

beyond the image



Art photography is little known in South Africa, but young artists like Alexandra Murphy are breaking creative barriers. Guido Duken sneaked a look at her portfolio.

IN 1/125TH OF A SECOND ONE CAN snap a picture or create a work of art. And while we are all able to point a camera and press the shutter release, only a chosen few can boast stunning results, time after time. Alexandra Murphy is one of those chosen few. Which isn't bad going for somebody who entered the darkroom through the back door. This Rhodes graduate knew that she wanted to study art, but it was only during her first year that she realized photography was an exciting and specific medium. It became her major and she set to work under the watchful eye of Obie Oberholzer, one of South Africa's most vibrant and acclaimed

photographers. After finishing her degree, Alexandra worked briefly in Durban before travelling overseas. There she did some freelancing and familiarized herself with the excellent quality of international art photography, which made her realize that this art form was still in its infancy in South Africa.

Alexandra returned to South Africa and enrolled for her Masters Degree. This had a profound effect on her work, as her thesis centred on the photographic transformation of the human form. It was here that her exploration of human anatomy began in earnest. Three pioneers in this field, Cindy Sherman, Jan Saudek and Robert



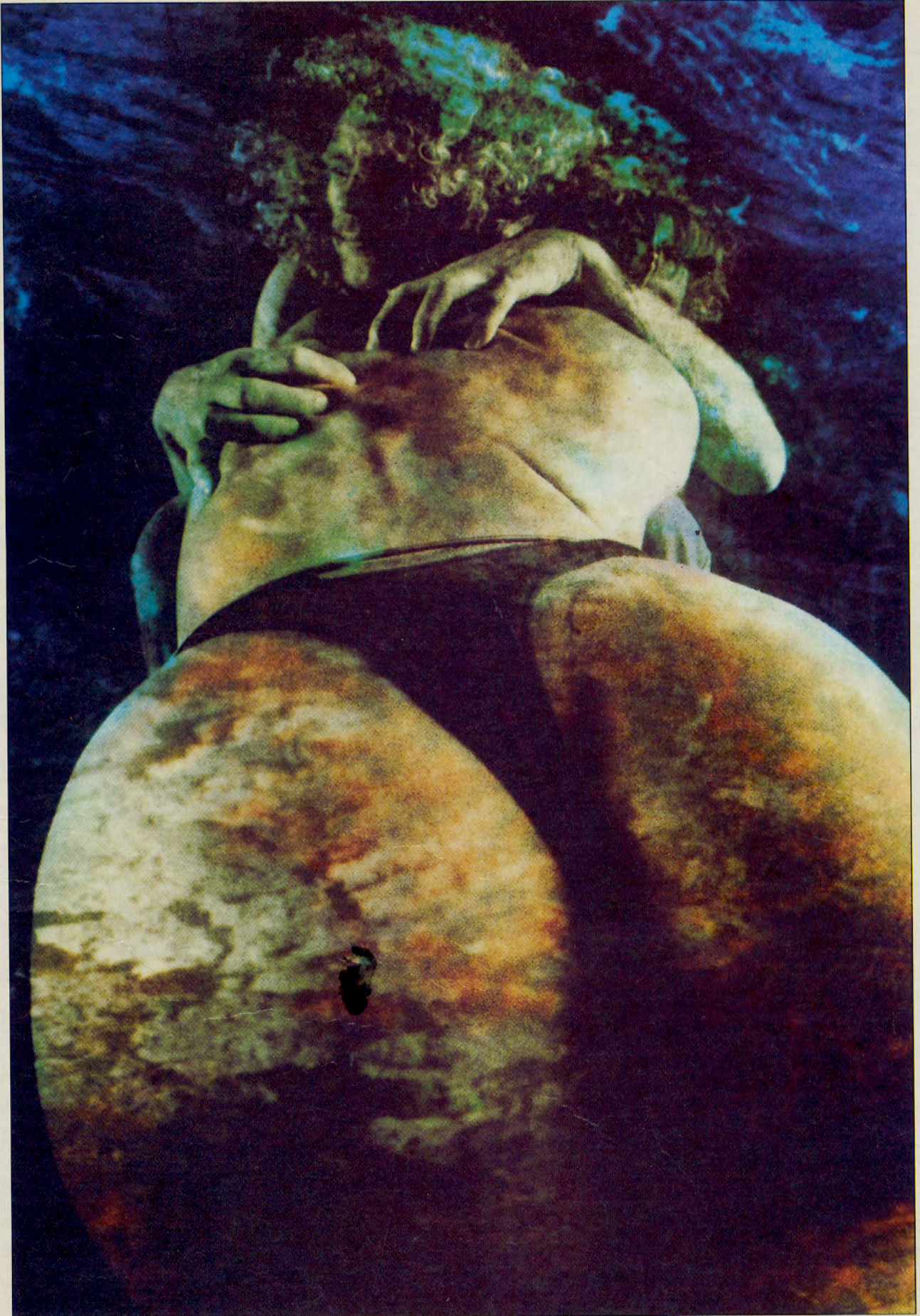
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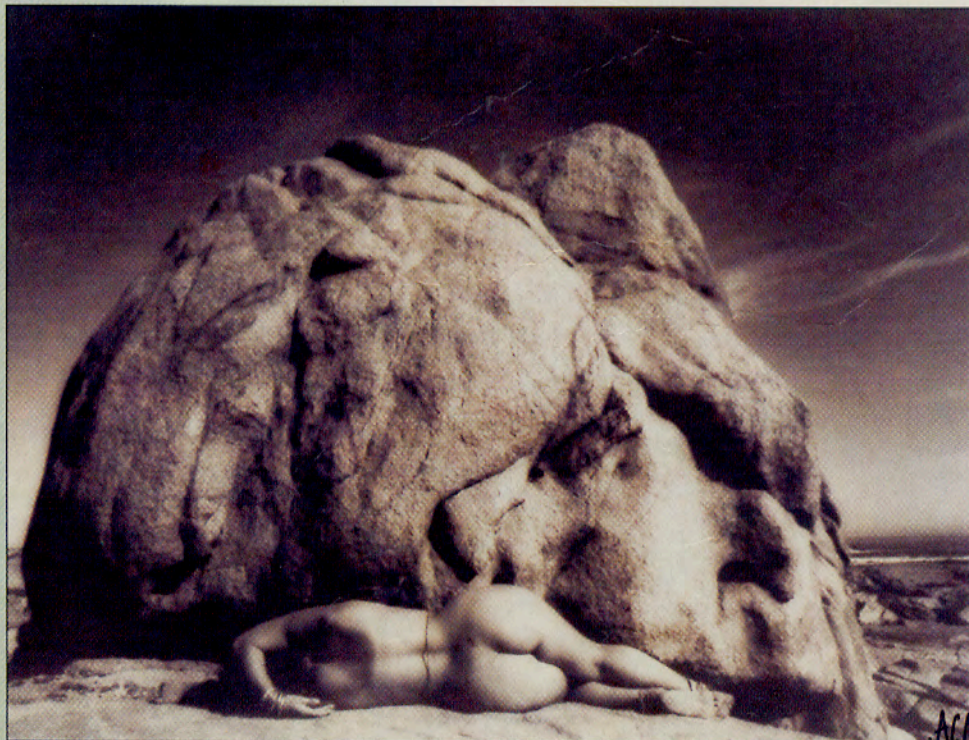
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aurora



