

DIANE VICTOR

During the last few years Diane Victor has established a strong presence among South African artists. At this relatively early stage of her career she already has a considerable list of exhibitions behind her name, and her works are represented in most of the major public collections in South Africa. Her sometimes macabre drawings of physical, sexual and psychological violence, the powerful quality of her drawings and graphics, and her consistently high level of technical excellence are well known, and have warranted her acclaim and recognition.

By the time that she completed her Fine Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1986, Victor had won a number of art awards and bursaries. In 1988 she won the Volkskas Atelier award, which afforded her a visit of ten months to Paris.

This article, based on an interview with the artist, reviews salient characteristics in her work from the time of her Parisian visit.

Early narrative works done in France

During her stay in Paris, Victor participated in various exhibitions there as well as in England, Germany and Monte Carlo. Her work from this period has a strong narrative trend, and shows a growing interest in eclectic content.

The large triptych *Looking for Arcadia Again*, now in the collection of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, was originally exhibited at the Cité International in Paris. The drawing reflects her strong reaction to the environment and the circumstances she experienced at the beginning of her stay in Paris. It contains direct references to the actual location of the Ile de la Cité, the Notre Dame, the Jewish Memorial on the island, interspersed with references to historical aspects of Paris. The figure in the first panel is based on a combination of literary references and personal observation.

*For the first few months at the Cité I felt that I had been relegated to the realm of the tourist. The first panel of **Looking for Arcadia Again** deals with tourists and the consumption of tourism. The character in the drawing is a voyeur who walks through Paris, this city with its immense history. He is partially based on the alienated tourists who wander around with their multiple zoom lens cameras, always taking pictures. They too are voyeurs with a consuming approach to everything, from quaint souvenirs and holy pictures to sacred places of history such as the Jewish Memorial in this instance.*

*The ironic title **Looking for Arcadia Again** exposes the way that the violent nature of an historical event is forgotten once it becomes merely a tourist attraction. It also exposes the pretence of trying to go back to a time before events occurred, as if they did not happen. People always forget what they do not like.*



Looking for Arcadia Again. 1st panel. 1989. Charcoal and pastel. 150 x 200 cm. Collection of the Johannesburg Art Gallery



Sweet Liberty Gone to Fat. 1989. Etching and mezzotint. 39,5 x 24 cm. Courtesy of the artist

The main figure in my drawing is partially based on a character from a John Irving novel that I was reading. In **Setting Free the Bears**, Irving describes a military man who did nasty things, small bizarre tortures, to animals in a zoo. One day when walking through the streets of Paris, I saw a man whose face was similar to the way I had visualised the face of the character from this novel. The man had these amazing sunken cheekbones. It looked as if his face had been damaged a long time ago and that the flesh had still not quite covered it. I followed this person for some distance down the street trying to get a better look at him. It was like tracking down your own drawing.

The etching *Sweet Liberty Gone to Fat* was produced for the Triad Graphics exhibition in Paris, which formed part of the bicentenary commemoration of the French Revolution. It incorporates eclectic content to emphasize the dehumanizing tragedy of the celebratory theme and Victor says it was her way of responding to the celebration of the Revolution.

Just like any media hype, the bicentenary celebration of the French Revolution became a bit much. You could not cross the road without having it rammed down your throat. It was approached like a big advertising campaign. They reduced the idea of cutting off people's heads to a caricature or cartoon level. One could buy a packet of sugar, and along with it you would get a little picture of Marianne - who is one of the symbolic heroines of France - running around with the guillotine in the background. Various adverts on French television at the time adopted a caricatured version of the image of the guillotine and phrased everything in terms of losing your head. It was done in quite a light manner, but I found it problematic that they should reduce something of this nature to fun. Literally

losing one's head is a bloody, messy process. Coming from a country, where at that time, a similar if slightly less official 'revolution' was taking place, I wondered if particular execution methods like our own 'necklacing' would one day be reduced to sales hype.

In the work, Victor also draws on Delacroix's depiction of the 1830 July Revolution, an uprising against the reactionary Bourbon dynasty which had been restored in 1815.

