

UBUHLE WOMEN:

Beadwork and the Art of Independence

December 9, 2013 - September 21, 2014



Director's Statement



Photograph by Susana A. Raab,
Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum

I am pleased to present the exhibition *Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence*, featuring the work of South African artists from the Ubhle arts organization.

Ubhle was established in 1999 on a sugar plantation north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal by Bev Gibson, a local resident, and Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela, a migrant laborer from Bizana in the Eastern Cape. Together they created a platform where local women could use the beading skills they had inherited as a means of achieving their own financial independence.

In 2011 Bev traveled to the U.S. and began visiting galleries and museums to try and market the beaded art works to a wider audience. In the course of her travels she visited me at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, where I saw for the first time images and examples of some of the smaller artworks completed by the Ubhle artists.

I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the work, the intricacy of the beading, and the majesty of the large scale artworks, but what seemed truly remarkable was the story behind the Ubhle artists and their efforts using their own skills to build a self-supporting community of artists to empower local women and to provide a better future for children in their new location in KwaZulu-Natal.

The Ubhle Artists being featured are Ntombephi Ntobela, Nonhlakanipho Mndiythata, Zondile Zondo, Zandile Ntobela, and Thando Ntobela.

Please join us in celebrating the work and the creative vision of the Ubhle artists.

Camille Giraud Akeju
Director

Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence showcases a new form of bead art, the *ndwango*, developed by a community of women living and working together in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The artists call their paintings in beads *ndwangos*, which translates as “cloth” or “rag.” The black fabric on which the Ubuhle women work is reminiscent of the Xhosa headscarves and skirts which many of them grew up wearing. By stretching this textile like a canvas, the artists transform the flat cloth into a contemporary art form with colored Czech glass beads.

Using skills handed down through generations, and working in their own unique style “directly from the soul,” according to artist Ntombephi Ntobela, the women create abstract as well as figurative subjects for their *ndwangos*.

UBUHLE WOMEN: Beadwork and the Art of Independence

Ubuhle was established in 1999 on a former sugar plantation north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal when Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela and Bev Gibson 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 their own financial independence. As a master beader, Ntombephi also trained other women not brought up in this tradition so that they too could join the community.

Ubuhle means “beauty” in the Xhosa and Zulu languages and it describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that for the Xhosa people has a particular spiritual significance. From a distance each panel seems to be formed from a continuous surface, but as each tiny individual bead catches the light the viewer becomes aware of the meticulous skill that went into each work and the scale of ambition: a single panel can take more than 10 months to complete.

Bev Gibson
Co-Curator

James Green
Co-Curator

THE ARTISTS

Ntombephi Ntobela beads a ndwango
Photograph by Susana A. Raab



Ntombephi Ntobela was born in June 1966 in Bizana in the Eastern Cape. She is Mpondo Xhosa. She learned to bead from her grandmother who wore beaded garments when she was a child. Ntombephi's sense of beading and of the significance of color and pattern is grounded in the traditional Mpondo framework.

In her early thirties Ntombephi followed her husband Malume to KwaZulu-Natal where he had migrated to work as a cane cutter on a sugar plantation. In order to supplement their income she began to make beadwork items to sell in Durban.

Ntombephi is a master beader, and she has taught many other women to bead. Her skill as a beader was the initial impetus which led her to co-found *Ubhle* with Bev Gibson in 1999.

Ntombephi is known as "Induna" which means "leader," a term of great respect in South Africa. The title also indicates the responsibility she feels for the community, viewing herself as the guardian of its future. Ntombephi hopes to establish the Ubhle guild so that children, including the orphans of her sisters Bongiswa and Thembani and other orphans cared for by the community, will one day learn to bead.

