

What's HAPPENING IN DAR ES SALAAM

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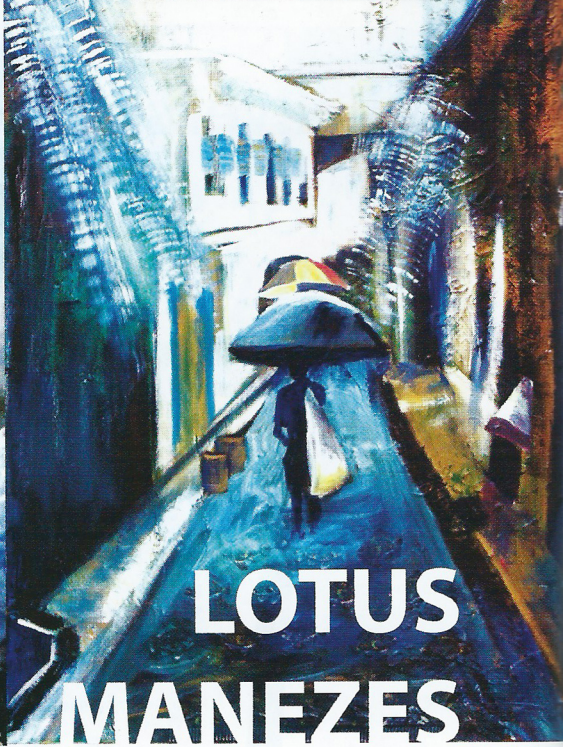


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LOTUS MANEZES

By Lotus Manezes

Lotus Manezes is a dancer, lawyer and painter. A daughter to Joanna and Thomas Manezes, she is a third generation Tanzanian, from her mother's side, and first generation Tanzanian from her dad's side. Mr. Manezes came on a boat from Goa, and decided to become Tanzanian because he loved it so much. He met Joanna and shortly after, they got married. A year later, Lotus was born. She grew up at Uhuru Street, Kariakoo, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Lotus went to Olympio Primary School in Upanga. But when she was 9, she convinced her mother to send her to boarding school in Kenya, Greenacres School, [because her best friend, Modesta, was going there too. After secondary school, she moved to South Africa, where she read Law at the University of Cape Town. Upon graduating, she came back home, qualified as an Advocate of the High Court of Tanzania and has been practicing law for four and a half years.

Recently, Miss Manezes sat down with Omar Mohammed to talk about her art and her upcoming exhibition on the 5th of August, 2011 at Makutano Art Gallery in Masaki.

So, who is Lotus Manezes?

That is a very interesting philosophical question (laughs). I think I define myself by my relationship with my mother, and the things that we've gone through in the past, my friends. My art is a priority compared to my work. I think I

would consider myself an artist and a dancer, before I consider myself as a lawyer.

And maybe that's my constant struggle – between my profession, and my art. I say struggle on the one hand, but the two go hand

in hand because without my art, I wouldn't be able to deal with my profession. And without my profession, I wouldn't be able to do my art.

How do those two things inform one another – you being a lawyer on the one and an artist on the other? How do your artistic pursuits inform your legal profession and vice versa.

The legal profession for me is very constricted. You have to adhere to all sorts of rules and regulations and there is a hierarchy within the profession itself, and so you always need to know your place. And anything you write has to be checked by somebody else, and sometimes people can be very aggressive in the way that they respond to you. So there is no room for creativity, from my perspective. Mainly because of the projects that I've been working on, and even if the projects are exciting, still you have to confirm to certain rules and regulations.

With art, for me, that is somewhere where no one can tell me what I've done wrong or what I should improve on. Especially when things are going wrong in my profession or in my life or anything like that, I find solace in the canvas and painting and just sitting there and being able to take control of a situation. Even though I may have an idea of what I'm painting, its not necessarily what will come out, but I at least have control on what's going to happen – how I can paint, when I can paint, and where this brush stroke goes and where it doesn't go. But with the law it can be very confined, sometimes, and you have to adhere to these really strict regulations which I tend to find very difficult as an artist.

Does Art make you a better lawyer?

Well [in Art] I can bring out my frustrations on the canvas and then I realize that when I go back to the drawing board at work, so to speak, I am calmer. I look at it with a better perspective and my emotions don't get in the way. So I always have to take time out and go and put it on the canvas.

People often ask me how I get time to do art, work and all sorts of other things, like Salsa. And the truth is, I don't find the time – it's something that I have to do, its something that's within me. I can wake up at 5am in the morning and paint. Or I can stay up late at night to paint. So it's not about making time in the day, it's just something that's a part of me, an expression that I have to channel.

