

## Alida Bothma

Alida Bothma is a versatile artist who works in a wide range of media and techniques. She is known for her paintings as well as her children's book illustrations, which have been described as imaginative, roguish and evocative.

She enjoys her role in making children's books and sees the illustrations as a child's first exposure to an "art exhibition".

The artist continues: "I work on different levels. On the one hand I do light-hearted illustrations for children, and on the other I paint, sometimes portraying my deepest thoughts, emotions and convictions. My book illustrations are naturally inspired by the story or the poem that I have to bring to life visually, but for my paintings I find my inspiration in many things that stir my heart. Things like nature, my love for the African continent and all its cultures, human vulnerability, and my relationship with God."

She often combines her media, and works in charcoal, inks, pastels, acrylics and also some graphic techniques. Lately she has been concentrating more on working in oils on canvas and board.

She studied art at the Cape Town Technikon in the seventies. Her first international exposure was in 1977 when some of her watercolour paintings were included in an international aquarelle exhibition in Germany. Since then, besides South Africa, her works have been exhibited in Japan, Italy, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Iran and India.

She is the recipient of several prestigious awards in this country as well as abroad.

International awards:

1. Merit award: **NOMA Concours (UNESCO), Tokyo, Japan 1994** - illustration in "Die Wit Vlinder by Corlia Fourie.
2. Bronze Medal and Runner-up award: **NOMA Concours (UNESCO), Tokyo, Japan 2005** for a volume of poetry, Woordreise.

National awards:

1. Katrine Harries Medal for illustration in 1985 for two books: *All Everest's Birds* (Rona Rupert) and *The Earth must be free* (Pieter W. Grobbelaar).
2. M.E.R. Medal in 1988 for illustrations in the book *Goue Fluit my storie is uit* (compiled by Linda Roode).
3. ATKV Award for illustrators in 1993, 1997 and 2000 for the books *Caty Collie Wobbles* (Elsabe Steenberg), *Stippe Stappe Stories*, and *Steweltjies na Wonderland* (Hester Heese).

The following is an interview conducted with Alida about her life as an artist:

**1. At what age did you know that you were going to become an artist?**

As long as I can remember, I have always been drawing and painting. As a child I always took a drawing book along on holidays and drew pictures of everything I saw, even while driving in the car. At first I thought I would be an art teacher, but only decided to study Graphic Art quite late in high school.

**2. Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Pretoria. My sister was an art teacher. She is 10 years older than I am and she was my art teacher in high school. She had a big influence on my love for art. We have always been very close friends.

**3. Do you think your upbringing has influenced the kind of work you create?**

My mother was an artist as well, although she never had the opportunity to study art. While I was still quite young (Grade 8), some evenings my sister and I would decide to draw and paint together, and then we would get so carried away that we would stay up all night painting. During such times my mother never told me to go to bed, which I appreciated very much. As a child I have been exposed to many different forms of art - we often went to exhibitions, ballets, plays, operas, classical music concerts etc.

**4. Where did you study?**

I studied at the Cape Town Technicon. I did a 3-year course in Graphic Art.

**5. Have you been influenced by other artists?**

I am sure everyone gets influenced by other artists, although you might not even be aware of it.

**6. If so how and why have they influenced you?**

I think that one is influenced in so many ways. I think that the minute you admire someone's work or are inspired by someone's work, you are influenced, although it might not even show obviously in your work. I have admired the drawing ability of Judith Mason and Michelangelo. I have admired the use of colour by Van Gogh, the strong use of line in Pieter Wennings oil paintings. In children's book illustrations I have been inspired by the quick drawings by Quenton Blake, the use of aspects of design in the illustrations by Bernadette, the loose style of drawings by Charles Keeping and Victoria Ambrus.

**7. What was the first job you had after studying?**

I was very lucky that I did not have to go and look for a job. At the end of my 3<sup>rd</sup> year the Art director of Cape Town's major advertising agencies: "Deviliers and Schonfeldt" came to view the students' work, and they offered me a job as an illustrator. It was a wonderful job and I gained a lot of experience of the advertising world. Very exciting.

**8. Have you ever spent time teaching?**

I once taught a group of students for one term. It was a course on book illustration. I found that it drained my energy and badly influenced my work.

**9. Where do you gather your inspiration?**

My inspiration comes from different sources. It usually comes from something I have heard: a story, a poem, a piece of Scripture, a song. My children's book illustrations are inspired by the story or poem I have to illustrate.

**10. How does your creative process work?**

When I illustrate a book, I read the story many times. Then I think about the characters and mood of the story for a long time before I actually start on the book. I never do any "roughs" before I work, but do the final work straight away. I guess it is the same for my paintings. I "see" the work (or

part of it) in my head before I start, and then it develops as I go along.

**11. What mediums have you worked in and which mediums do you prefer?**

I have worked in many different mediums. I am thankful that we were exposed to many mediums while studying. I prefer using mixed media for almost all my work. I use (or have used) oil paint, acrylic, watercolours, coloured inks, charcoal, pencil, etching, lithograph, woodcut and lino-printing, collage and photography. I love experimenting with different techniques.

**12. Have you gone through any definite stages in terms of concept or subject matter?**

Yes, definitely. I go through stages where I work with the same subject matter or colours for a long period, before I see a change again.

**13. What do you feel is the role of the artist in contemporary society?**

The artist can have different roles in society, depending on the type of art that the artist produces. The art can make people aware of the problem issues in society; it can help people to see life and problems or issues in a different light; it should invite people to think about what they see in the artworks - what do you want the onlooker to see and think about? Life/truth/God etc.

An artwork can also have the role to let people recognise beauty; or to be aware of your emotions when you look at the artwork.

**14. During the course of your artistic career, do you have regrets?**

I had the opportunity to study Art in Europe, but I didn't want to at that stage because I had a boy friend in South Africa! I regret that!!

**15. What do you think has been the highlight in your artistic career?**

Winning an award is not the most important thing in one's career, but it is good to know you are recognized in your

field. I have won several awards for best illustrator in South Africa, which have meant a lot to me. In 2006 I was awarded runner-up award (bronze medal) in Tokyo, Japan at the Noma Concours for Children's Book Illustrations. I think that was my highlight to be internationally rewarded.

**16. You have had many exhibitions, which have been most rewarding?**

In 2006 I was invited to the William Humphrey Gallery in Kimberley to have a solo exhibition of my work. What made it different to other solo exhibitions was that they wanted me to show an overview of my work. It included some of my work as a 9-year old, my work as a teenager, a student and my adult life, which included illustrations for children's books and paintings. I also had the actual children's books on show with rough sketches, which were exhibited in glass cabinets. I think that exhibition was the most rewarding to see all my work over a lifetime together in one exhibition.

**17. What is your opinion on South African art as a whole, considering your exposure to international art?**

I feel that the art in South Africa is of a very high standard. The art began as a way of expressing the pains of our sad history, but our contemporary artists have produced such beautiful work of such a big variety it is wonderful to see South Africa standing out in the art world.

**18. When you chose to pursue an artistic career, what was it that made you sure that it was the right decision for you considering the risks of committing to this field?**

Although I was passionate about my art, I never really made a conscious decision that this is what I would end up doing. I chose to study Graphic Design and one thing just let to another.

**19. Do you find that your art is therapeutic in any way?**

Yes, I think it is. I have found that my art is mainly an expression of my joy. When I go through times of unhappiness, I tend to lose my creativity. When my mother died while I was still young, I struggled to produce any work for a long times. I don't like to paint when I am unhappy, because I feel like my art tends to be unattractive.