

The fightback of an escape artist

Diane Victor talks to **Oliver Roberts** about death, acting under mirrors and the reasons for making her angry art

FOR someone who knows she may not be alive this time next year, Diane Victor is very light, light in her demeanor and light in her physicality.

This is unusual for all the obvious reasons, but it is also unusual for reasons specific to the artist herself.

Anyone familiar with Victor's work will tell you that it is not light at all. It is black and gloomy, hostile and sneering.

Some of it — such as two babies sucking the teats of a hyena (*Romulus and Remus*) or a limbless man on a horse (*Inglorious Bastards: Armless*) — is even repulsive. If you take any piece from the past 20 years and hold it up to a bare light bulb, the room will become pitch black.

Better yet, go to one of her exhibitions and witness the complete shock on people's faces when they stand before a representation of a vulture penetrating a woman (*Leda and the White-backed Vulture*).

Today, a Monday, both Victor's kidneys are operating at 8% of their capacity. After months of testing, she has found someone whose fresher, healthier kidney is most likely to fit into her body. He is the boyfriend of a friend. She was due to have had the transplant last month, but red tape pushed it further along. Now it is set for March.

If the operation does not work — if her body decides to attack the very thing trying to rescue it — the artist, 46, will die.

Yet here in her studio at the University of Pretoria, with a beautiful radiance smashing in through the windows and the thrilling promise of a Highveld thunderstorm bobbing into view, Victor's manner is easy. She sings a little when she talks. She laughs wittily when she makes a cynical aside.

And then there is that huge mound of ginger-blond hair — all puffed out and deformed to match artist perfection — that responds to her moods and thoughts.

Victor seems alive and well, which is odd because she is barely either.

"My blood is now like sewerage. Sewage?" she says.

"If I get a slight cut, it takes forever to heal. Kidneys also help with the production of haemoglobin, so, as someone who used to be fairly physically active — running, horse riding, mountain climbing — it's hard because I can't f***ing breathe anymore. I can't get enough oxygen and I can't keep warm. I'm always freezing."

Although it has only been public knowledge for about a year, Victor has officially known about her condition for quite a bit longer than that. "I've known for about eight years but I just shut the f*** up."



LIFELINES: Diane Victor in her studio on campus at the University of Pretoria. She will undergo a kidney transplant next year in a bid to prolong her life

Picture: KEVIN SUTHERLAND

she says. Unofficially, she has known pretty much all her life because her father and her uncle both died of kidney failure. Blackened blood is simply in her genes.

"Initially I didn't tell anyone about my condition because I was aware of the fact that the second — well, people just see vultures circling around your head, and in

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the art world that's not always a good thing.

"Either you get this frenzied buying because people think 'Oh, she's going to die, let's get it now', or it's hands off — they drop you like a cold potato."

Vultures may have swooped, but Victor did not see many of them. Instead, several exhibitions have been held — of both her and other

artists' work — to help with the mounting medical bills. Victor says she has been overwhelmed by the response. Not so much because of the kindness of those in the art world, but because she is, notoriously and by her own admission, an insular human being.

"I'm not a people person at all," she says. "I'm someone who's actually quite antisocial on many levels. I'm not a very outgoing, friendly person."

"I'm not horrible, but the fact that people have come and been so generous and willing to help is always a really big surprise to me, genuinely."

If you have never been told you are going to die, it is hard to imagine what it must feel like.

From these half-ghosts we seek assurance, even hope, that the bleak prospect will transform us in our last days into tranquil, elevated beings. In her lightness Victor offers this, but she also offers a kind of dry-witted, unencored reality.

"It f***s your head up," she says. "You don't want to be told by someone very sweetly that you'll be dead by December. But I dealt with it by working."

"A lot of people say it's a very bad thing to do, but I always say that I'm an escape artist — I spend

my life avoiding reality. "Look, I can deal with a lot of things, but I use the art world as a place I can slip into as a way of escaping reality. In that world there are problems I can solve."

"If a drawing screws up or an etching is not working, I can solve that — I can still work hard and solve that. Plus, it's what makes me happy, gives me meaning."

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Victor is at work on her etchings for her *Bastards of Peace* series, which has been on the go for 10 years. Despite, or even because of her illness, Victor still maintains her ravenous work rate, often staying in her studio until dawn.

The spectre of death has certainly had an effect on her recent work, but not in a way you might think.

