



Pink Skies Keep me Warm

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Zarah Cassim on introspection, secrecy and intimacy

Emphasising the sublime quality of the landscape, Zarah Cassim immerses her viewers within her dark and dreamlike paintings – creating a space of both fantasy and reflection. For Cassim, sometimes the landscape has little to do with land, and more to do with fragmented memories and private moments.

Zarah Cassim in Studio, Cape Town, 2018. Photographer Mareli Esterhuizen, Image courtesy of Salon Ninety One.

ART AFRICA sat down with Cassim ahead of the Investec Cape Town Art Fair 2018 to find out more

about her practice, and what we can expect to see from her at the Fair.

ART AFRICA: In 2017, your solo show 'The Guise of Reality' was exhibited at Salon Ninety One, and explored the natural landscape as a dark and dreamlike space of introspection, secrecy and intimacy. Can we expect to see more of these topics in your work for the Investec Cape Town Art Fair (ICTAF) 2018?

Zarah Cassim: In my collection of artworks for ICTAF, I continue to explore the natural landscape as a dreamlike space of introspection and intimacy. These dark, moody, dreamlike spaces allow room for subconscious fantasy, which is linked to my personal relationship with the natural landscape. For ICTAF, I have taken this concept further and worked on a much larger scale – emphasising the sublime quality of the landscape and hopefully allowing for one to be overwhelmed and immersed in the landscape. I'm also looking at ideas of seeing oneself in the landscape. The dreamlike spaces of introspection and intimacy are evident in my use of titles – sometimes the landscape has nothing to do with land and is linked more to fragmented bits of memories and private moments.

Some of my titles include:

- *Dim the lights*
- *Pleasure over Matter*
- *Withdrawals*
- *Pink Skies Keep me Warm*
- *Close to you*
- *So familiar*
- *Like a past life*

- *Night Shift*
- *So Real*
- *Summer Shade*
- *Places I've never been*
- *But you could've held my hand*
- *To other lands*
- *Shed Tears*
- *All my Life*

Zarah Cassim. *Sleepless III*, 2017. Oil on tissue paper, 945 x 945mm, Framed.

You have said that your work is a sort of confrontation with reality, and you reference Dostoevsky's understanding of the "illusion we perceive as reality" through your painting's multiple layers. Are there any other prolific authors or theorists who have had an impact on you and your art-making processes – and if so, who and why?

Pictures & Tears by James Elkins has had an influence on me and on my art making processes – especially with regards to my use of 'layers'. Perhaps this is why multiple transparent layers of paint are so important to me. Elkins discusses how artworks are able to move people to tears. In his essay 'Crying at Nothing but Colours', he discusses the Rothko chapel and the immersive abstract paintings by Mark Rothko.

This has left me wondering...

What is in an abstract image that allows you to be overwhelmed, and how is it possible to be moved to

tears by looking at a dark colour pane? What is beneath the layers of paint? What is beneath the layers of the artist creating the painting? How is what is beneath these layers transmitted to different people in different parts of the world, from different cultural and social backgrounds? What is this universal standard of taste? How is a painting able to make people cry, universally?

My conclusion is that it must be in the layers of the physical painting, the layers of the artist and the layers of the viewer – all of which are intertwined – to be moved, and to feel that something is such a beautiful thing.

It has impacted my artwork in that I paint in multiple, transparent layers. My paintings are often dark and abstracted, yet soft, fluid and dreamlike. The darkness, by dimming the reality and vision that we know, allows room for fantasy.

Zarah Cassim, So Familiar II, 2018. Oil on Paper, 600 x 420mm, Unframed size.

You have also said that you “confront a sense of confusion and disorientation in an absurd world”. In doing so, what is the end result that you hope for with this confrontation, and why is art the best ‘vehicle’ to do so with?

I hope to confront a sense of confusion and disorientation in an absurd world by creating a dreamlike, moody landscape, and allowing space for both fantasy and reflection. The result that I hope for, is for a viewer to have a private moment where you are able to see as much as you want to see – the layers

within the painting and within yourself.

I feel that art is the best vehicle to do so with as it something created – what we are looking at is framed in a specific way with a specific intention. It is an object with a function of confrontation with its viewer. Its purpose is to be looked at. The realisation that the understanding of the work is different to everyone is where it gets interesting, and very personal. I guess it is also my personal means of confrontation with the world around me.

As a Michaelis graduate, you majored in photography – often incorporating painting, sculpture and mixed media into your photographs. Recently, you have decided to focus solely on painting – is there any specific reason for choosing to do this, or is painting simply the best medium for conveying the meaning within your work?

In my life, in my practice, in both photography and painting, I am interested in exploring notions of perception. I love the combination of ‘abstract’ yet ‘soft and fragile’ that I’ve discovered in painting – and I think that this kind of sensitivity in painting works with the themes I am currently exploring. My photographs work within the same themes of reality and illusion though, and both my photography and paintings inform each other.

Zarah Cassim. *So Familiar I*, 2018. Oil on Paper. 600 x 420mm, Unframed size.

Lastly, what can we expect to see from you after this year’s ICTAF?

I’ve spent the past few months in Cape Town working

toward the ICTAF but I am based in Paris. And after ICTAF I will be heading to Los Angeles for a few months to exhibit in association with the Saatchi Gallery at The Other Art Fair LA – before going back to Paris.

I also have upcoming exhibitions in Australia, Stockholm, Brussels and London.

For my time in LA, besides the art fair, I plan on road tripping through California – exploring a part of the world I am unfamiliar with, landscapes and a situation I am unfamiliar with. I am excited to nourish and enhance my practice by placing myself in a completely new situation.

I would love to continue working on a large scale and focus on working with shadows and contrasts of both light and dark moments in my work. I'm really looking forward to exploring the unknown and enhancing my perception of the world. I'm ready for an adventure and excited to see where the next few months take me. All of this, with little bits of Cape Town in between.

Featured Image: Zarah Cassim. Detail of *Sleepless III*, 2017. Oil on tissue paper, 945 x 945mm, Framed.

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