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No Shrinking Violet
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no shrinking violet

Despite graduating from art school a mere year ago, artist Kudzanai-Violet Hwami's work is already being hailed as a blue chip investment. On the eve of her debut solo show — *If You Keep Going South You'll Meet Yourself* — *Twin* meets the one-to-watch

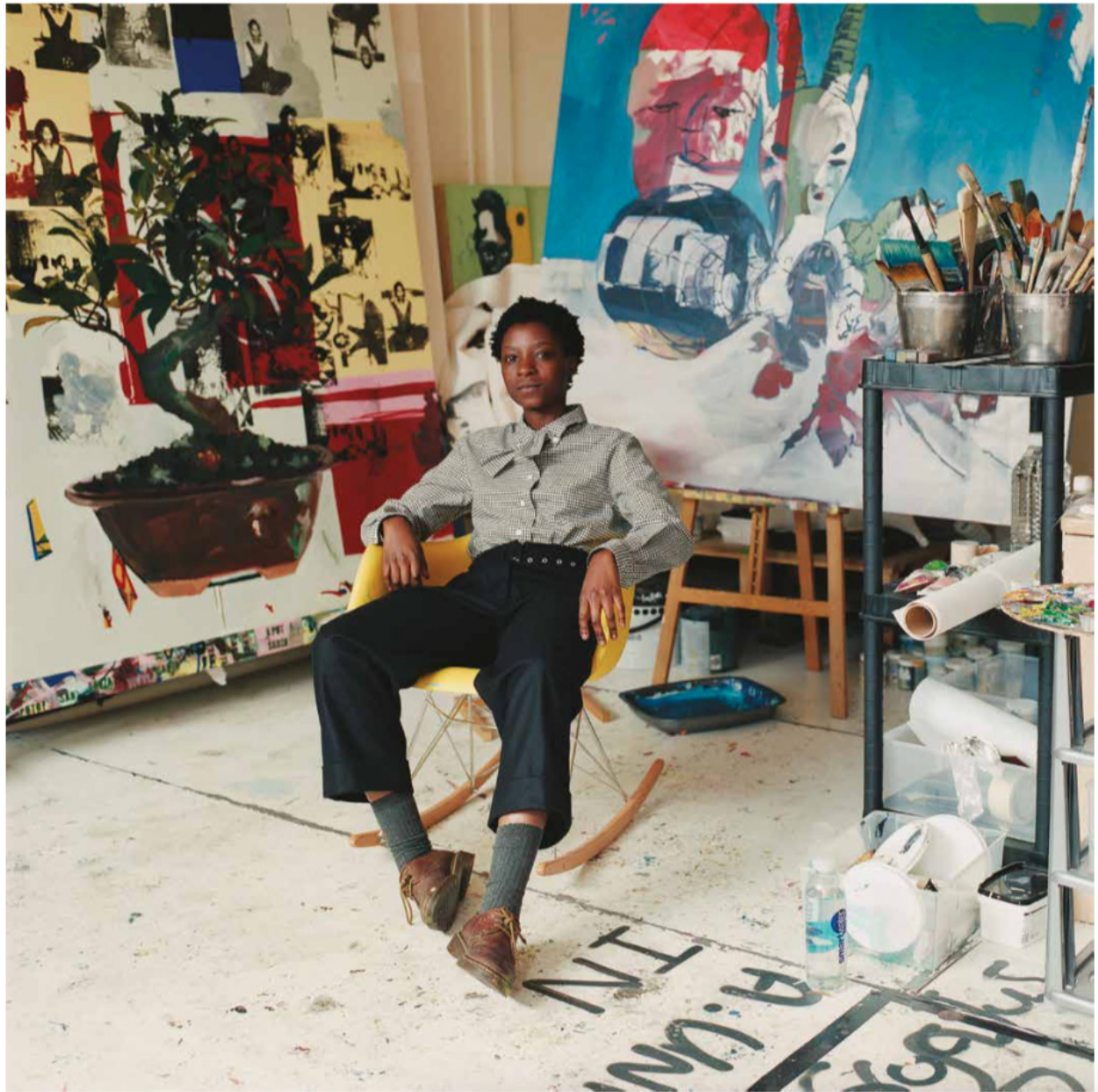
"I'm reading strange books," says Violet, as we discuss her take on the world at large. "Currently, it's *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. It's about the Soviet Union. I don't like the word 'deep', but it's a difficult book to read. It makes you want to just stay in bed, really." She laughs. "But I guess reading that opened my eyes to a lot."

We are sitting in a paint-strewn studio in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, with her large, colourful canvasses walling us in on all sides. It's not small by any means, but it is far from vast. In the distance, there is the sound of seagulls, interspersed with rumbling heavy goods vehicles, thanks to the remote, and industrial location. When we step outside, men in fluorescent workwear look on with bewilderment, as this gamine, 24-year-old skates along the pavement in beaten-up brown brogues, trailed by a camera crew.

Until recently, Violet's stomping ground was south London. With her art school based in Wimbledon — Tooting and Catford were home. However, upon graduating and entering into a world of international acclaim and attention, she needed somewhere cheap and remote to focus on her inaugural solo show, which is due to open imminently. "My aunt lives around here, and she's been living here since she came to England. So I decided to come," Violet explains. "I needed a place that was close to London, and this was the only option." Is it isolating? In a word: yes, "but I can handle it," she says. And in the same way that poets would lock themselves away in garrets to get down to the nitty gritty, it seems to be working. Her schedule is a strict nine-to-five daily affair, and the output is intense to say the least.

