

## SPIRIT OF PLACE: AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY SHARLÉ MATTHEWS

Sharlé Matthews' solo exhibition, *Spirit of Place*, opened on 6 October 2019 at the IS Art Gallery in Franschhoek, South Africa. These paintings were, in part, inspired by the artist's trip to New York City in late 2017. The exhibition was launched with short talks by Prof. Estelle Marais and Dr. Glenn Adler, which are reproduced below.\*

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### *In Search of Spirit and Soul: An approach to the layered work of Sharlé Matthews (Estelle Marais)*

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When walking into this exhibition on Friday, I was, as I suspect some of you were this morning, overwhelmed by the scale, complexity and energy of this collection of paintings. After going through it a couple of times, I thought the best way I could come to grips with it was to consider it, not on surface quality or factual statements, but as it was unfolding to me, layer by layer, like an archaeological site. That seemed to be the key, and as an archaeologist would go digging deeper and deeper to make sense of the facts of history, so these paintings started to make sense of themselves and the reason for their being here. And so, they took me on a journey through layers of history, world history as well as personal, and in a sense a reminder of the history of man's quest for his essence, his spiritual core. I think

Glenn will enlighten you on the history of New York and its relevance to this exhibition.

Clearly, when starting an archeological dig, one of the first things to do would be to demarcate the area of the site, and, like the red tape surrounding and demarcating construction sites in the city, the red tape that runs through a number of these paintings (e.g., *Construction Site, 34th Street*) demarcates New York as the physical area of exploration in this exhibition.



*Construction Site, 34th Street*

[Click on photo for larger image.](#)

This approach is clearly stated in the monumental composite work, *The Spirit of Place: A City Reimagined*. However, while giving clarity about the site of action, so to speak, this title also embodies the enigma of this exhibition.

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\* See p. 5 for larger images of the paintings referenced in the text.



*The Spirit of Place: A City Reimagined* Click on photo for larger image.

The skyline of the city is reminiscent of New York, but is it New York? If it is not New York – although it looks like it and reminds one of a New York, but without the iconic buildings in their supposed positions – then what is it?

So now ... What is it, where is it and why is it?

It is a city like New York, and it may still be New York for the onlooker, and we may call it New York, but in fact it is only a space and structure triggered by our memory of the place, which is tempered by the imagination. And the imagination transforms it into a living being, with layers in its psyche that resonate with the artist's personal quest, or journey. In her own words and in her world, Sharlé has always been interested in and curious about the feeling one gets from a place and the way a place can define its inhabitants. So when visiting New York a couple of years ago, she tried to come to understand the place, but soon realized in that immense city that she was an outsider and could only understand it as does an outsider: on the surface, as one would with another stranger, and with all the confusion that goes with it.

There are vast unknown areas, dangerous perhaps and dark, like rivers of the subconscious, running underneath the city. She had to be cognisant of an archaeology of the subconscious of the city. In *Still Waters Run Deep*, the reference becomes clearer: dark rivers snake through the city, hiding in their blackness its mysteries and dangers; the hidden things, not to be seen or heard, suggested by abstract shapes and patterns – stripes like those found on prisoners' uniforms, railroad maps, newspapers, churches and buildings are visually suggested, defined by the presence of that snaking, dark river. This painting was based on old maps of New



*Still Waters Run Deep*

York and combines natural and reclaimed land and all that one can imagine went with the structuring of the city. The fact that she chose a title that, while making use of imagery from nature, signifies a human trait, strengthens the link between the city and what Sharlé calls her "obsession right now with the spiritual and physical elements that give meaning, value and emotion and mystery to a place." And one cannot help but see that 'place' may also refer to the mysterious place or core of the artist's own spirit and soul.

The reason for not doing a "portrait" of New York, but to replace it with a reimagined New York, brings to mind what the art historian Sir Kenneth Clarke said of Rembrandt's landscapes: "For him, landscape painting meant the creation of an imaginary world, vaster, more dramatic and more fraught with associations than that which we can perceive for ourselves." And going one step further, one finds the clue to the mystery of the combination – and sometimes contrast – of seemingly realistic forms and the abstract or non-figurative symbols in Sharlé's paintings, in the words of Arshile Gorky: "Abstraction allows man to see with his mind what he cannot see physically with his eyes." And thus, the reasons for the reimagination and the abstraction of New York become clearer: it is not representation, but about finding the soul of the city and the city becoming the place through which the great journey toward understanding of the self must move. However, Sharlé is not a pure abstractionist or non-figurative painter. Her forms stand with their feet, so to speak, solidly in the real world. In that way, she strongly represents the view Pablo Picasso held, that "there is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterwards you can remove all traces of reality."

