

A MILLION LIVES IN ONE



After Nyne meets Beezy Bailey

— **Beezy** Bailey is an artist who eludes easy categorisation – painter, sculptor, printmaker, performance artist, surrealist, collaborator, iconoclast, opportunist – these are just a few of the names that have been used to describe this restless artist. Perhaps the most accurate of all is simply to say ‘artist’, a definition truthful beyond its seeming simplicity in the scope it has offered Beezy for a fascinating life lived in art.

One of South Africa’s leading artists, Beezy’s eclectic and effervescent approach to art, has attracted a stellar list of fellow polymaths as collaborators, including David Bowie, Brian Eno and Dave Matthews.

His is a storybook career that has spanned early encounters with Andy Warhol – which was to inspire Bailey’s own Cape Town version of The Factory – as well as the invention of an artistic female alter-ego, Joyce Ntobe.

A love of story-telling on a grand scale is perhaps not surprising for an artist whose own family history, touched on in his new book (published by Circa Press, out now), reads like an adventure story. His father, Jim Bailey, was the publisher of the seminal magazine *Drum*, and grandmother Mary was a pioneer of aviation. We see these early influences in a dizzying array of engaging, often lyrical characters including mystical flying men and his Chinese fantasy

character, Lee Ping Zing.

This is not to say that he is detached from the concerns of real life, however. Beezy aspires to create art as a balm for a mad world – a corrective for our most lamentable human qualities, including a planet brutalized by extremes of wealth and poverty, environmental ignorance and negligence. The sources of his imagery are elusive. In his own words: ‘frozen dreams, images and legends enter from my subconscious, the realm of my imagination. I act as a conduit for visual messages greater than I am.’

This is a book that surprises, challenges and delights in equal measure, an introduction to an artist who challenges the status quo and our own preconceptions. In *Beezy*, we find a rare artist, one whose ‘sense of freedom gives his output a darting, inquisitive quality that sharpens our curiosity’, says Richard Cork.





Beezy Bailey, Everard Read London,
© Dan Weill Photography

Beezy you've led many lives in one lifetime. A rich and varied path - who and what were your earliest inspirations?

Primarily my father, Jim Bailey, who described himself as an independent anarchist and who pioneered the free press across Pan-Africa with his legendary Drum magazine. He always advised me to swim against the flow of the river. He was a highly educated, brilliant mind and a free thinker who instilled in me the confidence to be different and to think out of the box. He was the first to advise me to become an artist when I was 18.

An inspiration was growing up on a farm outside Johannesburg with its traditional Ndebele houses and my father's collection of African bronzes which he used as references for his books he

wrote on the Bronze Age. It instilled in me at a very early age a romantic notion of being an African, in spite of my European heritage.

What themes do you like to explore and return to in your work?

I have a lot of angels, which have evolved from the traditional winged type, to being spheres in my recent work - because I believe when we die, we break up into spherical energy fields. Our planets and stars and sun are all spheres. A lot of my angels, including the spheres, are falling, illustrating the fall from grace which mankind and the earth finds itself in today. Fishes appear in my work, quite often in the sky or out of the water, this has ancient Christian symbolism and is about the Piscean age from which we are emerging into the Age of Aquarius. Dancing fig-

ures populate my work, because in a way, music and dance are an integral part of my creativity.

When you're creating a new body of work, what comes first - a visual cue, a theme, colours?

I make abstract rough marks on several canvasses. I call this 'cloud painting' in the sense of releasing figurative elements in the abstract shapes formed from within. So generally, I don't work with a pre-concept; I will do the same with wood when I make sculptures releasing the image within, in the traditional way that Michelangelo talks of releasing David from the block of marble.

It seems to me that your back catalogue is not just a history of your feelings and interests, but also a visual history of South Africa. What would you say to that?

I would not agree in the sense that South African history is fairly complex about Colonialism and about Apartheid essentially which my work does not illustrate. However I draw a lot of inspiration from the cliff edge that South Africa constantly finds itself on and the nervous creative energy that comes from that.

What has been the most memorable feedback/praise you've received in response to your work?

A woman who flew across China coming to see my retrospect in Wuhan in a private museum, busting into tears in front of my painting. And David Bowie sending me a quote that read: "everybody in the world should own a Beezy Bailey".

Tell us about your new book.

It's been a long process going over about 10 years, with the gathering of old slides from my archive going back to London art school days. A milestone was my meeting with Herman Lelie and his wife Stefania and a close friendship developing between us, along with an awareness that Herman and Stefania design the very finest artist books. Work with Herman then began on this 7 years ago. More recently, Herman introduced me to David Jenkins, the former director of Phaidon who now has his own publishing company, Circa Press. David decided to take the book on which I'm very excited about because distribution is key in producing any publication and David has a very good reputation in this field. He also ruthlessly edited the book, trimming down a lot of my 36 year art career, including collaborations with other artists and a huge archive into a coherent focused masterful product, printed to the highest quality in Verona Italy. I have also done limited editions containing original artworks to be sold at the launches.

It's clear that you're an artist who inspires others - including Brian Eno, David Bowie and Dave Matthews. Which artists inspire currently you?

There are no particular historical artists who inspire me but I am visiting Amsterdam in June for one day specifically to see the greatest painter of all time, Rembrandt. I was recently inspired by a BBC documentary on Francis Bacon and then, apart from other artists, there may be pieces of music that I find inspiration from when I'm working, for example, during the making of the 100 paintings I did for the limited edition books, I did them dancing and painting to music of Al Jarreau.



Then there will be the extraordinary landscapes we have in South Africa and Namibia that inspire the settings for a lot of my paintings - unearthly landscapes with an extraordinary sense of space and light.

What can we expect to see from Beezy Bailey during the rest of 2019?

I have two further book launches in Johannesburg and Cape Town which will be accompanied by smaller exhibitions and I have a one man show in Johannesburg in November. I am also participating in a sculpture exhibition in Dubai towards the end of the year.

BEEZY BAILEY

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Designer: Herman Lelie

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Beezy Bailey is represented by Everard Read Gallery, London, Cape Town and Johannesburg