

ENTERTAINMENT



Yesterday is one of the artworks from Michele Silk's series, New Eve, which looks at selfies.

SA artist's twist on selfies

By Mary Corrigan Aug 4, 2017

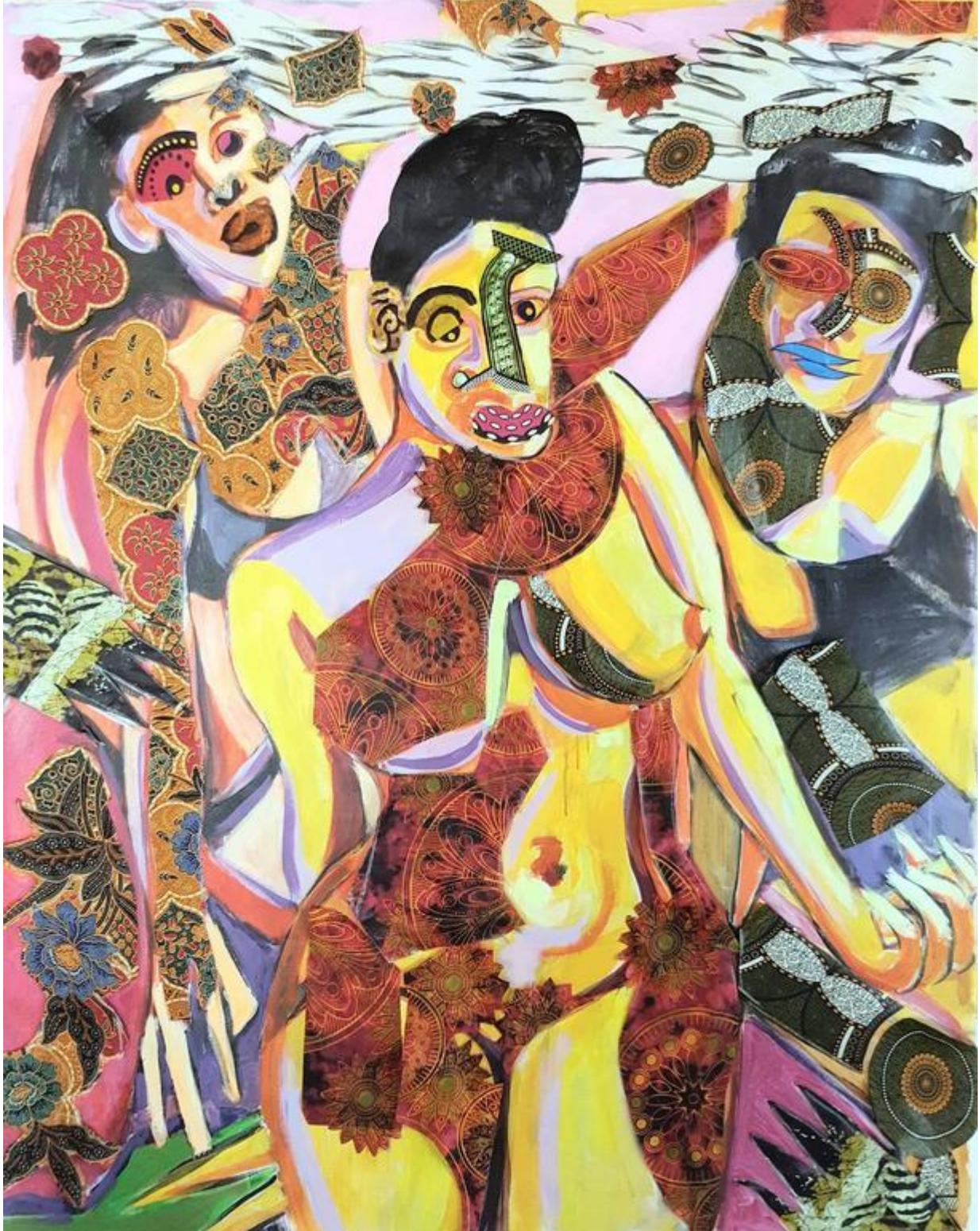
Michele Silk is fixated with selfie culture on Instagram. She isn't alone. Part of its allure is being witness to that seemingly private moment when an individual creates and appraises their own image.