Can you talk about your process as a painter?

Okay, I don't do many sketches so I don't start off with an idea and then a sketch and then onto the canvas. I go straight to the canvas.

So, for example, at the moment I just started a piece of work for my mother. It's two paintings, combined, by Jack Vettriano. My mom is a very passionate woman and she likes reds, it's a painting with sensual women. So that's for her. What I do is I look at the painting or the picture for a very long time. And then what I do is I start outlining it. I sketch very briefly and then I just start painting immediately.

I use thick brush strokes when painting. The only reason that I can explain my painting now is because I used to paint with, a friend, Joe, a painter as well. And his paintings are very delicate. He does very soft layers upon layers and he builds up to something. I just go at it and attack the canvas aggressively. So its very thick brush strokes, and if there is a mistake then I will pile on more paint.

Sometimes paintings change, like for example I have one called 'Zanzibar Monsoon' showing a man walking down a narrow street. It's mainly blue hues and its very textured. With that painting I started ages ago and I just had ochre and I was trying to paint – I cant remember what – probably a woman I think, something, it was very abstract. And then after a while I decided to paint this scene. It's a very well known scene in Zanzibar– its a postcard and there's lots of rain and there's a guy that you can barely see and he's walking into the perspective of the painting. And for that I use very thick brushes. I'm very lazy when it comes to cleaning my brushes so sometimes I pile on the paint and cleaning becomes a very arduous task.

I never consider a painting finished, even when it is signed. Salsa in Dar, for example, contains a flamenco dancer and she's got her arms up in the air and it's a really crimson background. I don't feel like she's finished. Maybe some time later I will pick up the brush and make a change here or there. But the paintings are never finished for me.

So that's the process so to speak–no sketching, I go straight onto the canvas and then build on it over time.

In terms of how long it takes me to paint something, it varies. It could be two hours, two months, a year. It depends on my inspiration and how I'm feeling at the time and what inspires me.

Talk to me about where you grew up and your background.

I am a daughter to Joanna and Thomas Menezes and I would say a third generation Tanzanian, from my mom's side, and first generation Tanzanian from my dad's side. My

dad came on a boat from Goa, and decided to become Tanzanian because he loved it here. He met my mom and shortly after, they got married. I was born a year after and I grew up in Kariakoo on Uhuru Street. Actually, Swahili was my first language. My mom always tried to make me speak English but because I spent a lot of time outdoors with the kids around the streets I spent a lot of time speaking Swahili.

I then went to Olympio Primary School. When I was 9, I decided to go to boarding school in Kenya because my best friend, Modesta, was going there. I said to my mom, 'my best friend is going, and I'm going with her.' And so I did. After secondary school, I came back home and then went to South Africa, the University of Cape Town where I studied law. I've been back home since graduating, which is four and a half years ago.

When did you realize that you were an artist?

My dad was good at sketching and he would always sketch my mom and I or sometimes write poetry. He had a very artistic soul. So, there was one time that I had this big eraser, with a big picture of Mini mouse on it – and I went to my dad, I think it was one afternoon after school, and I was pestering him and I asked him to please sketch this Mini Mouse for me, and he was a little too busy. And usually, being his only child, he would have all his attention on me, but at this one point he was quite busy. So he said to me, 'why don't you do it yourself?' And he was quite stern and I was a bit taken aback by it. So I was like, 'oh well then,' and so I went and started drawing Mini Mouse. After that, I felt compelled to draw. Just sitting in that moment and focusing on one thing and blocking out everything around me. So I started drawing and it became my pastime, my hobby. Also, I probably developed it more because there was no electricity at home and I didn't grow up with a TV. So, I would spend a lot of time drawing. I didn't have lots of expensive toys or lots of kids after hours to play with so I would just retreat and draw. And that became my thing.

So why didn't you pursue Art at University?

Well I did actually say to my mom at the time that I wanted to go study art and I did, in fact, get into Art School. But she sat me down at the arcade opposite Saverios in Mikocheni and said, 'I know that you want to do art and that it's your passion, but I honestly don't think you can earn a living from it, especially in Tanzania. So my advice to you is you love history and literature and the arts, so why don't you find something that would take you in a different

direction based on those subjects.' I did my A-levels in Art, History and Literature, so that's why she said this to me.

