

SECOND LIFE

Diane Victor almost died but now she has a new kidney — and she's ecstatic and conflicted and totally inspired, writes **Oliver Roberts**

I'VE never much thought about a kidney, and if I have it's never really been more than a passing reflection on its timeless shape and general function. If someone (for a reason I'll think of later) said, "You there! You! Point out the exact spot where your kidneys are," I'd hover my hand in pitiful manner over my lower abdomen and shrug my shoulders. All I know for sure is that I have two kidneys.

And so here I am, in the studio of one of South Africa's greatest artists (i.e. Diane Victor), and I'm trying to picture her transplanted kidney. When she tells me she's got a 35cm surgical scar running horizontally just above her belt line (and trails her finger across her T-shirt to demonstrate the scar's precise position) I glance down with attempted X-ray vision and imagine the kidney's location, both its linear proximity to my eye line and the depth at which it resides in her very talented tissue.

Victor's kidney is a new kidney in the sense that it's been in her body for only six months. Before that, it had been inside a 32-year-old man.

Six months ago Victor's old kidney was on the verge of succeeding in its lifelong, genetically programmed mission to kill her. Kidney failure took her dad, see, and Victor had one in two odds of developing the same condition. When I last saw her, in late 2013, things had got so bad that special auctions were being held to salve the artist's medical bills. There was a great, publicised search for a donor. Victor was on dialysis. She had resigned herself to the notion of dying.

'Hmm, you want to get one of my works now before I die and the price doubles'

"It's a bizarre thing," Victor says, "it was being reinforced that I was going to die and people's attitudes towards me changed. Subtly, but they did. Also, everyone started buying my work. I thought, 'You bastards, like a flock of vultures.' But it was great because all of a sudden I had financial support that



BACK IN THE SADDLE: A rejuvenated Diane Victor is reworking abandoned works

Picture: OLIVER ROBERTS



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WENDY KNOWLER
IN YOUR CORNER



I hadn't had before. It was like, 'Hmm... you want to get one of my works now before I die and the price doubles...'

I suggest to Victor that it sounds like she should have a bad kidney more often.

"Exactly. Next time I should say I have a bad liver and I'll have another price spike. It's a disgusting thing to say but it's just what you observe. There was just this sudden flurry of buying."

Victor is now in what she terms her "second life." And in recognition of this, her new, renally rejuvenated occupation involves taking failed etchings — etchings that were lying in a pile for years and destined for the rubbish heap — and reworking them. The artist is aware of the manifest symbolism of this and she tells me that the almost shameful (and very un-Victorish) sentimentality attached to these reworkings is a surprise to her, and it's something that the post-operative Diane Victor is kind of unsettled by, but at the same time she is "ecstatic"; ecstatic to be alive, to be working, to be in a position now to reinvent herself.

We've become used to Victor's dark, disturbing images, but the kindness of strangers might be about to lighten things a little and,

for Victor, that's kind of cool and kind of confusing.

"I'm a fairly cynical person by nature and the altruism is what amazed me," she says. "At least 10 people offered their kidney and were willing but just weren't compatible. It's a terrible thing to say but if it had been me I wouldn't have offered my kidney. That has

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messed my head up a little bit in terms of the work that I make and indulging in the negative aspects of humanity. What worries me a little bit is that darkness is where my art comes from."

Victor's studio is in August House in Doornfontein, Johannesburg. It's a dodgy building with a devious lift. There are a couple of other artists in the building. And a filmmaker. And a shoemaker, whose leathery tap-tap-tapping you can hear through the thin walls from morning until late afternoon.

The artist gently pats her belly, right over the place where she'd earlier indicated her longer-than-a-

ruler scar.

"I'm ecstatic with it," Victor says (that's now the second or third time she's used that word in the space of 30 minutes and, again, it's a very un-Victorish term. One assumes that the kidney, although missing its partner, is also ecstatic to have ended up in Diane Victor's body. In fact, perhaps it's the kidney talking.)

"It's like in a game of soccer when the game's over and there's extra time and you don't know how long it's going to be. I'm meant to be dead. My body clock had been designed to kill me before I turned 50. I'm very conscious of the fact that I need to reinvent myself, really need to go and see what boundaries I can find. All of a sudden all I want to do is make new work."

"Obviously I'm not going to change who I am — that's an impossibility — but to actually just work with new materials and do things is... I'm not going to go back to everything I've done before; there's got to be a whole new adventure. It's my second life, even if it's only for a year." **LS**

● Diane Victor's new work will be shown at Goodman Gallery towards the end of the year. For information, go to goodmangallery.com