

SEEING THE LIGHT

After 30 years as an interior designer, Johannesburg artist Aurelia James decided to change tack and pursue her lifelong passion for painting

Aurelia James pours espresso from a pot and piles chocolate brownies onto a cake stand. Looking relaxed in jeans and a white linen shirt, she's just got back from a week on an island off the Kenyan coast. "I must have taken over 600 photographs," she says. "There was endless painting material, from weathered, derelict buildings to fantastic market scenes and seascapes. I find beauty in the offbeat, in the old and worn. And I'm very drawn to simplicity. I can't wait to get started."

A walk through her spacious Westcliff home reveals a prodigious output, ranging from what she calls impressionistic landscapes to naturalistic portraits.

"I enjoyed a long career as an interior designer," she says, "and drawing perspectives made it easy to paint buildings in my landscapes." Despite three decades in the world of interiors, including 15 years with a private bank, plus a stint on her own when her two sons were little, Aurelia always knew she wanted to paint. "As a toddler I would draw all over my mother's walls in our home in Bloemfontein. And when I turned 50 I thought, it's now or never!"

Self-taught in still life and landscape painting, Aurelia has been painting seriously for the last seven years. "My first five paintings sold almost immediately and I thought, 'this is great'. The first thing I did was to buy more canvases and frames." Then her venture began in earnest when she took herself off to study portraiture at an old

Italian school in Florence, learning to look and paint in the style of the old masters.

Aurelia admits that years of designing commercial and retail spaces taught her enormous discipline. I'm not surprised to learn that she paints six days a week, or that she cuts up canvases that she no longer feels an affinity for. The still lifes and landscapes make up 90 percent of her work, a genre which she finds 'relaxing'. But it's her portraits that are perhaps her most arresting work. An impressive collection hangs throughout her home, ranging from models from the Florence school, to commissions and even strangers that she's asked to sit for her. "I use the sight-sizing technique that I learnt in Italy," she explains.

"You learn to walk away from the subject and really look – painting basically from memory. This carries on throughout the sitting and that means walking countless kilometres a week!"

Aurelia credits an American teacher at the school in Florence for helping her to become such a proficient portrait painter. "Portraiture can be stressful in that there's so much to it. Landscapes, for instance, are about working with a reference, mixing the colours and applying paint. It's primarily technical. But with portraits you've got to achieve a likeness, you've got to be technically skilled, but most of all you've got to capture something of that person's soul. I really get to know people when I paint them. And when a portrait's finished and I know that it's good, that's just the best feeling in the world." **GH**

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Aurelia James in the studio of her Westcliff home. The portrait behind her is entitled *Azli*. Portraits on the right from top to bottom are *Francis*, *Abigail* and *Tremayne*.

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To view Aurelia's work by appointment, call 011 646 3371 or 082 771 5954.