

# voices from abroad

Mbali Dhlamini (\*1990 SA)

Nnenna Okore (\*1975 AUS/NGR)

Buhlebezwe Siwani (\*1987 SA)

09. Nov. 2024 – 08. Feb. 2025

Curator and Text: Dr. Renate Wiehager

## READER [*ENGLISH*]

As the exhibition title suggests, this temporary gathering of current works by the three artists Mbali Dhlamini (SA), Nnenna Okore (AUS/NGR), and Buhlebezwe Siwani (SA) is not centered on a specific theme. This is, rather, an opportunity to experience an open dialogue between Black women artists who live in and work on the African continent, Europe, and the United States. In photographs, sculptures, and images, their bodies of work offer perspectives on contemporary forms of identity and spirituality as they reflect on issues of the post-colonial.

The exhibition presents around 20 works that together offer a broad, revealing spectrum of controversial, ever-expanding subjects: archetypes of the feminine, cosmic rhythms, cycles of individual lives, shifts in identity, and role-playing.

In a world of abstract and digital processes that undermine a lived knowledge of place and sense of permanence, many people seek a tactile, sensual experience in their encounters with art—an expression of the need for a culture that feels rooted in space, in the here and now. Contemporary trends in art itself seem likewise to be seeking out images that can be felt as well as seen.

Three overarching themes form links between the individual positions of the three artists: a reintegration of nature and culture through human agency; the post-colonial view: female gaze, female body; and contemporary forms of spirituality. The interest in these questions in this moment, made evident in the stories told and phenomena produced by contemporary culture, was the driving reason for bringing these three artists together.

### **Reintegration of Nature and Culture through Human Agency**

**Nnenna Okore** is represented in the exhibition with ten examples of her floral-like wall pieces, all produced in 2024. These works, inspired by ecological and environmental philosophies, act to establish an intimate connection to nature. As she explains, “they visualize the planetary journey, the passing of time and the fleeting nature of the planet.”

**Bulebezwe Siwani's** materials—organic matter found in nature, manufactured goods, or her own body—in many places offer themselves to readings in a context of ritual or of practices concerned with processes of becoming and passing on, of birth and death. “It’s about the direct relationship between the land, the Black body, and the spirit. I’m interested in traditions and practices centered

around Black culture, particularly IsiZulu. It takes into account how Black people practice their own spiritual forms.”

**Mbali Dhlamini’s** critical research is centered on the testimonies and traditions of religious communities in Africa, their relationship to nature and to their own bodies, which she redefines for a contemporary cultural practice.

### **The Post-Colonial View: Female Gaze, Female Body**

In **Nnenna Okore’s** work, the body is rendered present through the time-consuming processes the artist engages in during the gathering and processing of her materials, as well as the gradual layering and interweaving in the sculptures themselves. On the other hand, Okore wants to address the body, the physical experience of the viewer, who are thus able to react to these works not only visually but also tactilely.

The exploration of the Black female body represents the gravitational center of **Bulebezwe Siwani’s** artistic work. Another central focus, closely related to this, is her reinterpretation and translation into the present day of African spirituality, which contrasts with the Christian traditions that came to South Africa during its colonization.

**Mbali Dhlamini** uses historical photographs of African women, whose titles suggest geographical, ethnographic, or cultural classifications, and exposes the discriminatory access of post-colonial visual testimonies. In other series, she uses her own body for her research.

### **Contemporary Forms of Spirituality**

All of **Nnenna Okore’s** work is rooted in the traditions and creative practices of Igbo philosophy and spirituality as a lived, embodied experience that is shared by many people in Nigeria.

**Bulebezwe Siwani** explores from varying perspectives the clash between modern faith and traditional ritual, specifically in the forms of African spirituality and Christianity. By combining her practice as a sangoma, a spiritual healer, with her artistic practice and her own personal relationship to the spiritual, Siwani offers herself up to examinations of identity and self.

The starting point of **Mbali Dhlamini’s** cultural research and artistic practice originates in the inextricably interwoven state of religious traditions in South Africa with current questions of post-colonial conditions. She interrogates contemporary forms of spirituality while reflecting on ancient traditions of indigenous philosophy and visual culture.

