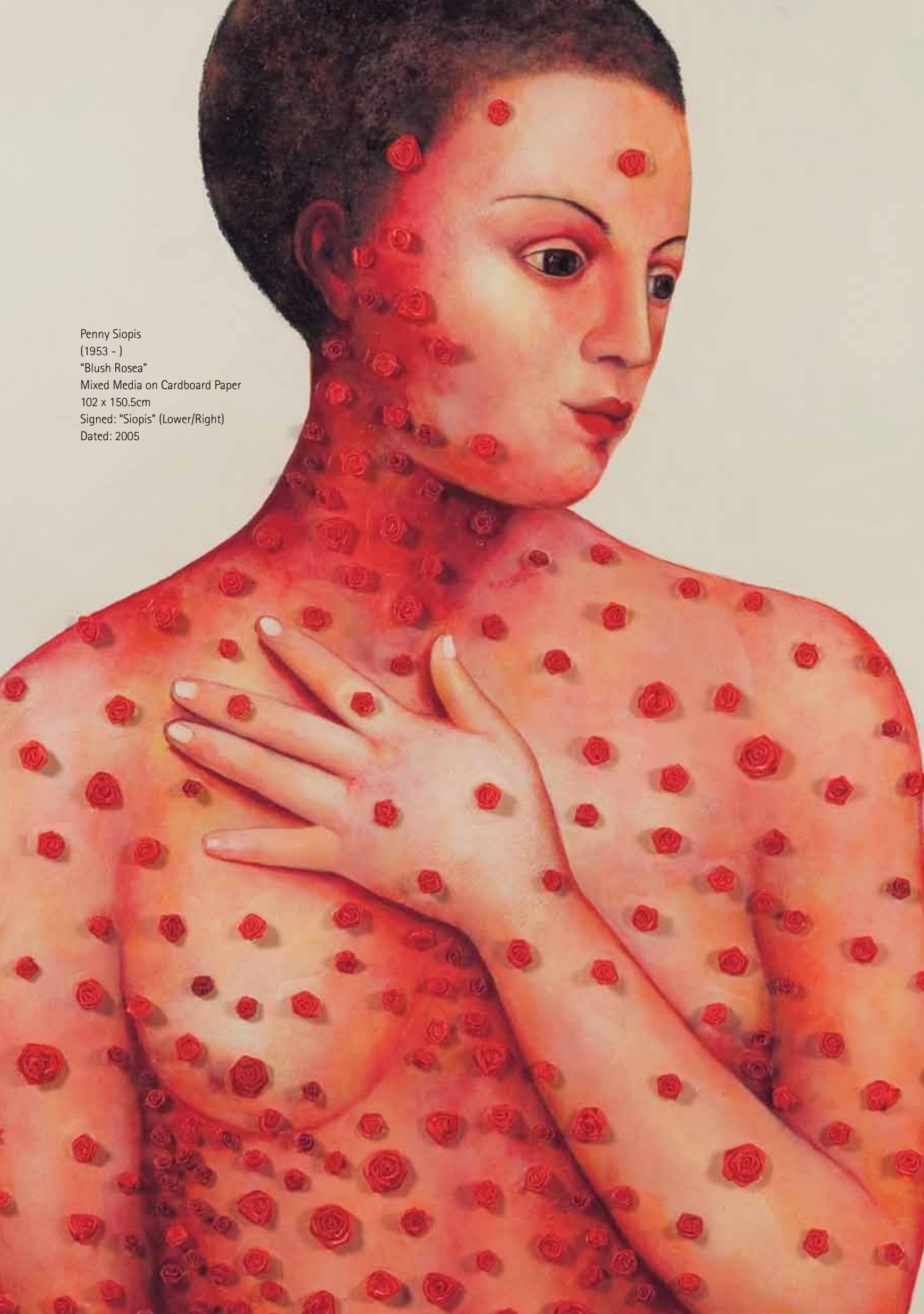


Penny Siopis
(1953 -)
"Blush Rosea"
Mixed Media on Cardboard Paper
102 x 150.5cm
Signed: "Siopis" (Lower/Right)
Dated: 2005



WOMEN

in Art

From Form to Function

The portrayal of women in art is a vast and varied subject; tumescent and endlessly enticing. Such feminine depictions traverse a vivid spectrum of representations and are a continual source of inspiration for literature, music, art and life. The earliest known images of women are the painted and sculpted portrayals of the Virgin Mary. Yet, from this initial position, the expression of women has metamorphosed, undergoing numerous transitions to reveal a complex and intriguing subject.

Words: AMY THORNE
Images: © GRAHAM'S FINE ART GALLERY

There are numerous themes in art that have a special focus on women: Motherhood, the Spiritual worship of women, the Physicality of women (the Nude), and the Domesticity of women. South African artists are renowned for their creativity and aptitude in shaping an art form that has developed in a periodic vacuum and which redefined the trends and movements of Europe in an African context; inspired and developed within a local perspective. This portrayal of women has thus resulted in a broad collection of artworks as diverse as they are compelling, drawn from international and historical principles and interpreted individually.

