A Learner Resource on the art of

I Am Because You Are: A search for UBUNTU with permission to dream

By: Usha Seejarim

Exhibition: *I Am Because You Are: A search for UBUNTU with permission to dream*
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What does "UBUNTU" mean to you? Is it a word you often use? How do you hear others using the term – family, friends, teachers, politicians, celebrities? Are they always referring to the same concept?

You might feel that "Ubuntu" is applied in so many different contexts that its meaning has become lost. Actually, the idea is best expressed not as a word but as a statement: "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" in isiZulu or "Motho ke motho ka batho babang" in Sesotho/Setswana. A person is a person because of other people. I am because you are.

Colbert Mashile, *Mponeng (Look at me now)* 2005, Oil on canvas

EMPATHY AND HEALING

Dumile Feni, *The Gun*, 1978, Ink on paper

Ubuntu as a concept depends on a particular phrasing, but as a belief system it is not necessarily unique to Africa; the idea of reciprocity (mutual exchange or dependence between people) as a crucial part of human identity and social dynamics has been explored by many European, Asian and American thinkers and writers. But Ubuntu does provide a useful framework for considering various aspects of South African history and our contemporary society.

Psychologist and researcher Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela emphasises how Ubuntu can be "an instrument for healing" in a country with a traumatic past and a conflict-ridden present. She equates it with empathy, which requires both imagination and a willingness to act; we must not only acknowledge the suffering of another person, or try to understand their point of view, but also ask: "What should I do about it?" In this way, we can "build healing communities" to help transform "deeply divided societies like ours". The primary cause of these divisions – a history of violent oppression – can be seen in works such as Dumile Feni's *The Gun* (1978).

UBUNTU, POLITICS, HISTORY AND COMMUNITY

Pieter Hugo, *Martie and Morkel Smith, their son Stephen and his fiancée Ilze Venter with their dog, Snooze*, 2006, C-print

Pieter Hugo, *Thina Lucy Manebaneba with her son Samuel Mabolabola and her brother Enos Manebaneba in their living room after church*, 2006, C-print

What are the limits of empathy? What are the dangers of assuming we can reach across barriers of race, class, and gender? Here we can refer to two photographs taken by Pieter Hugo in 2006 of the Manebaneba and Smith families.

When you look at these portraits, do you see similarities between the two families – "shared humanity" – or are the differences overwhelming?

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Think about a situation in your home, school or community that you find disturbing or that causes you concern. What could you do to show empathy? Brainstorm some suggestions with your classmates.

SOMETHING TO FIND OUT ABOUT?

There are a number of African languages, from across the continent, that give expression to the idea of Ubuntu in a similar way to the isiZulu and Sesotho idioms quoted above. Do you know of examples from any other South African languages? Try to find at least one example from another African country.

You might also like to experiment with different ways of translating these sayings into English or into another language that you speak.

Gobodo-Madikizela writes about Nelson Mandela as a fine example of the power of empathy: participating in and engaging with the "inner life" of those who were completely different to him, and even those who had persecuted him. Recently, however, the legacy of Mandela's presidency has been challenged. Was "forgiveness" the right starting point for building a post-apartheid society?

Almost three decades after Mandela was released from prison, South Africans are skeptical about the utopian ideal of the "Rainbow Nation".

DEFINITIONS

PEOPLE often confuse the words empathy and sympathy. Empathy means "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another". Sympathy means "feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune".

Adapted from Oxford Dictionaries.

