

# Green's art digs into her African roots

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**GALLERY** Over and over the figure appears — as a silhouette in a book, a painting on canvas, a relief sculpture, even a painted full body cast. The person always stands in the same position, head bent with an arm raised to clutch it.

Sometimes the figure looks overcome by grief or pain, sometimes ready to thrash out in anger. Elsewhere the person seems only to be shampooing his hair. Or her hair. It's not clear whether this is a man or a woman. Or whether it will ever completely emerge from the layers of paint and fabric that wrap its limbs, like a shroud or a bandage or a cocoon.

Jo-Anne Green sits in the Different Angle Gallery, surrounded by these images — which are partly self-portraits, partly portraits of South African miners. (The exhibit runs through April 7). The figure has yet to reveal its face, but after 30 years of struggling to discover her identity, the artist is prepared to show hers.

Once she was cloaked in privilege and in a persistent sense of discomfort she didn't quite understand. Her parents, South Africans of Lithuanian and German descent, felt nothing like it.

"They were in denial, like a lot of white South Africans," Green says. "I was never aware of the African National Congress. I didn't know Nelson Mandela existed. I was born one year before Sharpeville. When Mandela was on trial, I was so young, but I have memories of something uncomfortable."

Green's introduction to the mines that haunt her paintings came in a college art class. The professor instructed the students to go to deserted mines and pick up materials to create an object that would reflect the quality of life there.

"The whole issue of space came to the fore," she explains. "Psychological space. Emotional. Political. Intellectual."

Details became embedded in her mind and, later, in her art: a rickety chair, brought into the mines, so that workers could have their hair cut without missing a beat; primitive showers row upon row, like gas nozzles in a concentration camp; glittering gold veins amid pitch blackness.

Seven years ago, Green traveled to America for a summer vacation and became a voluntary exile. "I tried to discard my past altogether, starting with the materials I was using," she says.

Gradually, narrative dropped out and Green produced her best work — the large relief-on-panel paintings that dominate this show. Set against gorgeously painted backgrounds that suggest nighttime darkness, undersea worlds or fiery transformations, the human figures strain to be born. A bicep here, a leg there or a flayed ribcage bulges into three dimensions, encumbered by corrugated cardboard, burlap, wire and other objects found near her Somerville studio.