I was slightly disappointed because I really had my heart set on going to Art School. I'd sent my portfolio to this one University and they'd accepted me. But I had to make a decision, taking into account my mom's advice, I decided to do law. It seemed general enough for me to do it and then to branch out to different things. So when I went to university I don't think I did my degree to the best of my ability because I was doing it for the sake of doing it. But after a year there, and once I felt settled, I started painting. And whatever turmoil I was going through at university it translated into a painting.



What are your influences as an Artist?

When I was fourteen I discovered Roy Tabora, he's from the Philippines but he's based in Hawaii. He does these Hawaiian seascapes. So a lot of my seascapes are based on his, but with a Tanzanian context. I discovered him in a calendar and then I decided to find out more about him. I was going through a lot of turmoil at the time, so seascapes were the best

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way for me to express my feelings. So a lot of them are angry seascapes. I didn't think they were angry at the time but when people look at them they say 'you must've been really angry or really emotional.' And I probably was, but I wasn't aware of it at that time. So my way of expressing my emotions was not getting angry outwardly or shouting, it was painting.

That was one, another one is – I do like Jack Vettriano, mainly because he was self-taught so I'm drawn to that. And he does a lot of post-impressionist paintings of women and men in very basic situations – like in a bar, or in a club or by the beach. I like his work because of the strong paintbrush strokes and the red and black two-tone nature of his works.

When I was eighteen, I loved drawing mermaids. So through Google – that was when I had newly discovered the internet – I googled all these mermaids and mermaid figures and I discovered this guy called Jonathan Earle Bowser and he does very true to life paintings of women in different settings, including mermaids. And so I based my a-level art on his work.

But I liked Roy Tabora's work for a long time although I now feel that most of his paintings can be a bit contrived, his sunsets, for example, too orange or too purple and it doesn't just seem true to life. And with Jonathan Earle Bowser I've found that his paintings are just too perfect. I wanted something less perfect like Jack Vettriano.

Those are the three main ones that I can think of. But also, when I traveled to Italy and Paris, I jumped into lots of museums and art galleries and looked at the masters that I've really been taken aback by. And it's interesting because when you look at the paintings they're not as wonderful as when you see them in a book, for example, maybe the colours are slightly different or it's been hyped up too much. I like the impressionist paintings, mainly because they went against society and they painted whatever. And I guess the art dealers did a good job of trying to change people's opinion on how to view impressionist art.

Now lets talk about your upcoming exhibition. This is going to be your first solo exhibition. How many artworks are you going to exhibit? What are your expectations and what do you ultimately hope to achieve?

I'd say about twenty pieces. I'm hoping to make a few more beforehand.

Why am I doing it? Well, I want to sell paintings

(laughs). I do and I don't. Because when you sell a painting it's like loosing something that's a part of you, that you are unlikely to see again. So you can never really price your art. I don't know how to price my art, in that way, it's a very tricky thing.

When I initially decided to do the exhibition, it was a spur of the moment decision. I just came up with a step plan, executed it and before I knew it I'd put a down payment for Makutano Art Gallery and had already commissioned postcard artwork and the event poster. Now when I've had the time to reflect, I really don't know what I'm doing (laughs). Because it's scary – its one thing to have people walk into your home and go 'oh you paint, that's great, I didn't know that about you.' But to put yourself out there and have people come and view your artwork with probably the motive of owning it and keeping it in their homes, it's a very strange and difficult thing as well.

It's a personal thing for me, it's my emotions up there on the canvas. So I don't know how I going to respond to people's reactions, positive or negative. I don't know if I will be sad, really, really sad selling certain paintings. Because the way that I'll price it is, I will mark something up depending on how much I like it (laughs). So if it's really that good, if someone is willing to pay that much for it then they can have it.

There are a few paintings that I feel will be star paintings in the exhibition, others maybe not so much. But I'm willing to put everything in. What's stopped me from doing an exhibition before was the fact that I don't have a theme. I'm painting oceans one day and women the next, and little seascapes today then little flowers the next day.

But I met this woman once and she said to me, 'you don't need to have a theme. You should exhibit everything that you paint just to show your diversity.' And from that moment on I was like, well, okay. I have always been waiting for this moment when I would discover a theme. Because when you look at the lives of artists you see twenty years of progress and evolution of [a certain theme]. Yes I've been painting for a long time but I don't think that I've developed myself to the point where I know what my theme is, or what my style is. I'm constantly searching for a style and I haven't found it yet. But then through searching for a style, I'm doing different things.

And I think the positive thing that might happen at the exhibition is people's comments about what they may think my style is.