The exploration of motherhood is best seen when deciphering the Madonna, who embodies all that is nurturing and represents a universally recognised iconic image that transcends class, custom and culture. The illustration of the Holy Mother was first seen from the early 5th Century. By 500AD her imagery had developed into a consecrated figure, predominantly associated with holding the holy child. This classic, pious portrayal has not really



Maggie Laubser (1886 - 1973)
 "Portrait of Woman with Headscarf and Child on Back; Landscape in Background"
 Oil on Board; 60.3 x 50.2cm; Signed: "M Laubser" (Lower/Right); Dated: 1924

changed since, although this sacred subject has been explored in the birth of the modernist body, which began to radically redefine all previous perceptions of art from the mid to late 1800s.

A beautiful and compelling example of how this iconic image has been assimilated in a Modernist view in South African art is in Maggie Laubser's "Portrait of a Woman with Headscarf and Child on Back," dated 1924. One of Laubser's most favoured subject matters was the representation of scenes and portraits of working class people. She found an affinity with the working class and sought to depict shepherds, harvesters and general workers predominantly involved with agricultural labour. She paid particular attention to the portrayal of women, who often wear her iconic "blue headscarf." This blue headscarf echoes the renowned Byzantine Madonna, who is usually seen with her head draped in a blue veil and who inspires reverence and admiration; an aspect also achieved in works. Her portraits show the sitter not in

mimetic likeness, but as an emotional and expressive representation of her social position, which embodies a more sensitive and receptive understanding of the sitter. In this way, more is exposed about the individual than what a direct and photographic representation might reveal.

Laubser redefines the aspect of the Madonna and the Madonna and Child in a purely African context. In this portrait we can see the *Matre Amabilis*, or Madonna of Love, maternally at ease with her child, who is protectively tied to her back as is often seen in African traditions. Another striking aspect of this work is the placement of the Madonna in a pastoral setting, a prevalent feature seen in such art of the 16th Century and painted by some of the most notable artists including Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci. This shows the spirituality of the ultimate Mother in relation to Nature, combining two idyllic beauties and emphasising how such an inspiring subject matter as the Madonna continues to be one of the most intriguing



Gail Catlin (1948 -)
 "Blue Nude"
 Liquid Crystal and Oil on Perspex; 155 x 73cm

and important subjects when depicting women in art.

At almost the opposite end of the scale, the Nude has been a subject of intense interest for as long as the Madonna and has been imbued with as much spirituality in its depiction and in its context. The Nude has similarly gone through many transformations, yet has always been disquieting, alluring and sensual. As an unclothed figure, in the early Middle Ages this portrayal was associated with shame and humiliation. Where the Greek Nude was seen as heroic and beautiful in form, the Christian Nude was viewed in a state of conscious sin. Over the years, however, the Nude has altered these previous conventions and in modern day is provocative and enthralling in its sense of beautiful or nefarious nature.

François Krige's "Reclining Nude" draws on the renowned Odalisque that came to fame in the fantasies created by the European Orientalist obsession of the East in the 19th Century, which was fascinated



Francois Krige
 (1913 - 1994)
 "Reclining Nude"
 Oil on Board
 44.4 x 55cm
 Signed: "Francoise Krigé" (Lower/Left)

with the exotic and erotic portrayal of the naked demure and subservient woman reclining on a bed or chaise lounge. Krige's representation of the female Nude in this scenario shows her raising her arm behind her head while her right leg is lifted in a casual and unperturbed fashion. The style of this work is definitive of a redefined principle to this iconic imagery, as Krige uses the stylistic qualities of the early 20th Century painters such as Henri Matisse. These artists were inspired at the time to recreate the beloved Odalisque in their own style. We see this in Krige's work, where he redefines this significant theme in his own, distinctive manner.

A contemporary South African artist who has captured the beauty and femininity of a woman in an innovative, albeit classic manner, is Penny Siopis in her "Blush Rosea," dated 2005. Siopis' use of unexpected materials challenges the viewer to interpret more than just what meets the eye. Here, it is applied to express the complexity of feminine desire, vulnerability and exposure. The layers of alternative meanings open a forum for interpretation that expands across many issues including power, gender, role, and identity. "Blush Rosea" reflects the pose from the well-known image "The Birth of Venus" (c1482-1486) by Sandro Botticelli of the diffident presentation of the Greek Goddess. Siopis' work subtly subverts the female body by introducing alternative cultural values that challenge the conventions of motherhood, stereotype and physicality in a discrete, beguiling way. The contrast of these postmodern values with the traditional view of women creates a dynamic work that portrays women in a new and stirring light.

The rich array of works that explore the imagery of women in South African art can only be measured by the expertise and ingenuity of the numerous masters who have been in this field historically and in modernity. In any context relating to these expressive, emotional and revealing themes, the portrayal of women is one of the most significant and everlasting subjects that could ever be explored. ❁



Maggie Laubser (1886 - 1973); "Seated Female Nude Reading"
 Oil on Board; 48.5 x 43.2cm; Signed: "M Laubser" (Lower/Right); Dated: 1930