



Bowing to Stern

Irma Stern's paintings are often in the news as they fetch ever-higher prices on auction. Why has the art market fallen in love with her?

CAN YOU IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE ALL ART would be worth exactly the same: nothing?

In Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road*, he created a world of soul-destroying misery – a post-apocalyptic near future where life as we know it has ceased to exist; where “civilisation” accounts for a pre-history and where there are no longer any shared values, morals or markets to guide and regulate the handful of humans unlucky enough to have survived the great catastrophe.

McCarthy's masterpiece must be one of the bleakest books I have ever failed to finish and yet, despite having read no more than half, it prompted me to consider a question: if physical survival was the only instinct left to us and art had been stripped of all commercial value, how would we perceive it?

This bizarre thought kept bugging me as I stood in front of a painting that Irma Stern, the darling of South African art, painted in 1939, the year she first visited Zanzibar. Though the work belongs to a private institution and will probably never come up for sale, it is worth millions, even tens of millions, of rands. Stern's “Zanzibar” paintings are considered the zenith of her oeuvre and fetch the highest prices on auction, especially if still in their original Zanzibar door frames, which apparently she fashioned into picture frames herself.

In March 2011, *Arab Priest* was sold to Qatar's Orientalist Museum for £3.044 million (R35.055 million at the prevailing exchange rate). She painted it in 1945 during her second visit to the exotic island paradise. It is the highest price ever paid for a South African work of art.

As I looked at the broad confident strokes left by her palette knife, I became aware of my inability to separate the painting from its commercial value. I felt trapped by the knowledge, unable to judge what I really felt about the work, whether I even liked it or not. This is probably why I wandered off into McCarthy's universe. But it was to no avail. The potential price tag demanded that I look again and bow down in awe.

Generally, I don't find it hard to bow. I will bow

low to a magnificent full moon, to my fig tree's voluptuous offerings, to a bohemian friend's purple beetroot and walnut cake. I am also not averse to bowing to great works of art. I am, after all, a committed art lover. My idea of heaven on earth is the Tate Modern and the fifth floor of the Centre Pompidou (well, that and a walk in nature).

It's just that I have this thing with Irma. I am completely flummoxed by the meteoric price escalation and more than mildly irritated with the standing ovations it receives time after time. The frantic clapping is too loud.

Poor Irma. Even though she would probably have loved the attention and prices (from what I gather, she seemed to have been blessed with an enormous ego), she can hardly be held

accountable for any of this.

It was time I exonerated her, but I needed help. Assistance came in the form of two of the country's most erudite and respected art dealers, Johans Borman (www.johansborman.co.za) and Warren Siebrits (www.warrensiebrits.co.za).

“It is hard to believe now, but Irma Stern >>



Bahora Girl by Irma Stern fetched the equivalent of about R27 million on auction in London in 2010.

>> was not always the price leader in the South African art market," Siebrits reminded me.

Until 1993, various other artists held auction records for South African art.

"In 1984, Pieter Wenning's *Malta Farm* fetched R82 000. In 1985, *Extensive Landscape Northern Transvaal* by JH Pierneef exceeded that record when it went for R120 000. In 1988, Anton van Wouw's *Miner with a Hand Drill* sold for R125 000, and in 1991, Volks Auctioneers sold Gerard Sekoto's *Penny for a Door* for R180 000."

So why was it not one of these artists or even the other "darling", Maggie Laubser, who took the lead? As I went through auction catalogues and results of the past 20 years, it became clear that for a very long time all of these artists were among a group whose work sold in more or less the same price bracket.

That was the case until 1993. Irma's ascendancy started that year, when two of her paintings – *Two Arabs (Father and Son)* (1939) and *Still life with Delphiniums* (1938) – each sold for R209 000, setting new records for the artist and for South African art.

In 1998 it was one of her paintings, *The Water Carrier*, that broke through the psychological R500 000 threshold. In November 1999, she reached the million-rand mark with *Still Life with Fruit and Dahlias* (1946). In May 2000, *Cape Girl with Fruit*, painted in 1930, fetched R1.76 million.

The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 halted the price rise temporarily, but in February 2007 a huge jump occurred when *Indian Woman* was sold for an astronomical R6.6 million at the sale of the Kahn collection at Stephan Welz & Co. in Cape Town.

The financial crisis of 2008 again seemed to have had no more than a temporary effect on the rise of her art prices. In 2010, one of her works broke through the R10-million ceiling: on October 11, local auctioneers Strauss & Co. sold *Gladioli* (1939) for R13.368 million, a record that stood for a little more than two weeks. On October 27, 2010, *Bahora Girl* (1945) fetched £2.372 million at Bonhams, London. The price astounded everyone. *Arab Priest* proved last year that prices could go even higher.

And these are just the records; many others change hands at astronomical prices. According to the Blouin Art Index, works of art by Stern have been offered for sale on auction no less than 811 times since 2007. That's big business and big news. No wonder she's in the news all the time.

Colourful life and work

BORN IN SCHWEIZER-RENEKE IN OCTOBER 1894 to German-Jewish parents, Stern left for Europe at a young age, was mentored by German Expressionist Max Peckstein, came back to South Africa, travelled extensively through Europe and Africa, resonated with the African continent, loved the vibrant colours of Zanzibar, worked, exhibited locally and

internationally, painted, made pots, worked some more, and then died in August 1966.

She was a workaholic: her work was shown on more than 100 exhibitions in her own lifetime.

She was always part of the elite. "As a rich man's daughter, she was never dependent on sales to survive financially and therefore asked very high prices for her work," Siebrits explained.

She was a trendsetter; one of the earliest proponents of German Expressionism at the Cape. In the manner of expressionism, her work is vibrant, colourful and figurative. It is also accessible to most people – you don't have to be a sky pilot to know what you are looking at or what she meant to say. She was a colourful character who lived an extraordinary life, but she also knew how to use this life and these experiences to create and maintain her own myth.

She was a chain-smoker and would apparently drink strong black coffee while finishing her portraits in single sittings. "Expressionists always work fast; it is one of the characteristics of the style," Borman told me. I never knew that. It is probably why there is such a sense of spontaneity in her work. And it's probably why some are so (dare I say it?) ugly and unresolved.

Breaking cultural barriers

ACCORDING TO SIEBRITS, ONE OF THE IMPORTANT reasons for her commercial success in the past few decades is the fact that Stern was one of the first artists to break down the cultural barriers most other artists fail to breach. Traditionally, Afrikaans artists were bought by Afrikaans patrons (Pierneef, for instance), Jewish patrons supported Jewish artists (Stern) and English patrons supported "English" painters such as Gwelo Goodman.

In Stern's case she had an affluent Jewish market; an influential Jewish art dealer, Louis Schachat, who believed in her; and a powerful Afrikaans business tycoon, Anton Rupert, who by early 1990 had become one of her biggest private collectors. Each represented a cultural and powerful financial sector of the market.

Neither Borman nor Siebrits are surprised by the fact that she is the undisputed market leader, but both are perturbed by where this market is going. Although *Arab Priest* was sold to an international institution, Irma still is a local artist, Borman observed.

It is still mostly South African collectors who buy her work. That it sells at an international auction house and fetches "international" prices creates the idea that Stern has an international market, but she has yet to breach that boundary.

At those prices, Siebrits felt that one could buy a work of art by a truly international artist such as Van Gogh or Modigliani. Funny, this hold emotion can have on all of us.

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