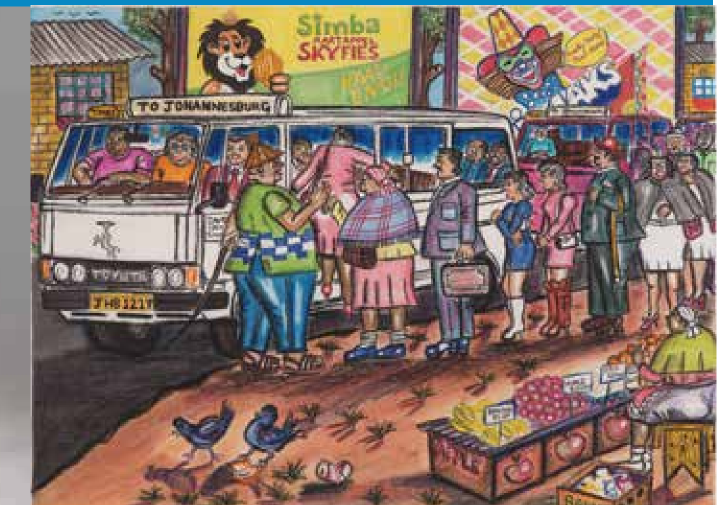
A UTOPIA is a perfect society where everyone is happy and there are no problems; it is an imagined place that can never exist in reality.

The idea of South Africa as a "rainbow nation" – a country made up of many different "colours" or races living in harmony – is often attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was commonly used after the first democratic elections in 1994, but has since been criticised for over-simplifying the complexities of race relations.

IMAGINE IT

A UTOPIA may be impossible – but utopian thinking can still be useful. What would your 'ideal' or 'perfect' society look like? How would it work? Can any of these ideas be implemented in the real world?

Johannes Segogela, *Mandela's Birthday Party*, 1998, Carved and painted wood



Tommy Motswai, *Taxi to Johannesburg*, 1992, Pastel on paper

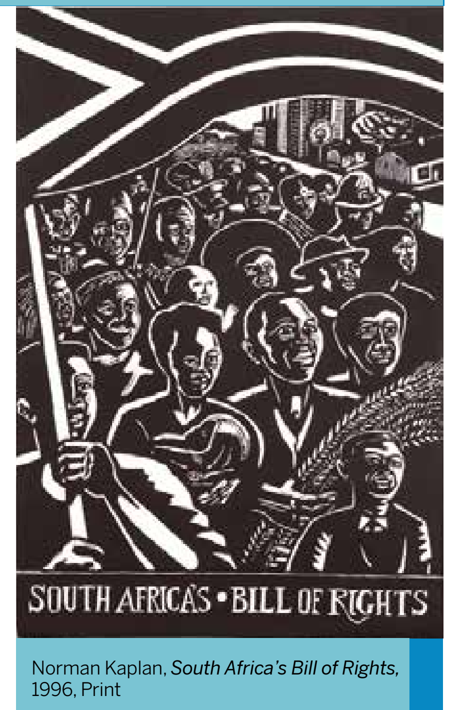
Sam Nhlengethwa, *Washing Day*, 2006, Black and white lithograph

Gerard Sekoto, Sophiatown Evening, Undated, Oil on board

The optimism of the 1990s – perhaps naïve, perhaps visionary – is expressed in Norman Kaplan's linocut *South Africa's Bill of Rights* (1996) and the carved figures in Johannes Segogela's *Mandela's Birthday Party* (1998). How do we reclaim this confidence in the capacity of our political system to uplift rather than exploit its most vulnerable citizens?

Usha Seejarim, the curator of this exhibition, suggests that "I am because you are" could also describe the relationship between the citizens of a country and those who are elected or appointed to lead them – for better and worse. This means that we share responsibility for the shortcomings of our leaders. It is not simply a matter of what happens on voting days. The way we act, the moral and ethical choices we make each day (as individuals and thus collectively), these also influence who governs us.

Referring to the exhibition's sub-title, Seejarim proposes that "a search for Ubuntu" may also be "a search for love": for creativity and affirmation as opposed to only criticism and destruction. If as a society we have "permission to dream", what do we dream about? Companionship? Camaradery? In this context, "love" might also include the sense of community and friendship that seems to connect the three figures in Sam Nhlengethwa's *Washing Day* (2006), despite their daily economic or other struggles. Tommy Motswai's *Taxi to Johannesburg* (1992) gives a more vivid, colourful, bustling sense of "common life" in South Africa – the shared experience of citizens in public spaces – while Gerard Sekoto's *Sophiatown Evening* depicts a quieter but also a more sombre urban moment.



