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RUTH FUNK CENTER FOR TEXTILE ARTS

South African Bead Art Focus of Funk Center Show Opening Saturday

January 28, 2020



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NTOMBEPHI "INDUNA" NTOBELA'S "TRIBUTE TO MY SISTER BONGISWA" FROM 2010 FEATURES GLASS BEADS SEWN ONTO FABRIC. IMAGE COURTESY OF ANACOSTIA COMMUNITY MUSEUM/SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

'UBUHLE WOMEN: BEADWORK AND THE ART OF INDEPENDENCE' FEATURES 'NDWANGO' ART

MELBOURNE, FLA. — *Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence*, a powerful overview of a new form of bead art developed by women living and working together in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, opens a nearly three-month run Saturday, Feb. 1, at Florida Tech's Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts.

This art, called *ndwango*, involves stretching a black fabric tight like a canvas and then attaching colored Czech glass beads to transform the cloth into a contemporary art form of remarkable visual depth. Using skills handed down through generations, and working in their own unique style, these women create abstract as well as figurative subjects for their *ndwango*s.

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generate. From a distance, each panel of the ndwango seems to present a continuous surface; but as the viewer moves closer and each tiny individual bead catches the light, the meticulous skill and labor that went into each work becomes apparent.

A single panel can take more than 10 months to complete.

To shed light on this labor-intensive process and its artists, a gallery tour will be presented at the Friends of Textiles Lecture Series on Tuesday, Feb. 4, at the Funk Center. Ubuhle co-founder and curator Bev Gibson will lead a gallery tour of the exhibition at 6 p.m., with a reception starting at 5:15 p.m. The lecture and reception are \$10 for the general public and free for Florida Tech faculty, staff, and students. For more information, or to register for the gallery tour, visit <https://textiles.fit.edu/events/>.

Ubuhle was conceived in response to the social and cultural transformation triggered by labor patterns where rural men were forced to leave their homesteads – and their wives and families – to earn salaries cutting sugar cane. Established in 1999 by Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela and Gibson on a former sugar plantation in KwaZulu-Natal, Ubuhle began as a way of creating employment for women by combining traditional skills and making them profitable.

By incorporating a skill that many of the women already had—beadwork, a customary form of artistic expression for generations of South African women—and teaching it to those who did not, Ntobela and Gibson began to provide women with a private source of income and a route to financial independence.

Since 2006, the Ubuhle community has lost five artists to HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, nearly halving the number of active artists. Many of the ndwangos thus function as memorials to Ubuhle sisters who have lost their lives. Remembering the dead is a key motivation for the creation of many of these artworks, and it imbues them with a spiritual significance.

Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence was developed by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum in Washington, D.C., in cooperation with Gibson and curators Ubuhle Beads and James Green. It is organized for tour by International Arts & Artists in Washington, D.C.

The exhibition will be on view at the Ruth Funk Center through April 25.

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