

## Question 1

*GD: John Kramer, you grew up and were schooled in Worcester in the beautiful Hex River Valley. You have mentioned that you had a dynamic art master at school. Would you be open to sharing some of your early experiences of an art education in Worcester? Did your early introduction to art pave the way to choosing a career as an artist?*

JK: Worcester, my hometown, located in the Breede River valley of the Western Cape of South Africa, is the perfect blend of small-town charm and big city accessibility. I would describe Worcester as a 'Goldilocks' town. Not too big, not too small. Founded in 1820 by Lord Charles Somerset, Worcester boasts a rich history and a diverse range of cultural and recreational activities. The town's wide streets and spacious houses, surrounded by picturesque mountains, offer residents and visitors a unique and inviting atmosphere.

Worcester was the center of the Cape fruit industry and was home to well-known South African artists Hugo Naudé and Jean Welz, each of whom left a legacy in the form of the Hugo Naude Art Centre, now the Hugo Naude Museum and Jean Welz Gallery.

My early introduction to art was inspired by my uncle Theo, who was an aspiring painter. As a young boy, I spent holidays at my grandfather's seaside house in Onrus and have fond memories of visiting my uncle's room, filled with tubes of paint and brushes. This experience sparked a desire in me to become an artist, and I would often show my uncle my own artwork and seek his advice and encouragement. Some of the tips he gave me I remember to this day. In high school, I had the opportunity to take art as a matric subject at the Hugo Naude Art Centre. The principal at the time, Bokkie Basson, was a practicing artist who worked in the abstract style, which was not always well-received in the conservative town. Bokkie would describe his detractors as 'Philistines'. He was a great teacher and inspiration to me and my classmates, many of whom went on to careers making use of the lessons learnt there.

After a nine-month stint in the army, I enrolled at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in 1966 and pursued my passion for painting. Worcester provided me with the perfect environment to nurture my love for art and set me on the path to becoming an artist.

## Question 2

*GD: To be 'a square' in the seventies was to be ultra conservative. Yet in choosing a square format for this exhibition you have broken with the classical tradition and the ratio of 1.618, the golden mean that dictated the ideal proportion of the parts to the whole in composing a painting. Effectively you are breaking with a tradition of landscape painting in SA that was established by Pierneef, Tinus de Jongh, and a generation of artists trained in the classical manner. Would you care to discuss your motivation in doing so?*

JK: When creating a painting, the choice of canvas size and format is crucial. As an artist, I have mostly worked with the landscape format as it suits my subject matter well. However, at some point, I decided to experiment with a vertical format. This required me to zoom in on my subject matter and focus on vertical and horizontal shapes, eliminating elements like sky and trees.

This in turn led in recent years to decide to do a series of paintings in the square format. Once again, I decided to concentrate by looking at buildings head on and eliminating any elements like sky. Here one could concentrate on abstract shapes, colour, interspersed by more irregular shapes in the lettering. The square format allowed me to experiment with new techniques and explore my subject matter in a different way. A series of works can be seen at the Cape Gallery in my exhibition "All Square" in February 2023

### Question 3

*GD: In the 1970's you have mentioned that you attended Prof. Neville Dubow's lectures in the History and Theory of Fine Art. By the 1960s and 1970s Michaelis advocated a liberal education and had moved away from the more authoritarian dictates of a classical art education, drawing from plaster casts etc. Students were encouraged to experiment and innovate. The art historian Lucy Alexander noted that by 'the late sixties and seventies even South African Artists were looking to New York for leadership'. One can surmise students were picking up on trends initiated by Robert Rauschenberg and subsequently Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein who traced their inspiration for Pop art to Rauschenberg's collages of appropriated media images, and his experiments in silkscreen printing. Did exposure to the art and theory of that time contribute to broadening your horizons and define in any way your future development as an artist? Can you be specific as to how?*

JK: I was at Michaelis Art school in the sixties (1966-1968) and during this time had the opportunity to attend lectures at the school and slide show talks by Neville Dubow, a prominent critic and teacher at the school. He also gave public lectures at the Association of Arts in Cape Town in the 1970's. These were usually based on what he saw on his trips to New York city. One of the key lessons I took away from these talks was Dubow's suggestion that instead of looking to New York for inspiration, we should explore the world around us and comment on the things we were familiar with. This stayed with me. In my third year Stanley Pinker was appointed to run the painting class as Carl Buchner now filled in for Maurice van Essche as principal. Stanley was a very good teacher who through his sketchbooks and collage swatches, amongst other things, introduced us to the fact that magazine images held interesting color combinations. After art school I tried to find my artist voice, trying various painting styles, Hard edge, Pop and Abstract. I did a series of space paintings as this was current at the time. There were so many directions and possibilities to follow.