My etching is a direct reference to Delacroix's **Liberty Leading the People** in the Louvre. I have subsequently used Delacroix's figure of Liberty in several works. She is a variation of the French heroine Marianne. She is also symbolically related to the biblical figure of Judith, another seducer and destroyer who decapitated Holofernes.

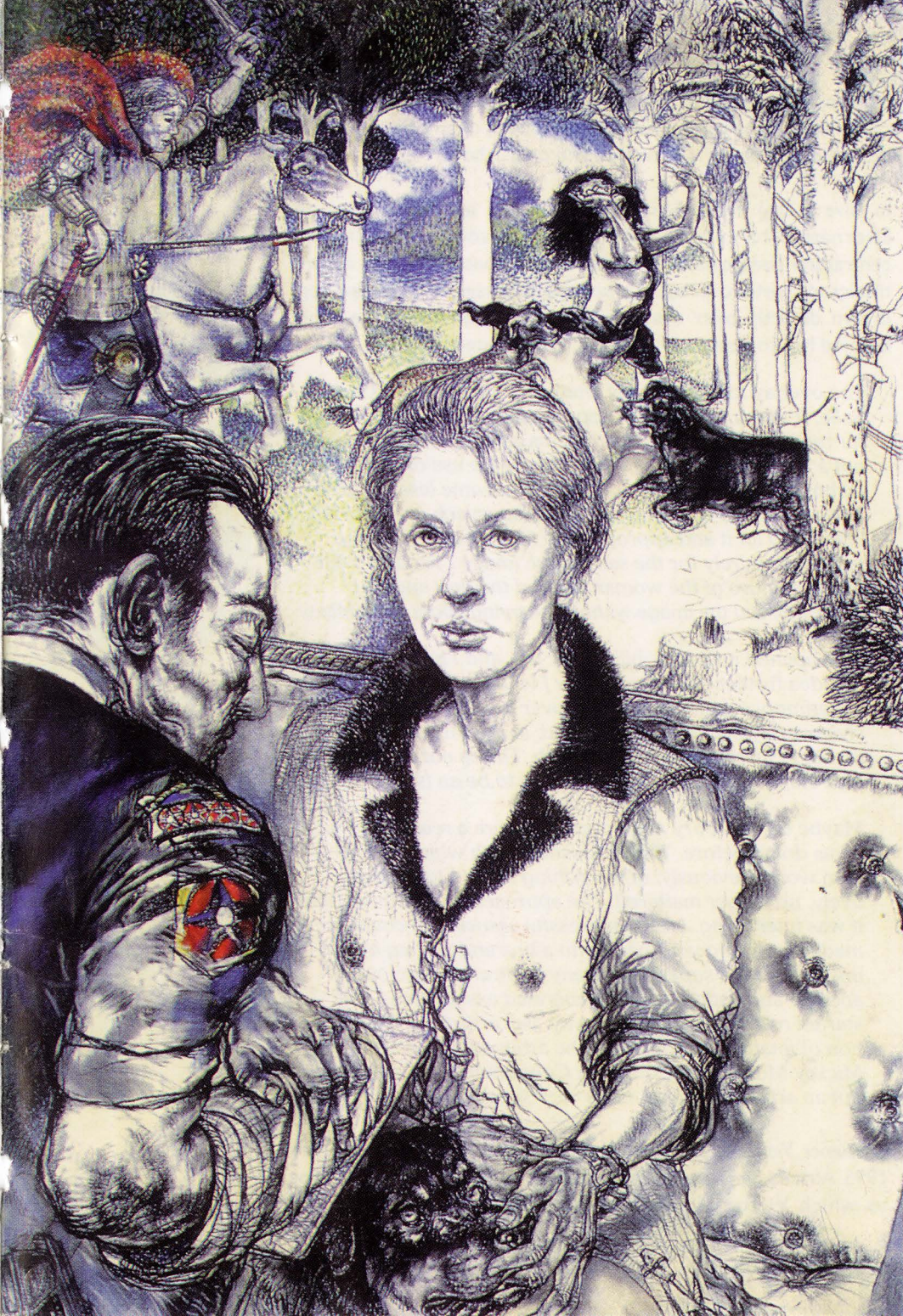
I find it very interesting that Delacroix depicts Liberty bare-breasted. I know that there are many traditional historical



reasons why and that most people probably don't even notice the nudity. Still, when a semi-naked woman - therefore a sexually available woman - is seen in a context of such violence, I question it. Obviously sexuality and violence are often used in conjunction

with each other, but in Delacroix's **Liberty** this combination is just so direct that, for me, it becomes romanticised and the violence is negated.

