out a bit more about her streetwise sense of style.

## **Is it a stretch to call your work futuristic?**

I would call it futuristic, only because of the superhero pussycat girls that I paint. But I'd rather call it pointillistic and street art-inspired. Street art is great, but I like to work on canvas. I also like to keep it quite pretty (especially with the girls), quite trendy and pop arty. There will always be these pretty, pouty girls.

## **What was your most interesting recent project?**

I've just come back from Washington DC, where I created murals for Nando's in Bethesda, Maryland. Nando's has a Serve Art Programme, which curates one of the largest collections of contemporary South African artists. They sent me to Washington to make art for two Nando's branches there.

## **Tell us about your time in Colombia.**

I did an artistic residency there through UNESCO in 2007, and while I was there I was inspired by the fact that, because they have such an unsettled government, the street art is extremely subversive and the art is public.

## **So to you, is art a form of activism?**

There was a stage when I was extremely political, and I created a lot of ribbon pieces with a very political message. I felt very strongly about women's issues and rape, so I did a lot of work that involves the ribbons you wear for breast cancer awareness and AIDS. I used to make these big works with tapestries of skulls. I used to do street art and go out and tag and all of that. I had a political element to my work and a reference to resistance and injustice, but then I realised that I wanted to be more playful, almost naughty in what I do.

## **Are you focused on cultivating and preserving the enigma around street artists? Is there always an element of mystery in your work?**

That's a good way of putting it. Yes, it's very important. I think that's something that makes my work quite successful – there is always that element of mystery.

## **But always portraits of course?**

That's me – it's always portraiture... but I like to do portraits of the trendy individuals.

**What else do you look for in your subjects?**

There's always something to do with the eyes and what they tell. I also look for very strong-looking people. There must be some form of beauty in the structure of their face.

**Do you often approach people and ask to take their portraits – at weddings, for example?**

Sometimes, but I prefer to do it when they're not really aware of it... when they're caught up in a moment. I'm always looking for portraits, working 24 hours a day.

**How long does one painting take?**

It depends... I like to work fast. No longer than four days on a piece

**Is there a song or soundtrack that best embodies your art?**

There's a song by Beck called "Timebomb", which always gets me started. Beatnuts, Fugees, Goldfrapp, Daft Punk... Anything that gets me working fast.

**What mediums do you like to use, and do you ever use technology in your process?**

The only technology I use is social networking for reference. I'm not a media-related artist. I work with sprays, acrylics, ribbons and, at one stage, wood. I also like to play around with the whole pointillistic element, which can relate to pixeling. The process is basically just layers and layers of creating and recreating those layers, then a texture comes out through paint application and then I will start painting a portrait over it.

**Wouldn't it be easier to use a computer?**

Creating and recreating the layers – that's the fun of it. Every mistake has its place. I work very fast and I don't work for too long. That's an element of street art: I work fast, get it done and move it out.

IMAGES: Danielle Clough