

Media Information

January 16, 2024

**BMW celebrates artistic journey of Esther Mahlangu.**  
Debuting in Cape Town, the Retrospective Exhibition showcases Esther Mahlangu's lifework, featuring the artist's BMW Art Car as a central exhibition piece.

**Munich/Cape Town.** The Iziko Museums of South Africa and BMW are pleased to announce **"Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting": Esther Mahlangu. A Retrospective.** The exhibition, curated by Nontobeko Ntombela, highlights Esther Mahlangu's over 50-year long career and her meteoric rise as a contemporary artist, earning her global acclaim. The retrospective will be on view at Iziko Museums of South Africa from **February 18, 2024 until August 11, 2024.** From there it will begin its global tour, stopping first at the Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa, before moving to the United States in early 2026.

BMW is proud to support this landmark exhibition which honours the talent of Esther Mahlangu and celebrates a shared history of collaboration. Included in this exhibition will be Mahlangu's BMW 525i Art Car, returning to South Africa for the first time in over 30 years. Mahlangu became the first African and woman to paint a BMW Art Car in 1991. This collaboration marked a significant moment in the art world, blending African art with contemporary automotive design.

"Painting has always been a part of me. I cannot separate it from myself, and neither would I want to. I look forward to sharing my practice and long and colourful story with you on my upcoming Retrospective Exhibition", says **Esther Mahlangu.**

Through the language of colour and form, the exhibition charts Mahlangu's contribution to contemporary art close to seven decades. More than 100 artworks have been gathered from global collections. They have been placed alongside historic photographs and a short film. This diverse collection from Mahlangu's expansive oeuvre which features in "Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting": Esther Mahlangu. A Retrospective, will offer a comprehensive yet intimate insight into her vast and vibrant career.

"Mahlangu's journey is a testament to passion, innovation, and resilience", **Curator Nontobeko Ntombela** remarks. Continuing, "The retrospective pays homage to Esther Mahlangu's unique approach to art, which intersects African cultures with modernity and the contemporary. The exhibition celebrates Mahlangu's voice, agency, and pioneering spirit,

Media Information

Date January 16, 2024

Subject BMW celebrates artistic journey of Esther Mahlangu.

Page 2

symbolizing her self-enunciation, self-determination and creativity", she says.

The retrospective is a landmark achievement for South African art. It recognizes Mahlangu as one of the few South African artists who have had the opportunity to present a Retrospective Exhibition in world-renowned museums. Of the exhibition, **Dr Bongani Ndhlovu, Acting CEO, Iziko Museums of South Africa**, says: "Iziko Museums is honored to celebrate the living legend, Dr Esther Mahlangu, and to host this colossal showcase where creativity, culture, and aesthetics are fused." He continues, "Dr. Mahlangu is a living symbol of triumph against adversity. Her approach to art has inspired generations and is a re-affirmation of calls for Africa-centred innovations."

"The BMW Group's commitment to this exhibition is a testament to our respect and admiration for Dr Esther Mahlangu's pioneering spirit and remarkable contribution to the world of art. This exhibition not only celebrates the incredible journey and legacy of Mam' Esther but also symbolizes a cherished collaboration that dates back over three decades. We are especially excited about the return of the BMW Art Car to South African soil – a significant symbol of our shared history and appreciation for art that transcends boundaries", says **Peter van Binsbergen, CEO of BMW Group South Africa**.

The BMW Group's Cultural Engagement, with exclusive updates and deeper insights into its global initiatives can be followed on Instagram at [@BMWGroupCulture](https://www.instagram.com/BMWGroupCulture).

**"Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting": Esther Mahlangu. A Retrospective**

February 18 – August 11, 2024

Iziko South African National Gallery

Government Avenue, Company's Garden, Cape Town, South Africa

If you have any questions, please contact:

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## Media Information

Date January 16, 2024

Subject BMW celebrates artistic journey of Esther Mahlangu.

Page 3

[www.press.bmwgroup.com/global](http://www.press.bmwgroup.com/global)Email: [presse@bmw.de](mailto:presse@bmw.de)**Past collaborations between BMW and Esther Mahlangu**

Esther Mahlangu's collaboration with the BMW Group, spanning over three decades, represents a remarkable blend of traditional Ndebele art and modern automotive design, demonstrating an evolving and deep-rooted partnership.

**BMW Art Car:** The journey began in 1991 when Mahlangu, as the first woman to do so, designed a BMW Art Car. She adorned a BMW 525i with vibrant Ndebele patterns, connecting South African art with automotive design. This project not only showcased her unique artistic style on an international platform but also marked a significant cultural and technological crossover, transitioning from mural painting to the canvas of a modern vehicle.

