

Media information

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A celebration of Dr Esther Mahlangu's life's work at Wits Art Museum

- Event: Art Exhibition
- Title: Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective
- Dates: 20 November 2024 – 17 April 2025

+++ Esther Mahlangu's major retrospective moves to the Wits Art Museum (WAM) in Johannesburg +++ Experience the iconic works of living art legend and national treasure +++ Artist's BMW Art Car features as a central exhibition piece +++

Midrand. Following the successful run of "Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective" at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, Dr Esther Mahlangu's major retrospective celebrating her life's work will be moving to the Wits Art Museum (WAM) in Johannesburg in November 2024.

The exhibition features over 100 artworks loaned from international collections, including her BMW Art Car, painted mannequins, a TV, and a series of prints created by her in collaboration with Nelson Mandela. Through the presentation of archival material from her illustrious career spanning fifty decades, the retrospective charts her meteoric rise from humble beginnings to becoming an art world colossus and one of the most celebrated artists of our time.

The curator Nontobeko Ntombela explains that, "this retrospective offers a remarkable opportunity to experience Esther Mahlangu's artistic journey. Her work has had a profound impact on South African modern and contemporary art, and this exhibition is a testament of her incredible contribution."

The foundations for Mahlangu's artistic journey were laid by her grandmother and mother, who taught her the cultural practice of Ndebele wall painting and beadwork from the age of ten. Mahlangu worked in the communal cultural tradition of the Southern Ndebele community in decorating one's home, at a time when the land was contested. Not only did the wall murals identify the

Southern Ndebele community, but they also signalled resistance to white oppression laying claim to this contested land. Mahlangu's story of perseverance and passion is encapsulated in the exhibition's title, inspired by her realisation: "Then I knew I was good at painting."

In 1989, Mahlangu gained international recognition when she was invited to participate in the Magiciens de la Terre exhibition in Paris. Mahlangu was invited to travel to Paris to paint a replica of her home which generated much media and other international exposure. In 1991, she became the first African and the first woman to paint a BMW Art Car, joining the ranks of art legends like Andy Warhol, David Hockney and Roy Lichtenstein.

Mahlangu is celebrated for her unique visual language, which has drawn inspiration from the Ndebele artistic practice. She has adapted, extended and transported these practices to develop her body of work. Described variously as a social justice activist, a Warholian entrepreneur, and a cultural ambassador, Mahlangu's work is complex and layered, defying any simple interpretive narrative or Western art historical framework. One thing art critics unanimously agree on, however, is her virtuosic mastery of colour and form and her extraordinary ability to successfully navigate the 'traditional' and 'contemporary' worlds.

"Mahlangu is a living symbol of triumph against adversity. She is one of the first among South African artists, as well as among women artists, to become a global icon of the art world. Her affable demeanour and her ability to inspire creativity and delight in so many around the world, has earned her reputation as a matriarch and mentor of the contemporary art world," says exhibition curator Nontobeko Ntombela. "Her approach to art has inspired generations of younger artists and reaffirms the call for Africa to take its rightful place at centre stage in the story of art."

In the lead up to the exhibition in Johannesburg, Mahlangu is set to be honoured in London by the Serpentine Gallery with the unveiling a large 9m x 5m mural as the opening event for Frieze London.

The artwork is titled 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' and directly translates from Ndebele to 'I am because you are', emphasizing a connectedness that exists between humans, communities and other living species. It will be presented in the garden at Serpentine North and be on view from 4 October 2024.

This is her first public mural in the UK, painted over sixteen wooden panels. The work depicts traditional Ndebele shapes and patterns outlined with a black border, having learned the art of Ndebele design from her mother and grandmother which is tradition amongst her nation.

The Melrose Gallery Director – Craig Mark – echoed Ntombela's sentiments, adding that, "very few South African artists have had the opportunity to present a retrospective like this one, and we hope to be able to take it even further with the potential of a global showing after the run at WAM which will hopefully lead to opportunities for other South African artists to be given access to these museum spaces which they have so long been denied."

