

CAPE ROYALTY



HISTORY: Every Spring Queen since the start of the pageant arrived for photoshoot
Pictures by PATRICK LOUW and SUPPLIED



HISTORY IN MAKING: Curator Dale Washkansky



SHOWCASE: Dr Siona O'Connell put on exhibition



GLORY DAYS: Factory workers' proud moments



FABULOUS: Dale has collected Queens' dresses

ON THE Cape Flats, everyone and their mother knows someone connected to the Spring Queen pageant.

It is one of the longest and largest running fashion pageants in history and completely unique to the Western Cape. For the past 35-odd years, Cape Town has been treated to the spectacle of ordinary factory girls strutting their stuff on stage. For one night, they are not the faceless people behind the latest fashions as they jostle for the sought-after crown. Up to 10 000 people attend the annual final at the Good Hope Centre organised by Sactwu (SA Clothing and Textiles Workers Union). Now for the first time since the phenomenon hit the ramp in the 1970s, an art exhibition showcasing the joys and sorrows of the pageant has been put on show.

The force behind the exhibit, Dr Siona O'Connell, says she wants to draw attention to the lives of factory workers and ask questions around gender, power, oppression and freedom – and just what happens to the Spring Queen after the lights have gone out. "This is only the beginning of a huge project," she explains. "I didn't realise how criminally low the factory workers' wages are, yet they build the city."

Stitched

"These women walk in the Waterfront and Canal Walk and they can say 'I stitched that shirt', yet they can't afford to buy the garment. "We want people to see the exhibition and think about the women who made the clothing." Siona says at a workshop with Sactwu held in May, dozens of previous Queens and princesses showed up. "We were expecting a few people, but about 70 people pitched," she says. "There were some truly magical moments as they told us their stories, a sort of re-enactment of their time on stage. "These ladies completely dispelled the notion of factory workers always being barefoot, pregnant, having no front teeth and drunk. "They were immaculate and it was obvious what the Spring Queen meant for them. "They were able to re-invent themselves." An important part of the pageant (some would say the most important) is the dresses. Exhibition



LEGEND: Mellissa Hendriks



BEAUTIES: Past Queen along with princesses

New art exhibition celebrates the history of Spring Queens

EXCLUSIVE BY
Warda Salvester



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curator Dale Washkansky collected some dresses worn by previous Queens. "Everyone contributes to the making of the dress, it's a team effort," Dale says. "The woman who is chosen to represent the factory has on her shoulders the wishes and dreams of all her co-workers." Siona says one theme that constantly popped up at the workshop was the fear of unemployment, short time and retrenchment. The crisis in the textile industry, brought on by "profit margins, the unions and the Chinese influence" has left many insecure and uncertain. "The women told us 'we'd make five panties for R60, but you can get it for R20 in China,'" Siona explains. But like it did back in the day, the Spring Queen offers the workers a chance to forget about their worries and just have fun. Mellissa Hendriks was the Colibri Spring Queen in 1988, 2004 and 2006. The 51-year-old Macassar mom has been working at the same factory for 32 years, where she is a machinist, a health officer and a quality controller.

Evolved
She says the pageant has evolved over the years. "Back in 1988 you did not have the dance practices like you have now," she says. "[And] you had to practise your walk at home." She adds parading in front of the judges was different. "It was like a dinner party with tables and chairs – the tables were decorated and you had to walk in the middle," she tells the *Daily Voice*. Mellissa is still actively involved in the event. "I encourage the girls at work to enter," she says. "There was a girl who said that she could not enter because she did not have a dress. So I said that I would get her a dress." Winners are also awarded a cash prize and bursaries to study. Siona encourages everyone to visit the exhibition, to get to know the brave faces behind the clothes. "It is weird to think that an art exhibition is going to be discussed in Hanover Park," she says. "These women have to be strong – life on the Flats is not for the faint-hearted."



TELLING STORIES: Siona

INFORMATION

■ **THE EXHIBITION** is open for viewing from 10am to 5pm on weekdays at the Bertram House Annexure Gallery, UCT Hiddingh Campus in Orange Street, Cape Town. There will be a special opening for the public on of July 28, starting at 11am.