One of the most significant works in terms of questions of identity and personal history is *Urban Tapestry: A City Imagined*. Here, several strands come together: Sharlé's visit to New York suggested in the skyline, but also her past history of living in Gauteng, with the silhouette of the Jo'burg skyline in the distance,



*Urban Tapestry: A City Imagined*

and the question arises: Is it New York ... or is it Hillbrow? And while one is considering this, the painting modulates into a tapestry woven in the dull ochres, browns and khakis of the African landscape, and it brings to mind Sharlé's dressmaker mother, Alice, in her sewing room, with the pieces of lappies that were such an integral part of Sharlé's and the family's history. This painting seems to serve as a reminder of who she is and where she came from.



*The Journey That We Seek*

I think the painting that comes perhaps the closest to what this exhibition is about, might be a humble work of paths, rivers, cities and rural areas, called *The Journey That We Seek*.

What is this but an indescribably personal and intimate journey in which Sharlé seeks to capture connections not just with the inner self, but also with private histories, issues and concerns. Some are abstract, others are very real and tangible; there are questions of identity and of values, but also of practical issues: should she move (house, town, country), and once those issues are resolved, what do you keep and what should be kept, what is essential or valuable because it was part of the fabric of your childhood, and what is frivolous? These were the issues that also inspired the little still lives, *The Spark of Joy*, in which objects from her parents' home, some only of sentimental value, were worked into the fibre woven into the fabric of who and what Sharlé is.

In the Jackson Pollock-like endlessness captured in the expanse of *For the Love of the Spirit and the Mystery of Land*,



*For the Love of the Spirit and the Mystery of Land*

the thought it embodies is not restricted by a frame but moves well beyond any suggestion of limitation, much like one might dig into the painting – layer upon layer of large colour fields broken up by smaller ones, scraped-away surfaces to expose the magic and mystery of what went before, discovering the pen and pencil lines barely visible from a distance, but which one registers subconsciously and which unify these sometimes monumental works.

I want to congratulate Sharlé on a singularly vibrant, exciting, electric and thought-provoking exhibition and thank her for sharing so courageously the intimacy of her deepest thoughts with us. And I conclude by wishing her many more of such outstanding quality.

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### ***Sharlé Matthews: A South African artist in New York (Glenn Adler)***

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We are here to celebrate my sister-in-law Sharlé's remarkable work, but I must acknowledge the family from which she emerged.

My son, Michael, once wrote that he comes from a family of artists, capturing so well these Grahamstown Matthews gathered here today.

I acknowledge our absent oupie and granny, Frank and Alice Matthews, who both passed in 2007. And their eldest daughter, Glenda Gendall, and her son Dean, who are both here today, and her son Brett, who is not. And Sharlé's son James, who is here, and her son Oliver, who is pursuing his life's journey in China. And my wife, Renée Matthews, who is here, and our children Michael and Abigail, who are home in New York.

Artists all: master painter, woodworker, builder, gardener; dressmaker and decorator; painter and sculptor; silkscreener, printmaker, weaver; graphic designer; photographer; engineer, musician; writer, editor, filmmaker, actor and singer.

Sharlé comes from a family of artists but she has taken us to places we did not know existed.

So, I'm here to talk about a particular place in Sharlé's creative universe, New York.

Sharlé's work has increasingly considered questions of humans' troubled connections to place and an awareness that we make contested – and often unresolvable – claims to the same space. Our claims of belonging carry with them acts of destruction and erasure.

Harbours are important for Sharlé. But the word carries double meanings: ships moor in shelter, but we harbour grudges. The word 'harbour' comes from the Old English word for military quarters, and this connection of safety and weaponry connects to her anxiety about seas and oceans: protective barriers, but also an entry point for invaders; they present possibilities for exchange or for exploitation.

Her attraction to New York is no accident.