Portrait of Ntombephi Ntobela
©Zanele Muholi/Ubhle



Thando Ntobela was born in Bizana in the Eastern Cape in 1979. She is Zandile's full sister and Induna's half sister. (Thembani, an Ubuhle beader who passed away, was also Thando's full sister.) Thando has recently taken charge of the Ubuhle shop, a place where the artists can sell jewelry and smaller beaded panels as a means of earning a steady monthly income. In charge of the shop books, she also keeps track of the supply of beads.

Thando loves to work with color. As an artist she uses color to represent a range of experiences, emotions, and people in her life. The white, red, blue, green and orange detail in some of her work reminds her of her mother; dark colors remind her of her father.

Portrait of Thando Ntobela
©Zanele Muholi/Ubuhle



Zandile Ntobela, a member of the Mpondo Xhosa, was born in 1986 in Bizana in the Eastern Cape. She lives at the Ubuhle farm where she beads, but she considers her true ancestral home to be in Bizana where her mother lives.

Zandile is an accomplished beader and one of the community's most successful artists. The annual flowering of the ornamental Japanese cherry tree in the garden of Little Farm has been a major source of inspiration for Zandile, and her pattern representing these flowers appears as the signature of her work.

Portrait of Zandile Ntobela
©Zanele Muholi/Ubuhle



Nonhlakanipho Mndiyatha was born in 1972 near Bizana in the Eastern Cape. She is a distant relative of the Ntobela sisters. She was taught to bead by her grandmother and started working for Ubuhle in 2003 after meeting Induna and the community through a mutual friend.

Nonhlakanipho's signature pattern is a white house which appears in nearly all of her works and which became the inspiration for the "clinic" you will see in *The African Crucifixion*. It is a traditional Xhosa rural house with white plastered walls and thatch roof.

Portrait of Nonhlakanipho Mndiyatha
©Zanele Muholi/Ubuhle



Zondlile Zondo is currently the only Zulu member of the group, and her cultural heritage is reflected in the distinct style of her beadwork. She was born in 1969 and grew up in the rural areas in Mpofane, near Thamboti in KwaZulu-Natal. Zondlile's late younger sister Ngoneni introduced her to Ubuhle in 2007 and she officially joined the community in 2008.

Her confident use of primary colors and her bold patterning as seen in her *Jamludi The Red Cow* relate to Zulu traditions of beading which use much brighter colors and a broader palette. (Xhosa beadworking tradition historically confines itself to white, blue, and pink beads.) Her work has inspired other artists and has been crucial to the development of this new art form.

Portrait of Zondlile Zondo
©Zanele Muholi/Ubuhle

Nolindelo Sidibi

(1981 – 2007)

