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OIL ON FIRE: Penny Siopis in front of one of her larger works, part of 'Time and Again', a retrospective at the Iziko gallery in Cape Town until March 23

Picture: SHELLEY CHRISTIANS

The accidental artist

Penny Siopis has made it her life's work to find the message in the medium, writes **Oliver Roberts**

It is, I think, the first time I've used the word "vagina" in an interview. There we are, Penny Siopis and I, in an overly air-conditioned room at the Iziko gallery in Cape Town, when it happens.

"So it's like an ageing vagina," I say. There are three of them staring right at us.

"Exactly," Siopis says. "Well, they kind of stand for the body, for femininity."

She points to another work.

"This one here was almost banned," she says. "Vaginas on the table with little ballerinas coming out of them."

The pieces form part of *Cake Paintings*, Siopis's first major body of work, dating back to the early '80s. They are a section of *Time and Again*, a retrospective of Siopis's bold and provocative career, on display at the Iziko South African National Gallery until March 23.

"With the *Cake Paintings*, it was really the first time I explored the potential of the medium and other possibilities, what was happening at the time for me socially and politically," Siopis says. "There's a strong reference to sexuality and questions around the body that were being debated at that time."

The materials and techniques that Siopis used were highly unconventional. She painted with piping nozzles and spatulas, implements her mother had used to make cakes in the family bakery when Siopis was growing up. She also plastered the oil paint onto the canvas in thick daubs, a high relief technique known as *impasto*.

"The paint is still effectively dry-

ing under the skin," she says, "so there's a kind of correlation between the painted self as a means to depict something, but then the paint is an object, which becomes almost like a body. It's all the changes that, for me, were synonymous with the changes of an actual body. It wrinkles, cracks, loses its juices like we do. It shows signs of ageing on the surface, but slowly."

Siopis's prominent motif is of chance and decay. She does not set out to master a painting, to dominate the expression. Instead,

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through her use of materials, she allows a relationship to develop between herself and the work.

In 2007, Siopis began experimenting with glue and ink, mixing the two on a horizontal canvas and then hanging it and allowing the substance to flow and settle.

"I came to understand how to use chance," she says. "The shapes and patterns in the paintings became a consequence of gravity. The glue and the ink sort of make this pool, which waits and makes this lovely shape that is kind of cosmic, like an abyss or something."

We're looking at one of the ink and glue works. The red pigment is like blood, like menstrual flow. It's running down the canvas.

"That's a squid, right?" I say.

"Yes. An octopus having, I don't know, sex with a lady."

And it is. It's a giant, gluey squid going down on a Japanese woman. Siopis made several of these works in the style of Japanese prints, inspired by the curious dichotomy of the originals she had seen in books.

"With the Japanese prints there's that strange distance of emotion on one level, and graphic depiction in another way. There's this tension between form and formlessness. They're like diagrams of emotions."

"It's strange that I came to think about Japanese prints because they're so clearly defined in relation to the pictorial feel, and I think it was almost like a kind of opposite image to what I was looking for. So in a sense its foreignness made it more curious for me, foreignness to how I actually work."

Siopis relies heavily on subconscious suggestion in the completion of her paintings. In one, created at the time of the xenophobic attacks in 2008, she noted that some of the drips and splatters created by the ink and glue looked a little like birds, so she finished them off with beaks and details that look like wings. Why? Because shortly after having heard about

the xenophobic attacks, Siopis was on the balcony of the Melville flat that was her home at the time when she witnessed a large pack of swallows swooping and diving for insects in the twilight. This violent association was what made the painting possible.

"In some ways I try to create the conditions for the subconscious to be even more powerful. We can't ever tap into it, not in a conscious way, and that's where materiality and random movement of stuff on a surface becomes suggestive. It's

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where you catch the suggestive things that, for me, mark the contact of the subconscious with the conscious."

And it's this contact that makes so much of Siopis's work unsettling. Her *Pinky Pinky* series is particularly haunting. Created between 2002 and 2004, *Pinky Pinky* is a visual realisation of a local urban legend, a creature that is part human, part animal, part man, part woman, neither black nor white but pink, that stalks children in school toilets and threatens to rape school girls who wear pink underwear.

Siopis heard about *Pinky Pinky* through her son's friend and gathered depictions of the being through interviews with school children. The connections between *Pinky Pinky* and the social/sexual fears in South Africa are self-evident.

Siopis is an insatiable collector of things. She is, she says, fascinated by the way objects outlive us. So, also part of *Time and Again* is the artist's personal inventory. Some of the objects are fragments of installations from the past two decades. Others are South African toys, posters, tins, mugs, coins, jewellery, diaries. There's one of those apartheid-era notices you used to see in shopping malls, with three-dimensional illustrations of the various "terrorist" weapons and explosives to be on the look-out for. On one shelf is a stuffed monkey in a complex state of decay.

Siopis plans to bequeath some of the objects to selected friends and family members after her death. These things, these bric-a-brac, will be what she leaves behind. And, of course, her works of chance.

"They're a symbol of time, a biography, because of where they came from," says Siopis. "But they also get ravaged. They have to live in the world in one way or the other, and it's great, though in some ways it's a bit more evocative. Everything decays, absolutely everything. And I think that's OK. It's like getting old." **LS**

• A multimedia retrospective exhibition of Siopis's work will be shown at Wits Art Museum from April to June 2015. info.witspress@wits.ac.za