Early in the 1970's I became aware of a style called hyper realism or photorealism that was based not on looking at nature but on two dimensional images, namely photographs. At that time using photographs as reference material for painting was regarded as a 'cop out'. I had always been interested in photography and had recorded shops and buildings in Worcester knowing they would soon disappear, and I wanted to have a record of them. Around 1972 thinking about Dubow's suggestion about exploring what one was familiar with, I became interested in what I called at the time "searching for the real South Africa". One day using one of my photographs of a rather mundane and ordinary corner store I proceeded to do a photo realistic painting. I entered a small work in the New Signatures Exhibition at the Association of Arts, and it was selected as one of the prize winners. At that time most paintings were nonrepresentational, and I think it had some shock value.

#### Question 4

*GD: For many years you oversaw the displays at the South African Natural History Museum and currently you are a member of the Vernacular Society. You are also a keen photographer and have in your archives a substantial collection of photographs taken over the years recording buildings that interest you. What draws you to focus on a particular building? How do you select what you choose to paint?*

JK: As a former display artist at the South African Natural History Museum and current member of the Vernacular Society, I have always had a passion for capturing images of buildings through photography. My years at the museum, both as an exhibition designer and ethnographic field trip photographer, allowed me to travel to various parts of South Africa, exposing me to a diverse range of architectural styles. I was sent on study trips to Europe, Canada and the United States in the late 1970's to investigate the latest display techniques for the new extensions to the South African Museum that were being planned. This was a rewarding experience, and I took the opportunity to visit many of the world's great art museums.

My role at the museum involved working closely with scientists, technicians, and taxidermists to plan new exhibitions, using a variety of skills such as screen-printing labels, designing showcases and lighting, and preparing graphics and artwork. I spent a rewarding 32 years at the museum working on many exhibitions including 'the Travelling Bushman Exhibition, Wonders of Nature and the Whale Well.

While my training as a painter was not always necessary for my job, I continued to paint in my free time and participated in various group exhibitions over the years including the Cape Town Biennial in 1981 and the Cape Town Triennial in 1983.

In 2002, with the formation of the Iziko Southern Flagship, I took the opportunity to retire early and pursue my dream of becoming a full-time painter. My wife and I joined the Vernacular Architecture Society in 2006, which has been a wonderful experience over the years. One particularly memorable trip to the Loxton area introduced us to the unique corbelled buildings of the Karoo. I have since made many trips to the Karoo to document these structures, which were used to illustrate a book by my wife on The Corbelled Buildings of the Karoo.

Throughout my career, I have been drawn to buildings that possess a quirky character and are typical of the small town. I am always looking for new and interesting structures to capture through my photography. I carefully select the buildings I choose to paint, focusing on those that have a special significance or meaning to me.

## Question 5

*GD: People relate to the cafes, barber shops, etc. you paint. You view your subject objectively, excluding any trace of a human figure. This calls to mind a comment made by the American artist Ben Shahn who speaking of the shape of content said 'Implicit in everything, whether it concerns criticism or technique, or the artist's communication with his audience is the quiet certainty that neither form nor meaning exist without the other in a work of art. Explicitly he makes a striking demonstration of how the very emphasis on form in denial of meaning results in the attribution of meaning to the form. This comment suggests to me that the more objective the content of a painting is the more subjective the audience's response will be. Can you relate to Shahn's assessment? Can you call to mind and relate an instance in which one of your paintings has solicited a meaningful personal response from a patron?*

JK: Most people have fond memories, especially from childhood for their local corner cafe. In an age before the supermarket came to town this is where one bought sweet, ice creams and cooldrinks and often there was a section for novelties like spinning tops, crackers and novelties. So going to the shop was a pleasurable experience that most people can relate to. In the early 1970's when I was searching for "the real South Africa" to paint, I was drawn to the ordinary buildings in small towns that as far as I was concerned, other artists had not used as subject matter. I loved the human sense of scale, the way light played across the facade and the patterns made by corrugated iron roofs. As most buildings are rather bland in terms of colour, I'm always on the lookout for advertising signs that add a touch of colour.