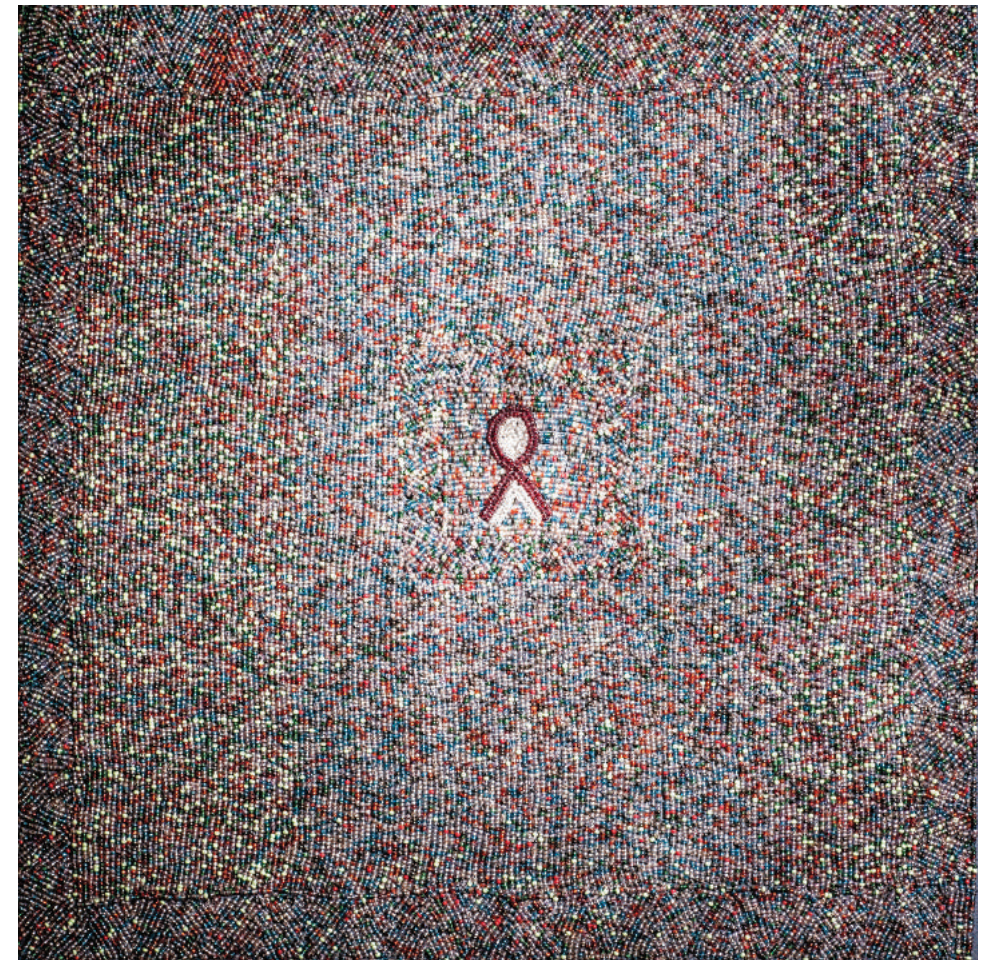
Since 2006 the Ubuhle community has lost 5 artists to HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, nearly halving the number of active artists. Many of the artworks thus function as memorials to Ubuhle sisters who have lost their lives. Remembering the dead is a key motivation for the creation of many of these artworks, and it imbues them with a spiritual significance.

Because the Ubuhle technique of stitching beads onto fabric is such a slow and meticulous process that can take up to 10 months for a large *ndwango*, the act of beading itself often serves as a form of therapy. Beading becomes a way of setting down the issues

REMEMBERING THOSE LOST

that are closest to the artists' hearts; a way of grieving; and a place to encode feelings and memories. By thinking about the deceased 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.

It is a Xhosa and Zulu belief that the ancestors walk among the living and influence day-to-day lives. The dead are often spoken of in the present tense, but are believed to be in the spiritual realm rather than the realm of the flesh. Certain *ndwangos* can become a physical manifestation of a particular ancestor. As Zandile Ntobela says in reference to her beaded bull: "... when I look at it I see my father."



