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From graffiti artist to top-end galleries

Dion Cupido did things 'backwards' by creating a body of work and selling it before he studied art, writes Penny Haw

DION Cupido, who won the Truworths Academy of Visual Arts Award at the Arts & Media Access Centre (AMAC) in 2003 and whose first solo exhibition closed at Worldart Gallery in Cape Town at the end of last month with just one inconclusive sale, didn't grow up understanding the viability of making a living as an artist.

As a teenager living in Mitchell's Plain, he was into hip-hop culture and, in the company of other well-known street artists from the area, including Falko and Makone, got his kicks from illicitly creating images on walls and other public places.

Like British street artist Banksy, who insists "the people who run our cities don't understand graffiti because they think nothing has the right to exist unless it makes a profit", Cupido began creating art as a means of expressing himself, not as a way to earn a living.

"But we were not gangster-type graffiti artists," he insists. "Sure, part of the culture was rebellious but our work was about peace, caring and unity. For me, it was a means of expressing my creativity in a way I'd never done before."

"For some, graffiti might express social and political messages but for my friends and me, it was an internal thing. We expressed our states of mind and spoke to one another through graffiti. Our work wasn't about the community and I think the only ones who really knew what was being said were the artists."

Even when Cupido's artist uncle pointed out the alleged fruitlessness of the youngster's hobby, he didn't accept the argument.

"My uncle, who had given me a few painting lessons when I was very young, must have recognised I had some talent. He said to me a couple of times: 'Dion, why do you paint walls? You can't sell them.' But I didn't imagine I could make a career as an artist so I dismissed his comments. It took me years to realise he had a point."

Part of the problem, says Cupido, was that — beyond the few informal lessons he received from his uncle — he was not exposed to art at school. The topic was introduced as a high-school subject for the kids a year behind him and, although he recalls primary school teachers showing off his colourful drawings and paintings when he was very young, he was not encouraged past that point.

It was only when a friend's younger brother, who was studying art for matric, asked Cupido to help him with a project that he realised he could paint and that he loved it.

"To that point, I'd been doing



HIP-HOP: Dion Cupido used to get his kicks from creating images on walls and other public places. Picture: TREVOR SAMSON

graffiti but when I started working on my friend's brother's project — copying a famous artist's work — I really got into it. He got an A for the work."

By that time, Cupido had left school and was doing various casual jobs to help support the family. His father, Clifford has a successful industrial business, which he'd hoped his son would join. But the youngster couldn't imagine himself as a businessman: "The closest I got to following a career in business was when I worked as a technician for World Online for about a year, 12 years ago. I hated it. Every morning, I'd wake up dreading the day ahead."

At this time, during lunch break, Cupido began visiting art galleries in Cape Town. He examined the work and asked gallery owners what he could do to get his paintings into their premises. Among those he spoke to was artist and gallery owner Gerard Cloete, who, at the time, owned the Peanut Gallery, in Church Street, not far from where Worldart Gallery is today. Cloete encouraged Cupido to go home and start creating a body of work. His father's business gave him access to inexpensive industrial ink, which he used to paint with. (It worked so well, he still uses it.)

Shortly thereafter, Peanut Gallery included Cupido's work in a group exhibition and sold

his first painting in 2000 for R2 000. This was enough to convince him to resign from World Online.

"It was like coming home. I realised that this is what would make me happy to wake up every morning and I saw it was worth fighting for."

"Dion, why do you paint walls? You can't sell them. But I didn't imagine I could make a career as an artist"

Under Cloete's guidance, Cupido began learning more about abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Robert Motherwell. In 2003, he studied at AMAC, which was a nonprofit community arts and media centre based in Cape Town. When he was awarded the Truworths AMAC Academy of the Visual Arts Award at the centre, it confirmed he was on the right track.

"Yes, I did things backwards; produced a body of work, sold it and only then studied, but that's how it worked out for me and, if I had the opportunity, I would love to study further."

