

AN AGELESS EYE

Rhona Gorvy's paintings transform subtly as you look at them, writes **Oliver Roberts**

Picture: **Waldo Swiegers**

ON the dining-room table is a shoe-box full of medicine. Pills for this, creams for that. 20mg. Twice daily. On the same table is a sketchbook and some oil pastels. The open page shows a rendering of a pot plant with red and green leaves. Gorvy, 2014, it says bottom right.

The artist has just turned 93. She has exhibited locally and overseas (Paris, London, California, Texas, Toronto, Helsinki). One of her most haunting pieces — *The Indomitable Spirit* — hangs in the Constitutional Court.

And so it is that the medicinal goods in the artist's home have come to equal, perhaps surpass, the art supplies. It's a strange anomaly — the amassing of medicines until they overflow from the kitchen and bath-



SOUL SPOTTER: Rhona Gorvy

room — and I'm not sure how long it takes for this to happen. I suspect, however, that most of us will find out for ourselves one day or another.

Daughter Elaine has put out a portion of her mother's works today, "So we can under-

stand". Eyes look out from them. Bodies are strewn or dismembered.

This is a portion of her work — but it's all of her work, really. Her life's oeuvre set up in a lounge. The late winter light comes in through the windows. Everything looks like a photograph, one taken just after the camera's invention, when people were still uneasy about the implications of frozen time.

Rhona Gorvy's father died when she was six months old. She once lived in a house that included her mother, her brother, her grandmother and her aunts. That's sort of how it began. That and a box of crayons.

"Perhaps that helped to make me in tune with people," Gorvy says. "I always loved to find the soul of a person, to help them to understand themselves. Somebody gave me a box of crayons when I was a child and that put me onto a forward line for the rest of my life. I opened the box and I was thrilled by it, but I was also scared stiff, scared that I would use it all up. That feeling has stayed with me for a long time."

In the entrance hall is a large wooden etching that Gorvy did when she was 13. It shows a young girl sitting beneath a tree facing a small baboon. She's handing over to the creature what appears to be a garland of flowers. It's a remarkable work in that Gorvy, barely a teenager, has somehow managed to lend both the girl and the baboon a certain weight of consciousness. The girl appears to be assigning deep consideration to her gesture. The baboon seems compliant, eager to receive the garland as a symbol of, what, harmony between species? Could it really be as meaningful as this?

Gorvy's ancestors and immediate relatives were forced from their homes in Eastern Europe under diabolic regimes. Some of them met terrible ends in cold forests. Is it possible that this bleak struggle has been chemically passed on? Does some of that sorrow still sleep in Gorvy's bones?

The artist had no formal training. "I think there was something in me already, at birth," she says. "It's like a magnet. It pulls you, whether you like it or not. I experienced, through my mother, a lot of pain. But [to be an artist] one must have an ability to see through the folds of a curtain, to be able to go behind it. When it is your inner soul talking it brushes away all barriers."

I walk among the works scattered in the room. Line drawings of faces with careworn eyes. Portraits of the cherished and the beaten. Sculptures. Marks of love. Gazes of grief



and intimidation. Confusion. Entrapment. Addiction. Violence. The struggle of existence and the wrestle with death.

The Indomitable Spirit depicts a gaunt, naked man oppressively boxed in by its frame. It's hard to look at without the dark weight of something within your subconscious seeping to the surface.

"There's a part of us that cannot escape pain, even tragedy," says Gorvy. "And you have to get certain things off your chest, otherwise you'll burst. I take the pain

within me. It's actually part of life but it must be dealt with and, if possible, changed."

The artist is a poet, too. Instead of accompanying her works with academic texts written by someone in a polka-dot bowtie, Gorvy sometimes partners them with words like these:

"The half-veiled miracles, resurgent life/the rhythmic seasons' measured plan/My words sound thin/to wonder at these things/and reverence the soul of man."

When Gorvy smiles you see that her eyes, the actual pupils, iris and sclera, have barely aged.

Do you ever wonder what it would be like to lie down and think, Hell, I'm 93? Where does it end? And why? Did I do enough? Do I really feel this old?

"I would say [life] is a necessary thing to go through. To experience and be part of a world that can sometimes thrash you. But you need to do it to understand other people."

With the news that Rhona Gorvy is "satisfied" with her life thus

far, she begins to drift off slightly. All this looking backwards and mid-afternoon pensiveness.

I browse among the artworks again. The pictures are the same but they're also different to the ones I saw an hour ago. The ones that seemed oppressed have become contented. The ones tender or self-reflecting have become tormented, violent even.

I want to ask Gorvy why this is so, ask whether she has cast a type of magic onto her works while we were sitting there. But her eyes are closed now. I can't tell what she's thinking anymore. **LS**

• Gorvy's work can be viewed at Art Eye Gallery in The Design Quarter, Fourways. www.arteye.com

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