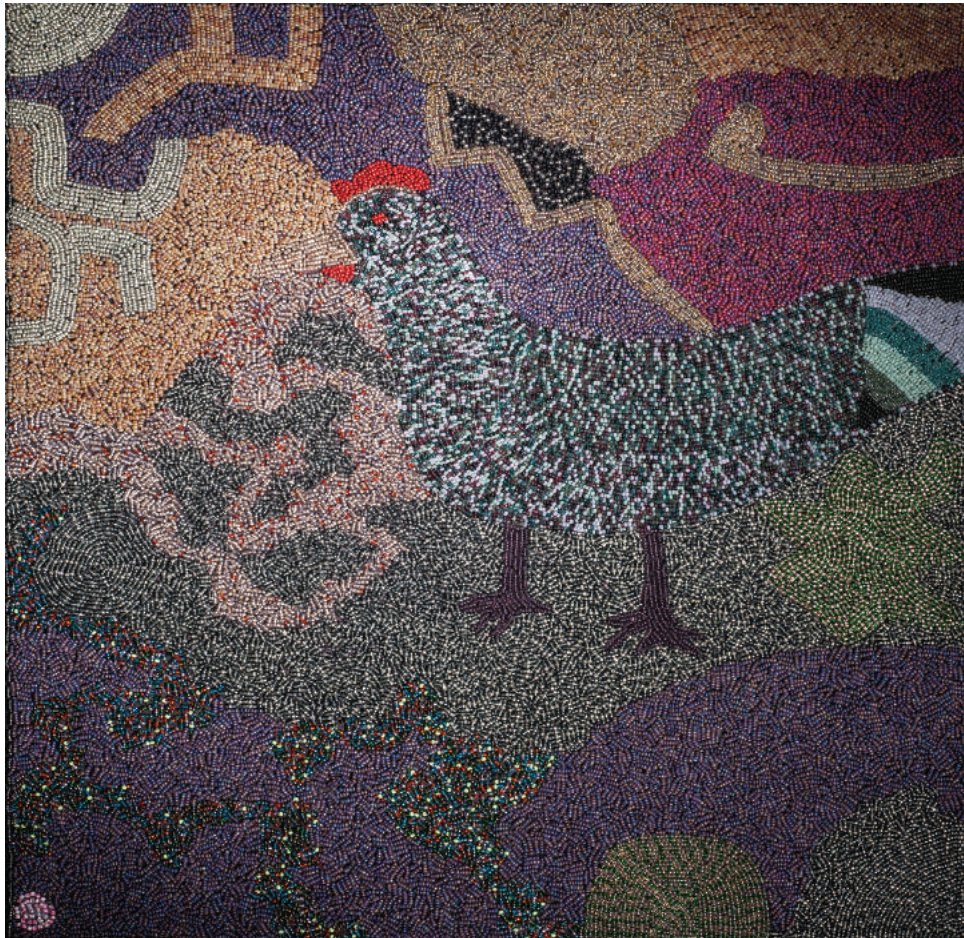
Once she found out that she was HIV-positive Nolindelo continued to work at Ubuhle, but she refused treatment. She produced more work in the time before she died than any other artist. Beadwork offered her a place of focus and drive; she was becoming a master of her craft when she died.

Nolindelo Sidibi
"Ndenzeni": *What Have I Done?*, 2008
Glass beads sewn onto fabric

The Ubuhle Private Collection

Them bani Ntobela

(1972 – 2011)



Sister to Ntombephi, Thando and Zandile, Them bani created the Christ figure in *The African Crucifixion* before she died.

In *My Life* she portrays the chicken, an integral and relatively inexpensive part of rural South African life. Them bani's mother is a *sangoma* or Xhosa traditional healer, who works with traditions of sacrifice to the elders. Traditionally chickens are sacrificed to the ancestors. While cattle indicate great wealth and are used in *lobola* or wedding payments, the chicken represents basic but cheerful survival.

Them bani Ntobela
My Life, 2006
Glass beads sewn onto fabric
The Ubuhle Private Collection

Bongiswa Ntobela

(1973 – 2009)



Bongiswa's style relies on creating a background of muted translucent beads into which she positions distinct objects in primary colors. The bright geometric shapes are visually removed from the flat surface which gives them a three-dimensional quality.

As a *sangoma* or traditional healer, Bongiswa employs colors and patterns that have distinct cultural references. In the lower center of this panel she represents a skirt known as a *beshu*, similar to the kind she herself might have worn as a young girl and which her mother remembers wearing.