But, having married and fathered two children in the interim, Cupido did not have the means to continue studying; he

needed to earn a living. His first extensive body of abstract work comprised a series of cityscapes as seen through the windscreen of a car.

His most recent work involves what he calls African-Pop portraiture. Five paintings in the series were on display in his first solo exhibition, Perceptions Of Beauty, at Worldart Gallery last month.

The paintings, says Cupido, who is a resident at Good Hope Art Studios and whose work is included in several prestigious collections, including the Nando's art collection in London, are about him "wrestling with paint and the surface of a canvas to express something deeper. Under the surface is a longing for meaning, understanding and beauty."

Using models and celebrities such as Alek Wek, Lara Stone, Jordan Dunn, Rihanna, Beyonce and Oprah as his muses, he explores perceptions of beauty and humanity and where the two meet.

"Our perceptions of famous people are mostly influenced by the images and information we are exposed to through the various media we consume. My paintings of these people are about more than creating a strong likeness. I dig deeper, colour over lines transcending the icon, and look beyond the flawless, glossy and

Photoshopped cover versions of the women in an effort to reveal someone more familiar and someone we can relate to."

Examining perceptions of beauty further, he throws into the mix recent controversies involving a white model (Stone), who was painted black, and a black model (Dunn), who was painted even blacker. Is white that's painted black beautiful or does black need to be blacker to make the grade?

The huge paintings — "I love

working on large canvasses because it makes me feel part of the work" — were created using industrial ink. The use of text and symbols here and there are reminders of Cupido's past as a graffiti artist.

"Yes," he smiles. "But at last my uncle's words have sunk in and this work, unlike all the walls of graffiti in Mitchell's Plain, can be sold."

And at a handsome R22 000 an artwork, what's not to smile about?

Seeing the world the Joburg way

CHRISTINA KENNEDY

IT WOULD be wrong to call the Trinity Session's exhibition in downtown Johannesburg a retrospective, since most of the works by Marcus Neustetter and Stephen Hobbs are, strictly speaking, new. That's because the two collaborators are constantly reinventing, rejigging and repackaging their works to suit different spaces and purposes. So the review title refers not just to a reflection on 10 years of smashing boundaries and exploring the parallels and contradictions inherent in urban terrain, but also to a revisiting of individual works conceived during that time. Hobbs and Neustetter mash up site-specific interventions with virtual creations; old media with new.

In addition to their current contract, curating the City of Johannesburg's public art projects, they flit around the globe, from Martinique to Mali, from Dakar to Mozambique, integrating these observations into their experimental (and often experiential) artworks. Rewritten versions of several of these creations will be showcased at the new Museum of African Design (MOAD) at 281 Commissioner Street, Johannesburg — a new addition to the Maboneng precinct.

The exhibition is on in the evenings, from tomorrow to March 25, with private viewings by appointment thereafter. They are thrilled they were invited to hold the inaugural exhibition at the new MOAD space by developer Jonathan Lieberman.

"It's a unique space for the arts; a large, old factory warehouse space," says Hobbs. "Such large-scale interior spaces are rare in SA for exhibitions."

Having the luxury of a cavernous exhibition space means Hobbs and Neustetter



can fit in large-scale video projections, found objects, sculptural works and blown-up images from their onsite interventions. A focal point is a new work, titled Temporary Museum of Art. This film, which will also be shown at the Havana Biennale in May, examines the lack of art infrastructure and resources in Alexandra's informal settlements. Still in the township, a 3m-by-6m image encapsulates the essence of their Borderless Intervention, which entailed artists herding goats from Alex into Sandton central last year, culminating in a performance and shoot at the Michelangelo Hotel. This work not only provided a comical visual juxtaposition, but also explored questions of xenophobia and comparative value systems.

Fascinated by the urban landscape and its artistic possibilities, they have helped art spill out of the galleries and into the public domain.

"From queues at taxi ranks to the once-white flatlands of Hillbrow, it's all about where the richness of material resides. Joburg has taught us lessons regarding the way in which we see the world," says Neustetter. "Wherever we go in the world, we're always looking for contradictions. Basically, we're interested in what's f**ked up!"

