



The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent (Triptych). 1998. a) Oil on board – 166 x 122cm. b) Sculpture – 200 x 70 x 45cm. c) Oil on canvas – 190 x 160cm. Collection: Constitutional Court

Among these works is one which Justice Albie Sachs considers to be “one of the great pieces of art in the world of the late 20th century”:

The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent (1998). A triptych,

the piece was inspired by two stories Mason heard on the radio at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) hearings. They told of the execution of two liberation movement cadres by the security police. One was Harold Sefola, who as Mason relates, “asked permission to sing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*” before he was electrocuted; the other was Phila Ndwandwe, “who was tortured and kept naked for ten days” and then assassinated in a kneeling position. As the TRC found, before Ndwandwe was killed, she “fashioned a pair of panties for herself out of a scrap of blue plastic.” This moved Mason to make a dress of blue plastic bags, inscribed with text beginning: “Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armour of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood, and against powers, against the rulers of darkness ...” This piece forms the centrepiece of the triptych.

While Mason’s pieces are sometimes imbued with lyrical and poetic overtones, and sometimes informed by the poetry of Christopher Smart and Wilfred Owen, another important feature of her work is what van Rensburg describes as “the synthesis she establishes between beauty and ugliness in each of her artworks: a beautifully drawn or painted face often gives way to a gaping, snarling monster ... The beauty/ ugliness, or abjection, dichotomy in Mason’s work is no other than an expression of how awful pain is.”

As a retrospective exhibition, *A prospect of icons* covers the expanse of Mason’s oeuvre and is a testimony to a lifetime with art. It includes paintings, drawings and installations, such as *Walking with and away from Dante* (2006–7) and *Tombs of the Pharaohs of Johannesburg* (1987), with its mine dumps as pyramids and mineshafts as tombs.

The show also includes her books, such as *A Dante’s Bestiary* (1989) and *The Fish Hoek Reader* (1992) in which she has erased the original printed texts and retained, or invented, all sorts of marginalia that readers often make or scribble in books.



The Fish Hoek Reader. 1992. Paper and mixed media. 21,8cm high. Collection: Jack Ginsberg

It is a book of, to quote from the title page, “the graffiti, addenda, marks of dubious origin found in public library books in the Southern Cape Peninsula, and reproduced here in facsimile.”

Accounting for why some people make art, Mason has remarked that “One reason is that it is delightful to forever seek the Holy Grail, even if it turns out to be a grotty old cup when we’ve done making it. Disfigured as most artists are by self-doubt, we all believe that it is within our power to create a perfect work. This is an effective recipe for keeping our demons at bay, and when our work is good it has the power to keep other people’s demons at bay.” On the same topic, she has scoffed at, and dismissed outright, “Freud’s assumption that [artists] do so because they desire riches, fame and the love of women ...” “There are,” she says, “many more reliable ways of achieving these really rather adolescent goals.”

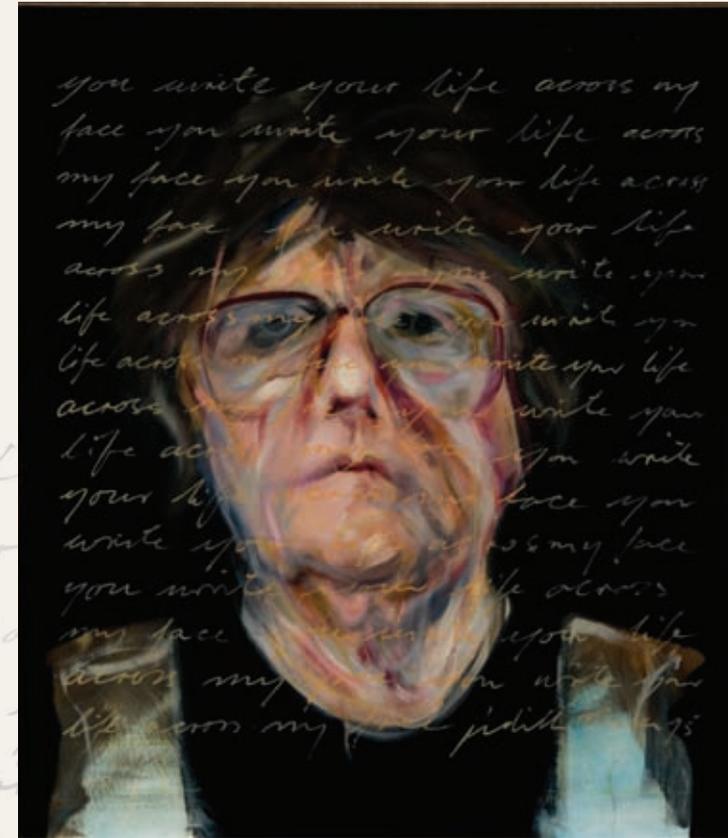
But Mason has also said, “All the arts are forms of play.” A great deal has been written about the creative process, about the pathology which may or may not underline the need to turn play into a way of life and a means of communication.” *A prospect of icons* shows the fruits of her play.

About Judith Mason

One of the most important figures in South African art for a number of decades, Judith Mason was born in 1938. She studied at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), obtaining a BA in Fine Arts in 1960. She taught painting at Wits and also occasionally at other institutions on a temporary basis, such as the University of Pretoria, the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town, and Scoula Lorenzo de Medici in Florence, Italy. She has been an external examiner at a number of South African universities; has exhibited frequently since 1962; and is represented in all major public collections in South Africa, as well as private and public collections in Europe and the USA. She represented South Africa at the Venice Biennale in 1966, at the São Paulo Biennale in 1973.

