

# The eyes have it

A series of stirring portraits is to form an upcoming exhibition by one of Antigua's most acclaimed artists. In a candid interview with *Luxury Locations Magazine*, Naydene Gonnella talks inspiration, growing up as the 'invisible' middle child - and why she never ever paints within the lines.

Before an assembly of famous tragic faces – including the haunted, hunted gaze of Kurt Cobain and the chaotic, furious despair of Amy Winehouse – a list of questions probing everything from the source of artistic inspiration to the finer details of its execution quickly becomes superfluous. Said list is subsequently abandoned down the side of an armchair which cheerfully wears the colourful bruises of an artist at work.

Paint splatters, discarded coffee cups and stacks of pieces in various stages of progress were only to be expected inside Naydene Gonnella's sequestered studio. This startling oil-painted ode to misadventure and misery was not.

Today, on an otherwise unremarkable Friday morning, I am being let in on a secret. "I haven't shown my faces to many people," Naydene tells me with

what appears to be an unintended double entendre.

Here, in this low-ceilinged Midway warehouse, sunrays cast glints and shadows across Jimi Hendrix, Robin Williams, Michael Hutchence, Marilyn and Elvis. The astonishing likenesses means there's no mistaking the identities within this congregation of the anguished, the ill-fated and the lost.

Locally, fans of Naydene's work may be more familiar with her seascapes, often featuring bold vibrant depictions of turtles, pelicans and seahorses. Her "beautiful innocent animals", as she calls them, displayed to the left, make for a striking juxtaposition opposite the tortured souls on the right.

Somewhere in the middle – both figuratively and literally – is Naydene.

"I have my tormented and my tranquil



side," she imparts. "Sometimes there's a craziness going on in my head and I spend a lot of energy trying to cover that up.

"The calm seascapes are the other side of me; they've been coming up a lot more. Painting these beautiful innocent creatures helps me; they are just happy doing their thing. I realised I'd better get happy doing my thing," she says smiling.

It may be some years since Naydene's earliest exhibitions – paintings carefully pegged to a washing line at her childhood home in Ontario, Canada, awaiting an audience of obliging relatives – but there's one particular memory of those days that stands out like a beacon.

"When I was eight and my sister was nine, we were both given a paint-by-numbers set. We sat down to do them, my sister going totally by the numbers. I started doing that but then decided I wanted to do my own thing with it. Hers ended up looking exactly like the box and was put up in the living room. Mine ended up crazy and chaotic and was hung in the hallway where the light wasn't too good."

She adds with a wry laugh: "I was told I didn't stay within the lines. I always remember that."

A need to defy traditional rules was to fuel a lifelong affair with expressionism. When an initial course in commercial illustration proved too stringent – "far too much staying in the lines" – it was ditched after two years. At 26, Naydene joined Ontario College of Art and Design and this is where her creativity was really able to flourish. Her final year when she was chosen to study in Florence, Italy, remains one of the happiest periods of her life. In 1994, she graduated with honours in the figurative discipline.

The last two decades have won Naydene a slew of awards for her work which has encompassed diverse themes of doorways, nature, abstract landscapes and her own children, Kianna, 17, and Danya, 13.

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But a fixation with faces, both real and anonymous, emerged time and again. Her latest collection – some of which have been in process for several years – are to form a solo exhibition being staged in Antigua.

"I was originally going to focus on women, standing up for women's rights," Naydene says, "but it seemed a bit gimmicky, it didn't ring true for me. I thought, what am I really feeling? I'm really overcoming my own darkness.

"Tragic faces really appeal to me. It's the eyes that tell the story; the other details are secondary so I focus on the eyes and leave some of the rest to imagination."

It is indeed the eyes that exquisitely encapsulate the essence of each person, complemented by Naydene's use of colour. The cataclysm of Amy Winehouse's

abruptly aborted life is portrayed in deep red and black.

"Amy was so tragic, I wanted red. Red can be passionate and it can also indicate anger. I imagine she must have had a lot of anger," she continues. "Robin Williams is a toned down blue – it's a sad feeling of waste. And Jimi seems purple to me."

Look closely and there's another recurrent theme – a tiny image of a lamb can be found somewhere in each depiction. "That's my signature with these tormented figures," Naydene explains. "The lamb signifies that little bit of innocence that was destroyed.

"What links them all together is their discontent with reality; that's something I'm always exploring."

Gesturing to Kurt brooding in the corner, she says: "I often wonder how many times he thought about suicide before. And Robin – who would have thought that a man who made so many people laugh was that tormented?"

"Many of them weren't comfortable in their own skin; I struggled with that for a long time myself. To think of the ones that can get up and perform in front of so many people when they're suffering so much within is interesting to me.

"Some of the deaths had to be a mistake, they didn't mean to overdose. Some ended things on purpose, others went too far trying to disappear."

The idea of striving to obliterate the mind is one that strikes a chord with her.