I knew that viewers at the exhibition would see the etching in the context of the celebrations and that they would not be able to not



I was specifically trying to get French viewers to see beyond those aspects of the celebrations which reduced atrocities to a humorous level.

The narrative image reaches its zenith

After her return from France, Victor participated in various group shows nationally and held a number of solo exhibitions. Particularly significant of these was her first exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg in 1992, where she exhibited *Nastagio*, *Degli Onesti*, and *Other Difficult Decisions* as one of the main works. The panel from this triptych reproduced here, is an example where she combines eclectic sources with references to everyday life.

Animals, for a long time a recurring theme in her work, once again resume a presence in this and other drawings. Diane worked for a veterinarian at the time, and the images of dogs, the operating table and other objects from the veterinary context often appear in her work.

In *Nastagio*, she continued to explore the narrative image and the possibilities it allows for complex cross-referencing. She adopts images from a Botticelli painting for the background of the drawing. The process of combining historical content with contemporary issues and aspects of her immediate environment resulted in a complex drawing with tightly woven references.

Images obviously cross-reference all the time without my intentional planning. I think my brain is well sourced, it does its own thing and I just do the drawing. I consume images - often not intentionally - but with the desire to understand how they work. They all play a huge part in my art-making because I mostly work from visual memory.

When circumstances allow, I work under the sort of sleep deprivation and intensity where my brain - as a coping strategy - suddenly starts simplifying and sorting elements. This enables a level of almost automatic interlinking of ideas and images to take place. This exhausted state of concentration also allows me to make changes and associations against which I would normally have too many resistances.

At the time Victor felt that her works for the Goodman exhibition had reached the most thorough level of narratively knitted images containing involved layers of multiple meanings. In a press review, however, art critic Hazel Friedman (1992) delivered a harsh and negative commentary on the complexity and excessive layering of the work on the exhibition, labelling it an aspect of self-indulgence.



I appreciated the criticism, because I was not getting feedback from anyone else, and I considered her criticism very carefully. Initially, I did not like to consider pulling away from what I was enjoying - probably a very good sign that I had become too comfortable with what I was doing. Nevertheless, I started to look at my own work, thinking that it possibly needed careful editing. I needed to make more choices. I needed to select and focus on things, rather than allowing everything in.

Simplification and formal change

Towards the end of 1992, significant changes began to show in Victor's work, particularly on a formal level. Her work from this period begins to display an exploration of different approaches to narrative content. She describes a process of grappling with an experimental exploration of alternative formal approaches, while trying to retain her own particular vision.

The drawing *The Undertaker* shows the initial simplification of her compositions. She explains that she attempted to limit the symbolical content of the drawing. Instead of complex inter-linking, she subdivides the format of the drawing

into opposing upper and lower halves. This helps to focus on the cross-associations between the nakedness of the figure below the table, and his formal manner and dress above.

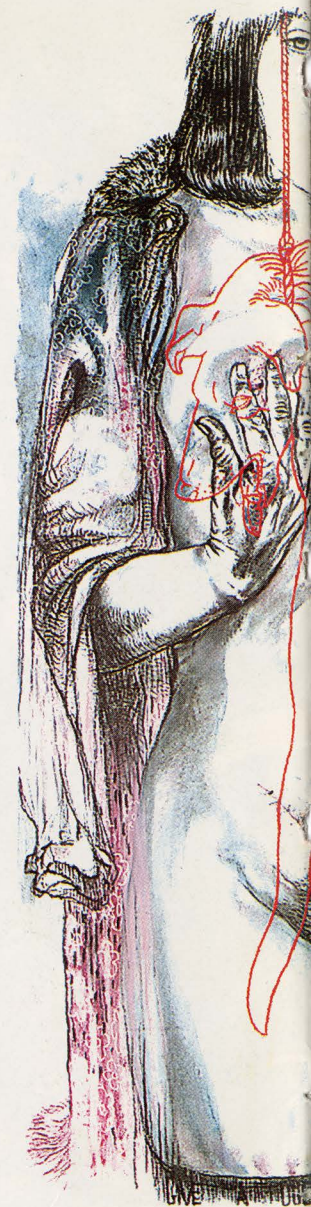
In *Give a Dog a Bad Name* contradiction again serves as an alternative to narrative content. She adopts a decidedly centralised composition that she then deconstructs with a contradictory pastel overlay of a newspaper image of a hanged dog, drawn directly over the original drawing of the figure. This enabled her to retain her use of eclectic content.

