

# Terence Howard King, 1947–2025

by Anton van der Hoven

Terence Howard (Terry) King, artist and former professor of Fine Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg), died in Johannesburg on 5 August 2025, after a short illness. He leaves his wife, Pam, his two daughters, Karen and Jeanine, and three grandchildren.<sup>1</sup>

Terry King's career spanned more than five decades, a good deal of which was spent in Pietermaritzburg; and his death marks the loss of a rare and generous intellect – one whose influence shaped the cultural and educational landscape of KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa at large. He trained at the University of the Witwatersrand, earning a BAFA in 1970 and an MAFA (cum laude) in 1978, followed by a UED from the University of Natal. His teaching career began at Natal Technikon, UNISA and Wits before he joined the Department of Fine Art at the University of Natal in 1985. Over the next two decades, he served as professor and later senior professor. He also served with distinction as dean of Arts on the Pietermaritzburg campus where his calm authority, organisational clarity and collegial fairness earned him deep respect. In 2008 he retired and, in recognition of his service both to his discipline and the university as a whole, was appointed professor emeritus.

Terry King's legacy is inseparable from the university's broader commitment to educational transformation. He believed in the power of the arts not only to enrich individual lives, but to foster dialogue, empathy and social cohesion. His leadership in Fine Art education helped cultivate generations of artists and scholars who continue to shape South Africa's cultural narrative. He championed an inclusive pedagogy, interdisciplinary engagement and the integration of local artistic tradi-



Terry King

tions into academic discourse; contributions that were at the heart of the university's goal of civic renewal.

Beyond his university work, Terry King also played a pivotal role in shaping the artistic infrastructure of KwaZulu-Natal. As a founding trustee of the Tatham Art Gallery Board (1995–2015) and chairperson of its acquisitions committee, he helped build one of South Africa's most respected public art collections. In a society still grappling with the legacies of exclusion and inequality, Terry believed deeply in the transformative potential of the arts and he embodied a quiet but resolute commitment

to beauty, truth and justice. His quiet demeanour, deep art history knowledge and wise, measured counsel made him a trusted mentor and institutional steward.

Terry was also a prolific and widely admired painter who participated in over fifty group exhibitions and fourteen solo or joint shows. His paintings are held in major public collections, including the South African National Gallery (Iziko), Durban Art Gallery, Tatham Art Gallery and several corporate collections and universities across the country. His post-retirement years saw a remarkable resurgence in his studio practice, and he held or participated in a number of public exhibitions, including *Five Degrees of Realism* (KZNSA Gallery, 2017), *Five Degrees of Separation* (Tatham Art Gallery, 2018) and *Found and Imagined* (Hodgins House Gallery, 2019).

It is these paintings that will make up Terry's most enduring legacy; and, for this reason, it is worth dwelling on them for a little longer. The paintings and sketches cover a wide range of subjects, but perhaps the most significant of them fall into two surprisingly traditional categories: landscapes and still lives.

Commenting on his own work, Terry noted that '[m]y painting is about three things: the nature of the land, the tradition of still-life, reflections on the art of painting.' This last – the art of painting itself – is not, strictly speaking, a subject; it is better seen as the way in which Terry wanted his artistic processes, from visualisation, through colour choices, to texture and the brushstrokes themselves, to be accorded as much importance as the more obvious content of his paintings. In other words, for Terry the painterly process is not merely a means to a representational end, but a key element of his work. Indeed, it is the seemingly endless productive interplay between the painterly process made visible and the traditional subject matter, between the means of representation and what is represented, that repeatedly draws the viewer back to his works. It was his way to move viewers beyond what he felt was the prison of conventional depictions.

In his later years Terry's landscapes fell into two loosely conceived groups. There is what he called the 'littoral' series, where he drew inspiration from the coastline, and the way in which all too transient human structures such as piers and bollards attempt to ameliorate the break between land and sea; and then there are the 'emblem' and the 'midpoint' series, where the subjects have their origin in the landscape surrounding Pietermaritzburg and the Harrismith hills. In these paintings, signs of past and present farming activity – fences, silos, and the like – stand as emblematic but fragile markers of human occupation, placed in a landscape that is itself subject to slow geological erosion and change.

The still lives pursue a parallel path. For Terry they too should be considered as 'history paintings', simultaneously presenting the viewer with 'records of possession and dispossession', 'inventories of communal values and identities' and 'images of cultural contact and exchange.' But of the objects he painted (and they often came from ancient and faraway cultures) he also wrote: 'An isolated small scale [sculptural] object is all too likely to strike one as a mere thing unless it is staged so as to prompt one to think otherwise of it.'

It is this staging, or presenting for the viewer, that brings us back to the essential aspect of Terry's mature paintings, whether landscapes, still lives or other, more occasional, subject matter. In a couple of notes that he wrote, he himself described his works as 'Loosely layered and excavated passages of paint [that are



*Fortress (2025)*

used] to convey the unruliness of the environment and its containment through the geometry of human occupation.' These he arranged such that 'no particular elements of the painting are given undue prominence – backgrounds, foregrounds and objects are accorded equal importance.'

But, and this is one of the most paradoxical and abiding characteristics of Terry's paintings, the overall result of this juxtaposition and ambiguity, of this placing one history on top of another, is not troubling to the viewer. His paintings are not jolting studies in human confusion or insignificance. Partly because of his inspired choice of colours, partly because of his unerring sense of design, Terry's paintings are wonderfully serene, providing viewers with scenes for contemplation and endless quiet fascination. It is as if he has been able to place human history and geological time within a shared space, within a world which is both in flux and nevertheless infinitely calm.

In the end what distinguishes Terry King's work is its peacefulness; they are wonderful paintings to live with.

#### NOTE

- 1 The early parts of this obituary have been adapted, with permission, from Louise Hall's official University of KwaZulu-Natal tribute to Terry King.