## **CVs**



**Mbali Dhlamini** (\*1990 in Johannesburg, South Africa) is a Johannesburg-based photographer and time-based multimedia artist. She studied Visual Arts at the University of Johannesburg from 2008 to 2013. She received a Master of Arts from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in 2015. In 2021, Dhlamini was invited to be artist-in-residence at the Embassy of Foreign Artists in Geneva, as well as a residency at the Black Rock Studios, Dakar, Senegal, founded by Kehinde Wiley. Alongside the artist Phumulani Ntuli, she is the co-facilitator of the Preempt Group Collective, which was awarded the Visionary Award 2021/2022 by the Javett Art Centre at the University of Pretoria. The Preempt Group Collective is a multidisciplinary collective working within the intersection of archives, trans-media and open-source technologies. On this basis they engage in the translation of research results through film and hypermedia, critically reflecting on aspects of analog and technological image production. Dhlaminis work is represented by Gallery Sakhile&Me, Frankfurt. Since 2018,

Dhlamini has also been a lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

[<https://mbalidhlamini.com/>]

In her work, Dhlamini engages with postcolonial issues. This can encompass contemporary forms of spirituality and the craft of indigo dyeing in Senegal, with the evidence and consequences of colonialism and missionary work in (South) Africa, traditions of indigenous philosophy and visual culture, as well as the function of language as a medium of understanding and knowledge building.



Australian-born, Nigerian-raised artist **Nnenna Okore** (\*1975 Canberra, AUS) lives and works in Chicago, Illinois, and works temporarily in Nigeria, her family's home country, as part of teaching assignments, exhibitions, etc. Okore engages in various climate policy initiatives in both countries and teaches since 2005 at North Park University in Chicago. Okore studied at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka until 1999 with El Anatsui and at the University of Iowa until 2005. With her research on the use of bioplastics as an art material, she obtained a Doctor of Philosophy (Fine Art) degree from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, in 2023. Her work is represented by the galleries Sakhile&Me, Frankfurt, October Gallery, London, and Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco. In Okore's works, colors and shapes, textures and materials flow in from three cultural spheres—Australia, Nigeria, and the USA. In her multimedia objects, we can see the cultural legacies and traditions of craftsmanship found in her countries of birth and childhood as they combine with visual interpretations of natural cycles and energies, her works are informed by current environmental policy issues and feminist discourses.



**Buhlebezwe Siwani** (\*1987 in Johannesburg, South Africa), who lives and works in Cape Town and Amsterdam, grew up in Johannesburg, though due to her nomadic upbringing has also lived in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces. In 2015 she completed her MFA at the Michaelis School of Fine Arts, Cape Town. Siwani has exhibited at the Michaelis Galleries in Cape Town and has been featured most recently in site-specific installations and exhibitions at the Gwangju Biennale, South Korea, Culture Summit Abu Dhabi, and the Kunstinstituut Melly in Rotterdam. Her work is represented by Galeria Madragoa, Lisbon. Siwani engages in performative practices that can manifest as installations, sculpture, painting, video, and/or photography. The thematic focus of her work is an exploration of the Black female body, with pieces that analyze and visualize both traditions and current forms of African spirituality and their relationship to Christianity. In her performances, Siwani often poses questions about what African spirituality truly means while interrogating its relationship with colonization, historical narratives, socio-economic conditions, traditional culture, as well as Black female corporeality. She turns her eye to the ways in which these relations play out in today's world, how bodies and movements relate to memory, and to the stereotypes of femininity and Black identity that ask to be redefined.

## On the Work of Mbali Dhlamini

(\*1990 in Johannesburg, South Africa, lives in Johannesburg)

Mbali Dhlamini's cultural research and artistic practice finds its roots in the indissoluble interweaving of South African religious traditions with the post-colonial issues felt in that country today. In her series of photographs, as well as videos and installations, she interrogates contemporary forms of spirituality, focusing on subjects such as the craft of indigo dyeing in Senegal, the results and consequences of colonialism and missionary work in (South) Africa, traditions of indigenous philosophy and visual culture, or the function of language as a medium of understanding and knowledge building.

Extending her visual, tactile, and discursive approaches to research into contemporary indigenous practices, Dhlamini is also active in various artist collectives and multimedia collaborative projects. Since 2018, Dhlamini has also been a lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. [<https://mbalidhlamini.com/>]

"Looking into objects or materiality, as a way of simultaneously looking at historical experiences of Black women, has been the strategic rerouting that Dhlamini's work repeatedly dwelled on. This strange but familiar place of material objects and the matter of Black feminine presence always already reducible to the property of another, is the furtive and subterranean theme that arguably subtends Dhlamini's project." (Athi Mongezeleli Joja)

## On the Works by Mbali Dhlamini in the Exhibition

Mbali Dhlamini is represented in the exhibition *Voices From Abroad* with photographs from two of her work groups, *Look into*, 2017, and *Go Bipa Mpa Ka*, 2020.