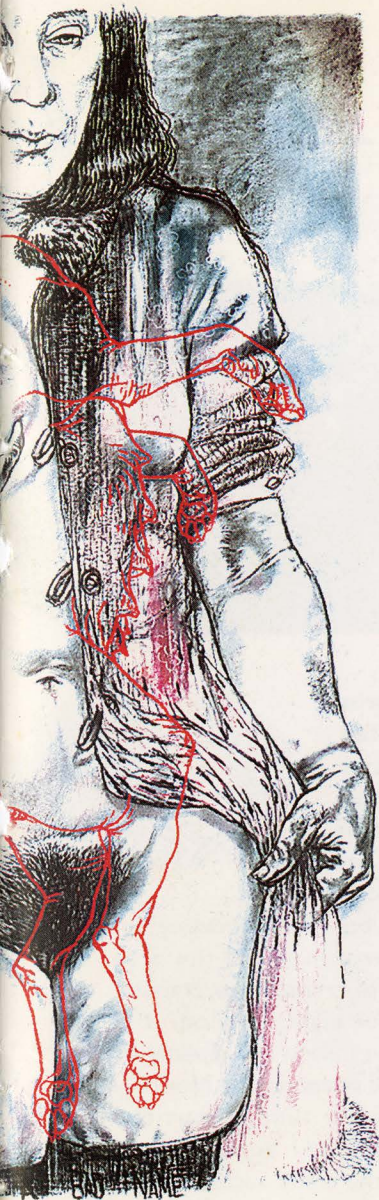
The overlay technique was lifted very clearly from David Salle. It was a new way of approaching eclectic elements for me. The idea of adding that image over the figure was not a derivative comment, but merely the use of an old technique. At that point it started to become less problematic for me to use someone else's approach so obviously, literally to lift it and appropriate it for myself. I used the technique purely for the sake of the image I wanted. I felt that the figure of the woman needed the dog and so I superimposed the image without worrying about authenticity.

This opened new possibilities for me, and I have developed the idea further since then. Now I will take an image and superimpose multiple overlays over it so that each successive overlay becomes fragmented, at the same time breaking up the image underneath. This is not an original idea either, but I don't consider that to be an issue.

*Maybe the arbitrary and accidental were a reaction to what I was doing before. The seriousness with which I took my own work previously, of everything having to fit narratively, no longer mattered. The approach was different and it was interesting. I felt a successful association could be made by putting your hand into a box and pulling out an image - I could superimpose any arbitrary image over another and suddenly they generated associations and started relating in their own way. Nevertheless, the adoption of images cannot always be arbitrary. Superimposing Mickey Mouse in the drawing *Consumer Violence* was not an arbitrary choice, but a very specific one.*

Consumer Violence, exhibited at the 'Edge' on the fringe off the 1995 Africus Biennale in Johannesburg, demonstrates the extent to which Victor attempts to innovate, while retaining the





Give a Dog a Bad Name.
1994. Pastel and charcoal
on paper. 150 x 100 cm.
Collection André Naudé

interests, content and critical social awareness that has motivated so many of her previous works.

