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REVIEW
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**PAPSAK
PROPAGANDA:**
When I was five my
school took us to
the farm of a white
man and we
stamped on grapes
for hours and it was
delightful but I'm
sure we were free
labourers of chardo-
naai, chardonnay,
chenin-blackout,
#DOPSYSTEM,
2019

LADY SKOLLIE'S CHAIN REACTION

Global art projects culminate in a bold new series from the South African artist after she uncovers unsuspected links, writes Graham Wood

The last time Laura Windvogel aka Lady Skollie exhibited in the UK, in 2017, director Danny Boyle, famous for films including *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Trainspotting*, asked for the gallery to be closed so he could have a private viewing.

Boyle subsequently commissioned Lady Skollie to contribute artwork for a New York stage performance he directed to raise funds for his charity, Dramatic Need, which harnesses the power of art to “build hope and self-belief in the face of conflict, trauma and hardship” and has centres in SA and Rwanda.

The play, *The Children’s Monologues*, involved actors dramatising the accounts of children growing up in Rammulotsi, a township in the Free State, of a day they will never forget. The actors included the likes of Jessica Chastain, Daveed Diggs, Andrew Garfield, Audra McDonald, James McAvoy, Anne Hathaway, Trevor Noah, Susan Sarandon, Sienna Miller, Catherine Zeta-Jones, McKinley Belcher III, Common, Daniel Kaluuya and Lakeith Stanfield. Lady Skollie created the backdrop for the Carnegie Hall performance.

Another opportunity that sprung from that 2017 exhibition, *Lust Politics*, was an invitation she’s now taking up in Birmingham, “a miniature residency of sorts”, working with an artist-run public gallery, Eastside Projects. It’s part of Here There Everywhere: Africa, a collaborative programme of international research, residencies and exchange. As well as putting on an exhibition, she’s given performances, conducted a zine workshop, given interviews and created a large-scale mural.

The power of Lady Skollie’s work is undeniable – its energy and immediacy and sense of urgency make for a potent combination, and she’s recognised on her home turf. She had her own dedicated booth at Art Joburg, where we spoke the day before she left for the UK.

The exhibition expands on the recent series of “Papsak Propaganda” works that formed part of her exhibition *Good & Evil* at Circa in June. There are works from *The Children’s Monologues*, too, as well as new works, including a lithograph of chains (of which more later) and others echoing the R5 coin she designed for the South African Mint to commemorate 25 years of democracy.

“We have some great new works and a selection of very strong works from the last couple of years,” says Gavin Wade, director at Eastside Projects. Together they reveal how far Lady Skollie has come from the sexually provocative paintings of bananas that looked like penises and paw paws that looked like vaginas that first gained her recognition.

At the time, she was preoccupied with breaking sexual taboos and to a certain degree, her art works were intended to shock.

She’s a little dismissive of that work now, though it led directly to the more sustained exploration in her work of topics related to sexual abuse and gender violence, which in turn led to her more sustained exploration of oppression, violence and historical traumas that characterise the works on show this year. (The fruits are still, however, a leitmotif in her work.)

The “Papsak Propaganda” works at the centre of this exhibition deal with the “dop system” of paying farm labourers in the Western Cape with alcohol.

“Drunkenness has been used to control oppressed nations forever,” she says.

“Everyone who has a mystical connection to earth or to nature or to God or whatever have always been the first nations to be quelled, especially by addiction and alcohol.”

She’s referring to her own cultural roots, which she calls “so-called coloured or San or of Khoi descent, or Griqua”, although usually just “coloured”. She’s unflinching. “We have to ask ourselves why we are the ones within that structure,” she says. “A lot of my work is trying to shake that or rattle it.”

Her exploration of the topic has led her to consider the blanks in her own cultural history – something she compares to the amnesia you might have after a traumatic

event, but on a broad cultural level. She sees her own cultural heritage or identity as “chopped together” from diverse sources, from the history of Malay slaves in the Cape to “cut-and-paste African-American culture”.

But she also talks about this hybrid identity being cobbled together as a way of not facing issues such as the colonial legacy of “proximity to rape and violence”. “It’s hard for us to get over that trauma, because we can’t acknowledge the violent ways that started our origins,” she says. She refers to it as a history that’s been “nipped in the bud” or “stamped out”.

The mysticism of the ancient San rock-art motifs she invokes suggest ritual and spirituality – she plays around with terms like “genetic spirituality” and the idea of trance. Sometimes it seems a bit superstitious. “We still have this connection, once you tap