Mbali Dhlamini. Three photographs from the series "Look into"

(Li.) Untitled - Afrique Occidentale, Fille Ouolof, 2021

(Mi.) Untitled - Dakar, Jeune Fille, 2021

(Re.) Untitled - Afrique Occidentale, Jeune Femme, 2017

During an artist residency in Dakar, Senegal, in 2017, Dhlamini's work focused on an exploration of the cultural significance of the indigo plant. She used historical photographs as reference points for works that through their titles suggest geographical, ethnographic, and cultural associations. In 2021, Dhlamini was able to return to Senegal for further research, during which time she created a mural made of indigo pigments and drawings.

The photographs from her series *Look into* are sourced mostly from photographs from estates and postcards from around 1900, apparently or actually taken for the purpose of ethnographic documentation, though probably often also for erotic purposes. *Fille Ouolof*, for example, refers to the large ethnic group residing mainly in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania. "Ouolof," or the anglicized "Wolof," is a language spoken by a large part of the population in Senegal. "Afrique Occidentale," the title of another photograph in the series, refers to West Africa as a whole.

Dhlamini's photographs present female figures emerging out from the blackness of indeterminate spaces into the foreground. They are identifiable only by their traditional, indigo-colored garments and by the image titles which define them as women from various indigenous West African communities. Their skin merges totally with the darkness of the image backgrounds; any cultural or

personal specificity is dissolved into the no-place of racist understandings. Stereotypical descriptions, like those used in ethnic photographic documents from the colonial era, definitively withdraw any basic sense of lived individuality from the persons whom we are nonetheless unable to resist seeking out. Dhlamini realizes her critical examination of the erasure of Black individuality and history by means of digitally processing original documentary images. The dissolution of the boundary between the feminine physique and the pictorial space forces us as viewers to supplement the ideas of the person and identity of the portrayed in our imagination.

*"I am drawn to the research by the titles used to describe and label most of the images. [...] The project intends to Lindela (dwell) on the titles and use artistic interpretations to rethink and rename the images. Through this process I ask: how do you bring back the image to the owner? How do you retract images recorded and shared publicly without the subject's consent? What is the significance of these images that exist in colonial archives and museums, outside their country of origin? Can the images be erased? Or rather how do you reimagine the image and its place in history?" (M.D.)*  
[<https://www.eofa.ch/en/resident/mbali-dhlamini-2/>]

*"Through her reworking of the photographs, Dhlamini makes her own revisions to the mechanisms inscribed in the photographs, as in the depiction and exhibition of Black, female bodies, shifting attention to the colorful patterned garments that conveyed social codes and carried cultural significance in the indigenous communities of Senegal. In Look Into, as is often the case in Dhlamini's work, a process of un-learning and re-learning takes place which allows for the questioning of (allegedly) established knowledge and for pictorial representations to become legible in a new way."*  
(Nadine Henrich)

### **Mbali Dhlamini. Series "Go Bipa Mpa Ka Mabele"**



(left) Bugubedu II, 2020



(right) Ya fanang ka seatla se bulehileng otle hlonolofatswa, 2020

First appearing as part of a solo exhibition of her work in Johannesburg 2013, translucent robes have been a recurrent motif in Mbali Dhlamini's oeuvre, hovering in space as empty shells or, in her videos and photographic series, worn by the artist herself. These works thematize the body of Black women from a post-colonial perspective while at the same time refer to the so-called seaparo, long, wide garments worn by women from religious communities in South Africa. The works in the photo series *Go Bipa Mpa Ka Mabele*, 2020, can also be seen in this context. The title refers to a proverb in the Bantu language Setswana, which loosely translates as "conceal" or "hidden in mystery"—perhaps in reference to Dhlamini's keen interest in the visual "uncovering" of cultural practices and indigenous knowledge.

In 2021, Mbali Dhlamini was able to expand on this theme during working visits to Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock artist-in-residence program in Dakar, Senegal, and to the archives of the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, Switzerland. Here she researched the Swiss missionaries who had been sent to South Africa beginning at the end of the 19th century to spread the Protestant faith, found churches, and provide medical care and education.

