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Museums

# Beads that shimmer with aspiration at Anacostia museum

By **Lonnae O'Neal Parker** December 27, 2013

The [Anacostia Community Museum](#)'s new exhibition "[Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence](#)" recognizes the powerful cultural currents and back stories from the artists as central to their every stitch.

The 31-piece exhibition of bead art — what the artists call ndwango, which means cloth or rag — features religious, metaphysical and earthbound themes rendered both literally and through various stages of abstraction. The tiny colored Czech glass beads densely hand-sewn onto black fabric canvases showcase both Xhosa and Zulu traditions. And they display a decades-long partnership that began in 1999 on a former sugar plantation north of Durban and that now includes the five featured artists, all living and working together in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and others.

Ubhle co-founder Ntombephi Ntobela, is known as Induna, or Leader, in the cooperative. She was married to a migrant sugar cane cutter and began using the beadworking skills she learned from her grandmother to make items to sell. She taught beading to other women, but when their local market became flooded with cheaper plastic bead jewelry and Chinese imports, the women stitched their beads onto canvas and transformed their creativity, and aspirations, into high art.

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The challenge was “making use of this tradition and making it work for their own agency,” says museum senior curator Portia James. “We were just blown away by the scale and labor and majestic woven stories. They are just the types of stories the Anacostia Museum likes to tell.”

Nonhlakanipho Mndiyatha, who began working with Ubuhle in 2003, uses a signature rural Xhosa white house pattern. It appears in “The Bulls” series, done after the women spent time on a farm; cattle represent a source of wealth in Xhosa and Zulu life. And it appears in her portion of the exhibition centerpiece, the massive, seven-panel “The African Crucifixion,” which was commissioned by an Anglican cathedral and includes biblical as well as everyday themes of rural South Africa: health, food, water, jobs. The house represents dignity, security, the future of Mndiyatha’s family. It acts as a proxy in pieces of enormous complexity, and it reinforces the point that art is often what happens when our life experiences become too big for our words.

“The Red Cow,” by Zondlile Zondo, makes use of the Zulu tradition of a bright, broad color palette to meditate on the economic and emotional significance of cattle. It shows a striking difference from the Xhosas’ use of muted pastels.

Each piece evinces such technical precision that it’s impossible to discern how the artists maintained the tightness of their lines and patterns without revealing the cloth underneath.

A display of early 20th-century beadworking borrowed from the Museum of African Art collection — a skirt, an apron, a married woman’s hat — highlights the cultural traditions from which the contemporary beading artistry was derived. A video of the artists’ stories shows their attempts to transcend lives marked by hardship and the scourges of AIDS, poverty and privation, and their growing sense of themselves as women with voices.

Thando Ntobela is half-sister to Induna and sister to Ubuhle artist Zandile Ntobela and another beader, Them bani, who has died. She says that her mother always urged her to be strong and that she wants to tell her own children, “‘See the work I have done,’ so they see that I am a clever woman.” She recalls finishing a piece and running up to Ubuhle co-founder Bev Gibson to say, “I don’t believe that I did it.”

Gibson co-owned the sugar plantation where Ubuhle began and later, in the early 2000s, bought a small farm for the Ubuhle women set up shop. “I needed these women as much as they needed me,” says Gibson, reached in South Africa. She says she had been divorced, had little money and bought the farm because as a white, educated South African woman she was able to get a loan.

“It is very much us combining skills, where I have had access to certain things the artists haven’t had, but it is the artists who have had the ability and the creativity, and also the tenacity,” she says. “It would have been far easier to have done a commercial commission: You just follow and do what people ask you to do. But they say, ‘No, we want our creativity to be seen.’”

## **“Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence”**

at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, 1901 Fort Pl. SE, through Sept. 21, 2014.

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