

PAIN, PAINT AND POSSIBILITIES



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NOMAZA NONGQUNGA COUPEZ'S ART RESIDENCY PROGRAM FACILITATES PRACTICE-FOCUSED VISITS TO THE SOUTH OF FRANCE FOR FEMALE SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS, RESULTING IN THEIR TRANSFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT.

By Alastair Hagger

"IT WAS MY FIRST TIME HAVING A STUDIO."

— Nthabiseng Boledi Kekana



God knew the African woman was going to have a very, very hard life," writes Sindiwe Magona in *Beauty's Gift*, her paean to the fierce sororal resilience of female survivors. "He gave her that tough, timeless skin so that her woes would not be written all over her face, so that her face would not be a map to her torn and tattered heart."

This pain, and its healing, is instead charted in other ways; in South Africa, it is embedded in and articulated through the artistic expression of women who transform generational trauma into palliative innovation and creativity. To trace the journey of the artist Nthabiseng Boledi Kekana is to understand the ways in which South African women support and uplift one another; how female agency is liberated through opportunity and empowerment.

Kekana is a beneficiary of Undiscovered Canvas, an art agency "showcasing the best emerging talent from Africa and the diaspora". The agency is the brainchild of Nomaza Nongqunga Coupez, who identifies and evolves nascent ability through the Makwande Art Residency program, which facilitates practice-focused visits to the South of France for female, fledgling South African artists.

"As I was successfully growing the careers I represented, I realized there were very few female artists I was able to have on my roster," Nongqunga Coupez says. "And it concerned me, because I realized I did not hear their voices; I was not able to tell what is happening within their communities. Emerging artists are very vulnerable; they don't have any form of support. We're losing a lot of critical voices from the African continent, especially from women."

The Makwande residencies provide precious studio space and time to these artists, and fresh artistic perspectives via educational tours to France's revered museums and galleries. "It is fascinating to

see a young artist asking themselves so many questions. As they see the path of the masters, it validates what they are doing; that they will have something at the end that will be tangible. Once they have produced a body of work during the residency, I take it to Undiscovered Canvas, and promote those artworks through partnerships with galleries, institutions and foundations."

Success stories such as Kekana's are poignant and important not only for the evidence of joy engendered through fulfilled talent; they are roadmaps leading back to a struggle for dignity and visibility that has deep roots in South Africa's past and the painful challenges still haunting its present. Nongqunga Coupez was born in the village of Ngqeleni in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, one of the sectors of the country hit hardest by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and where transmission between mother and baby took a heavy toll on communities with little or no access to healthcare provision.

Last year, Undiscovered Canvas partnered with One to One Africa for *Dualities*, an exhibition at the Bernard Jacobson Gallery in London that celebrated the NGO's Mentor Mothers project: a vital service which supports women and families in Nyandeni, one of the region's most isolated districts, by "delivering systemic psychosocial change through in-home healthcare on foot, along the gravel paths, many miles from the nearest roads". The exhibition showcased Kekana's work alongside that of fellow female South African artists Lesego Seoketsa, Lulama Wolf Mlambo and Nene Mahlangu.

"This project is about empowerment of the individual first," says Gqibelo Dandala, One to One Africa's Executive Director. "These 40 Mentor Mothers, who are ordinary rural women we recruited locally, trained, and equipped, have acquired a status they wouldn't otherwise have. We work in communities where there are no public facilities, no hospitals, no clinics. And yet we've managed to virtually eliminate mother to child HIV transmission simply because of this model: you empower one woman; she goes into households, and she empowers other women in those households."

For Kekana, who grew up in the impoverished Alexandra township in Gauteng, South Africa, the journey of transformational empowerment, for herself and her family, has been transcendent. The accelerating interest in her work has led to a placement at the David Krut Workshop in Johannesburg, noted for its ongoing collaborations with William Kentridge, while her residency in Nice has opened up radical new commercial and creative possibilities.

"It was life-changing," says Kekana. "It was my first time having a studio; at home, I worked in my bedroom, and my workbooks, my bed, and my mom's furniture were all covered in paint. So having the space and freedom to express myself was incredible. I saw clearly the type of work I created, and the place that it came from. Coming back, I wanted to prove there was a growth; I wanted to have my own space, to grow more freely. Now I have a big, beautiful place where I can create. So it really instilled those values."

During her residency, Kekana produced more than 25 pieces of work, in a whirlwind of inspiration and productivity. One of the most striking resultant paintings is *My Ancestors Healing*, a tender, maternal evocation of cyclical nurturing: hands grasp to be held, bodies are comforted, the living and the dead reach out across time to be heard and healed.

"I come from a family where we are spiritually connected with the divine, with our ancestors. There is so much that my ancestors have endured in order for me to be here; we inherit, in some way, the trauma of those who came before us. So that piece was also about opening conversations: delving into the scar, in order for that wound to actually heal. Once somebody questions these causes and effects, the curse is broken." 