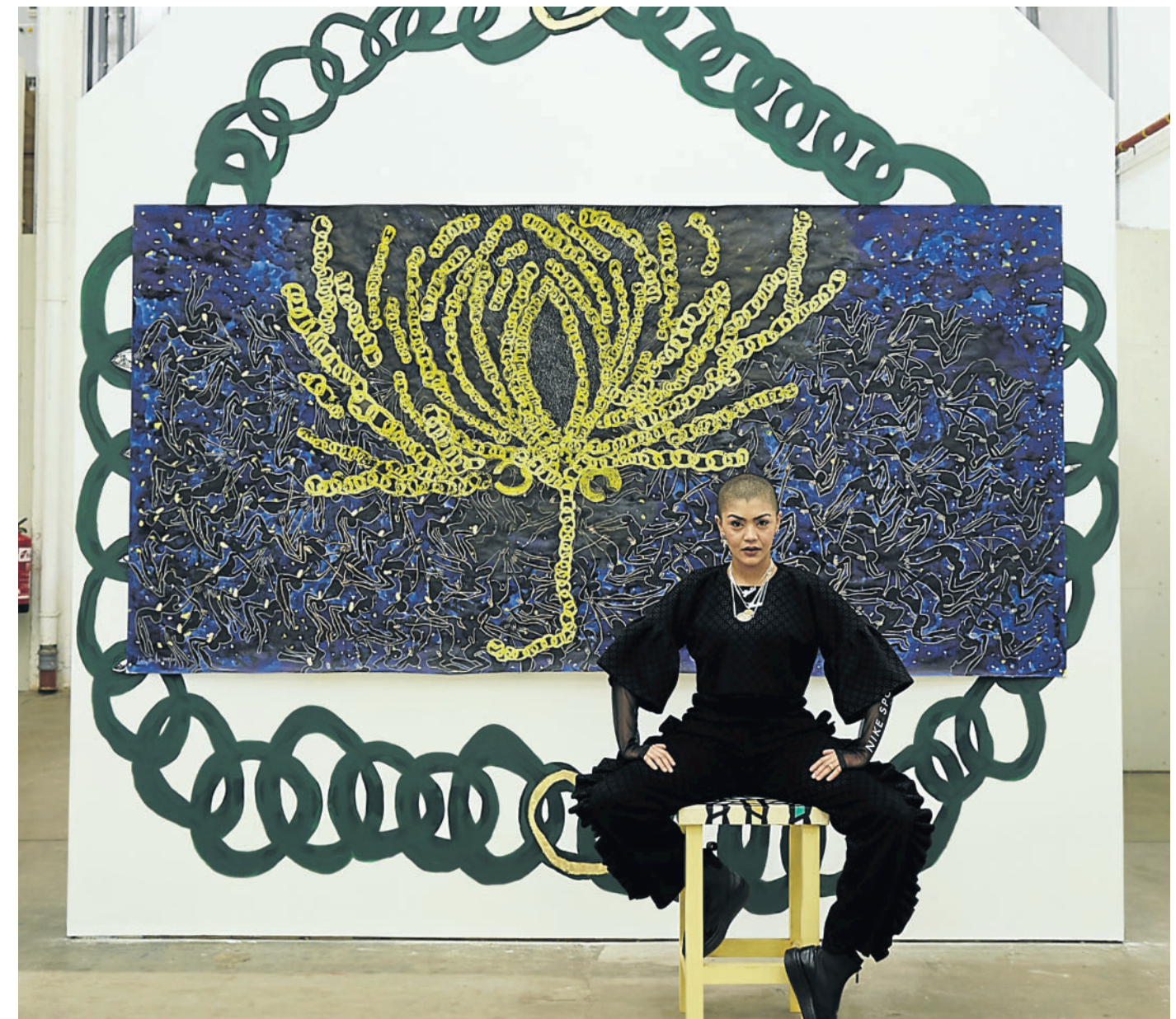


into it, that puts you in contact with people you are supposed to meet, things you didn’t know existed,” she says.

But at the same time, there’s a self-conscious nostalgia about yearning for origins in this theme, which at once connects with her most ancient human and cultural origins, and simultaneously acknowledges the loss of that connection. It’s an act of

reclamation or re-appropriation on her own terms – a kind of commentary on her own disjointed or interrupted relationship with her own heritage. The spirituality in her work also marks a silence – a missing part of history.

It’s also a gesture that connects with other largely unacknowledged artists, such as Coex’ae Qgam (also known as Dada) and Cg’ose Ntcox’o, who designed the tail art for a British Airways plane in the ‘90s, but went largely unacknowledged and uncompensated. Lady Skollie’s own hunger for the spotlight, her desire to be “the centre of attention”, has



Above, Lady Skollie at Eastside Projects.

Picture: Stuart Whipps Courtesy of Eastside Projects.

Left, PAPSAC PROPAGANDA III: And I was really far out and you thought I was waving, but I was drowning (Stevie Smith tribute), 2018. Below, Cagn speaking to the people from the sky, 2018. Pictures: Supplied



become a way of taking historical acknowledgement for those who went before her and had none. “I’ll take it for all of us,” she says.

Similarly, the urgency and immediacy of her works, particularly those drawing on poster aesthetics, connect her to artists like Lionel Davis. “He is a South African artist who is still living and not acknowledged in a lot of ways, who did huge work in social justice in the ‘70s within poster culture and fast-publication culture,” she says.

And yet she hates to overanalyse. “I work fast and intensely, so I can be up-to-date,” she says. “I hate having to read into stuff. I am a very literal person.”

It’s that combination, however, that gives her work its power. There’s directness and profundity. There’s also a level of deceptiveness.

She says that she learnt that the sexiness of her early work was magnetic.

Rather than abandoning it, she has used it a bit like a Trojan horse to sneak more serious messages past people’s barriers. “It’s a trap,” she says. “Sex sells, and in South Africa, people love being entertained before they get preached to.”

Before Art Joburg, she did a lithograph of chains as a universal symbol. She recalls that when Wade saw it on her Insta stories, he said, “Oh God, is it because you heard about the dark history of the chains of Birmingham?”

She hadn’t, but discovered that “something like 70% of the chains, manacles and collars used in slavery were produced in Birmingham, a stone’s throw from where Eastside projects is”.

“I wasn’t even going to show that one here,” she says. Perhaps it was a mystical connection. “I believe in divine timing,” she says.

She’s now titled her exhibition “Weakest Link”.

Lady Skollie is showing at East Side Projects in Birmingham until December 14.