

BY Simphiwe Mngomezulu

STATE OF THE ARTS

It takes a specially trained eye to interpret and arrange artworks in a way that amplifies their meaning, resonates with viewers and appeals to prospective collectors. We talk to curators about the business of art



KHANYISILE MBONGWA: CURATORSHIP IN CONTEXT

While curatorship is associated with the glamour of artists in galleries, Mbongwa – an independent curator and the CEO of Sankofa Studio – says the job requires sensitivity to the topics the works are addressing, location, budgeting, technical details, production, audiences and vision. “You have to consider each layer very carefully, but at the same time be prepared for any sudden shift, whether in artist management or funding,” she explains.

She agrees that the slow pace of gender and racial transformation in local curatorship is an echo of what’s happening in broader society. “If the country itself is slow in effecting transformation [in business, government and industry], that also translates to other professional spaces,” she says. Individuals’ social environments also influence their perceptions of the rate of transformation. “If you were born into privilege, you might feel that the change is rapid, but if you were born into the margins of society, you know that transformation’s barely begun,” says Mbongwa.

With Honours in curatorship from the University of Cape Town, her journey in the art sector began nearly 15 years ago as a performance poet, when she was one of the founding members of Gugulethu, a group of young township artists from Gugulethu who sought to re-establish shebeens as centres of creative

and intellectual discourse. The collective aimed to represent township artists who had no access to formal galleries.

“During my time with Gugulethu, I acquired most of the practical skills I needed. The university helped equip me with the language to articulate what I wanted to say – and to better understand the theoretical element of curating,” she says.

She believes that an essential component of successful curating is the ability to listen. “In order to weave together the complexities that come with some of the works you engage with, you must listen to understand, rather than listening to respond,” she explains. Establishing a coherent narrative that speaks to the work of an artist, while also accurately portraying a curatorial vision, requires a constant transfer of information between the individual

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and the artist in question. The curator also draws inspiration from audiences’ ultimate responses to works. “It’s the conversations the audiences engage in – in the aftermath of experiencing, witnessing, engaging with or rejecting the artworks presented – that I love most, because those are the moments of intersection, where creative ideas meet the reality of everyday lived experience,” she says.

As an entrepreneur managing a profitable venture, she believes curatorship is also about accurately judging the collector’s market. “You have to ask whether the works you’ve included in an exhibition are saleable and why you selected them,” she says. Some exhibitions are curated to spark dialogues, while others are used as platforms for emerging artists needing to attract the attention of commercial galleries and dealers.

Ultimately, there’s a continual need to balance aesthetic sensitivity, integrity and business sense.

KHOLISA THOMAS: TRANSFORMING SPACES



The local art industry’s transformational potential lies in the rate at which more black female curators can be absorbed by the sector, says independent art consultant and entrepreneur Thomas. She believes that because of the subjective nature of curatorship, the inclusion of black females in this role is one way of achieving a broader representation of narratives that were previously excluded from the arts.

“Traditionally, curators have been white men, but now we’re seeing black female ones who often curate exhibitions of works by black female artists. This is

exciting because it’s throwing the spotlight on themes like inequality and women abuse, which weren’t as pronounced in the past,” she says.

With a passion for empowering the emerging contemporary collector market, Thomas says another way of uplifting black art is by strengthening the base of emerging black collectors, curating works to which they can relate. “Once the bigger segment of the population start seeing the art world as relatable and finally talking to what’s relevant and interesting to them, there’ll be more feet in galleries,” she adds.

Through her company, Kholisa Thomas Art Advisory, the entrepreneur offers a service of linking artists and artworks to emerging collectors. “My intention is to bridge the gap between emerging art collectors and the art world. I have the necessary relationships with galleries. I facilitate the collector’s acquisition of the artwork after advising them of the types of works available and what they could acquire, based on their personal taste and budget,” she says.

A mother of two, Thomas works from her Johannesburg home studio, where art novices can express their preferences in a non judgemental space. “Art galleries can be unapproachable and intimidating places and coming into my home is a lot more personal and intimate. My husband and I also collect works, so our collectors walk into our house and actually see what it’s like to live with art,” she says. While she doesn’t have a background in art curatorship, her experience and wide knowledge of the sector guide her selections of works to hang in private homes, rather than public galleries.

Thomas says the mainstream definition of curatorship has evolved over time. In a gallery, curators are responsible for managing artists and their material. They catalogue and archive the works, while also compiling exhibitions that will have a strong conceptual meaning. Although curators are educated in art history and have been trained to interpret works, they’re now being increasingly incorporated into other spaces outside of the arts.

“On social media and in the art circles, the word ‘curator’ has come to mean anybody with a critical eye who brings content together, whether it’s news on a blog or music, if they’re a DJ. You even hear of people curating pop up stores,” says Thomas.



**JENNY NIJENHUIS:
HONOURING A VISION**

"The curator sets up the work so that it becomes an extraordinary experience, rather than subordinate to their own vision," says contemporary artist Nijenhuis, who was jointly responsible for the installation of 3 600 pieces of underwear on washing lines across the streets of Maboneng, Johannesburg. The exhibition – which coincided with last year's 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children campaign in SA – was set up in collaboration with Nondumiso Msimanga. During the event, Nijenhuis also co-curated an exhibition at SoMa Art + Space exploring sexual violence.

Her mediums are sculpture, photography and installations, while she also holds a corporate job in strategic brand development at her company, Geneology, an integrated communications design agency which employs three support staff and a

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freelance designer. With a BA Honours in fine arts from Wits University, Nijenhuis says she isn't usually involved in curatorship, as she works with galleries.

"I feel very fortunate to have sold a number of pieces, but the amount of time that goes into producing them and the cost of materials don't equate to a living income," she explains. Tight budgets in the art sector require many other artists to have dual careers too. Nevertheless, she aspires to becoming a full-time artist in the future.

"There's a significant narrative which can be extrapolated and communicated through the considered and careful curatorship of art. When a curator truly understands the meaning behind a body of work and the questions being posed, they can create a space that helps the viewer follow that narrative," says Nijenhuis.

Her sculptures have been bought by private collectors through galleries and directly. **W**