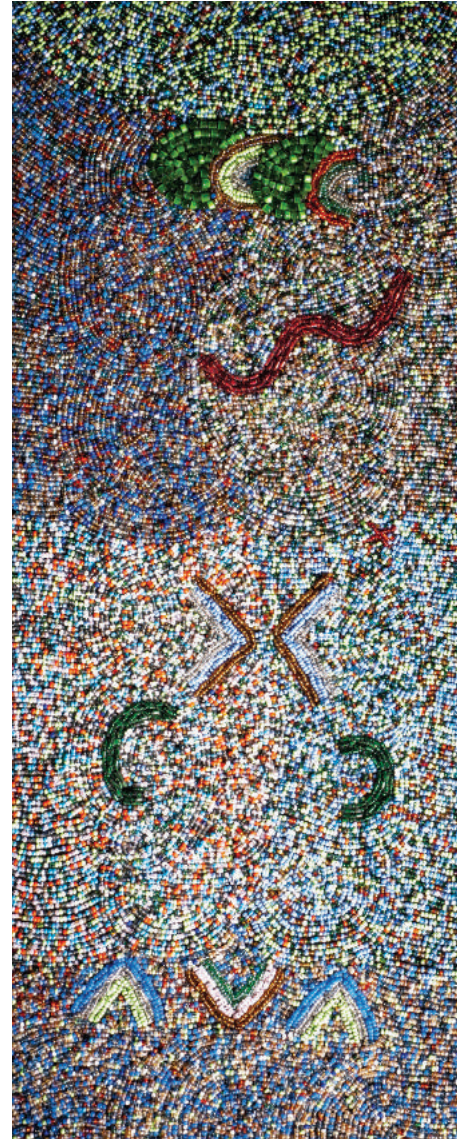
Bongiswa Ntobela
Beshu, 2007
Glass beads sewn onto fabric
Private Collection