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deva

Mapplethorpe, greatly inspired Alexandra, and their influences are clearly detectable in her work.

Cindy Sherman is well known for her representations of women in society. She pioneered film stills, a form of photography where she features as the photographer, stylist, model and director. In this manner Sherman models different selves or identities. Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS in the Eighties, was well known for his celebrity photography, as well as his work on the homo-erotic scene. He influenced her through his portraiture and lighting techniques. Jan Saudek, a Czech photographer, gained fame through shooting his photographs of women, often against the background of his warehouse studio's peeling wall. His work is admired for its erotic qualities. The synthesis of all these influences is apparent in Alexandra's portfolio, which focuses mainly on the body, or "figurative work" as she prefers to call it.

But technique and ability mean little if the photographer doesn't have a creative eye. Alexandra's pictures distinguish

themselves by having a mythical, dreamlike quality, which is produced through composition, exposure and darkroom technique. Many photographers spend hours planning their shoots, but Alex prefers to let the image guide her. She explains it this way: "When I shoot a subject I often have a vague idea in my mind, but it's not specific. Some people don't agree with me, but I think the image guides one in terms of where it wants to go." However, it is in the darkroom that she asserts her mastery by manipulating the image to achieve what she wants.

And what she wants is an image "that brings out the essence of the figure". She engineers the darkroom process until the photo fully expresses itself. *Aurora* is an example of such technique. She sandwiched two negatives together for texture, hand coloured one of them and then printed the negatives together. It sounds a lot easier than it really is.

Alex is fascinated by the word "voyeurism" as she believes that everybody is a voyeur to some extent. This is

especially true of photography, where the voyeuristic link stretches all the way from the photographer to the viewing public. She classifies *Aurora* as an example of a voyeuristic photo, while *Deva* is more of a sad and anxious image. Yet there is an underlying sensuality that runs through most of her work.

A journey through Alexandra's portfolio quickly assures one that her future looks rosy. Last year she won the Female Category of the AGFA Photographic Competition, and she has already been involved in a number of exhibitions, including two at the Grahamstown Festival. And she knows where she's going. "I want to carry on doing what I am doing. I want to carry on exploring imagery. This country, and I know this sounds very egotistical, needs to be pushed into photographic art."

With her enthusiasm, talent and dedication, it is certain that art photography will soon be receiving recognition in South Africa. If one leads by example, others soon follow. **Ⓢ**