

# Westport Artist Hails Mandela

*Printed in the Westport News – May 1994, by Don Casciato*

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Artist Janet Slom, one of several hundred former South Africans living in Fairfield County, was thrilled by Nelson Mandela's presidential inauguration yesterday and other recent democratic developments in her native country.

When she emigrated from South Africa in 1978 with her husband, because they did not want to be a part of the apartheid system. "It was a major step in our lives," she said. "We couldn't agree with the South African system so we decided to leave and do what we could from this end."

On Monday, Mr. Mandela brought three centuries of white rule to a close when he unanimously was elected South Africa's first black president by its first all-race Parliament. The 44-member U.S. Delegation for Tuesday's inaugural included Connecticut Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr., and the peaceful election succeeded beyond all expectations.

Time magazine recently observed that the "surprise was not that the election was carried out, but that it happened at all. Here was a white government, still with a monopoly grip on political power, handing over control of the country to the black majority it had held in servitude for 300 years."

For Ms. Slom the turn of events in her native country coincides with a major success as an artist as 50 of her works since 1990 have gone on display in her first New York show. It opened last week at the same time her former countrymen – black and white – were voting for democracy. The paintings are at Kohn Pedersen Fox, 111 West 57<sup>th</sup> St.

The local artist, now a U.S. citizen, is excited by the developments in South Africa. She has been in touch with relatives and friends there, and Ms. Slom reports that there is joy that South Africa has become united. The artist said that she hopes to visit her homeland later this year, although she has no plans to return permanently to South Africa. She compared the situation in South Africa to a painter approaching a blank canvas.

“It is absolutely joined. There is joy in the country. This is a beginning. Although there are pockets of trouble, they are starting with a clean state. Everyone I’ve talked to seems positive.” She credits her father, who died in 1982, with inspiring her liberal outlook. “He sought similarities in people and he believed in what he was doing,” she said. “He respected one’s differences.”

Ms. Slom, who has lived in Westport since 1985 with her husband and children, discussed her roots. “Shambhala is an ancient Tibetan philosophy that embraces the universal dignity, respect and decency in mankind. This philosophy has a very personal meaning to me. While growing up on a farm in South Africa, my father treated me to the shining example of this human kindness. Our farm Shambhala would serve as an educational center for Tibetan believers from far and wide to share the teachings. It was a natural oasis in the face of political turmoil...a place of peace and tranquility. My most recent paintings deal with an abstract perspective and interpretation of the past. I hope to communicate the spirituality of Shambhala and stimulate a sense of oneness.”

A New York art curator called her a “primordial time traveler. Her work harkens back to a timeless place in history and in the present.” Although the events in Africa are a vital part of her life, Ms. Slom reflects on her artistic success and says what many transplanted Americans have said before her: “This could only happen in America. Here you can follow your dreams.”