

ART REVIEW

Meaning, memories are stitched into South African beadworks

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, May 15, 2019, 5:31 p.m.



"The African Crucifixion," by Tshengi Duma, Sthembile Majola, Nontanga Manguthsane, Nonhlanipho Mndiyatha, Kalipha Ntobela, Ntombepi Ntobela, and Thembanani Ntobela. (ANACOSTIA COMMUNITY MUSEUM/SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION)

MANCHESTER, N.H. — Twenty years ago on a sugar plantation in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Bev Gibson and Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela founded a collective called Ubuhle (pronounced uh-boo-klay), which means "beauty" in the languages of the local Zulu and Xhosa peoples. The women of Ubuhle live and work together, raising their children and crafting large, often searingly personal beaded textiles called ndwangos — in English, "cloths," or "rags."

The Zulu and Xhosa peoples have been making beadwork, archeologists tell us, for 72,000 years. “Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence” at the Currier Museum of Art spotlights a group whose cunning use of the age-old art has fostered their financial autonomy.

The work is intricate; a single ndwango can take 10 months or more to make, as the artist painstakingly stitches tiny Czech glass beads into black cloth. The smallest pieces are just over a foot square; the largest, a jaw-dropping, multi-panel altarpiece, is close to 15-by-23 feet.

In this sparkling exhibition organized by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, light plays in great waves over the ndwangos as you walk by them. Translucent colors and organic, purling patterns of stitches add layers of movement and meaning.

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Working with Ubhle provides the artists spiritual and emotional sustenance as well as a livelihood. The group has seen children grow and sisters die. Five artists have been lost to HIV/AIDS or other illnesses since 2006. Stitch by stitch, bead by bead, the artists express grief, love, and loss.

Among the dead: Ntobela’s sister Bongiswa Ntobela, the most visionary artist in this show. The speckled grounds in her pieces seem to tremble as distinct forms pop against them. In “Beshu,” concentric circles, arrows, and pinwheels hover and spin, orbiting around the central image of an abstracted, multicolored skirt. The viewer’s eye shuttles between form and background. solid and

ethereal, now and forever.

Bongiswa Ntobela died in 2009, and another sister and beadworker, Them bani Ntobela, died in 2011. That year, Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela made “My Sea, My Sister, My Tears,” a bold, watery blue abstraction that reveals her carefully designed stitching — a foundational element harder to see in Bongiswa’s speckled works. Concentric circles balloon and whipsaw into spirals; pathways of white beads arc and curl. The blue, overlapping curves feel pillowy and welcoming; it’s a picture of embrace. “Under our skin we are all blue, because we are all made of water,” the artist writes in accompanying text.

Visiting a nearby ranch, several of the Ubuhle artists undertook a group project to depict cattle. Bulls signify wealth to the Zulu and Xhosa peoples, who still use cattle as dowries.

Each artist chose a bull to portray, and poured her own history into the portrait. The title of Zondlile Zondo’s “I am ill, I still see Color and Beauty: Jamludi the Red Cow” reprises a song her father used to sing: “I am Jamludi the red cow, the one that has survived in the war; the others died but the red cow does not go anywhere!”

Zondo chooses a burning palette of reds, greens, and blues, which vibrate with gestures that ripple out from the stolid bull in the center. At the moment, she is the only Zulu member of the group, and her palette and patterning are rooted in Zulu traditions.

The gravitational center of the show is an enormous, multi-panel piece, “The African Crucifixion,” originally made for the Anglican Cathedral in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Ntobela chose a theme — trees — and seven artists went to work on seven ndwangos. Them bani Ntobela, ailing with

HIV/AIDS-related illnesses, took on the task of Christ on the cross. He is a gaunt black man, his expression quiet; the overlong stretch of his arms appears, somehow, embracing.

The other panels, antic and allegorical, and nodding to contemporary conditions in South Africa, play backdrop to Them bani’s piece. Vultures perch high in the “Tree of Defeat” panel as AIDS ribbons dot the barren landscape below. The “Tree of Life” panel, on the other hand, is cut across by

... a river and populated by fish and birds.

The Ubuhle artists started in tough economic straits and carved a niche for themselves selling work in galleries in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Now they have this exhibition touring the United States, and more commissions are rolling in. They're using their new funds to form a guild, and they plan to teach their children how to bead. The technique is age-old, yet each stitch in these works is of the moment, connecting the artists to living memory, capturing their pain and joy, and reflecting an ever-evolving aesthetic.

UBUHLE WOMEN: BEADWORK AND THE ART OF INDEPENDENCE

At Currier Museum of Art, 150 Ash St., Manchester, N.H., through June 10. 603-669-6144, www.currier.org

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