Norman Kaplan, *South Africa's Bill of Rights*, 1996, Print

YOUR PERMISSION TO DREAM!

What do you dream about? Love and companionship? Fame and fortune? Peace and prosperity for all?

Write or draw something that expresses your hopes and dreams.

ART AND HUMANITY: SEEING AND BEING SEEN

Samuel Daniell Korah *Hottentots Preparing to Remove*, 1804, Lithographic aquatint

In the catalogue for this exhibition, Ashraf Jamal writes of **UBUNTU** as "the ability to yield and experience the truth of our lives in the 'instant' that we see ourselves in the eyes of another". If **UBUNTU** is about seeing and being seen, about recognising and being recognised, then it is appropriate that we think about it through the visual arts.

The works in *I Am Because You Are* ask some "Big Questions": What makes a person? What defines a person?

In South Africa, the answers to such questions have often been based on a person's perceived race or "ethnicity". From the early colonial period through to apartheid, the majority of people were treated as less-than-human by those in power – viewed as second-class citizens or even "animals". Without intending to, some artists have become part of this process. Even the beautiful aquatints produced by Samuel Daniell in 1804,

which clearly present their subjects in attentive and admiring detail, fit into the pattern of depicting non-European peoples (in this case the "Hottentots") as "noble savages": exotic, wild and in need of civilisation.

Then there are works that might lead to another question: What is required to make us recognise something as a picture of a person? Lucky Sibiya's undated wood painting *Three Figures* (Undated) and Colbert Mashile's oil on canvas *Mponeng (Look at me now)* (2005), for example, very clearly portray groups of people, even though they are abstract compositions: they are made up of geometrical shapes.

Human beings have a striking ability to identify our own form in external images and objects. Joni Brenner's *Temenos Guardians* busts (2008) give us just enough detail with rough marks and dents in the clay to suggest a head and a neck.

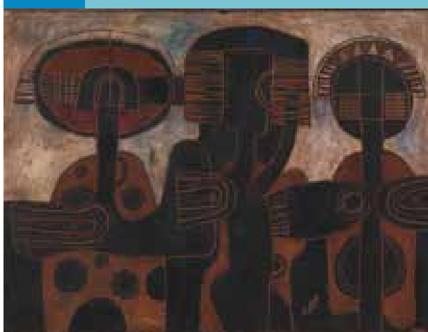
By contrast, Brenner's watercolour painting *Taung I* (2015) gives a much clearer view – in this case, not of the outside of a head, but of a skull. Here is yet another question about what can be defined as "human": does it include the hominid species Australopithecus africanus?

FACT FILE

The word "**Hottentots**" was made up by Dutch settlers in the eighteenth century based on their misunderstanding of the languages spoken by the Khoikhoi (Khoekhoe) or Khoi people. The term is seen as derogatory (insulting).

The Khoi were part of South Africa's 'first peoples' who were subjected to violence and enslavement by those who came to settle in the areas where they lived and who took control of the land. In what ways do you think this process of displacement could be related to the forced removals evoked by Haroon Gunn-Salie's *Sunday Best?*

Joni Brenner, *Temenos Guardian I*, 2008, Sikagard-consolidated clay



Lucky Sibiya, *Three Figures*, Undated, Carved and painted wood

Skulls are important to our sense of what is "human" because they signify the most basic component of the biological body. What is left when everything else is stripped away? A skeleton. But we can never view the bare bones of what was once a human body without imagining an actual, feeling, thinking human being. Skeletons can be seen with x-rays

DRAW IT

Draw an outline of your own head and neck – without facial features, colour or any other detail.