**BMW Individual 7 Series by Esther Mahlangu:** In 2016 Mahlangu once again partnered with BMW. This time, she lent her distinctive style to the interior of a BMW 7 Series. Her iconic motifs were meticulously integrated into the wood trims of the luxury sedan, exemplifying a seamless blend of traditional art with contemporary luxury. This unique vehicle, symbolizing the enduring collaboration between Mahlangu and BMW, was revealed at the Frieze in London and later auctioned for charity.

**The Mahlangu Phantom:** The collaboration took a luxurious turn in 2020 when Rolls-Royce commissioned Mahlangu to create an artwork for the Gallery of a Phantom, named 'The Mahlangu Phantom'. This project elevated her art to the pinnacle of automotive luxury, affirming her status as a respected cultural icon and artist.

**50 years BMW Group South Africa:** In 2023, as part of the 50th-anniversary celebrations of BMW Group South Africa, Mahlangu was invited to design a commemorative logo. This logo, infused with her artistic essence, symbolized the half-century milestone of BMW in South Africa and highlighted the long-standing relationship between Mahlangu and the BMW Group.

**The Electric AI Canvas:** Also in 2023, Mahlangu's artistic journey with BMW reached a new dimension with the "Electric AI Canvas" project at Art Basel in Basel. Here, her traditional art was transformed through technology, as AI-generated animations based on her designs were projected onto the fully electric BMW i5. This innovative display merged Mahlangu's cultural heritage with the forefront of digital technology, showcasing the dynamic potential of combining traditional art forms with modern innovation.

Throughout these collaborations, Mahlangu's work with BMW has not only elevated her art to a global audience but has also served as a beacon of the harmonious blend of cultural artistry with automotive design, illustrating a unique and enduring relationship.

**About Esther Mahlangu**

Dr Esther Nostokana Nagiyana Nikwambi Mahlangu is a celebrated South African contemporary artist known for her innovative work that pushes boundaries beyond the traditional mural. Widely recognized as one of the most influential artists across generations, Mahlangu began her artistic journey at the age of ten under the guidance of her grandmother and mother, learning the traditional techniques of Ndebele mural painting. Her

contemporary works which span a wide variety of non-traditional surfaces, found objects as well as automobiles, build upon this rich tradition.

Mahlangu's participation in the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) in Paris, shot her to fame, marking the launch of her transition from a communal practice into her own agency as a contemporary artist. Shortly thereafter, in 1991, she became the first woman artist and African to paint a BMW Art Car. Mahlangu has exhibited in over 20 different countries, sometimes with multiple solo shows in at least seventeen different cities. She has painted murals across eight different countries and participated in residency programmes with institutions like Project Row Houses (2005), L'Associazione Culturale Colonos (2009) & Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (2014). Some of her more significant engagements include Documenta IX (1992), the 5th Biennale of Contemporary Art (2000), the 1st Malindi Biennale (2006), the 3rd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2009) and Art Basel (2023). Mahlangu has also worked on projects with fashion brands like *Comme des Garçons* (1991), shoe companies *Melissa* (2009) and *EYTYS* (2015). She created the *Belvedere* (RED) bottle design, which helped fund a campaign against HIV/AIDS (2016). Mahlangu's works are represented in well over 27 public institutions' collections. And she has been collected by many more private individuals worldwide. She continues her artistic career to this day.

#### **About Nontobeko Ntombela**

Nontobeko Ntombela is a member of faculty at the Wits School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Her academic and curatorial work focuses on modern and contemporary South African art, with a particular interest in, but not limited to, early modern Black women artists. Prior to starting her academic career in 2012, Ntombela worked as a curator for more than a decade in organisations such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery (2010- 2020), Durban University Art Gallery (2005-2010), BAT Centre (2001-2005), and Art for Humanity (2000-2001). Some of Ntombela's most well-known curatorial projects include, *When Rain Clouds Gather: South African Black Women Artist 1940 - 2000* (2022-2023), co-curated with Portia Malatjie at Norval Foundation; *The Burden of Memory* (2019) – a multiple-site event in the city of Yaoundé Cameroon – co-curated with Rose Jepkorir and Princess Marilyn Douala Bell; *Solo at the Cape Town Art Fair* (2018), *A Fragile Archive* (2013) at JAG, *Spectaculaire* (2013) *Frac des Pays de la Loire Carquefou* France, *MTN New Contemporaries* (2010) at the KwaZulu-Natal Society of Art and *From Here to There* (2007) co-curated with Storm van Rensburg at the Association of Visual Arts (AVA) as part of the CAPE07 fringe programme. She is the co-editor of *The Yoni Book*, in collaboration with artist Reshma Chhiba (2019). Ntombela has served on various boards and committees for organizations such as the Department of Arts and Culture, VANSAs Visual Arts Network of South Africa, National Arts Council, KZNSA KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts, Art for Human Rights Trust, Johannesburg Art Gallery, and UNISA Art Gallery. In 2019, the Melrose Gallery invited Ntombela to curate a worldwide touring show of Dr Esther Mahlangu's work, which begins with this exhibition: "Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting": Esther Mahlangu. A Retrospective. of South Africa in Cape Town.

