



**Penny Siopis**, the skinnymalinks artist known to every matric visual arts student for her baroque "banquet paintings" from the mid-1980s, has a habit of using snappy titles for her exhibitions. Her 2007 solo show in Cape Town, the first in that city in 23 years, was titled *Lasso*. Subsequent shows have been named *Paintings and Furies*. The title of her new exhibition, a career survey that opened in Cape Town in December and travels in slightly reduced form to Joburg next month, is a little more luxurious: it is titled *Time and Again*. It could just as easily have been called *Family Relations*.

An impressive showcase of 35 years of painting, film and installation work, the exhibition includes all those near and dear to Siopis: her mother, maternal grandparents, late husband – artist Colin Richards, who died unexpectedly in 2012 – and her only son, Alexander. Unlike Marlene Dumas, who has repeatedly painted her daughter, Helena, Siopis doesn't make portraits of her family members. Not literally. Rather, she invites them into her work in unexpected ways.

Take *The Baby and the Bathwater*, a 1992 painting that spans five rectangular boards and includes collaged images of black slave women photocopied from old books. The wine-red painting also features fragmented photographic depictions of Alexander, as well as a half-dozen nonsense words spoken by Alexander spelt out in iron lettering and affixed to the surface.

Produced in the manner of her celebrated "history paintings" from the late 1980s and early 90s, works in which solitary figures are portrayed in iconic poses in garbage-strewn landscapes made up of found images, *The Baby and the Bathwater* heralded a period of renewed experimentation. Siopis, who graduated from Rhodes University with a master's degree in fine art in 1976, set aside painting in favour of working with installation, photography, video and performance.

In 1994, a decade after moving from Durban to join the faculty of the Wits School of Arts, she collaborated with Richards, an accomplished medical illustrator, on a performance. The 17-minute video documenting the performance, titled *Per Kind Permission: Fieldwork*, starts with Richards painting a white rectangle onto his wife's exposed back. Wearing white gloves, he then proceeds to make two consecutive drawings on the improvised drawing surface: a rendering of a facial cast of an anonymous black subject, followed by a likeness of Siopis based on a photo.

Filed by Stephen Hobbs, then in his final year as an art student, the grainy video is austere and oddball. It is also a perfect example of the "aesthetic liberation" that accompanied the political emancipation of 1994. During a walkthrough of her survey exhibition at the

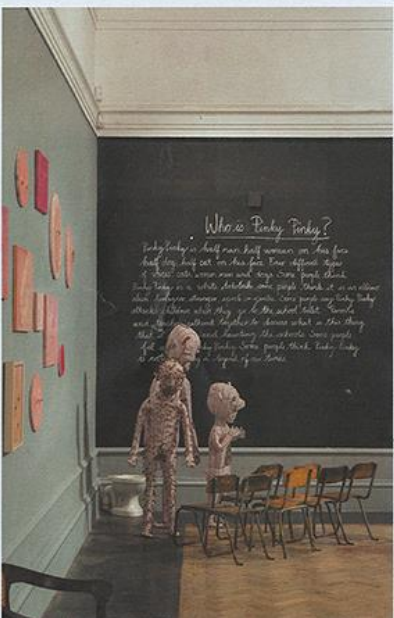
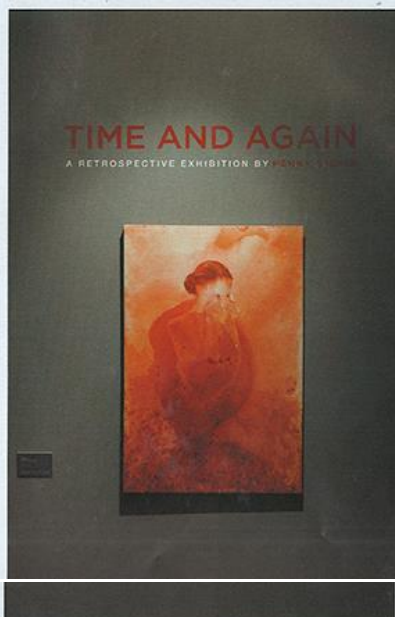
# A PERSONAL NARRATIVE

COVERING 35 YEARS OF PAINTING, PENNY SIOPIS'S NEW EXHIBITION IS A HOMAGE TO HER FAMILY

photography DAVID ROSS text SEAN O'TOOLE



# Initially when I made the cake paintings, I used to get really pissed off with people when they attributed it to growing up in a bakery



South African National Gallery in December, Siopis said that where previously her paintings had been about "the dilemma we found ourselves in, all of us in SA, around the question of history and the future", in the 1990s she started to investigate "personal and micro narratives rather than the master narrative that was apartheid and the resistance to it". *My Lovely Day*, a 21-minute film composed of 8mm family films shot by the artist's mother in the 1950s and 60s, marked the culmination of this self-reflexive process.

