



AFRICAN ART / CAPE TOWN

# New waves

With its bustling gallery scene and artist-friendly lifestyle, Cape Town is the epicentre of new South African art.

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“It does not take a whole lot of convincing to get someone on a plane,” is the droll answer of Joost Bosland, curator at Stevenson, one of Cape Town’s leading commercial art galleries, when asked about the spectacular growth of the city’s art scene.

It’s not hard to see what he’s on about. Cape Town has natural beauty in spades: towering cliffs, golden beaches, and historic vineyards that produce seriously good wines. The city’s centre, wedged between the soaring sandstone of Table Mountain and the glittering Atlantic, is compact and safe enough to explore on foot – a mix of art deco, modernist and Victorian buildings home to restaurants, design shops and entrepreneurs.

And then there are the galleries. You’ll encounter many of these on an amble through the centre, or by heading to Woodstock, a gritty, vibrant nearby suburb, where many of the city’s top commercial spaces are based. “The visual arts sector in South Africa is technically as good as anywhere else. The subject matter is universal. Often examples are very affordable relative to elsewhere,” says Charles Shields, the director of Everard Read Cape Town. The gallery, which has been based in the v&a Waterfront for the past 22 years and recently opened a new satellite space, Circa, sells roughly half of its works to international collectors.

Commercial galleries have been the driving force behind Cape Town’s emergence as an art capital, and their presence at the Cape Town Art Fair – now a fixture in the calendar of many international collectors – has seen the annual event grow



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from a poky tent six years ago to 6,300 sq m of space at the city's International Convention Centre this February.

And now art lovers have two reasons to visit at any time of the year. Last September, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Mocaa) launched in the v&a Waterfront. Billed as Africa's Tate, its nine floors are home to works in a variety of different mediums by a who's who of contemporary African art. And 25km away, on Cape Town's southern edge, is the Norval Foundation,

I think it was only a matter of time for their voices to be heard and it is immensely satisfying to see the world finally giving African creativity the credit and exposure that it deserves," the former Puma CEO says. The museum that bears his name is a way of ensuring that African art "takes its rightful place on the global stage, rather than it being a passing moment".

At the epicentre of what Zeitz describes as, "a vibrant and growing art ecosystem" is the University of Cape Town's



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"All the young people in Cape Town are trying to do their own thing"



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fine arts school, Michaelis. Founded in 1925, the school has had an outsize influence on the city's art scene; many of its artists and curators studied in its grand buildings right in the city centre. One of its most promising young graduates, Morné Visagie, says that its four-year degree embedded in him a strong work ethic and attention to detail, along with "curatorship and craftsmanship". The school, he says, "asks and expects you to think outside the box. It teaches a contemporary and conceptual discourse. You can imagine what it must be like, coming from the timid suburbs to art school and watching Matthew Barney's [challenging performance piece] *The Cremaster Cycle* in class in first year!"

The faculty combines heavyweights such as sculptor Jane Alexander with young contemporary artists teaching part-time. The Michaelis graduate show every December is inundated with Capetonians on the prowl for exquisite and affordable pieces, while local curators circle the makeshift white cubes sizing up the talent. Soon after his 2011 graduate show,

Visagie was invited by Whatiftheworld to participate in a group show; since then he has had solo shows at the contemporary space (one of the city's finest).

"All the young people in Cape Town are trying to do their own thing and start their own businesses," Visagie says. "This innovative energy is inspiring. It's a fast changing and developing space, with more and more foreigners visiting and moving here. As an old port city, it still functions as that: a constant exchange with people from around the world."

When Brett Murray graduated from Michaelis in 1988, Cape Town had only one forward-thinking commercial gallery. Now there are dozens, along with two printmaking studios and several new non-profit organisations such as the Maitland Institute and the A4 Arts Foundation, which host residencies and exhibitions. "It is beginning to feel like the city is embracing and supporting art practitioners," he says.

Murray's studio, where he creates provocative sculptures that have



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which opened in April. Looming as vast as an aircraft carrier over vines and wetlands, it was founded by property mogul Louis Norval, and houses his family's collection of South African modern art, including key pieces by Gerard Sekoto and Irma Stern. There's a sculpture garden and a library, while cavernous gallery spaces host temporary exhibitions of both modern and contemporary African art.

The Norval Foundation's chief executive, Elana Brundyn, interprets the current "explosion of interest" in African art as an attempt to remedy years of neglect. Jochen Zeitz, whose collection of contemporary African art forms the core of the Zeitz Mocaa collection, echoes this.

"There is amazing talent coming out of Africa in all aspects of artistic expression.



