

Twin exhibitions conjure the depth of feeling love and loss

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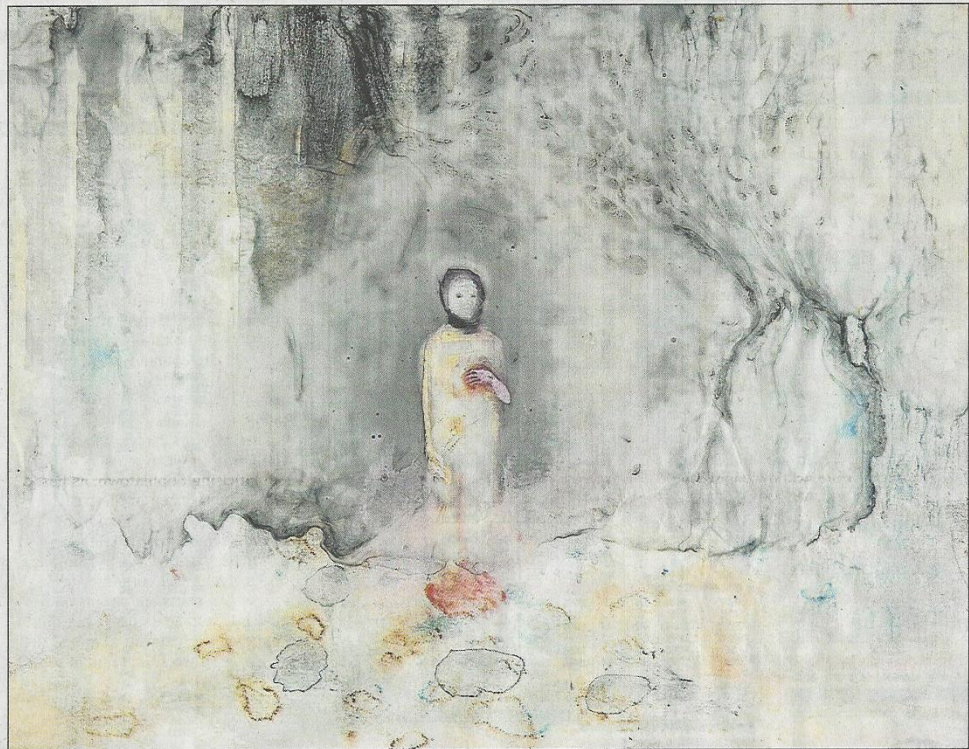
WE EMBRACE to be embraced, love because of others. Our sense of desolation is spurred by the loss of a loved one; our joy is the sum of all our tender connections. It is this double bind of love and loss that lies at the heart of the latest offering at the Stevenson art gallery in Cape Town, a pairing of works by Penny Siopis, the globally feted South African artist, and the emerging Zimbabwean artist, Portia Zvavahera.

The works could not be more different, and yet their exhibition side by side could not be more uncannily twinned. Siopis's pieces are works of mourning. Her figures, all women, are snarled in worlds more elemental than real; worlds incendiary, scorched, molten, torn, and shattered. In these worlds in which moods veer between the melancholic, sepulchral, ghoulish, and meditative, Siopis immerses her women. It is impossible to tell the nature of her women from the elements that seem to engulf them.

THESE are worlds created with oil, ink and glue. They are not, however, merely visceral and textured; rather these glutinous materials generate a claustrophobic density. In one work the woman seems to disappear back into nature itself, symbolised by a ravenous tree trunk. Is Siopis conjuring a return to a mythic Edenic source? Perhaps. However, conjecture aside, the works more generally suggest not so much a return but an immolation.

Her women, abstractly drawn yet perceptibly human, seem to invoke more the idea or the myth of womanhood rather than any one in particular. So, while she may name a work Zoe, the subject, whom the artist may know, is from the viewer's perspective an iconic or idealised creature. Enfolded by, or seeming to liquefy in, a molten maw, her women — in this case Zoe — seem to conjure some unconscious Jungian inescapable.

Siopis's colour palette is rich in primary colours — blues, greens, reds, yellows — and yet it is also viscous, thin, or gnarled in application. Barring the features of her women, who embody the caricatured simplicity of porcelain dolls, every other dimension of the paintings is amorphous. Line is barely perceptible, the mark-making more a matter of splatters and sludge-like movements of earth, sky and



Note 4 by Penny Siopis is part of her exhibition, *Still and Moving*, at the Stevenson in Cape Town. Picture: STEVENSON GALLERY

water. Every element is sheer yet dense, swamp-like, as though the artist were nothing but an extension of some cosmological force that is raging, yet still.

TITLED *Still and Moving*, Siopis's exhibition is first and last the story of a vanishing, for her women seem to disappear before our very eyes, or they seem to peer through a momentary portal, or to flicker through the veil of some inviolable and remote and boundless domain.

It is, however, Siopis's film, dedicated to her late husband, friend, fellow teacher and artist, Colin Richards, that most plainly tells the tale of a broken heart. A vision of a veld fire, of panic-stricken buck, of scorched earth, the film also poses a sequence of probing questions regarding justice and betrayal, for at the film's end we learn of a gnawing battle regarding the propriety of "owning" or possessing a brace of human skulls.

It is clear these human remains, like the memory of her partner — who was born in 1954 and died in 2012 — must be returned to the earth.

PORTIA Zvavahera tells a very different story. If Siopis's paintings are thickly viscous ciphers for an engulfing pain, then Zvavahera's bold, brash and brutishly scored paintings of lovers in states of passionate embrace forcefully return us to the lived and living world. The figures are sharply delineated and roughly hewn. The paint is thinly and desultorily applied, as though what mattered most to the artist was the simple and raw gesture. Basquiat springs to mind, because Zvavahera's men and women are drawn with the same rudimentary "art-brut" manner.

The canvases are vast, the colours bold, the effect instantaneous, for Zvavahera, unlike Siopis, seeks the raw moments when lovers conjoin. Her lovers, however, are not illicit but sacramental. Like DH Lawrence,

Zvavahera is invoking the fulfilment of a deep and lasting yearning. "I love reds and purples," she says, they "make the work complete".

It is this sentiment of completion — one that echoes Lawrence's vision of a man and a woman making one angel — that defines the spirit of Zvavahera's art. When conjoined with mark-making that is deft, effortless, even scandalous in its disregard for wholeness, the passion sings the more, for this cycle of paintings, titled *I Can Feel It In My Eyes*, works brilliantly precisely because of the abstract-expressionist fervour that drives them.

It is love that is the theme, a love best executed in a visual prose that is unutterably light, quick-footed, incidental and disarmingly simple. These are perhaps the best paintings I have seen in some time, and Zvavahera promises to continue to startle and pleasure us, for while we as a society find ourselves snagged by grief and despair, we nevertheless need to believe that life and love truly matter — if only in a suddenly felt yet eternal instant.