The underlying narcissism and vanity driving this endless stream of selfies may have become tiresome, but as an artist interested in portraiture, Silk exploited this instant form of self-portraiture as the basis for a series of artworks dubbed New Eve.

Unlike the Eve from a bygone biblical era, who covers her body and is ashamed of her ability to seduce with it, Silk's female figures exude self-love. The title of the works *Selfie-Assured* and *I Ain't Sorry*, express the attitude she is interested in capturing. Her subjects are young black women who have used the selfie medium to revel in their beauty and self-confidence.

Some, such as Lady Skollie, are artists too, who in a way have become intoxicated by their self-image. Silk has a positive take on the culture, believes it is part of women's liberation from beauty norms. "They are celebrating within themselves and taking control of their lives no matter what they look like. I don't think they are fitting into a certain way of looking," she observes.

Her race, age and background has in some ways been at odds with her subject-matter and has attracted criticism on social media. Perhaps the young women that inspire her are annoyed that someone else is “rewriting” images they have so carefully crafted and claimed ownership of. Silk doesn’t rework the photographic material - she uses them as references for paintings.



Changing Faces, a work from Michele Silk’s series, New Eve. Picture: Supplied

She collages African printed fabrics into her illustrative-like paintings and fuses them with influences from the Western-art canon, drawing from the likes of Gauguin to Picasso.

The art of the Durban-based Andrew Vester also comes to mind, when you consider the heavily patterned bodies that dominate Silk's recent work. Picasso's famous *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* is evoked via the work, *Changing Faces*, which presents three female figures with angular, cubist-style faces, which are partially abstracted via printed fabric collaged pieces.

"I wanted to focus on women but wanted to put it in an African context. For me, the most obvious and great way to do it would be by using fabrics because fabrics are such a reflection of a culture and I love African fabrics, it is a wonderful way to express the content of a culture."

Growing up in Zimbabwe meant she had limited access to a proper, formal art education and viewing contemporary or even historical art. "There was no exposure to contemporary art. We bought books about art theory and we learnt what we could but I think I would have progressed a lot faster with (more) exposure (to art)."

A correspondence course in art through Unisa broke her isolation. Leaving Zimbabwe and resettling in South Africa in the mid-1990s didn't exactly deliver her into the bosom of the local art world. In KwaZulu-Natal she found herself adrift from art centres in Joburg and Cape Town and raising four children meant she had to put her artistic ambitions on the back burner. It is easy to conclude these events compelled her interest in the selfies of young confident black women, who are seemingly in control of their lives and bodies.

When she picked up painting and studying art again she produced portraits of overlooked people. Her last exhibition at the Art Eye gallery in Joburg, *Shadows in Time*, featured pensioners. She hadn't paid much attention to this demographic until her mother became frail, moved into a cottage on her property and opened her eyes to the ways into which this population move invisibly through our society.

For a while she painted portraits of the cashiers at her local Spar, who caught her eye before she started to take an interest in pensioners who roamed the shop on Tuesdays - pensioner's days.

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"I would just walk around and sneakily take these photographs. I got some amazing photos of old people because I felt connected. I felt such empathy for them, as if I was on a journey with them," she says.

As with her rendering of young selfie-addicts, her focus was on a "celebration of their existence". *The Swing after Fragonard* presents a frail, knobby person in a swing. In other words: an old person refusing to let go of their carefree youth.

Like the young women fixated with snapping themselves, Silk is constantly changing her focus and position in her art. She is currently looking at ways of combining fabrics and patterns connected to her Scottish heritage into her collaged portraits.

* *Silk's art is on exhibit at Art Eye Gallery in Joburg. Visit: www.arteye.co.za.*

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