Could someone viewing this picture tell your national identity, cultural identity, race, gender or age? Or what is happening 'inside' your head – your thoughts, feelings, memories?

– modern medicine offers the hope of healing for the living – but mostly we associate them with death. This is why Walter Oltmann's *Mother and Child* (2007) is so moving.

If Oltmann's wire weaving invites us to grieve for the lost potential of a human life, then other works in the exhibition also challenge the cliché of youthful innocence and opportunity. Lisa Brice's two portraits of a girl (2005) hint at sadness and even something ominous or threatening. William Kentridge's *Adaptability, Compliance, Silence* (1999) is not very optimistic about the future experience of a child as he or she grows up. And what, we may wonder, has brought *shame* to the figure in Penny Siopis' 2005 tapestry of that title?

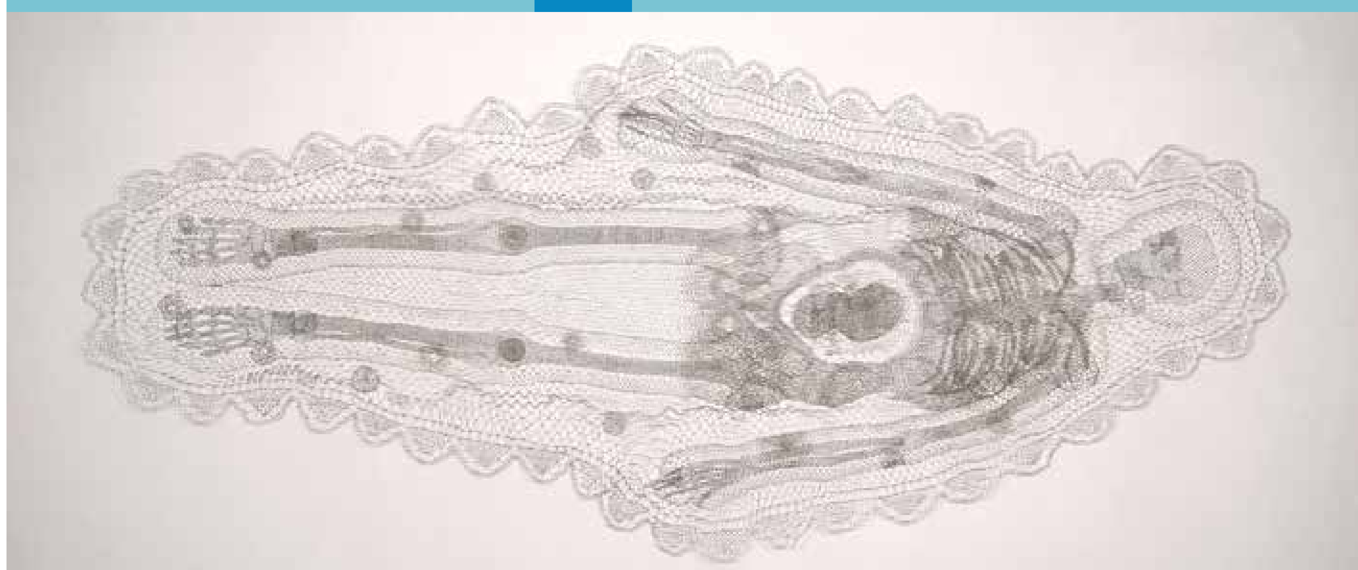
Other female figures in the exhibition are presented to us through their absence. Haroon Gunn-Salie's bronze *Sunday Best* (2014) gives us a further variation on the human form: here we

Haroon Gunn-Salie, *Sunday Best*, 2014, Bronze

have clothes but no body. Gunn-Salie's *empty* statue refers to the forced removals from District Six in the 1970s. It pays tribute to Susan Lewis, herself an artist, who could no longer walk the streets of Cape Town in her *Sunday best* clothes.

