

Artist clings to dream of time before war

ELIZABETH DONALDSON catches up with African impressionist painter Daniel Novela before his first solo exhibition in New York

DANIEL Novela is a practical man. Asked how he chooses his canvases he says simply, "They must fit into the boot of my car." He is also compulsively creative and can't make it through the day without painting.

His sophisticated landscapes are infiltrating galleries and private collections as his special brand of African impressionism becomes better known.

He is elated about his forthcoming solo exhibition in New York.

Novela's success is the result of years of hardship in an almost stereotypical story of an artist who would not let go of his dream.

"I was born in Makhado but my Mozambican father took the

family back to his home in Gaza as National Party politics grew increasingly sinister," he says. I remember so well the wide open spaces of northern Mozambique, the miles and miles of ploughed land, and the farms.

"There was such a strong sense of community. People knew you, knew your family. There was a sense of belonging. It was an idyllic childhood, the happiest days of my life, and I return there with every painting.

"Each work is a return to that state of bliss. There's always a woman in my paintings wearing red and blue. That's my mother Elina. My art is my life with her.

"I want to recapture the beautiful simplicity of herding the



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cattle, collecting firewood and water. It was so peaceful.

"But then I lost my father. I was 10 years old. When war broke out it became dangerous to live outside the big cities and so my mother sent me to Maputo. I enrolled at the Escola de Artes Visuais but before I could finish I received word that my mother had been captured by Renamo soldiers. By the time I found her she'd been beaten so badly she couldn't walk.

"By then the war and famine were at their worst so we returned to SA, to my mother's family in Khuma outside Klerksdorp.

"There was a different kind of

war there — apartheid. It was the end of my studies.

"I couldn't speak the language and art wasn't taught in township schools." Novela says that in his desperation to become an artist, he wrote a letter to the education minister in Brazil begging for assistance. They responded, but needed documents he didn't have.

"I was devastated," he says. "I wanted to study so badly. But it was over so I went to work in the local Indian store.

"I would paint at night — always those memories of Mozambique. The same scenes I love to paint today except my canvases

were smaller. I'd sell them outside the supermarket for a couple of rand so that we could buy food.

"Then I heard about a monthly craft market in town and I started selling there. I stopped working to paint professionally. It was hard. Many nights we went to bed hungry and often we'd travel somewhere to sell my work and land up with no money to get home."

His need to study never subsided. Novela later met the campus director of Vaal Triangle Technikon, who referred him to Amareza Buys, head of the art department.

She enrolled him for a national

diploma in fine art. "But money was tight. I sold my paintings outside supermarkets but it wasn't enough. My exam results were blocked because of unpaid fees.

"One day I met a man who would become like a father to me, Les Lategaan. He believed in me to the point where he settled all my debts so that I could focus on my painting. I haven't looked back."

Lategaan, a Klerksdorp businessman, is still one of Novela's greatest fans. "How can you not believe in a man who tells you, 'I'm going to be a great artist?'" he asks.

Novela says his technique evolved through his studies but his subject matter remained the same — memories of a happy childhood.

Since his graduation in 2000, Novela has exhibited regularly in Gauteng and recently completed a successful tour of Europe, where he sold 60 paintings.

In the past five years gallery owners have increased the price of his work from a modest R350 a painting to a set rate of R7 000 for a canvas.

In September Novela will have his first exhibition in New York at the Sankara Ranka Art Gallery, owned by Gambian-born American Saihou Saidy, whose passion is to showcase African art.

Novela is keeping up the pace, finishing the 25 pieces due to the Sankara Ranka Gallery, as well as painting several commissions for private collectors.

"I'm also studying a BTech degree in business administration. I've still got the study bug," he says.

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