The photograph *Bugubedu II* shows the artist herself in a long robe made of transparent material, with a braided belt, a headdress, and a black Bible in her hands. Her gaze, seemingly elevated, looking down towards the viewer, can be read as a translation of the dominance of ecclesiastical representation into gesture, facial expression, and posture. The simple cut of the garment follows the style of the seporo, whose fabrics and patterns signaled different ethnic affiliations and religious functions and were intended to cover the body completely.

With her awareness of this reference to the religious traditions of her home country, Dhlamini's exposure of the naked body can be understood as a radical transgression of conventions. At the same time, the effect of the nakedness of the body is softened by the reflections of the material and the superimposed silhouette of color.

*In several work series, Mbali Dhlamini is [...] "celebrating the religious women of the African Independent Churches (AIC). Historically, AICs were formed by black religious leaders who either broke away from traditional colonial churches or influenced by the redemptive theology of African American missionaries who frequently visited Southern Africa at the turn of the last century. Although these churches enjoy considerable following and stature today, under the British colonial administration their black nationalist inclinations were menacing. [...] Seeing these women walking the streets, particularly on Saturdays and Sundays, in their colorful and immaculate church tunics is a common sight in the South African landscape. Like a sacrosanct layer that can be put on, the sumptuary laws the wearer abides by beckons a certain social decorum, that the onlooker must readily perceive and interpassively enjoy, and they [the wearers] must immediately perform, proclaim, and even exploit. A poetics of relation and a performance of dignity." (Athi Mongezeleli Joja)*

"Bugubedu" means "red" in the Southern Sotho language, a title that expresses the close relationship of this color to the earth. In the high-contrast, black-and-white form of the motif, reflections of light convey a sense of spiritual suspending of the body's pure physicality—an optical "veiling" through unveiling. The title *Ya fanang ka seatla se bulehileng otl'a hlonolofatswa* is a religiously grounded phrase in the Sesotho language that translates as "He who gives with an open hand will be blessed." It expresses a deep-rooted cultural conviction that generosity and selflessness have positive effects on one's own life.

### **On the Work of Nnenna Okore**

(\*1975 Canberra, AUS, lives in Chicago, Ill., and works temporarily in Nigeria, her family's home country)

Nnenna Okore's artistic work focuses on complexes of ecological themes, including carbon emissions, energy consumption, and civilization's destructive overuse of natural resources. Her work is grounded in the notion, shared by many African people, that all forms of life—including humans, animals, plants, the earth, as well as intangible modes of being—possess an energetic force that permeates all of our lives. Okore is involved in numerous environmental art projects and exhibitions that pursue investigations, dialogue, and transformations of our current ecological challenges.

Her sculptures, objects, installations, and public artworks are created from biodegradable materials, acting to raise awareness of the feasibility of sustainable practices within the art world. Frayed layers of jute fabric point to the importance of woven materials in the context of her Nigerian cultural heritage. More broadly, the materials in her works can be understood metaphorically, revealing the ways in which the construction of memory and history itself is layered, frayed, constantly rewoven, and, yet, simultaneously ephemeral.

*“My aesthetics and visual forms critically question the destruction of the natural world by humans. In my sculptures and installations, I work to transform materials with intricate surfaces into tactile objects inspired by the energies of nature. My materials are animal skins, barks, dried leaves, vines, rocks, and many other organic and fibrous materials that I find in my living environment, such as fabrics, paper, clay, hessian fabrics such as burlap and jute, but also sticks, yarn, ropes, and bioplastics. My creative approaches are labor-intensive, sometimes involving time-consuming and repeated processes of tattering, sewing, dyeing, starching, tying, and stiffening with food or paint-based mediums. I have been exploring the intersections between spiritual, corporeal, ecological, and social relationships. I’m interested in how everything is connected through bodies, cycles, networks, strands, and fibers.” [N.O., lecture as part of the discussion event on her work at the Stanley Museum of Art, Iowa City, Iowa, July 2023]*

Growing up in Nigeria, Okore engaged in an everyday practice of reusing things. Whether it was newsprint, fabrics, cans, or anything else, this was a kind of permanent act of recycling within her own environment. The material jute, for example, which plays a central role in her works, was omnipresent during her childhood. In the household of her Nigerian parents, jute sacks were used to hold grains and for many other uses often until they were completely torn and tattered and were only fit to be repurposed into sponges. Beyond these uses in the home, jute was a material essential to the local culture that was found everywhere in everyday African life, from the clothing people wore to the mats found on the floor. Based in this experience of the artist, jute has remained for her a material that renders tangibly tactile the transience, fleetingness, and fragility of our lives. It is a material that can tell stories.

