



FLINT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

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EXHIBITION OF BEAD-ART FROM SOUTH AFRICA TELLS STORY OF INDEPENDENCE, MIGRATION, AND MEMORY

Flint, MI – The Flint Institute of Arts begins its 90th year with the January 21 opening of *Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence*, which showcases a new form of bead art, *ndwango* (“cloth”), developed by a community of women living and working together in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The plain black fabric that serves as a foundation for the beadwork is reminiscent of the Xhosa headscarves and skirts that many of them wore growing up. By stretching this textile like canvas, the artists use colored Czech glass beads to transform the flat cloth into a contemporary art form of remarkable visual depth. Using skills handed down through generations, and working in their own unique style “directly from the soul” (in the words of artist Ntombephi Ntobela), the women create abstract as well as figurative subjects for their *ndwangos*.

Ubhle means “beauty” in the Xhosa and Zulu languages and describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that, for the Xhosa people, has a special spiritual significance. From a distance, each panel of the *ndwango* seems to present a continuous surface; but as the viewer moves closer and each tiny individual bead catches the light, the meticulous skill and labor that went into each work—the sheer scale of ambition—becomes stunningly apparent. A single panel can take more than 10 months to complete.

Migration has defined the history of modern South Africa. The late-19th-century discovery of gold and diamonds—and, to a lesser extent, the cultivation of sugar cane—transfigured South African society with its demands for a large, flexible workforce of able men. As workers left their homesteads in rural areas to earn money, traditional social systems based on direct production from the land began to change. Low pay and harsh working conditions forced many cane cutters to live apart from their wives and families, which led to a breakdown of family life. *Ubhle* was conceived in response to this social and cultural transformation. Established in 1999 by two women—Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela and Bev Gibson—on a former sugar plantation in KwaZulu-Natal, *Ubhle* began as a way of creating employment for rural women by combining traditional skills and making them profitable. By incorporating a skill that many local women already had—beadwork, a customary form of artistic expression for generations of South African women—and teaching it to those who did not, they began to provide women with a private source of income and a route to financial independence.

Since 2006, the *Ubhle* community has lost five artists to HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, nearly halving the number of active artists. Thus, many *ndwangos* function as memorials to *Ubhle* 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.

Due to the slow, meticulous process, the act of beading becomes a form of therapy: a way of setting down the issues that are closest to the artists’ hearts; a way of grieving; and a place to encode feelings and memories. Through their presence in the artist’s thoughts during the act of creation, the deceased enter the very fabric of the work, and the *ndwango* becomes a site of memory.

The Ubuhle community exists mainly to the determination of two women, Bev Gibson and Ntombephi Ntobela, who co-founded Ubuhle in 1999. Ntombephi is a master beader from the Eastern Cape whose tremendous skill, both as artist and teacher, has been the foundation block of this community. Ntombephi is known as "Induna," which means "leader," a term of great respect in South Africa, and it also suggests the responsibility she feels for the community as guardian of its future. Bev does not bead, but she has created the space for Ubuhle artists to explore, experiment, and transform the traditional art form. Bev has also been a source of energy and persistence in the emergence of Ubuhle's growing vision.

Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence runs from Sunday, January 21 through Saturday, March 31, 2018.

Ubuhle artists Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela and Zandile Ntobela, along with curator Bev Gibson, are available for interviews both before the exhibition and during its opening. Additionally, Ntombephi "Induna" and Zandile will demonstrate their beadwork techniques live in the FIA galleries on Sunday, January 21 from 1-3 p.m. To schedule an interview or to view the exhibition, please contact FIA Communications Coordinator Chene Koppitz at 810.237.7387 or ckoppitz@flintarts.org.

ABOUT THE FLINT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

The Flint Institute of Arts is Michigan's second largest art museum and one of the largest museum art schools in the nation. The FIA's mission is to advance the understanding and appreciation of art for all through collections, exhibitions, and educational programs. The FIA is located at 1120 East Kearsley Street in the Flint Cultural Center. The museum is open Mon–Fri 12 p.m. - 5 p.m.; Sat 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Sun 1 p.m. - 5 p.m. Admission to the FIA is free to members and children under 12; Adults are \$7; Senior Citizens and Students with I.D. are \$5. Saturdays are free thanks to Huntington Bank. For more information, please call 810.234.1695 or visit www.flintarts.org.