

TRAVELING EXHIBITION OF STUNNING BEAD-ART FROM SOUTH AFRICA TELLS A LUMINOUS STORY OF INDEPENDENCE, MIGRATION, AND MEMORY



Image: Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela, *My Sea, My Sister, My Tears*, 2011. Glass beads sewn onto fabric. 24” x 24”.

ROCHESTER, NY, June 15, 2022 – The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester is pleased to announce *Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence*. This spectacular exhibition showcases a new form of bead art, the *ndwango* (“cloth”), developed by a community of women living and working together in the rural province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The black fabric on which the Ubuhle women work is reminiscent of the Xhosa headscarves and skirts that many of them grew up wearing. The artists stretch this textile like a canvas and use colored Czech glass beads to transform the flat cloth into a contemporary art form. Using skills handed down through generations, and working in their own unique style “directly from the soul”—in the words of artist and co-founder Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela—the women create abstract as well as figurative subjects for their *ndwangos*. *Ubuhle Women* will be on view July 17–October 23, 2022.

Ubuhle (Uh-Buk-lay) means “beauty” in the Xhosa and Zulu languages, and it eloquently describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that has a particular spiritual significance for the Xhosa people. From a distance, *ndwangos* seem to be formed from a continuous surface, but as each individual bead catches the light, the viewer becomes aware of the meticulous skill that goes into each work and the scale of the artists’ creative ambition. A single panel can take more than 10 months to complete.

Ubuhle was established in 1999 on a former sugar plantation north of the city of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, when Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela and Bev Gibson became friends and shared a vision of combining skills to create employment for rural women. Together they created a means for local women to use inherited beading traditions as a way of achieving financial independence. As a master-beader, Ntombephi also trained other women who were not familiar with this tradition, so that they, too, could join this community.

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Bev Gibson and Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela created *Ubuhle* in response to the consequences of a breakdown of family life and traditional values caused by migration in South Africa. Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela, the wife of a cane-cutter, had left Bizana in the Eastern Cape with her husband to work on a sugar plantation in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. By helping the world to see the *ndwangos* as important and dynamic contemporary art, Gibson and Ntobela created the opportunity for women to develop their own source of income and to build a route to financial independence by commercializing a centuries-old traditional practice.

Since 2006, the *Ubuhle* community has lost five members to HIV/AIDS, cancer, and other illnesses, nearly halving the number of active artists. Many of the artworks on view throughout the exhibition function as memorials to *Ubuhle* artists who have lost their lives. Remembering the dead is a key motivation for the creation of many of the artworks, and it imbues them with a spiritual significance. Because their technique of stitching beads onto fabric is such a slow, meticulous process the act of beading itself serves as a form of therapy. Beading becomes a way of setting down the issues that are closest to the artists’ hearts; a way of grieving, and a place to convey feelings and memories. In a sense, through their presence in the artists’ thoughts during the act of creation, the dead become a part of the very construction of the work itself, and so the *ndwango* becomes a site of memory.

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

In Rochester, the exhibition is sponsored by the Rubens Family Foundation and Nocon & Associates, a private wealth advisory practice of Ameriprise Financial Services, Inc. Funding is also provided by the Gallery Council of the Memorial Art Gallery, Paul Marc and Pamela Miller Ness, and Marion Swett Robinson, with additional support from FULL MEASURE, Caitlin and Benn Kireker, Partners + Napier, Mary Ellen Burris, Mary Goldman Crowe, Carolyn Ettinger, Dr. Mattie Alleyne, Barbara, Daniel, Lisa, and Susan Hoffman, Mark and Mona Friedman Kolko, Theta Alpha Zeta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta, Joyce Boucher, The Rochester (NY) Chapter, The Links Inc., Dr. Karal Ann Marling, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

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About International Arts & Artists

International Arts & Artists in Washington, DC, is a non-profit arts service organization dedicated to increasing cross-cultural understanding and exposure to the arts internationally, through exhibitions, programs and services to artists, arts institutions and the public. Visit www.artsandartists.org

About the Memorial Art Gallery

The Memorial Art Gallery showcases visual art from antiquity to the present day, including the outdoor public Centennial Sculpture Park. In addition to its permanent collection, MAG offers a year-round schedule of special exhibitions, lectures, concerts, tours, after-hours social events, and family activities.

Hours: Wednesday–Sunday 11 am to 5 pm, and until 9 pm on Thursdays and select Fridays. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

Admission: \$20; senior citizens, \$18; college students with ID and children 6–18, \$9. Always free to members, University of Rochester faculty/staff and students, and children 5 and under. Half-price general admission Thursdays from 5–9 pm is made possible by Monroe County, with additional support from FULLMEASURE.

Discounted admission tickets are available when purchasing online. For more information, call 585.276.8900 or visit mag.rochester.edu.

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