"The retrospective at WAM will open to the public on the 20th of November 2024, made possible thanks to the partnership and support provided by the National Arts Council and the BMW Group, without whom this retrospective wouldn't have been possible," says Mark.

The WAM showing provides an opportunity for audiences from Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Tshwane and outlying areas to experience the iconic works of living art legend and national treasure Esther Mahlangu. Mahlangu lives in Mpumalanga, but she has spent a considerable amount of time in Tshwane and Johannesburg; the exhibition is an opportunity for audiences from this region to experience and celebrate this important milestone with her. "Wits Art Museum is honoured to host this retrospective, allowing visitors to experience the extraordinary scope and breadth of vision present in Mahlangu's work," said WAM spokesperson Julia Charlton, Senior Curator.

Accompanying the artworks, Mahlangu's BMW 525i Art Car makes its historic return to Gauteng for the first time in over 30 years. It is one of the highlights of the exhibition. Other highlights include a meticulously curated timeline of Esther Mahlangu's practice and some of her earliest canvas works.

"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 symbolises a cherished collaboration that dates back over three decades. We are especially excited about the return of the BMW Art Car to Gauteng – 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 museum is open from Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 4pm and admission is free.

If you have any questions, please contact:

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Editor's Notes

About Dr 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 isiNdebele mural painting. Her contemporary works which span a wide variety of non-traditional surfaces, found objects and 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 countries, sometimes with multiple solo shows in at least seventeen different cities.

She has painted murals across eight different countries and participated in residency programs 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), and the 3rd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2009). Mahlangu's collaborations with BMW Group span decades, including the 1991 BMW 525i Art Car, the Electric AI Canvas at Art Basel 2023 (which featured AI-generated animations based on her designs projected onto a BMW i5), and the 2024 BMW i5 Flow NOSTOKANA, a one-of-a-kind vehicle combining colour-change technology developed by BMW. Esther Mahlangu has also worked on projects with fashion brands like Comme des Garçons (1991), shoe companies Melissa (2009) and EYTYS (2015). In 2016, she created the Belvedere (RED) bottle design, which helped fund a campaign against HIV/AIDS. Mahlangu's works are represented in over 27 public institutions' collections, and she has been collected by private individuals worldwide. She continues her artistic career to this day. Esther Mahlangu is the recipient of numerous honorary doctorates for her contribution to art.

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About Nontobeko Ntombela (The Exhibition Curator)

Nontobeko Ntombela is a lecturer in the Department of Curatorial, Public, and Visual Cultures at the Wits School of Arts in Johannesburg. She holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Cape Town. Her research focuses on Modern and Contemporary South African art, with a particular interest in Black women artists. Ntombela began her career as a curator in 2002 and has worked at various institutions, including the BAT Centre, Durban University Art Gallery, and the Johannesburg Art Gallery, where she curated numerous exhibitions. After a decade of curatorial work, Ntombela took up an academic position at Wits, shifting her curatorial practice to centre more archival and research-driven historical projects. Some of her most recent notable curatorial projects include: "Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective" (2024) exhibition at Iziko South African National Galleries in Cape Town and Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg, "When Rain Clouds Gather: South African Black Women Artists 1940–2000" (2022-2023) at the Norval Foundation in Cape Town, and "The Burden of Memory" (2019) at multiple venues in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

About The Melrose Gallery

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.

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About WAM

Located in the heart of Braamfontein, Johannesburg, Wits Art Museum is a university art museum that serves both academic and public audiences. With over 13,000 African artworks, WAM's mission is to facilitate compelling encounters with African art for academics, students, and anyone who appreciates great art. The museum's extensive collection includes historical and contemporary artworks, showcasing the rich diversity of Africa's visual culture.

For more information, please visit WAM's [website](#), or connect with them on social media:

<https://www.facebook.com/WitsArtMuseum>

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Further information: www.bmwgroup.com/culture and www.bmw-group.com/overview

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