

Georgina Thomson: My Special Place

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Paris and home – two very different places, but both are special places for Georgina Thomson, director of Dance Forum.

I meet Georgina on a sunny Wednesday morning at her quaint home in Westdene, Johannesburg. Upon entering, I am immediately reminded of a quote by Pam Brown: “One small cat changes coming home to an empty house to coming home”. Spread out on one of the two couches is a pure white cat, Sissy, who is deaf, as some white cats are, but lives a blissfully happy cat life nonetheless. There’s another, a black and white, who I meet later. What’s a home without a cat or two?

Georgina’s home is inviting: there are paintings on the walls, luxurious green covers on the couches, “a market find” she says, and bookshelves crammed with books.

“I love reading,” says Georgina. “I go into bookshops and pick books.”

Another sign of a home for me – and I have a look at some of the titles; there’s the American novelist Ann Tyler, “she’s very clever and beautiful”, there’s Simone de Beauvoir, André P Brink, Neale Donald Walshe’s Conversations with God series, Ian McEwan whose Cement Garden she discovered in Scotland, and has since read all his books. She’s an ardent fan of JM Coetzee, I spot Marilyn French’s The Women’s Room, “that book gave me the courage to leave my husband,” she explains. There are novels by Kate Atkinson and Margaret Atwood, among others.

“I can’t really afford to buy paintings,” she says, partly as explanation for so many of the heirloom paintings that surround her: “I feel centred and happy surrounded by the things I grew up with.” Many of the paintings hung in her parents’ home. There is a Frans Claerhout, a Fayettea Varney, an Iris Ampenberger. “As a young child in Lesotho, I wanted to be a ballerina. These artists showed me an alternative way to live – as the artist,” Georgina explains.

She met some of the artists. Voney painted her in blue, just after Georgina had returned from Paris, and that painting now hangs above Georgina’s fireplace. There are portraits of her grandmother, another portrait of Georgina herself as a young woman, and Georgina’s own paintings of friends.

In the dining room, I am struck by a vivid artwork by Patrick Ngcobo. With its colourful township scene and tin roofs glinting from the canvas, it looks like real pieces of tin have been used. In the kitchen, I exclaim that there are paintings there too – few people put paintings in their kitchens – but there are striking ones by Ampenberger, again, as well as by Carol Preston, Sedu Medi and Marianne Meier. I notice a cluster of antique cups on a side table, all inherited from her mother, says Georgina. In her bedroom, a striking line drawing of Georgina also hangs on the wall.

Sitting in the homely lounge again, surrounded by this rich sense of personal history and heritage, we talk about Georgina’s other love: the city of Paris.

Her first experience at the age of 18 was traumatic. Fresh from Bloemfontein, “I didn’t last long. I couldn’t cope,” she explains. It was to be another 25 years before she returned. The French Institute sent her to look at dance spaces in the city, and that’s when she fell in love with the place. She walked its streets. “There’s an amazing sense of art there,” she smiles. “The theatres are full of people as well. Art is part of peoples’ lives. I go back now, and walk extensively along the River Seine, taking random walks. They live very differently there. You can just go and sit, and then walk, it’s

just so open. I love the Metro, the Champs Élysées, the museums, especially the art museums, the pavement cafes... Down every road there's something to see. I love the bookshop, Shakespeare and Co – you can hang around there for hours. You'll find anything you could ever think of looking for."

Georgina leans back on the couch: "I often dream of getting a small apartment there, but I don't think I could afford that."

For now, the warmth of Georgina's house in Westdene is home – a small home, modernised and rejuvenated, while retaining its quaint features such as a fireplace. It's redolent with the warmth of family, echoing with personal history. The cats play together as we walk around, and I drive away. Georgina's home is a calm, homely, quiet oasis. No wonder she feels at home in this special place.