



African Queen

In the three decades since she was ‘discovered’, Esther Mahlangu’s Ndebele designs have been applied to fast cars and supermodels, footwear and aircraft.

Words: JAMES BAINBRIDGE

ESTHER MAHLANGU has introduced the vibrant patterns of Ndebele design to the rarefied setting of the art world and achieved a level of international acclaim enjoyed by few South African artists.

Her work, featured recently at a solo show to mark her 80th birthday at Cape Town’s Irma Stern Museum, also involves an element of performance. For example, she spent September 2014 painting two large-scale 4,5m-high canvases at the entrance to the African gallery of the Virginia Museum of Fine

‘Each time a new glance is given to [Esther] Mahlangu’s mural paintings, the eye dances, swirls, and skips, finding movement in distinctly two-dimensional works,’ said arts critic Amelia Pleasant at the artist’s first solo exhibition in 2003. Mahlangu is the recipient of several international awards for her dedication to the evolution of traditional Ndebele painting

PORTRAIT: DANIEL MALVA



Arts in Richmond – clad in traditional Ndebele beads, bangles and blankets.

The Virginia residency was a powerful way of introducing US onlookers to the culture of an African village such as Mahlangu’s Mpumalanga home, and it received an enthusiastic response. Local school projects based on geometric Ndebele designs sprang up, while Mahlangu would stop to talk to her audience, who tweeted their appreciation.

The catalogue accompanying the Irma Stern Museum show quotes the reaction of Virginia street artist Andre Shank aka Bombproof, who likens Mahlangu’s career to the late American graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat’s rapid rise from homelessness to gallery darling. ‘Her story is a fairy tale... some no-name nobody from nowhere that was just doing it because they loved doing it and then, all of a sudden, people decided that their work was special.’

Mahlangu’s biography is, indeed, as striking as her artwork. She was well into her 50s when the establishment came knocking. Growing up in the 1940s, she learnt at the hands of her mother and grandmother to create the austere designs that decorate Ndebele homes, using her fingers, brushes made from chicken feathers or *bobbejaanstert* (*Xerophyta retinervis*, or black-stick lily), coloured clay and cow dung.

Decades later, French researchers who visited her home village of Weltevrede, northeast of Pretoria, were so impressed

by the walls of her house that she was invited to recreate the design in Paris, for the Pompidou Centre’s landmark Magiciens de la Terre exhibition of non-Western art in 1989.

She had never been overseas or travelled by plane before and could barely speak English – let alone French – but her concerns were allayed by being allowed to take her son and check in a 50kg bag of mealie meal. When she reached Paris, she set to work covering the walls of an exact replica of her homestead, minus the thatch roof, with interlocking Ndebele symbols, attracting thousands of spectators and wide media coverage.

A BMW Art Car soon followed (see ‘Mobile art’ overleaf), and subsequent commissions included a mural in collaboration with

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US minimalist Sol LeWitt at the Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2000. Mahlangu's designs have added Ndebele flair to the tail of a British Airways Boeing, a Fiat 500, stilettos by Brazilian brand Melissa, and a high-end sneaker range by Swedish shoemaker Eytys.

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Despite her international travels and experimentation with new materials, Mahlangu's simple and traditional village life is largely unchanged. The octogenarian can normally be found pottering around her lapa barefoot, tending her small patch of maize and, in time-honoured Ndebele fashion, passing on her artistic knowledge to local girls, including her innumerable grandchildren and great-grandchildren. All of which is, of course, part of her persona – as with the great modernist icons, from Salvador Dali to Andy Warhol, the myth of Mahlangu feeds into the power of her art.

Nicknamed the African Queen, in her beaded headdress with its Ndebele patterns as evocative of Mondrian's geometric shapes as mud hut decorations, it would be derisive to see her as an ingénue proffering tribal exotica. Rather, she is a cultural chameleon operating on the border between authenticity and performance, and between personal expression in the Ndebele tradition and envelope-pushing endeavour. This opens all

manner of debates of the kind the art community thrives on, around anthropological versus critical readings of Mahlangu's work and the ethnocentric Western gaze on African art.