Jon Stewart's Vagina Ideologues

GREAT heading, right? And now I have your attention, sit back while I vent. The term Vagina Ideologues isn't my own (damn it!) it's from the brilliant Daily Show with Jon Stewart — the best political satire to come out of the US since the history of political satire. It's on Comedy Central and if you can't watch live, tape it. Please.

Lately Stewart and the show's team of award-winning writers have set their sights firmly below the belt, as has the team of terrifying elders of the Catholic Church in the US, all because President Barack Obama wants to do the right thing by women and the Catholic Church doesn't particularly like doing right by, or giving rights to, women.

The furore started when Obama introduced a bill ("the Pill Bill"; Stewart's, again) that requires religious colleges, hospitals and other institutions to include contraceptive coverage in their healthcare plans. "If," said Obama, "a woman's employer ... (has) a religious objection to providing contraceptive services in their health plan — the insurance company will be required to ... offer women contraceptive care free of charge."

It has "caused a firestorm among many Catholics", according to Republican Senator Roy Blunt. Or, as Stewart notes, really just among the old white guys who run the US Catholic



KATY CHANCE
Chance Comments

Church. That's the same church that has been giving women the finger since ForeverBC (Before Contraception).

At a panel discussion of Jewish, Catholic, black and white leaders (but no women; Stewart called it "the world's holiest sausage fest"), one cleric declared "violating someone's moral conscience", as this apparently does, "is equivalent to a rape of their soul". Others say this is Obama's way of waging "war on religion". "You have to hand it to these guys when it comes to imagination," said Stewart. "Wine becomes the blood of Christ and insurance reform becomes war."

Inevitably if inexplicably the Nazis got dragged into the fray. A Southern Baptist minister said the Holocaust, too, "had started with something small". Stewart exploded. "Hitler's Holocaust did not start with insurance reform!" And then, just when I thought my chest couldn't get any tighter, we get Republican presidential candidates Newt

"A Southern Baptist minister said the Holocaust, too, 'had started with something small'. Stewart exploded"

Gingrich, Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney weighing in.

Gingrich (who marries and divorces a lot): "(Obama) will wage war on the Catholic Church if re-elected!"

Santorum: "Abortion may be 'legal' (air quotes), at least according to the Supreme Court (snicker), but we will never have rest because that law does not comport with God's law."

But this has nothing to do with abortion. Contraception is the diametric opposite of contraception; contraception prevents abortion. If the Catholic Church was really serious about abortion, it would make contraception mandatory.

And Romney, often accused of "doing a 180" on every topic, said in Ohio: "I'm not for the bill ... contraception is working just fine, let's leave it alone." Three-and-a-half hours later, on radio, he said: "Of course I endorse the Blunt Amendment ... I really misunderstood the question." Would you want a president who doesn't want contraceptive rights for women, or one who doesn't understand the question?

Good news, with Romney you could get both.

Blunt wants a clause that would require employers only to provide healthcare "consistent with their religious beliefs and moral convictions". What if the employer is a Christian Scientist? Or a woman? Does she have to cover Viagra usage? Yes, because "Viagra addresses a genuine medical condition but contraception is about lifestyle".

A very nice Professor of Law and Theology explained this issue falls within what the Catholic Church calls "cooperation with evil", which means as a contracepted woman — or, as rabid radio whack-job Rush Limbaugh would call me, a prostitute or slut, as he did a young female caller to his show — I am evil and immoral. And yet suddenly, I was also calm. The right-wing cohort of US Republican presidential hopefuls make the Keystone Cops look competent. Even the snake-whispering Bible belt has stopped speaking in tongues lest the neighbours think they are running for office. And despite the many people disappointed by Obama's handling of the endless crises on his watch (economics, oil, ovaries — poor man) I am certain he will be re-elected, because all the 14, 15, 16 and 17-year-olds too young to vote last time, are now 18, 19, 20 and 21, a demographic purportedly quite keen on contraception.

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