

Masking The Art

From cartoon characters with human teeth to BDSM imagery and hidden prison tattoos, Kayf's art explores masks, compulsion and chosen captivity. The self-taught artist speaks to Oliver Roberts about solitude, weirdness and the strange freedom of obsession.

Between 2pm and 4pm on any given day, you'll find her pedalling her stationary bike. The room is thick with incense, cannabis and techno music. In front of her, caught in a shaft of sunlight, are five artworks in progress: two canvases, two photo prints, and a mask. Now and then, she leans over to write something in the notebook beside her.

"There's a thread between all five pieces," she says. "I start with a mask, and that sets the tone for everything else in the series."

Mask. The word surfaces often in our conversations. It recurs throughout her work too, sometimes literally, sometimes in suggestion. Even the artist's name is a mask: Kayf, Zimbabwean slang for 'fake'.

"It comes from the struggle of being self-taught," she says of the name. "I never felt like a real artist, so I'll become the thing I fear most: fake."

The doubt seems absent in those around her. Tyrone Salmon, owner of Art Eye Gallery, which sells Kayf's art, believes she could emerge as the voice of a new generation. He says people walk into the gallery and instantly become "besotted" with her work.

When Salmon says this, the three of us are standing in the gallery admiring one of her pieces, and Kayf recoils slightly, almost shy. She lets out a laugh I became familiar with over the time I spent with her: three or four quick ha's, then a long inhale.

Kayf's work moves constantly between playfulness and unease. One moment you're looking at versions of Pink Panther or Garfield fitted with human teeth, one of them gold. The next, vintage pornography prints populated by cartoon characters watching from the margins or joining in. Kermit and Miss Piggy stand flanked by two women in BDSM latex suits. A Powerpuff Girl wearing a strap-on penetrates another from behind. Two stylised Furbys wielding anime-inspired wands as sex toys.

The cartoon motif is a nod to nostalgia. "Childhood was an easier time," she says. But the collision between innocence and something darker gives the work an unsettling charge. There's

humour to it, certainly, but in some pieces the characters appear trapped inside the frame against their will, doe eyes and exaggerated smiles stretched over something closer to hurt, confusion.

But Kayf insists the work is not about a loss of innocence.

A handful of times, she has visited a members-only sex club. When I ask whether it was for research or simple curiosity, she breaks into that familiar laugh.

“I wanted to see, like...”

She pauses, pulls a tin from her pocket, and places a nicotine pouch on her tongue.

“I went on the regular hardcore BDSM nights. You can lie in a coffin, try out the latex masks, get stepped on, or have someone run knives across your back. I tried all of it. No one was sad. No one was getting humiliated, unless they wanted to.”

Art as Sensory Experience

Time: 14:00-16:00 (Sunny day preferably)

Scent: Myrrh

Sound: Techno (High BPM, Hypnotic)

Turn over some of Kayf’s canvases and you’ll find instructions on how best to experience them. She wants the work to function as a kind of synaesthetic encounter, mirroring the conditions under which many of her pieces are created.

She begins with a mask, whose look and feel set the tone for everything that follows. The music she listens to, the scents she burns, shape the colours and imagery that emerge. Gradually, the five works settle into an odd coherence, one you only really recognise once you stop looking and begin feeling instead.

Despite the attention her work attracts in the Fourways gallery, Kayf senses a certain hesitation among local viewers, as though they are circling the work rather than stepping fully inside it. For a period, she sold her pieces through a US-based online platform instead.

“Americans are more open to the weirdness of my art,” she says. “South Africans need to be coaxed. They tend to prefer more abstract art; they’re used to what they understand.”

In many ways, this tension feels central to the importance of Kayf’s work. South African art is often expected to arrive neatly categorised: politically legible, aesthetically familiar, easily

located within existing narratives around race, identity or the continent itself. Kayf resists this instinctively. Born to a Ukrainian mother and Zimbabwean father, her work occupies a far more unstable terrain, one shaped as much by internet culture, rave aesthetics and global image overload as by geography or tradition.

Yet this refusal to fit neatly inside expectation may be precisely what gives the work its contemporary relevance. The masks, exaggerated smiles and cartoon avatars that recur throughout her pieces feel less like escapism than defence mechanisms: ways of protecting oneself within a world increasingly built around performance, visibility and constant perception.

Kayf herself seems to shift in and out of focus in much the same way as her work. One minute she appears shy; the next she's telling you, unprompted, about being cut with knives at a sex club. Her body is covered with tattoos of cartoon characters dancing happily next to phrases like "Loser" and "Up all night with demons to fight". What I first mistake for dimples turns out to be scars from piercings.

Growing up in Zimbabwe, she struggled to make friends as a child. "I was weird," she says. She spent long afternoons at the local library instead, reading and drawing on scraps of paper. She collected objects from the ground as she walked home: rocks, leaves, bones, twigs.

Somewhere in this solitary world she also learned to sew, a skill she now uses to create her masks.

"It was normal in Soviet Ukraine to sew your own clothes, so my mum made ours when we were kids," she recalls. "It definitely made it harder to fit in, but I loved playing with fabrics."

There's a level of technical precision running through the work that feels increasingly rare within contemporary art's drift toward gesture and abstraction. As well as the hand-stitched masks, Kayf's canvases show layers of paint, varnish, collage and texture built slowly and deliberately. Even the most chaotic pieces reveal an obsessive attention to detail up close, hidden symbols and surfaces embedded carefully beneath the noise.

Web of Compulsion

The first time we meet, in Melville, the morning is overcast. There's a chill in the air, the smell of soil waiting for rain. Before I leave the house, Kayf messages me: "Do you have a fuzzy hat? I spend all my time in headphones so my ears don't really like the cold."

Later, as we walk the streets browsing thrift stores and stopping to buy incense, I suggest the drizzle and dull light seem like perfect conditions to stay inside and make art. But I've forgotten one important detail.

"When it's overcast or raining, the paint takes too long to dry," she says. "I get impatient because I constantly want to paint."

Even with South Africa's unreasonable abundance of sunny days, Kayf uses heating mats designed for reptiles to speed up the drying process. Before discovering the mats, she says, she would smudge paintings simply because she couldn't wait long enough for them to dry.

Watching her describe it, I'm reminded less of discipline than compulsion.

Back at the gallery, we stand in front of a painting of a tiger. Look closely and you'll see its fur is covered in tattoos. One shows a chain snapping around a thick neck. Another, a candy ring of the kind Kayf used to buy from a shop in Bulawayo. On the tiger's elbow, a spiderweb: a prison tattoo worn to mark years spent behind bars.

Kayf talks about her love of texture, and the trick of hiding things inside a painting. To me, they feel like rewards, or messages, intended for the person willing to step a little closer to the work.

We return to the spiderweb, and from there drift into a conversation about time, purpose, and the things that hold us captive. For better or worse.

"I spend so much time alone painting that it feels like a life sentence," she says. "But it's one I chose. I'm happy to serve it."

Kayf's work can be viewed at Art Eye Gallery, Dainfern Square, Fourways. art@arteye.co.za