

Media information  
18 November 2024.

## **A retrospective of Dr Esther Mahlangu's iconic life's work at Wits Art Museum.**

+++ BMW celebrates artistic journey of Esther Mahlangu +++ Retrospective highlights Esther Mahlangu's over 50-year long career and her rise as a contemporary artist, earning her global acclaim +++ 'Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective' from 20 November 2024 – 17 April 2025 at the Wits Art Museum +++

**Midrand.** Dr Esther Mahlangu's acclaimed retrospective exhibition, 'Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective,' is set to captivate Johannesburg audiences at the Wits Art Museum (WAM). Following its successful run at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, this landmark exhibition, supported by BMW Group South Africa, WAM, and the National Arts Council, will open its doors to the public on 20 November 2024.

Curated by Nontobeko Ntombela, the retrospective offers a profound exploration of the life and artistic practice of Dr Mahlangu, a national treasure and global icon. It chronicles her remarkable journey, from her humble beginnings in a small village in Mpumalanga to her international recognition as one of the most influential artists of her time. In a comprehensive collection of archival materials spanning five decades, the exhibition celebrates Dr Mahlangu's significant contributions to and lasting impact on contemporary art.

"Dr Mahlangu is a living symbol of triumph over adversity. As one of the first South African and female African artists to achieve global recognition, her warm personality and ability to inspire creativity have established her as a matriarch and mentor in contemporary art," says exhibition curator Nontobeko Ntombela. "Her artistic approach continues to

inspire younger generations and emphasises Africa's rightful place at the centre of the art world."

Craig Mark, Director of The Melrose Gallery, shared Ntombela's sentiments, noting, "Few South African artists have had the chance to present a retrospective of this scale. We hope this exhibition can pave the way for a global tour, creating opportunities for other South African artists to access these long-restricted museum spaces."

Dr Mahlangu's BMW 525i Art Car, a milestone in the history of both art and automotive design, is a highlight of the retrospective exhibition. Created in 1991, this iconic vehicle marked a historic moment as her work became the first by a woman and an African artist to be included in the prestigious BMW Art Car Collection. Its return to Gauteng after over three decades allows local audiences a unique opportunity to experience this world-renowned masterpiece.

"Dr Mahlangu's extraordinary legacy is a testament to her pioneering spirit. Our longstanding relationship with her, culminating in the return of the BMW 525i Art Car, is a celebration of her artistic brilliance and our joint effort to push the boundaries of creativity," says Thilosh Moodally, Director of Government Affairs and Communications at BMW Group South Africa. "I am proud to say that we have a long and rich history of supporting the arts and culture and remain committed to using our platform to promote innovation."

The WAM retrospective invites audiences from Tshwane, Mpumalanga, and surrounding areas to immerse themselves in the iconic world of Dr Mahlangu. This special regional tribute honours her deep connections to both Gauteng and Mpumalanga. "Wits Art Museum is honoured to

host this retrospective, showcasing the remarkable scope and vision in Dr Mahlangu's work," says Julia Charlton, WAM Senior Curator.

Bettina Korek, CEO, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director of the Serpentine Galleries hailed Dr Mahlangu as "one of the most important artists of her time" at the unveiling of her large 9m x 5m mural as the opening event for the VIP Programme for Frieze London in October. The artwork is titled 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' and translates from isiNdebele to 'I am because you are', emphasising human kindness, connection and community. This is her first public mural in the United Kingdom, painted over sixteen wooden panels.

'Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective' will be on exhibition at WAM from 20 November 2024 until 17 April 2025. The museum is open from Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and admission is free.

If you have any questions, please contact:

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**END****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 recognised as one of the most influential artists across generations, Dr 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.

Dr 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. Dr 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 programmes with institutions like Project Row Houses (2005), L'Associazione Culturale Colonos (2009), and 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). Dr Mahlangu's collaborations with the 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. Dr Mahlangu has also worked on projects with fashion brands like Comme des Garçons (1991), and shoe companies Melissa (2009) and EYTYS (2015). In 2016, she created the Belvedere (RED) bottle design, which helped fund a campaign against HIV/AIDS. Dr Mahlangu's works are represented in over 27 public institutions' collections, and her work is also held in private collections around the world. She continues her artistic career to this day. Dr Mahlangu is the recipient of numerous honorary doctorates for her contribution to art.

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

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/esthermahlanguart](https://www.facebook.com/esthermahlanguart)

Instagram: [www.instagram.com/esthermahlanguart](https://www.instagram.com/esthermahlanguart)

**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 the '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. They 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. The Melrose Gallery runs a curated programme of exhibitions, participates in respected art fairs, supports many artists in their participation at Biennales, and conceptualises and implements significant non-commercial exhibitions in association with leading museums.

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Or send an email to: [craig@themelrosegallery.com](mailto:craig@themelrosegallery.com)

**About Wits Art Museum**

Located in the heart of Braamfontein, Johannesburg, Wits Art Museum (WAM) 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:

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

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YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtgElZOT88sGGrA-\\_Uq1jQ/featured](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtgElZOT88sGGrA-_Uq1jQ/featured)

**About 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 2023, the BMW Group sold over 2.55 million passenger vehicles and more than 209,000 motorcycles worldwide. The profit before tax in the financial year 2023 was €17.1 billion on revenues amounting to €155.5 billion. As of 31 December 2023, the BMW Group had a workforce of 154,950 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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**About BMW Group Cultural Engagement**

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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 a corporate citizen, the BMW Group takes social responsibility seriously, a part of which it has been involved in hundreds of cultural initiatives worldwide for over half a century, in the fields of contemporary art, music, and film 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)

Instagram: [@BMWGroupCulture](https://www.instagram.com/BMWGroupCulture)

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