In 1990 Renée and I witnessed the great parade to honour the recently freed Nelson Mandela. To mark the route, New York City repainted the road markings from their standard white to Blue and Orange.

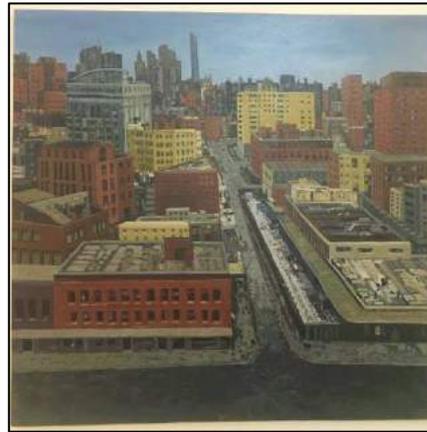
The peculiar choice made us remember that New York began in 1625 as Nieuw Amsterdam. Like the Cape of Good Hope a generation later, it was part of the vast overseas expansion of Dutch capitalism. Its early maps, which directly inspired Sharlé's *Still Waters Run Deep*, immediately recall those of the Cape under the Dutch East India Company: villages centered on a natural harbour and fort. As at the Cape, the Dutch presence in America yielded to English expansion and in 1664, Nieuw Amsterdam became New York. But Oranje, Blanje, Blou remain the colours of New York City's official flag.

In both places, these invaders brought the destruction or forced dispersal of the indigenous populations – in New York, the Lenape people – and the creation of slave societies. New York City, in fact, had a far higher percentage of slaves than any city in America except for Charleston. From 1799 New York State underwent gradual emancipation, and it was a free state by the Civil War. But legal freedom did not bring safety for people of colour; New York City was a conservative place, inhospitable to runaway slaves and free slaves alike, and sympathetic to the slave South. Frederick Douglass did not linger in Manhattan on his escape from slavery in 1838. And though Abraham Lincoln won New York

State in the elections of 1860 and 1864, he never carried the city.

These legacies are depicted – if only quietly – in Sharlé's encounter with New York.

One of the three panels of *The Spirit of Place: A City Reimagined*, focuses on New York's historic meatpacking district: bisecting the frame runs Gansevoort Street, which honours Peter Gansevoort, revolutionary war hero and descendant of Harmen Harmense Gansevoort, a 1660 immigrant from Holland.



*The Spirit of Place: A City Reimagined* (detail)

The street traces a path that once connected the Lenape village, Sapokanikan, to the Hudson River. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gansevoort Street became the center of

New York's meatpacking industry, spurred by the invention of industrial refrigeration, its proximity to the Hudson River docks, and the extension of a rail line running like a steel spine connecting the warehouses, docks and light industries of Manhattan's west side to the country's railroad network.

But these businesses moved away after World War Two, and, as so often happens in the remains of a neighborhood after industrial flight, the meatpacking district became a harbour to artists and musicians and the city's most infamous underground clubs. Gansevoort Street was famously depicted by the artists Lee Krasner and Willem de Kooning, and by photographer Berenice Abbott. Some may recall that it provided the carcass- and blood-stained exteriors location scenes for Glenn Close's apartment in the 1987 thriller, *Fatal Attraction*.

Sharlé captures the area at another moment of profound transition, now driven by gentrification. Her painting takes its perspective from the upper floors of the new \$420-million Whitney Museum, which marks the district's transition from an artists' haven into a

place where expensive art created elsewhere is displayed. The museum anchors the southern terminus of the High Line, the extraordinary elevated urban park that repurposed the long-abandoned rail line that once helped connect the meatpacking district to the world.

The displacements depicted in Sharlé's new paintings contribute to New York's peculiar growth: it is now among the wealthiest – and most unequal – cities on earth. The continuing legacy of slavery is evident in the strong and persisting correlation between colour and poverty, and in the persistence of gun violence –

familiar patterns, of course, which also afflict Cape Town.

For many people, these harbour cities now provide little refuge, and arms are deployed as much against those within their borders, as against threats from outside.

Sharlé depicts cities wrestling with these legacies of centuries-long encounters across oceans. Who pays for the sins of the forefathers, she has asked? She does not – cannot – answer these questions. But engage with her art and you cannot escape them.

