In the late 1960s I was a student of Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand. I was not a good student; I tended to take the lectures for granted or to get into conflict with them. I was a difficult student, I think I wasted some splendid opportunities to improve myself. I was a lazy student. It was not their fault. I was indolent, but some of the indolence came from a refusal to buy into the current fashions, which were flat, hardedge, and to me, sterile and pointless. I was a cookery little bastard, for sure, and deserved everything I didn’t get from the brilliant academics who ran the show.

However, there was at least one person on the teaching staff for whom I had nothing but the utmost respect and affection, and that was the astonishing Judith Mason. Judy was teaching senior students in the department, but no one objected if there were gatecrashers at her crit sessions and though very ca-low and junior, I was a gatecrasser of note. She struck in the brain like a special kind of revelatory sage, speaking with the tongues of angels and art students. She was not puffed up; she got to the nitty-gritty of the everyday existential crises of being an imaginative painter (and thus a demonstrably frivolous and irrelevant person) in a world of conscientious pragmatism. And she was neither flat nor hard-edge! She took it for granted that we all wanted to stay the plastic beast of painting, to find the path and the truth and the way and the light. She was a shining example of the artist, the ham-fisted wrestler with the craft and sullen business of finding, but she was also something else, something so rare that it intoxicated. She could find the words and the images and the poetics to speak directly to the acolyte. She made sense that was not the elegant sense of the art historians and design lecturers, but the throw and sneer sense of the maker.

Reading The Mind’s Eye was to be taken back forty-seven years into that studio in the John Moffat Building, listening to the dark-haired young woman with the strangely flat accent and the twinkle - the inevitable twinkle - of anti-ease with the stern seriousness beneath the monologue. In this slim but rich volume - a wonderful companion to art-making - Mason allows herself the freedom to write as she speaks, from the hip, from the heart and (you’d better believe it) from the head. She addresses all the departments - the neurones, the need for discipline, the compulsion to form. How does one tackle the metaphysics of the human face, the living anatomy, the stagnant psyche that refuses to paint? What is beautiful? (The answer will surprise you, but you must first draw or paint shrouded things, shadowed things, moving things, harsh, gross and edible things.)

Since I left Wits and her diverse influences, I have been making a living as a teacher of art - theory, education, critting, painting, even history - god help us - and have developed strategies that address a range of issues: conceptual, perceptual, technical, historical, philosophical and psychological. I am quite proud of the strategies. I didn’t know until I read Mason’s book how very much my well-worn ideas, theories and methodology must have been shaped by her. I kept saying, “but I say that!” and I do, but so does she and so well, and she probably said it first. I shall be scoring her text as prescribed reading for my professional students because she says things that absolutely are required drumming-into-the-head stuff for anyone faced with the prospect of making art. She is pungent and looking very hard at things and choosing things that do not immediately declare themselves to be lovely. She is stern with base matters like techniques and (porta mode) believes passionately in the dark and numinous power of the creative imagination expressed in a stern and controlled emotion - what Yeats called, “the rag and bone shop of the human heart.”

Anyone who knows the history of Judith Mason, as do I - the class-fisted schoolboy acolyte who saw her drawings in the 101 Gallery in 1967 (and had a damascene experience right there then) and who has followed this straight-talking mystic over fifty years of poetics, romance, religion, Africa and her place in it, who has learned from her what it is like to stand ajar and assured at the domestic business of making paintings, despite all kinds of logic and reason - will recognize in this peal of a book much of the commentary that has accompanied her artwork over the years; what she herself has described, quoting T.S. Eliot, ‘the fragments that shave up our ruins’. From the rich soil of a fabulously informed and intrepid imagination, Mason has grown a history of dark melodies for our singular place in the evolution of Africa. Her book, despite her disclaimer, “this is not a how-to book. It is a how-to-think-about-how-to book,” is the perfect concordance to that history. Read it, artist, and learn!

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