

**A fine artist and historian who uses women as protagonists**

**Doctor of Fine Arts**

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Penny Siopis’s work is regarded as paintings that take a critical look at history, challenging dominant narratives of colonialism, apartheid by inverting imperialist pictorial conventions by including figures of women as protagonists of history.

A Rhodes University Master’s degree in Fine Arts and a British Council scholarship to the United Kingdom’s Portsmouth University launched a political and cultural art career that was strangely influenced by a bakery owned by Siopis’s parents in Vryburg, where she was born.

Siopis produced her famous ‘cake’ paintings, with sexual politics consciously encoded in through their challenge to the idealising genre of the female nude in western culture. “Looking, with a specific consciousness, is a way of thinking for me. It is as if thoughts unfold from my eyes and attach to things,” she said.

Concerned with exploring the materiality of paint and its potential as an object associated with flesh, Siopis worked with oil paint in a way that strayed from the norm, layering it thickly in high relief. Two of her cake paintings were selected for the prestigious Cape Town Triennial in 1982 and in 1983.

They also featured on her major solo exhibition at the Market Theatre gallery in Johannesburg. The City exerted a powerful influence on her life and work. Civil unrests were growing and progressive academics and artists were called upon to support the struggle for national liberation.

Siopis’s paintings began to reflect these politically turbulent times, not through direct depiction but through overabundant, layered compositions allegorising the excesses of wealthy white society existing in the face of black dispossession.

She won first prize on the Volkskas Atelier award, which included a seven-month residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. Paris gave her the opportunity to delve deeper into the story of Sarah Baartman whose tragic life ended in the French capital. Baartman’s story was to become an important part of Siopis’s political consciousness and informed later explorations into the fraught representations of race and gender that she was to engage.

While in Paris, she received a request from an anti-apartheid organisation in her home country asking her to make a work protesting the horror of detention without trial.The work was to be part of a calendar that would raise public awareness about the plight of detainees.

This got her thinking critically about her medium and about the ethics of making images that reflect the pain of others. The work that emerged, entitled *Flesh and Blood,* though modest in scale, opened a new world of collage for the artist.

Collage, as Siopis attests, ‘is fundamentally disruptive as it puts together fragments from

disparate contexts; a process that invariably exposes the violence of representation’. Collage became the chosen medium of her now famous ironical history paintings.

Andrew Soloman wrote in the New York Times, “Siopis’s mesmerising paintings and collage pieces often address women’s history and experience and the integrity of the female body. The power of her work lies in its hidden quality of empathy as much as in its technical achievement and sophisticated intellectual base. She is a rigorous thinker”.

She and her husband Colin Richards encouraged a critical consciousness of the relationship between theory and practice, art and politics, within the academy and in wider society during their time as academics at Wits University.

In 1993, she prepared for her solo exhibition ‘*Private Views’* in Johannesburg. She experimented with creating a canvas on her own body onto which two instances of racial inscription were drawn and erased, the process consciously bringing to the surface her ‘whiteness’ and her complicity in the colonial history that the work referenced. This early work indicated the artist’s mode of engagement with her own practice where making oneself vulnerable became a key aspect of her process.

In 1996, she produced the powerful *Mostly women and Children* for *‘Faultlines; Inquiries into Truth and Reconciliation’*, an exhibition presented in the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town to mark the launch of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Siopis arranged around objects - relics of South Africa’s traumatic past - in a form echoing a museum setting but referencing an actual massacre by apartheid military forces.

She was also awarded a residency at the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam to facilitate her work as artistic advisor to the curated exhibition *‘Group Portrait: Nine South African Family Histories’.* She started a series of works that would develop into what became known as her *Shame* paintings. The work expressed the psychosocial, psychosexual state of shame in a postcolonial context.

The installation included a sound piece, in which seven prominent South Africans spoke of their personal experience of shame in relation to the idea of public shame, which marked South Africa's past.

Siopis has been very specific in the manner in which she engages cultural hybridity and the working- through of fears within a culture caught in a moment of radical social transition, a moment in which poverty, AIDS, sexual violence, xenophobia and residual white power were all too present.

In 2010, the University of Cape Town appointed her Honorary Professor and she was able to concentrate on her practice as an artist in a more fulltime capacity.

In 2014, a retrospective of Penny Siopis’s work was mounted at the South African National Gallery. The exhibition was highly acclaimed and it showcases the artist’s major contribution to the development of contemporary African art by presenting a range of works that reflected not only an exceptional career spanning thirty five years, but also a way to look at South Africa’s history in all its political and aesthetic vicissitudes.

Siopis’s iconic works have become part of the country’s cultural heritage and are studied and admired by both schoolchildren and academics. They are the subject of extensive research in South Africa and abroad. Her work has exerted a powerful influence on young artists over the years as much through her teaching as through her drive to experiment and constantly open herself up to new relationships - with people, ideas, politics and media.

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**Issued on behalf of Rhodes University by Communications and Advancement Division.**

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