Her oeuvre is as solemn and portentous as it has always been, but two series in particular — her smoke drawings and her ash drawings — are significant for their fragility and impermanence. As a medium in these works, Victor has quite brilliantly used soot from a burning candle and the ashes of a subject's favourite book.

They are pieces that are incredibly difficult to handle and impossible to keep. They cannot be sealed in a very short time, the black soot and the ash will fall from the paper and be swept up by a broom, or feet, or some other gust of wind, and scattered, then absorbed into the earth.

"They are just ghosts, I'm just catching ghosts," says Victor. "You touch them, you kill them, you destroy them. It's like most people's lives."

In one way or another, Victor is always depicting herself.

After she has seen someone she wants to draw, she must over their most evocative attributes.

Then she spills them on a canvas. For the peripheries — details such as arms and legs — she uses her own. She has two mirrors strapped to the ceiling in her Johannesburg studio and she lies beneath them to make a different self.

"I can become anyone I want to be. I literally become the person I'm going to draw," she says. "It's very performative. It's almost method acting, which is why it's best for me to draw when I'm on my own because I probably look very silly."

"The whole process is subconscious, intuitive."

"I draw it out of myself so that it becomes a dialogue between me and the drawing. It's almost someone you're creating."

"My brain is like a sponge — the entire world gets absorbed and a bit of it drips out, but you don't necessarily know when it's going to."

About a year ago, at the Nirox sculpture garden in the Magaliesberg, I saw a woman in a black flowing skirt hopping nimbly about the place, studying all the works with intensity. I watched her from a distance because I found her demeanour — a forceful mishmash of sweetness and melancholy — enthralling and unsettling.

It was only a few months later, when I saw a photograph of Victor, that I realised whom I had been looking at.

Victor faces the same judgment that anyone born into difficult faces — their inwardness is very often mistaken for arrogance.

Before meeting her, I was forewarned by a number of people that Victor was difficult, unpleasant even.

I googled her and noted that there was really only one online photograph that captured her smiling. In the rest, she appeared serious and glum.

I did not know what to expect, especially at this time in her life. But immediately there was that lightness, and immediately there was that darkness. There was a shyness and a humour and a deep, silent spark.

And there was an anger, but the anger was not about her illness, about her dying. Instead, it was about the frustration, the loathing, the mistrust, it was all still funnelled into that part of Victor that might soon be made to leave the room for reasons beyond an offensive piece of art. And that, appropriately, is a very grim thought.

"My aim has always been to get people to question their own realities," says Victor, "because one of the things that frustrate me the most is indifference. It absolutely disgusts me, but a certainly the thing that I work against the most."

"I've learnt that if you rattle people too much you lose them — you get the 'ag nte' response. So you just do enough to get them upset. Even if they come up to you afterwards and say 'I really hated your drawing. How could you do a diagram of a four-month-old child with an adult penis?' I think, well, think about it, join the dots, for f*** sake. But they don't want to. They don't want to."



NATIONAL CONSUMER COMMISSION

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Expression of interest for Opt Out Register

I, Ebrahim Mohamed, commissioner of the National Consumer Commission (NCC), do hereby advise that the NCC, in line with the provisions of section 11 (3) of the Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008 (CPA), read with regulation 4 of the Consumer Protection Act Regulations (Regulation), intends recognizing as authoritative, a registry in which any person may register a pre-emptive block, either generally or for specific purposes, against any communication that is primarily for the purpose of direct marketing.

I therefore, hereby call upon all interested parties with existing registries/ databases to submit proposals to the NCC. Please note that any opt-out database which has been created directly from the information provided by consumers, such databases must include the opportunity and necessary capacity for consumers to register his/her physical address, landline telephone number, email address & cell phone number.

In submitting proposals, the intention of interested parties are particularly drawn to the minimum requirements for a registry as stipulated in Regulation 4.

The closing date for submission of proposals is 17h00 on Wednesday the 15th January 2014.

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5) The NCC hereby reserves the right to amend, modify or withdraw this Expression of Interest at any time, without prior notice and without liability to compensate or reimburse any party or person.

Mr E Mohamed
Commissioner: National Consumer Commission.
Enquiries: All enquiries may be addressed to: Mr O C Thuyabale
018 761 3865 / 0765851140 (9h00-16h40)
E:thuyabale@ncc.org.za

All proposals to be delivered to: Mr Tabeko Mofe, Director Supply Chain Management, Envel, 15 Casselle Street, CCZA
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