UBUHLE TODAY

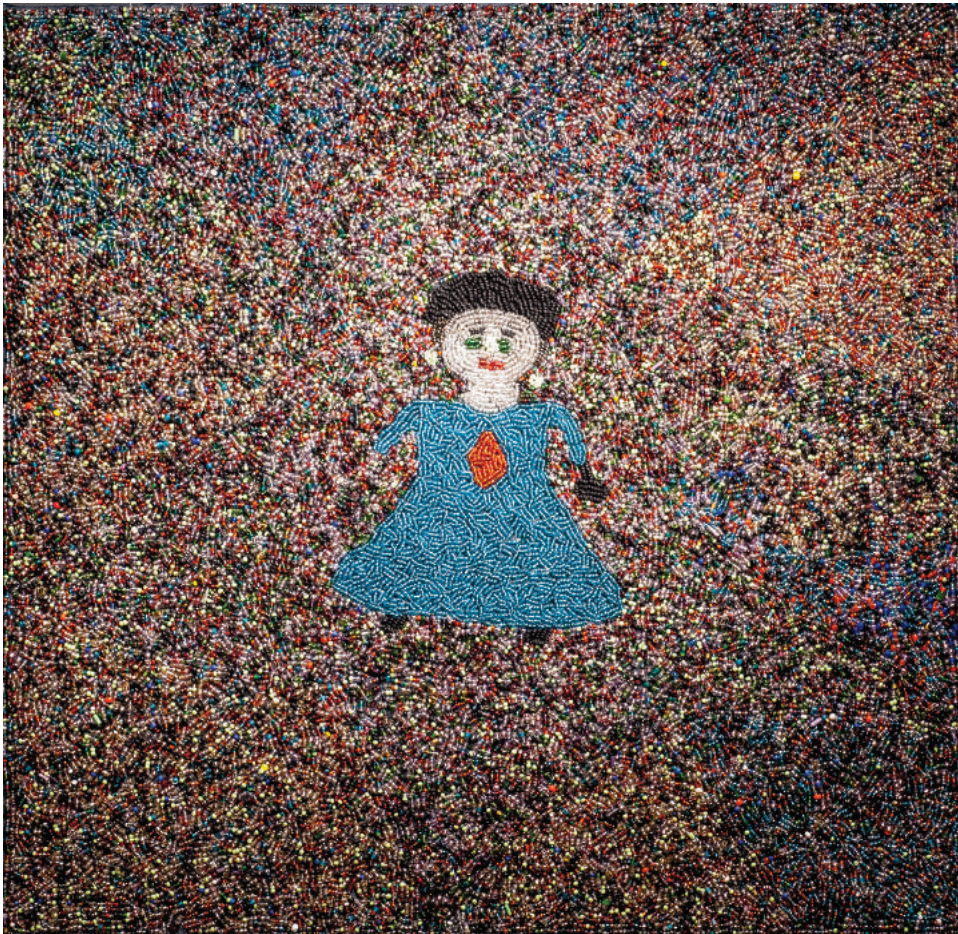


Non and Zondlile
Photograph by Susana A. Raab



Nonhlakanipho Mndiyatha
Transkei Landscapes, 2007
Glass beads sewn onto fabric

The Ubuhle Private Collection



Thando Ntobela
Lucky, 2005
Glass beads sewn onto fabric
The Ubuhle Private Collection



At home where I grew up there was a peach tree. My mother loved it and . . . she used to take out her sewing machine and sit under the tree. . . . When planning this *ndwango* I had a sudden memory of that tree where my mother used to sit when we were extremely poor. We didn't even have our own home and my mother was striving so that things would be okay for us, but we had this peach tree and when it bloomed it was blazing. . . . blazingly beautiful. . . .

Zondlile Zondo

Zondlile Zondo
My Mother's Peach Tree, 2012
Glass beads sewn onto fabric
The Ubuhle Private Collection



The cherry blossom pattern is my signature pattern because I use it in each and every single *ndwango*. When I first used this pattern, I placed it in the branches of a tree and specifically called it a flower, but over time I didn't want to show this so overtly so I hid it as a pattern.

Zandile Ntobela

Zandile Ntobela
Cherry Tree, 2011
Glass beads sewn onto fabric

Private Collection



We are made of water; we exist because of water. It is the connection between all that lives. Under our skin we are all blue because we are all made of water. We are related by water and water is the source of all life.

Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela

Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela
My Sea, My Sister, My Tears, 2011
Glass beads sewn onto fabric

The Ubuhle Private Collection



THE AFRICAN CRUCIFIXION

The African Crucifixion was originally commissioned by the Anglican Cathedral in Pietermaritzburg. A plain, sparse building, the cathedral required a large-scale artwork to hang behind the pulpit, where natural light from a skylight in the roof would illuminate the surface and catch the shimmering surface of the beads.

Ntombephi Ntobela was the driving force behind the composition and execution of the work. She suggested that they use trees to tell the story. Trees are an important theme in her work, and all of the artists could relate to them literally and spiritually. Together they came up with the idea for a “Tree of Destruction” to represent the suffering of Jesus; they understood the crucifixion itself in terms of the “Tree of Sacrifice”; and the “Tree of Life” became the symbol of His resurrection.

Although telling a biblical story, *The African Crucifixion* is seen through the eyes of a community of women who are dealing with the key issues of 21st-century life in rural South Africa: health, food, water, jobs, and security.

The seven Ubhle artists who worked on this each worked on a separate section of cloth, which they lay down on the lawn at the Ubhle farm and over months worked out how each section would fit together as a whole. This labor of love took nearly a year to complete. Just after it was completed Thembani, sister of Ntombephi, Thando, and Zandile, died of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses.



The African Crucifixion
Photograph by Susana A. Raab

1 The Storm

Kalipha Ntobela

A storm is gathering above the Tree of Destruction. Even though the storm is understood to be destructive in its own right, the rain will bring hope and new life. In order to make sense of the poetic statement, the artists saw it in terms of their own life stories and the artworks which they had already created, many of which served as studies for this masterpiece.

2 The Darkness

Sthembile Majola

The darkness before the storm symbolizes the personal dark periods in the artists' lives: as migrant laborers and as vulnerable women without homes. The imagery also represents the political darkness of the apartheid period. The tears of the people become the river of life feeding the Tree of Life itself in the panels at far right. The rainbow is the symbol of the euphoria experienced by South African citizens at the time of the first democratic election in 1996. The Xhosa artists feel a special connection to President Nelson Mandela, who was born not far from Bizana in the Eastern Cape where they were born and where his second wife, Winnie Mandela, went to school. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, another legendary leader of the post-apartheid period, was also born in Bizana.

