



INSIDE

The darker side of SA's debt culture

PAGE 8

TB doctor surfs to recovery

PAGE 10

The perks of loving pets – pics

PAGE 11

Kuyasa's hoop stars to play for SA

PAGE 24



## Smoking Art

Thomas Mills

Cross-legged on the carpeted floor, internationally acclaimed artist Diane Victor sits beside a lit candle and a blank paper. "All my life the way a child draws stuff out their head it's the way I've always done, just drawn things out of my head", she explains as she lifts her hand, allowing the flame to lick the paper's surface for the first time.

Born in Witbank, Gauteng, Victor travels annually to Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape to lecture part-time at the Rhodes University Art Department and focus on her work in the tranquillity of the small town. Having majored in Printmaking while completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Witwatersrand, Victor developed her trademark smoke drawings during an earlier trip to Grahamstown. "It's really basic and primitive", she says as she works through the outline of the image, "all that it is, is that you're taking a lit flame and moving it over a paper surface and you're catching the de-

posit of smoke".

This residue soon develops into decipherable picture, and with the gentle yet swift motion of her hand beneath the sheet held above her head, the flame's light offers a glimpse of the artist. With curly blond hair, blue eyes and a pale complexion sculpted by years of laborious work, she elegantly moves her toughened hands in every direction, pausing to dab drops of hot candle wax on a piece of newspaper beside her feet. Even though her actions may look random, each movement is studied and meticulous. And while care and caution remain crucial to keeping the paper from catching alight, the final piece is often far less benign. Well-known for her satirical and visceral social commentaries, Victor both captivates and alienates audiences locally and abroad by focusing on the transitions in South Africa and on the country's many social inequalities and complexities, from healthcare, to politics, corruption and education. This frequently cynical content aside, she maintains that she is a cheerful person. Neverthe-

less, she affirms that happiness undermines the artist in her, thereby weakening her artwork. Because of this, Victor focuses her creations on issues that upset and disturb her. "[I] make work as a way of communicating things that anger me", she notes, as the eyes of the portrait become visible. Yet she insists that, through the vehement indignation that her work represents, one must perceive the ever-present humour which acts as a "survival tactic and a way of lighting things and making things approachable."

As the portrait of the elderly man begins to take shape, Victor pensively whispers that the method is "very additive, subtractive", tracing the surface of the man's chin with her finger and brush. However, and unlike her print works, the inability to fix a smoke drawing and protect it lends it a particular fragility and vulnerability that carry with it a powerful meaning. "You touch them and you destroy them, just like so many people's lives, you touch them you do more damage than good".

CREATING ART... World renowned South African artist, Diane Victor, works on one of her many smoke drawing portraits that she has come to Grahamstown to complete. Photo by: Thomas Mills



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