Mahlangu is generally regarded as the greatest living Ndebele artist, but it is difficult to place her in the South African canon because she has achieved greater recognition overseas. Andries Loots of 34 Fine Art Gallery, which represents Mahlangu, believes her closest comparison is the late New York street artist Keith Haring, who also designed a BMW Art Car, collaborated with many brands and body-painted supermodel Grace Jones. 'Mahlangu's work is represented in all the major international museums and her association with brands is what every contemporary artist strives for, as that creates interest and the artist ultimately becomes a brand,' says Loots.

If the story of Mahlangu's arrival on the international art scene as apartheid was ending has any parallel in South African art, it is perhaps those of modern masters such as Gerard Sekoto. The illiberal climate of apartheid and the restrictions for black artists forced many to seek success overseas – and exile, in cases such as that of Sekoto, who fled to Paris in 1947 and never returned. Happily, these influential figures of the 20th century are now regarded as the forerunners of today's burgeoning African art market. They have strong investment potential because it was the sheer quality of their art that broke through the political barriers at home and gained international attention. While paintings by the likes of Sekoto fetch millions at international auctions, Mahlangu's work was priced at about R25 000 at the Irma Stern Museum show – making the Ndebele doyenne an interesting investment. □

Esther's exhibition is part of the SA-UK Seasons 2014 & 2015, a cultural exchange partnership by South Africa's Department of Arts and Culture and the UK's British Council.

Esther Mahlangu collaborated with Scandinavian footwear brand Eytys to design sneakers that debuted at Paris Fashion Week 2015. They will retail at high-end fashion stores in Milan, London, Paris and New York this year



(Above, from left) Artists John Baldessari and Cao Fei have been commissioned to transform BMW's M6 GT3 race cars, which entered the market at the end of 2015. They replace the BMW Z4 GT3, which has been on the road since 2010

MOBILE ART

For 40 years, the BMW Art Cars project has seen artists ranging from Esther Mahlangu to Andy Warhol add their trademark touches to BMWs, turning the vehicles into canvases on wheels. Artists Cao Fei and John Baldessari are currently working on the 18th and 19th cars in the series; aged 38 and 84 respectively, they are the youngest and oldest artists commissioned to date. Mahlangu's car, a BMW 525i sporting multicoloured Ndebele patterns from bumper to bumper, was unveiled in 1991 and remains her signature artwork.

The series began when French art auctioneer and racing driver Hervé Poulain, along with the BMW Motorsport director at the time, invited mobile sculptor Alexander Calder to decorate a BMW 3.0 CSL, nicknamed the Batmobile for its striking spoilers.

The result, featuring Seventies swirls of disco-worthy reds and yellows, was raced at Le Mans in 1975. Designs by a who's who of pop and postmodernism followed, including Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, David Hockney and Jeff Koons.

You don't have to be a patriotic South African to proclaim Mahlangu's contribution one of the best. Its tribal patterns form a striking contrast with the vehicle's familiar Western form, creating a timeless quality. Indeed, her Ndebele sedan was a showstopper in the Global Africa Project exhibition at New York's Museum of Arts and Design.

Not only was Mahlangu the first woman commissioned and still the only African, she also reflected a new direction, according to Thomas Girst, head of cultural engagement at BMW Group Corporate Communications. The early BMW Art Cars were designed by household names and raced at Le Mans, but that changed during the '80s and '90s, when the manufacturer entered new markets internationally, and the collection's focus shifted from racing cars to road models. 'We left the trajectory of huge artists of the mid-20th century and commissioned other artists, including Esther Mahlangu and the Australian Aboriginal artist Michael Nelson Jagamara, and we now have a very multifaceted collection,' Girst told *Private Edition*.

The cars are rarely parked in one place, but a good selection was seen in last year's worldwide exhibitions celebrating the collection's 40th anniversary. London's Institute of Contemporary Arts gallery exhibited all but one in a multistorey car park in 2012, and nine will be shown at Hamburg's Automuseum Prototyp later this year. A few can normally be seen at the BMW Museum in Munich, while Mahlangu's car is set to appear at London's Frieze Art Fair in October before moving to a major exhibition of South African art at the British Museum.

Baldessari and Fei's rolling sculptures will hit the museum circuit and the racetrack next year. Both are decorating M6 GT3 race cars – a homage to BMW's racing heritage. The two artists, a pillar of the Californian art scene and a Chinese multimedia conceptualist, represent two strands of a collection embracing both cultural heavyweights and up-and-coming artists from non-Western countries.