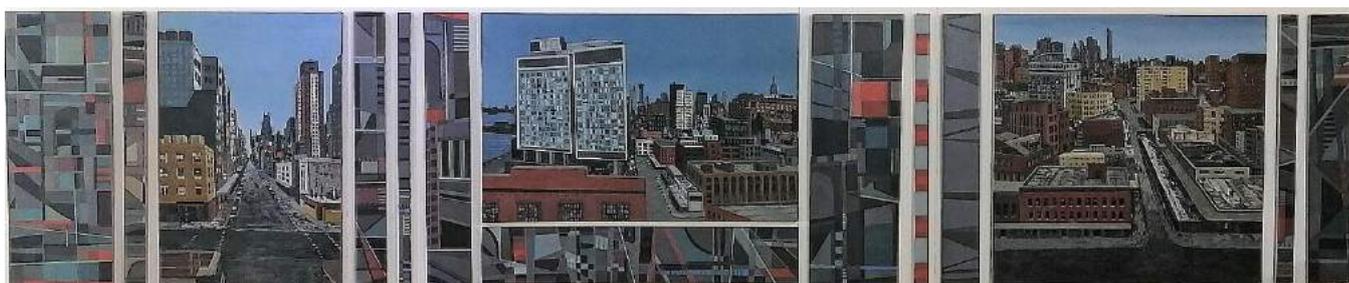
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## Paintings Referenced in the Text

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*Construction Site, 34th Street*



*The Spirit of Place: A City Reimagined*



*Still Waters Run Deep*



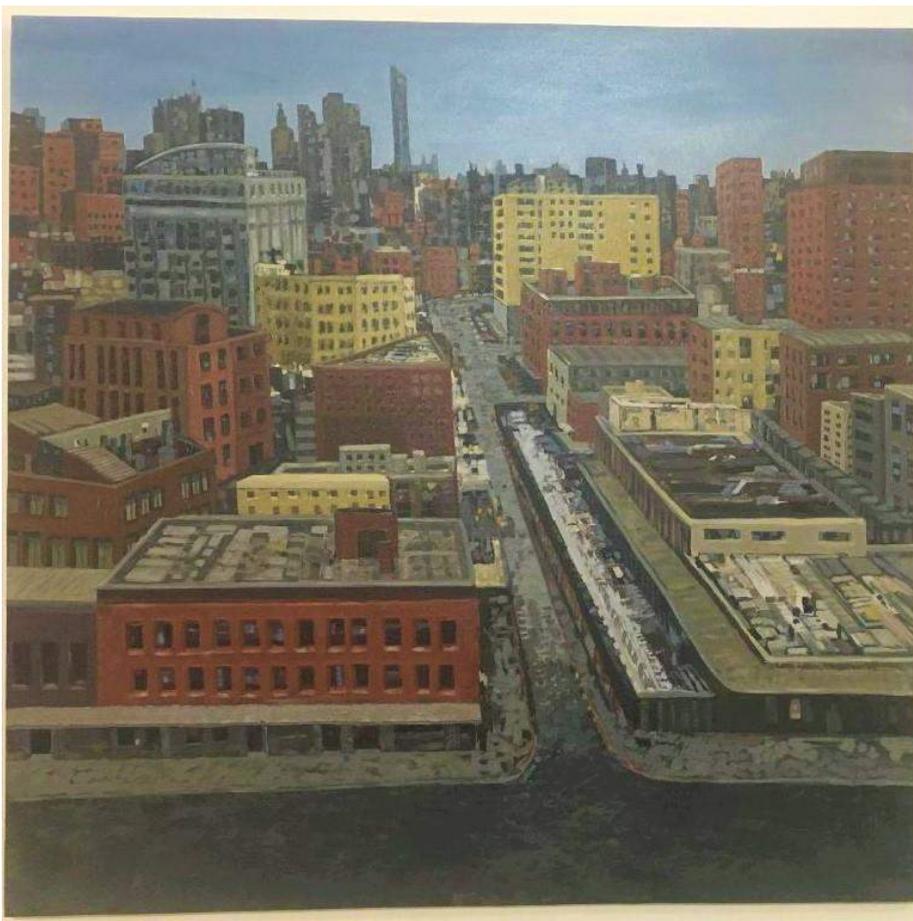
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*The Spirit of Place: A City Reimagined (detail)*