An impressionistic collage of family images, the film is tied together by a subtitled narrative, an account by her maternal grandmother of surviving the Greco-Turkish War in 1922. "She was an incredible entertainer and spared us nothing. She introduced me to this idea that history is both violent and transformative," says Siopis when I meet her in February at her studio, a large airy space on the campus of the Michaelis School of Fine Art.

The umber melancholy of *My Lovely Day* is further augmented by a recording of the artist's mother singing the popular 1947 show tune *This is my Lovely Day*, which she recorded in 1955. First exhibited at the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale in a custom-made film salon evoking a bygone era of film, *My Lovely Day* has been widely exhibited since, notably at the Museum for African Art, New York, in 1999, and London's Tate Modern, in 2004.

It is also indirectly about her maternal grandfather. A teenage runaway turned successful entrepreneur, his business interests extended to film distribution outlets in Asia Minor. He owned cinemas in Mthatha, Graaff-Reinet and Cape Town, operating the Gem Cinema and Globe Bioscope, both in Woodstock. He also owned a dry-cleaning business in Johannesburg, where Siopis's father, a Greek-born lawyer with leftist sympathies, worked.

Siopis was born in Vryburg in 1953. Her family moved there to run a bakery acquired by her wealthy grandfather. Her breakthrough work as an artist – a series of early 1980s paintings of cakes, some made with cake-icing nozzles – suggests the way biography has always infiltrated her work. The paintings were directly informed by her childhood experiences of watching her mother ice cakes in the dining room.

"That was a very powerful experience for me. I can remember it vividly. Initially when I made the cake paintings, I used to get really pissed off with people when they attributed it to growing up in a bakery. I didn't want the paintings to be reducible to that biographical information. But actually now, I find that really interesting: one can have a knowledge that impresses itself on you before you know you have that knowledge."

Painting, at least for Siopis, is an act of transformation, not a tool of mere description. So, her dirty pink and stained white globules of oil paint and wax might resemble cakes, but they also look like pink breasts and

vaginas. Her mother approved of the paintings. "Anyone who has worked with an icing squeezer would know that there is something sensual or sexual about that."

Sensuality is a key word in the artist's lexicon. Her paintings especially demand a sensory encounter, something that reproductions in books or online do not allow. Paintings, after all, are not the same as photographs; they are not merely an accumulation of pictorial elements and signifiers, but material objects that exist in the real world.

"The digital age has flattened out all kinds of images. It is important to see paintings in the flesh and see the

distinctions in the thought literally made material. You can't really see the material part of thought if you only see a painting reproduced on a screen or in books as a flattened image." Alongside material, colour and scale are also important. Scale, says Siopis, imposes a "bodily relationship to viewing and looking".

This insistence on the thingness of painting partly owes to her conservative education at Rhodes in the 1970s, which enforced a no-jeans dress policy. "We saw images of art history reproduced in black and white as slides. You had to do the translation in your head. It was so obvious for me, even then, that it was never really the true thing." She remembers her later amazement at encountering the immense physical works of Romantic painters like Delacroix and Géricault.

Siopis is a worldly artist, at ease moving across geographical and cultural boundaries. Her work freely quotes from art history, philosophy and psychology. But what might surprise about *Time and Again* is the embedded conversation it stages with Johannesburg. The bulk of the work was made in this "rough", "wild", "alienating", "contested" and "enabling" place, where things perpetually renew themselves.

"If I had to think of it as an organism it wouldn't be pinned down," says Siopis. "You think you have some understanding, and then you don't. It moves and it is vast. It is like this big creature; you don't know where it ends." A bit like your paintings, I propose. "Yes," she laughs.

PREVIOUS PAGE Penny Siopis

TOP LEFT *Charmed Lives* (2014), Installation of found objects. ON FAR RIGHT *Baby and the Bathwater* (1992) Oil, collage, marble, steel and photographs on board

MIDDLE *Quake* (2010), Ink and glue on canvas.

BELOW *Sculptures installation – Pinky Comes to Cape Town* (Castle of Good Hope 2007), Reconfiguration 2014; Wire, beads and found objects