#### **About Iziko Museums of South Africa (Iziko)**

Iziko operates 11 national museums, the Planetarium and Digital Dome, the Social History Centre and three collection-specific libraries in Cape Town. The museums that make up Iziko have their own history and character, presenting extensive art, social, and natural history collections that reflect our diverse African heritage. Iziko is a public entity and public benefit

## Media Information

Date January 16, 2024

Subject BMW celebrates artistic journey of Esther Mahlangu.

Page 5

organisation that brings together these museums under a single governance and leadership structure. The organisation allows \*free access to all individuals on commemorative days, (\*excluding the Castle of Good Hope, Groot Constantia and Planetarium and Digital Dome). Iziko regularly provides information about events, news and new exhibitions on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

[Home - Iziko Museums](#)

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**About The Melrose Gallery**

The Melrose Gallery, Esther Mahlangu's global representative were tasked with implementing her Retrospective Exhibition. The Melrose Gallery is a leading Pan African Contemporary gallery located in Johannesburg, South Africa. The gallery represents established and emerging artists whose voices speak to issues of significance to the Continent of Africa on a global basis. We are passionate about ensuring that the elders who have made a valuable contribution to African Contemporary Art are recognised and continue to be heard. These inspiring stalwarts provide a stable foundation to an exciting young guard of artists who are swiftly emerging from the African Continent and Diaspora to establish themselves globally. We run a curated programme of exhibitions, participate in respected art fairs, support many of our artists in their participation at Biennales and conceptualize and implement significant non-commercial exhibitions in association with leading museums.

[The Melrose Gallery](#)

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**BMW Group Cultural Engagement**

State Opera for all Gerhard Richter **CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP** Kochi-Muziris Biennale BMW Art Cars Berlin Biennale Ólafur Eliásson Art Basel Max Hooper Schneider BMW Art Journey **INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE** Art D'Égypte Cao Fei Esther Mahlangu Zaha Hadid Les Rencontres d'Arles Jeff Koons Acute Art Tate Modern **LONGEVITY** Artsy BMW Open Work by Frieze **PARTNERSHIP** Andy Warhol BMW Guggenheim Lab Lu Yang Samson Young Bavarian State Opera BMW Welt Jazz Award **CREATIVE FREEDOM** Tefaf **INTERACTION** State Academic Bolshoi Theatre of Russia Kyotographie Premio de Pintura Garage Museum of Contemporary Art Paris Photo **SUSTAINABILITY** Leelee Chan Art Dubai Teatro alla Scala BMW Classics Jenny Holzer BMW Art Guide by Independent Collectors

Why Culture? Why not! Culture is knowledge, a sanctuary of beauty and depth, of meaning and peace. An inspiring escape. Tranquil at best, even unsettling sometimes. As corporate citizen, the BMW Group takes social responsibility seriously, as part of which it has been involved in hundreds of cultural initiatives worldwide for over half a century, both in the arts, music & sound, architecture as well as in design. As a long-term partner, creative freedom is key – and as essential for groundbreaking works as it is for major innovations within a business enterprise like ours.

Further information: [www.bmwgroup.com/culture](http://www.bmwgroup.com/culture) and [www.bmwgroup.com/overview](http://www.bmwgroup.com/overview)

## Media Information

Date January 16, 2024

Subject BMW celebrates artistic journey of Esther Mahlangu.

Page 6

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**The BMW Group**

With its four brands BMW, MINI, Rolls-Royce and BMW Motorrad, the BMW Group is the world's leading premium manufacturer of automobiles and motorcycles and also provides premium financial and mobility services. The BMW Group production network comprises over 30 production sites worldwide; the company has a global sales network in more than 140 countries.

In 2022, the BMW Group sold nearly 2.4 million passenger vehicles and more than 202,000 motorcycles worldwide. The profit before tax in the financial year 2022 was € 23.5 billion on revenues amounting to € 142.6 billion. As of 31 December 2022, the BMW Group had a workforce of 149,475 employees.

The success of the BMW Group has always been based on long-term thinking and responsible action. The company set the course for the future at an early stage and consistently makes sustainability and efficient resource management central to its strategic direction, from the supply chain through production to the end of the use phase of all products.

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