Penny Siopis, *Shame*, 2004/5, Tapestry

William Kentridge, *Adaptability, Compliance, Silence*, 1999, Printed text with charcoal



Walter Oltmann, *Mother and Child*, 2007, Weaving aluminium wire

INTO THE FUTURE

It is interesting to note that, in a number of the works featuring people "on the move", we are ignorant of where they are going. Andrew Tshabangu's *Passage* (2007) and Pierre Crocquet's *Buy a gift: Stone Town, Zanzibar, Tanzania* (2002) are the most obvious examples.

Ultimately, we don't know where we're headed as a species – our collective future is as uncertain as any individual's. *I Am Because You Are* has been described as an attempt to fix "a broken value system" in a global "age of anger". Jamal quotes Jeremy Rifkin: "The most important question facing humanity is: "Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilisation and save the earth?"

Thinking of humanity on a worldwide scale is important, but it can also be hard to get our heads around this kind of anxiety. Artists help us to "localise" – to give these things meaning in our local context. Addressing a global problem like xenophobia (distrust and mistreatment of "foreigners" or immigrants), South Africans can try to understand our own country as a place that has always been defined by migration: by the movement of peoples to and from and across the land. Here we may take our cue from works such as Hasan and Husain Essop's *Cape Town, South Africa* (2009) and Nhlanhla Xaba's *Migrant Family Life in South Africa* (1996).

A work like Barbara Jeppe's *African Monarch* (1972) might also get us thinking about the migration patterns of animals and insects – in this case, Danaus chrysippus, the African Monarch butterfly. Did you know that some butterfly species migrate thousands of kilometres each year? Climate change poses a serious threat to their established

Pierre Crocquet, *Buy a gift: Stone Town, Zanzibar, Tanzania*, 2002, Silver Gelatin hand print

migration patterns.

"Saving the earth" also, of course, means reversing the environmental damage that humans have caused. For too long we have seen the natural world as something purely for our use – something on which we can put a price tag; this attitude is criticised in Norman Catherine's *Bushbuck Rand* (1977).

But despite the threat of ecological and political crisis, it's not all doom and gloom. This exhibition contains sources of encouragement and of future hope. Instead of the idea of a "rainbow nation" there is a different – almost biblical – promise of a new start in Daniel Naudé's *Rainbow, Hanover, Northern Cape* (2009). Perhaps, as a species, we are learning once again that "the human" is dependent on, and part of, a system of natural elements. Gerhard Marx breaks down the opposition of the human and the natural with his 2014 work *Head (Skull and Skin)*, which depicts the human mind – right down to the neural networks of the brain – using plant materials. Nature is not something external, to be observed and documented (as beautiful as illustrations of fauna and flora, such as the watercolours by H.C. Andrews and Barbara Jeppe, may be). Instead, nature is central to our identity as "thinking animals".

Almost all of the subjects depicted in this exhibition show evidence of a rich and complex "inner life" to which we have no access, and at which we can only guess. For whom or what is the *Waiting Woman* (1998) in Percy Konqobe's 1998

Andrew Tshabangu, *Passage*, 2007, Fibre-based print

Nhlanhla Xaba, *Migrant Family Life in South Africa*, 1996, Linocut

bronze sculpture waiting? Or consider Santu Mofokeng's *Ishmael, Eyes Wide Shut* (2004). How can we try to see the world through someone else's eyes when we can't even see their eyes? It may be that this is only possible through the broad vision of the artistic imagination, dreaming up – and so creating –

About these worksheets
This educational supplement accompanies the exhibition *I Am Because You Are: A search for Ubuntu with permission to dream.* In it artworks are explored through analysis, thought-provoking questions, fact files, word/concept definitions and practical projects. Discussion topics help learners to develop a critical attitude to art, rather than just a grasp of media, styles, subject matter and themes. These worksheets are designed primarily for grade 10-12 learners, but are easily adapted for younger learners. Together with the introductory text, they are a stand-alone educational resource on the works on this exhibition.

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