*My drawings have moved away from the narrative. Still, I have not yet - and I do not know if I ever will - removed myself from some form of social criticism. The first panel of **Consumer Violence** portrays the traditional stereotype of the crouching, tortured figure with a sack over his head. The superimposition of a Mickey Mouse and the combination of these images, results for me personally in a social comment on the current saleability of the violent image. Whether it be in media coverage, cinema entertainment and even in the production of art works, the more blood and trauma or implied violence, the more marketable.*

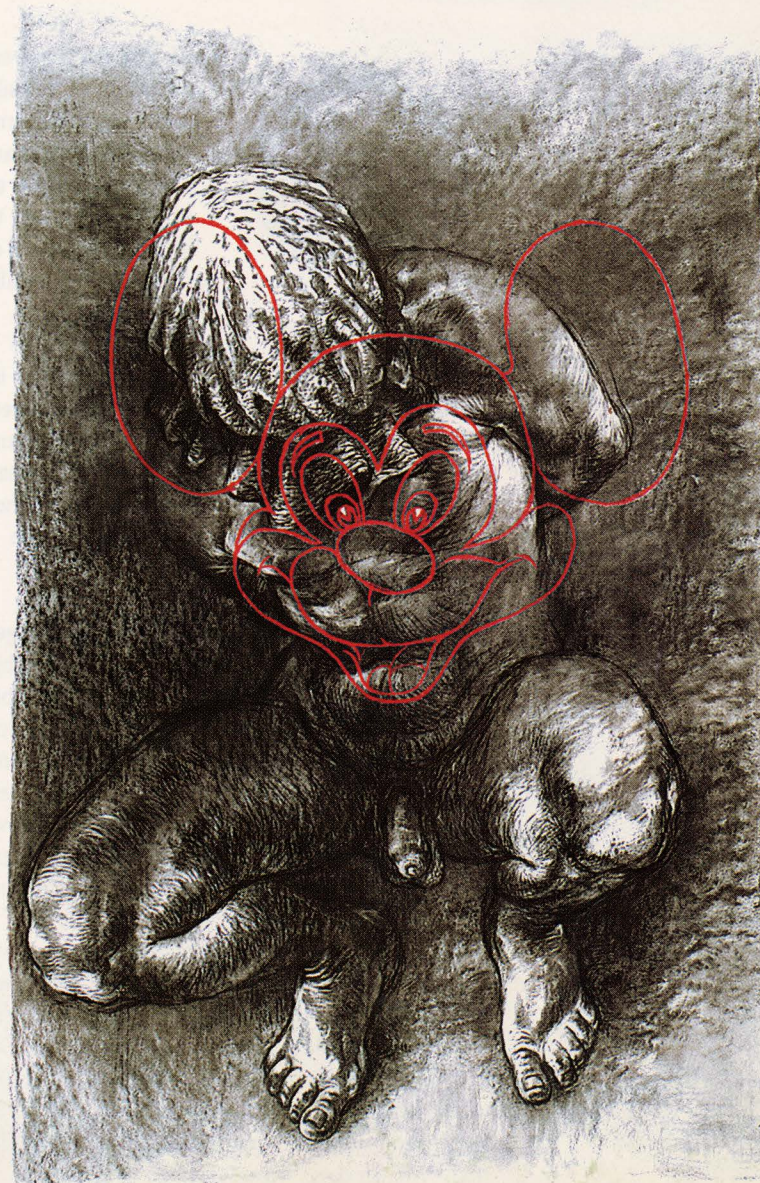
Although I am starting to work with far more simplified elements, I cannot leave issues that anger or upset me alone. They are still part of my range of choices and an element of my social conscience - although I'm aware that this is potentially an awful cliché as well - that wants almost to rattle people or make them take one step beyond their comfort zone. I do not intend to improve society but only to make people think slightly. That's what I was trying to do even in Paris.

In this country, now that suddenly we are in a new society, and everything is wow whoopee Rainbow Nation, we are still slaughtering people. Perhaps it does not happen at the same rate as it did before, and perhaps it is almost too easily forgotten. Yet one can still switch on the radio, and hear that they killed twenty people in Kwazulu-Natal or five were necklaced or stoned. Nothing seems to change, no-one responds unless they are affected personally, and people still forget what they do not like.

*My technical approach may have changed, but my drawings are always a personal, if critical response to my surroundings. **Consumer Violence** is an attempt to experiment with arbitrary visual images, without sacrificing content. Social commentary seems to remain a recurring characteristic of my work, no matter how hard I try to escape it.*

References

- Friedman, H. 1992. Hodgins a master at more from less. *The Star Tonight!* 8 September.
Victor, D. 1995. A personal interview. Pretoria. April 1995.



Consumer Violence. 1st panel. 1995. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 150 x 86 cm. Courtesy of the artist