

Pretoria artist Minnette Vári is one of six nominees for this year's coveted FNB Vita Art prize. GERALDINE FRÖHLING discovers why she is known as one of South Africa's most innovative contemporary artists

City artist on the cutting edge

Don't call Minnette Vári a controversial artist. It's a label she doesn't relate to. "I find it quite bewildering," she explains. "I'm just trying to do my work without letting the possible consequences dictate to me."

This work, she says, entails finding new ways to define her identity and if that involves using imagery which may seem weird or absurd, then so be it.

Unquestionably, though, the petite young Pretorian is one of South Africa's cutting-edge artists, constantly exploring new and unique ways of expressing this search for identity/meaning.

Probably best known here for her eye-catching billboard at the Pretoria Art Museum in 1995, featuring a picture of her naked and dark-skinned in provocative pose, Vári has never been afraid to push the envelope when it comes to socially-acceptable art.

And that consistent ability to find highly original ways of expressing herself is in all likelihood the reason why Vári is one of six South Africans nominated for this year's coveted FNB Vita Art Prize.

She is in good company with some of the country's top artists including Kendell Geers, Robert Hodgins, Jo Ractiffie, Zwelethu Mthethwa and Isaac Khanyile.

The most fascinating person to interview, Vári spins wonderful tales of her family history, her unusual chronology of art and the fascinating process which went into making it.

The poignant story of her family's roots features strongly in her latest work, a video art piece currently on exhibition in Austria.

She said she made it while on a one month residency in Linz as a means of reflecting both her time there and her personal history.

Titled *Cross Current*, the video uses computer animation/manipulation of images and straight camera work to explore the moving story of her grandfather who was born in Budapest and at age six was sent off to Amsterdam with his sister because of famine in the wake of World War I.

They were later adopted and never saw their real parents again.

Vári uses evocative images such as a photograph of her family floating down the Danube River (which runs through both Linz and Budapest), a tiny image of her standing on a huge steel bridge with cars driving backwards and the distorted sounds of her shouting her family's names into the freezing water.

She describes the video as "an unsuccessful homecoming, a search for truth in the wrong place".

"One of the things I think my art wants to do is find new ways of retelling our histories to both ourselves and each other."

Vári says that same theme of identity and the search for our origin has always run through her work.

"I think political correctness is an enemy of art," she states emphatically. "We should be scratching at wounds that are still sore, digging at things uncomfortable. Whenever something feels too easy, I get out of it at once."



Minnette Vári
PICTURE: JACOLINE PRINSLOO

This philosophy is very much behind one of her recent works entitled *Alien*, a video art piece exhibited in Sweden last September.

Vári said this was her first motion graphics piece which she created around the idea of a new democracy in South Africa.

She said she made it by taking visual footage of recent events in our history and superimposing graphically distorted naked images of herself on to the politicians/police/photographers, etcetera.

"I wanted to investigate how these events implicate me, my role in this and how truth is manipulated in the media."

Vári said she had always been interested in video art, but only recently decided to explore it as she had access to "the most wonderful silicone graphics machines".

"It's not just an in-vogue thing," she says. "I basically use whatever best represents what I'm thinking at that moment."

Other tools she has used to create her unusual art have been photography with a simple automatic camera, the use of light against her skin and perhaps the most unique of all, various awful-sounding animal and plant parts in the creation of a perfume.

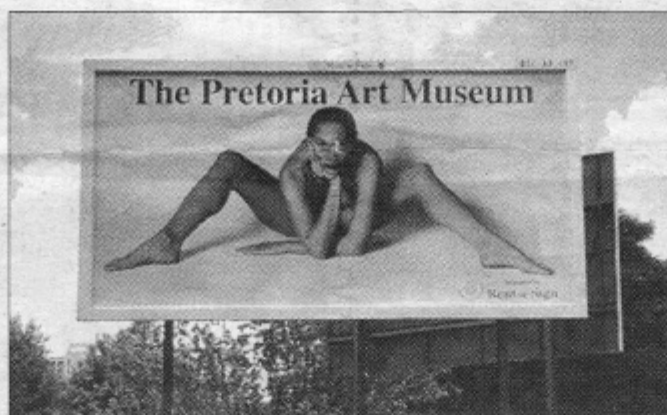
Vári started her career as a painter "making a big noise" and getting herself noticed.

Between 1988 and 1992 she was studying towards a Fine Art degree, trying to work professionally and entering her fair share of competitions - in which she reluctantly admits she "did quite well".

After her "big painting" period, she got into more experimental stuff, such as creating a tyre out of white porcelain in 1995.

In 1996 she got into curios, taking her own graphically-distorted facial features and moulding them on to the form of a curio. She then printed hundreds of this same image on to adhesive paper and stuck them up on a wall. The work was called *Souvenir* and was exhibited in London.

Along the same lines she also took



(Above) The controversial billboard outside the Pretoria Art Museum in 1995.
(Left) A still from the computer-animated work *Alien*.
(Right) Stills from Vári's video *Cross Current* in which the artist shouts the names of her family members into the Danube River.

a photo of her face which had been graphically distorted to make her look black and placed this on a curio postcard of traditional black women.

"I then went into curio shops and slipped them in with all the other postcards," she says with a twinkle in her eye.

"I wonder how many of them have ended up in some American's home without them even noticing anything wrong!" she laughs.

And then in 1997, after completing her Masters degree, she decided to create a perfume as "a rip-off of the CK1 culture" for the Johannesburg Biennale.

She set up a multi-media installation, complete with curved stand, perfectly-designed bottles and exotic-looking ad poster.

She called it *Faith* "because we believe so happily in what the media tells us" and designed it using ingredients such as the fat of a jackal, the skin of a python and other animal and plant parts which she got from sangomas.

(In fact, a municipal bus with the *Faith* logo on it can to this day still be seen around town).

At the same time she also got into big installations and photography-based work and later created a sound



CD "using birds in my garden and Hungarian swear words".

As part of her show *Beyond the Pale* in Johannesburg last year she exhibited her *Alien* video, the sound CD and a white on white camouflage piece.

Last year she also created a video in which 12 female contenders come to blows "as a means of exploring violence as a cultural phenomenon and setting this in a South African context".

It was called *VexQuest* and used the idea of video games to bring the theme across.

"At the moment I'm working on a

number of new projects and am very interested to explore computer animation further," said Vári. "But I'm constantly looking for clues all around me to determine my function as an artist."

Asked about ideas for her Vita work, Vári chose to remain mum.

The six nominees have been given R5 000 each and are expected to produce a work by August 10, when an overall winner will be chosen (and awarded R20 000).

Vári said she was completely bowled over by her nomination, especially as she found herself in such "distinguished company".

"What happens with most young artists is that you're the flavour of the month and then people tire of you. But it's important to persist, to hang in there," she says.

"And even though I went through a lean, self-searching period, I never considered giving up and doing something else."

She said it was also encouraging that her peers seemed to be taking what she does a little more seriously. "I'm still young in terms of art," she said.

"But I hope I, like Robert Hodgins, will still be doing cutting-edge stuff when I'm 80!"