There is no doubt that when I meet her, Violet is dealing with a huge amount of pressure. Understandably, there is the gallery show to consider, but much of the mental weight comes from comparison to her peers, and constant self-analysis. "It's my first solo show and I'm scared that I may not live up to the expectations," she admits. "I guess I look at other artists who are African, or black artists, and I see that they make work that is political in a way. It's about social justice and stuff. And I'm not involved in social justice, in that manner. I don't want to feel like a victim." The theme of not being a victim is a topic that crops up repeatedly when we speak, or of feeling cornered into using a 'voice' to tell a story that she doesn't necessarily identify with. "I feel like I'm





under pressure," she continues, "because I feel like other students when I was in uni — and most of them were white — they can make work about anything. Absolutely anything. As long as they're skilled at what they're going, and can explain it, it's good enough. And I'm always in my head like 'I'm not doing enough' because I'm not making work about 'the struggle' or whatnot, you know?"

It is these relentless hidden subtitles — or pigeonholing — notions of who the artist is on paper, dictating what they must produce, which doesn't sit well with Violet. "Why can't a woman artist just paint something that they want to paint without it being about social justice or feminism?" She asks. Having dabbled in fruit as a motif for sexuality in the past — "I was reading articles about how when gay culture wasn't being spoken about much, people would have sort of cue words, like 'fruit basket' or 'fruit market'" — Violet has now stripped that back to focus on form, colour and composition. "It's more literal now. And it's...it's more about the figure, and the environment the figure is in." But this transition didn't arrive without a struggle. "I paint males. Or mostly

males." She says. "And I don't know why, but I found it difficult to paint women. Because I want to paint them nude, and I don't want to explain that it's about 'feminism' or something. It should just be me enjoying painting the nude." All of this is much to the confusion of the elder generation of her family. "My aunt, she asks me: 'Why don't you paint animals, and normal things?'" Violet laughs. "Sometimes I have a collage, and there's a guy's penis just there, and she's confused by why I do that." She elaborates, "She knows I'm gay, but she does not speak about it. She's never asked. We just don't talk about stuff like that. It's cultural." Despite this, the family is incredibly close. "Yeah, they don't understand it. But they're like 'It's great!' You know? They say: 'Whatever you're doing, just keep doing it!' They're supportive."

Of her show — *If You Keep Going South You'll Meet Yourself* — Violet says, "It's basically about my own self-discovery. I want people seeing it to understand where I came from. And that's the story that I'm trying to tell." Beginning in her first home of Zimbabwe, which is in the south of Africa, before continuing to South Africa itself, where she also lived, Violet's journey and her work ends up in Shoreditch, Southend-on-Sea. The geography fits in neatly with the theme. "I usually focus on futuristic, imaginary worlds," Violet says, "but this time I want to talk about the past, but the past revisited. So it's not going to be the same, it's not things that I've experienced, if that makes sense, I'm just thinking about a particular moment, or memory, and then remixing it."





Jacket & Trousers Paul Smith T-Shirt Artist's Own

"Meeting your own devil is important, so that you can fight it."



"I like that it's fast here in the south," Violet says, when I ask her about her former UK home of Manchester, where she lived with her mother, after leaving South Africa. "I prefer the south. In London, everyone has their own issues happening. And everyone just wants to get on with their life. Maybe I'm like that as well?" She continues. "I find I'm more productive when I'm thinking for myself. Making decisions for myself. And taking responsibility for myself. So, if anything goes wrong, it's my own fault. It's not anyone else's fault...I listen to a lot of podcasts about self-help, and most of the things that are being said are usually: 'Take responsibility for your own life. Make the choices, or have a choice made.'"

Come 2018, Violet will definitely need to be doing more choosing. Post-exhibition, there will be the bun fight about which gallery she works with for a residency, but also, travel. She has recently seen — and been inspired by — *Into The Wild*, and is now keen to track the course of the Pacific highway in a van. "Yeah I'm just going to get a backpack and go!" She laughs. "Leave the world." However, she's in no rush to commit to one plan too soon. "I turned 24 and I was like 'Oh my God...I need to think about what I want to do in my life.'" She admits. But with such a huge career milestone already notched, it is now the personal that is piquing her interest. Less of



Coat & Blouse A.P.C Jeans & Shoes Artist's Own

the escapism, and more of the biographical, which can also be felt in her work. "To have a good life you need to tell the truth. And to tell the truth is to accept reality."

And so what of Violet's strange books? Writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn certainly resonated with this fiercely independent young woman. "The things that I disagree with, such as not wanting to just fit into a group, were spoken of in that book. But in a more political way. Like the victim mentality, and all that stuff I disagree with, the book really pointed that out." She says. "And it points out that being an individual is a great thing, I guess." With politics so far having remained something of a personal interest, as opposed to worked through on the canvas, Violet is mindful of treating the subject

carefully, nevertheless, she has dabbled, privately, before: "I realised it's too much [to show] because it's too soon," she explains. "Because I'm not sure what I'm saying. And I need to know what I'm saying before I can just put it out there." This isn't to say the future will be without some kind of more direct commentary, but first, it is important for this artist to experience, and evaluate said experiences. "I think sometimes you are moved by the political 'struggle'," she concludes, "but also personal struggle. Meeting your own devil is important, so that you can fight it."

If You Keep Going South You'll Meet Yourself is on from 29 September - 15 November, 2017, at London's Tyburn Gallery; www.tyburngallery.com



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