"People can easily relate to the cafes, barber shops, and other establishments that I paint. They recognize the iconic advertisements like Coca-Cola, or Pepsi that compete for attention with the business owner's signage, along with the crudely painted images of ice cream cones, hamburgers, and roast chicken on the café facades. I approach my subject matter objectively, excluding any human figures. The decision for this is that I want the viewer's attention to be focused on the building with all its quirks and weathering over time. Including figures in the painting changes the dynamics of the scene.

The strongest response that I get to a particular painting of a building is when there is a connection or ownership. One instance that comes to mind is when I did a painting in Salt River and some family members living abroad were informed of its existence. This caused a lot of excitement, and many memories were shared. I love getting feedback on the history of the building and who the owners were.

## Question 6

*GD: When you have published one of your paintings on social media, I notice a lively conversation ensues as people share their recollections of the subject. Has this direct access to your audience been of benefit to you?*

JK: Having direct access to my audience through social media has certainly been of benefit to me. When I publish one of my paintings on Facebook or Instagram, I love seeing the lively conversation that ensues as people share their personal memories and experiences related to the subject matter.

This interaction with my audience not only provides me with valuable feedback, but also helps me to better understand the impact and significance of my work. It also offers a glimpse into how my art resonates with people and allows me to connect with new audiences who may not have otherwise encountered my work.

## Question 7

*GD: Your approach to painting has been compared to that of the celebrated American artist Edward Hopper. You share his interest in the urban environment, a keen observation of the effect of light on form, and an objective point of view. In his book 'Visions of Reality' Ivor Kranzfelder suggests Hopper saw himself as a performer. Can you relate to this? Is there a story you would like to share?*

JK: In 1959 I bought a paperback book called Modern American Painting and Sculpture by Sam Hunter. To this day one illustration in the book, Edward Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning," left a lasting impression on me and has stayed in the back of my mind ever since. It depicted a row of colourful buildings with a fire hydrant in the foreground casting a long shadow.

I'm always flattered that people compare my paintings to the great Hopper, but I think my early influences were by the photo realists or Hyper realist in the 1970's, artists like Richard Estes, Robert Cottingham, Ralph Goings, Chuck Close and Robert Bechtle who produced paintings that drew heavily on photography and depicted the ordinary. They focused mainly on the mundane like cars, trucks and diners.

I never went to the extreme lengths of the photo realists but was certainly influenced by them in their choice of subject matter and using photographs as a reference.

## Question 8

*GD: Since leaving art school you have established your own unique interpretation of the subjects you choose to paint. You have acquired a technical mastery and understanding of colour and composition. I am sure emerging artists could benefit from any experiences that you would be willing to share.*

JK: Being an artist is often a solitary pursuit, with limited opportunities for collaboration and exchange of ideas once one leaves the structured environment of art school. This transition can be particularly challenging as art students are suddenly cast into the real world with little support or guidance on how to build a successful career.

While the technical skills and knowledge acquired in art school are crucial, building a career as an artist also requires determination, persistence, and a continuous commitment to creating and sharing work. This can often mean finding work in a related field, such as teaching, advertising or museums, to support oneself while pursuing a career as an artist.

It's important to continue creating work in your spare time. Participating in group shows and competitions can help you gain exposure and build a following of collectors who will support your work. Attend art events, reach out to other artists on social media, and make connections with other artists, curators, and gallerists in the art world. who may be able to help you further your career.

Having an online presence is crucial for artists in today's digital age. Create a website or online portfolio on Instagram or Facebook to showcase your work and use social media to promote your art and connect with potential collectors.

Additionally, it is important to develop a unique style that is recognizable and to not overprice your work in the beginning, as it may discourage sales. Instead, one can gradually increase prices as your work gains recognition and demand. Ultimately, building a successful career as an artist takes time and effort, but with dedication and hard work, it can be a fulfilling and rewarding journey.