Apart from producing a large body of paintings over the decades, which have made her one of the stars of the South African art galaxy, Mason has also published her work in books, sometimes in collaboration with poets. Publications include ‘A Dante Bestiary’, with Ted Townsend, (ombondi editions, New York, 1990) (a mixed-media portfolio); ‘Selected poems’ by Patrick Cullinan (The Artist’s Press, 1993) (lithographs); and ‘Talking pictures’ (essays published in 1988 by the Broederstroom press).

JUDITH MASON:



a prospect of icons

Standard Bank Gallery
3 October – 6 December 2008



Not being able to Paint. 1992. Oil on canvas. Collection: Johan and Gardiol Bergenthuin

A prospect of icons, Judith Mason's retrospective exhibition at Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg opens on 3 October, running until 6 December 2008.

The title of Mason's show is drawn from her essay in a book dedicated to Heather Martienssen by her former students and colleagues. In her essay Mason reflects on the use of religious imagery in painting, a cornerstone of her own work, particularly in regard to Christianity and eastern religions.

Mason, "an agnostic humanist possessed of religious curiosity," as she puts it, once commented that "... the bulk of Judeo-Christian thought is part of our culture, even if ... the Russian Revolution has superseded it and will in time assume its own mythical proportions. The Judeo-Christian myths are instinct with drama, and time has eroded them into skeletons which can be clothed in a richer fabric than orthodoxy. The painter of religious themes, whether he does so as a reflection of his faith or as an exploration of his doubts, makes icons."

According to the curator of the show, Wilhelm van Rensburg, "A prospect of icons is in a sense an inventory of her icons. The list vacillates between a painterly exploration of conventional, if not collective iconography to the development of a highly personal iconography ..."



Christ at the Column. 1965. Oil, paint, wire and cloth on board. Height: 123,2cm. Length: 93cm. Width: 2cm. Collection: University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries



Self Portrait as my own Ventriloquist. 1996. Oil on board. 150 x 120cm. Collection: Mrs Jill Wentzel



Arachne. 1996. Oil on board. 123 x 120cm with web extending 79cm below. Collection: Mr Barry Mortimer

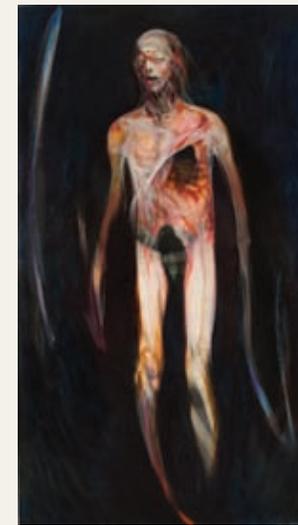
While Mason's work draws extensively on religion, it is also informed by her exploration of mythological figures and creatures such as the Minotaur and Arachne, the spider symbol of creativity and aggressiveness that features in a number of her works, among them *Arachne* (1996). "Mason," says van Rensburg, "chooses many such like creatures as the leopard to which she adds the image of the hyena, the ape, the monkey, perhaps to symbolise our baser instincts ...". "She also," van Rensburg continues, "works with the image of the phoenix to suggest the eternal capacity of human beings to reinvent themselves."



Leopard of Delight. 1965. Oil on board. 91,5 x 144cm. Collection: The Pretoria Art Museum



Wild Dog. 1962. Oil on board. 91 x 123cm. Collection: The Pretoria Art Museum



Shiva Slowing Down. 1983. Oil on canvas. 170 x 98cm. Collection: Jack Ginsberg

As van Rensburg notes, this personal iconography includes her many self-portraits made throughout her artistic career, such as *Self portrait as my own Ventriloquist* (1996) and *Not being able to Paint* (1992); and recurrent and ambiguous symbols, such as the wing, the eye, the heart, the female breast, the plait of hair, puppet strings, the wire mesh, the under-vest, the shred of cloth, or simply the artist's fingerprint. These symbols are widely used in what van Rensburg calls Mason's "trajectory suite of religious iconography," which includes paintings such as *The Plague* (1980), *Pieta* (2003) and *Judas* (1996).

These creatures are represented in works like *Wild Dog* (1962), *Leopard of Delight* (1965) and *Leopard's Breath* (1971). Mason's work is often understood as having 'psychological insight' into her subject matter. Van Rensburg's view here is that "it can be argued that Mason's 'psychological insight' might be detected in her concern

with the bodily drives in relation to life and death in her work, or suggested in notions of the damaged body, in a fascination with trauma, both personal and collective, reinforced by her interest in the 'abject' body. Equally strongly it can be argued that Mason paints an 'exulted' body, and it is in this paradox that the genius of Mason's work resides."

Mason has a clear-cut view on the role of art as a political tool: "... I have no doubt that one telegram which arrives at its destination is politically more effective than ten radical pictures on a gallery wall. People who attempt to prescribe to artists with regard to their social or political role make me very sad and deeply suspicious, whether they are the aesthetic arbitrators of the Third Reich or the spokesmen of the liberation movements. They seem to want copywriters who masquerade as artists. Artists do what they are driven to do, copywriters serve their clients. Each role has value but they must not become confused."

Nevertheless Mason's work does reflect on such iconic socio-political issues as the homeless, street children, HIV/Aids, abortion, war mongering and the politics of conifer under apartheid.



Leopard's Breath. 1971. Oil on canvas, bone. 91,5 x 122cm. Collection: UNISA Permanent Collection