3 The Tree of Defeat

Nontanga Manguthsane

This first tree was used as a symbol of all that is negative and dreadful in rural South Africa: the HIV/AIDS virus, represented by the hospital and the ribbon symbols; drought, shown by the sand and stone-colored grey and brown beads; death, represented by the bones of the dead cow; and the vultures, which symbolize not only death but also politicians who feed off people for their own personal gain.

4 After the Storm

Tshengi Duma

During its creation the panels began to take on more overt political significances; this work can be understood as a depiction of the recent history of South Africa from the perspective of the artists. The birth of the Rainbow Nation ushered in by idealistic leaders promised peace, relief from the policies of apartheid, and reconciliation.

5 The Tree of Life

Ntombephi Ntobela

The Tree of Life represents all that is good in the world from the perspective of these women, a simple pastoral idyll, where food, water, and security—and the basic freedoms that most people take for granted—are ensured. Trees have always been a central image in Ntombephi Ntobela's work and appear in almost all of her panels. To her, they are linked to the spiritual world and symbolize the vitality of her ancestors. They also embody the living world and the gift of life that comes from the land.

6 Mary and John Our Hope

Nonhlakanipho Mndiyatha

Nonhlakanipho looks forward in this section to the future of Ubhule and to the birth of a new community and a new family. The artists hope that they will be able to pass on the Ubhule legacy to their children and enable them to strive for their own independence by the skill of their hands, just as their mothers have done.

7 The Crucified Christ: The Tree of Sacrifice

Thembanani Ntobela

This was the last major work that Thembanani Ntobela completed before she died of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. She imagines Christ as a figure with whom she can identify and sympathize. He is a thin black man, near his physical death like an HIV/AIDS victim, and yet his face shows an expression of peace. She re-worked the face over a dozen times in order to get the expression just right.



Bulls are a major component of Xhosa and Zulu life and represent wealth. The ownership and trade of cattle provides a foundation for traditional society. *Lobola*, a form of dowry or wedding payment, is measured in heads of cattle; this practice continues today throughout South Africa.

THE BULLS

To create these works, the artists spent time with Boran and Ankoli bulls on a farm close to the location of the Ubhle community. Each artist selected a bull with which she felt a particular connection. Photographs and videos taken on their mobile phones provided raw material which they used in more than ten months' work on these *ndwangos*.

Not only do these panels represent actual bulls, but they also contain the stories of each artist's life. Their personal histories are woven into the carefully selected bead patterns and colors and give each work a depth of personal meaning.

Ubhle Bead Coop members with a Boran bull
Photograph by Susana A. Raab



Above:
Zondile Zondo
*I am ill, I still see Color and Beauty:
Jamludi The Red Cow, 2012*
Glass beads sewn onto fabric

Below:
Thando Ntobela
Ankoli Bull, 2013
Glass beads sewn onto fabric

Collection of Simon Hodgson, South Africa

Collection of Simon Hodgson, South Africa



GENERAL INFORMATION

1901 Fort Place SE
Washington, DC 20020

202.633.4820 Monday - Friday
202.633.1000 Saturday - Sunday
202.633.3183 Fax

HOURS

Open daily 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
Closed December 25

ADMISSION FREE

TOURS

For group tours,
call 202.633.4844

PARKING

Museum parking lot and
on-street parking

Accessible to people with
physical disabilities



www.anacostia.si.edu



facebook.com/SmithsonianAnacostiaCommunityMuseum



twitter.com/AnacostiaMuseum

The mission of the Anacostia Community Museum is to enhance understanding of contemporary urban experiences and strengthen community bonds by conserving the past, documenting the present, and serving as a catalyst for shaping the future.

Cover images: ©Zanele Muholi/Ubuhle