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(1) Morné Visagie's studio (2) Exhibition at Norval Foundation (3) Owen Martin, Norval's chief curator (4) Visagie and Tracer exchanging ideas

been snapped up by the likes of Gérard Depardieu and P Diddy, is a five-minute walk from his house in Woodstock. "Within a few blocks there are framers, silkscreen workshops, timber yards, metal merchants, hardware stores, art supply shops, engineering companies and bronze casting foundries."

Thania Petersen, whose extraordinary photographic self-portraits explore the Cape's legacy of slavery and apartheid, returned home in 2007 after 12 years abroad. She doesn't regret it. "At any time of the day, no matter where you may be working you can escape into the abundance of her beauty. You are always five minutes from ascending into the magical and mystical forests of Table Mountain." The ability to do that, she explains, "makes us feel sane, loved, thankful and hopeful" in a city that, given its stark inequalities, "can sometimes leave you utterly heartbroken".

Claudette Schreuders, who lives and works in the leafy suburb of Pinelands with her partner, fellow artist Anton Kannemeyer, also enjoys the mountain: her weekly hikes "provide a good balance with work". Although she's been exhibiting with Jack Shainman Gallery in New York since 2001, she says, "I've never seriously considered living there".

Zander Blom moved to Cape Town from Johannesburg in 2014, the same year

he won the Jean-François Prat, a €20,000 international prize for young painters. As the burdens of identity and political expression in South Africa lessen, artists such as Blom are more at liberty to negotiate the meaning of shape, space and colour in an abstract dialogue that never really occurred during the upheaval of the country's recent past.

"Even though parliament is a stone's throw away from my studio, I can't say that I feel any more connected to politics or current affairs or that any of Cape Town has really influenced my stuff in a noticeable way since I moved," he says.

"Cape Town is full of nice things that are very close together," Blom says, comparing his experience of Johannesburg, where he was constantly in his car. "It's easy to pop out of the studio for lunch or to have a beer with some friends. Many of them are artists and it's great to have chats about art on a regular basis."

In 2012, Michael Tymbios and Gareth Pearson began the Cape Town edition of First Thursdays, with six galleries staying open late on the first Thursday of the month. At the time, the inner-city became a dead zone as soon as workers clocked off. Today more than 50 galleries and shops participate, attracting thousands of visitors.

Artists and entrepreneurs are making the most of the audience First Thursdays lures into the city, he says. "We've seen a

#### Galleries to visit:

##### 1. Everard Read Circa

Once somewhat safe and staid, this venerable gallery and its satellite space, Circa, now represent some of South Africa's most exciting talent, including visual artist nomThunzi Mashalaba, sculptor Beth Diane Armstrong and ceramicist Lucinda Mudge. [everard-read-capestown.co.za](http://everard-read-capestown.co.za)

##### 2. Stevenson

Along with Goodman – its rival a few doors down – this gallery represents many of contemporary African art's A-listers. Stevenson is particularly strong on photography, showing work by visual activist Zanele Muholi and provocateur Pieter Hugo that has been snapped up by collections the world over. [stevenson.info](http://stevenson.info)

##### 3. Norval Foundation

A strong curatorial team and access to the Norval family's peerless 20th century collection should ensure a programme that situates current movements in South African art against the backdrop of its recent lineage. [norvalfoundation.org](http://norvalfoundation.org)

##### 4. Iziko South African National Gallery

In spite of a lack of resources and less limelight than other institutions, this grand old lady in the city's central gardens still manages to punch above her weight with rigorous and thoughtful programming, such as the current show 'Assessing Abstraction' which delves into abstract art's turbulent presence in South Africa. [iziko.org.za](http://iziko.org.za)

##### 5. Blank Projects

Blank has built a reputation for unearthing daring, exciting talent that engages creatively with the charged complexities of the South African present, including 2018's Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Arts Igshaan Adams whose finely embroidered work reflects on his identities as young, gay and Muslim. [blankprojects.com](http://blankprojects.com)



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collective of galleried-artists self-organising and selling their works from the entrance to a gun-shop, the mayor's office using the platform to feature the work of artists from across the broader metropolitan area, and architecture studios opening their doors to the public."

Back at the Norval Foundation, Brundyn says she believes the gallery will complement the work of the city's commercial galleries by being "a platform for the exploration of alternative ways of seeing and making in the visual arts that aren't always commercially viable". And so, in the months to come, Norval will play host to a busy line-up of concerts, lectures and artist residencies.

It's likely art connoisseurs will make the most of this, but Brundyn hopes that Norval reaches far beyond this well-heeled audience. Like Zeitz Mocaa, the foundation offers free entry on one day a week, and is developing education programmes to enhance access for schoolchildren and others who may never have been inside a gallery. "There's excitement brewing in the air here," says Visagie. — (M)