When Okore came to study in Iowa City, she was initially shocked by her confrontation with the waste problem this city had, as so many Western cities in general do, as well as by the overwhelming prevalence of ubiquitous consumption.

*“In a broader perspective, my work has also developed out of critical questions about how the history of colonization has not only robbed the people of the African continent of their homeland, but has robbed them more profoundly of their natural ties to the energies and cyclical processes of nature. In pre-colonial times, art was an experience, not just an aesthetic experience, art was worn, it was part of an attitude and an internalized view that art first enriches your day. People had artifacts and figures that were part of their lives and recognized them as representing different forms of wholeness and power.” (N.O.)*

Further important aspects of Okore’s work, essentially linked to impressions from her childhood, are the lengthy process of refashioning the raw materials into new relationships, as well as the time-consuming process of creating the sculptures and spatial installations themselves. As a child growing up in Nigeria in the 1980s, Okore faced the daily necessity of finding and building everything from scratch. This meant that such tasks, once begun, could only be completed in tiny steps, over the course of hours upon hours.

As a child, the artist recalls, she experienced all this as a kind of torture: the daily shelling of grain seeds, picking grains from their stalks, and other tiresome tasks. Today, she regards such time-consuming, manual work as a form of contemplation; it is time spent that feeds into the complexity of her works, into their layering of meanings.

Her heritage also manifests in the terms, words, and phrases she uses from the Igbo language she grew up with, which appear in the titles of her works. Her father was a person very connected to the philosophy and spirituality of the Igbo traditions; they were lived, authentic aspects of the language

he used and his manner of speaking. For people who understand this language, these Igbo terms and names reveal a great wealth of associations; they can be linked to the cyclical forces and energies of nature, the cosmos, and the spirit. According to Okore, none of this is translatable.

*The motif of the cyclical that runs through my work is closely linked to the experience of individual physicality—and here, of course, also to my body awareness as a woman, as a mother. I was in my early 40s when the youngest of my children was born and this was also a time when I was confronted with the fact that my body was changing and that I was experiencing my mother getting older and older. (N.O.)*

Okore's childhood in the cultural region of Igboland—home to an ethnic group of around 30 million people—in turn stands in the larger context of her youth in Nigeria and, from an even wider perspective, can be further linked to her experiences growing up in Africa. There are associations that, according to the artist, encompass all of this: African culture and indigenous African practices in general. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country, and so Okore distinguishes the Igbo philosophy she grew up with from the many philosophical traditions and divergent ways of thinking that exist in Nigeria.

*“In terms of nationality, I speak of myself as Nigerian, but in my thinking, in my philosophy, in my artistic and material practice, I am connected to Igbo traditions. It is ethnicity that nourishes and frames my thinking, my worldview and my perspectives.” (N.O.)*



### **On the Works by Nenna Okore in the Exhibition**

Okore interprets her wall-mounted floral works as metaphors for

*“the planetary journey, the passing of time and the fleeting nature of the planet. I employ different materials and weaving processes to explore material compatibility and expand the material meaning. The floral pieces elicit more intimate connections with nature. Also, these smaller pieces are inspired by ecological and environmental philosophies. The African Igbo philosophy, which I grew up with, is rooted in phasal, cyclic thinking: thinking about life in terms of birth, youth, adulthood, death, and reincarnation, and back again. I go one step further in my work when I speak of the metaphor of the floral, of flowers—they too embody moments of the cyclical, with initial growth, blossoming and withering. So, flowers are very strong metaphors for how we connect and how we relate to environmental ecological issues.”*

Nnenna Okore on her Artistic Philosophy

*“I position myself as an artist, a teacher, and an eco-art researcher who is interested in creating awareness through social material consciousness.*

*In my art I typically would draw on Afrocentric notions with the idea of thinking about how all things—living, non-living and spiritual—are connected and how they intersect to change things or to create experience. I see the art that I create as having agency and that all the materials I use are interconnected, and they also relate with other forces unknown to us, spiritual forces. Everything has a live force to it.*

*I believe that art is a material force, that art is a powerful agent for speaking about the things that affect human perspectives.*



*By experiencing art, we're also able to experience life and the different forces that make up our cosmic experience. Being part of this complex web of the planetary experience and interconnectedness, people can become more embodied with their surroundings. It's from the premise of my African belief that all things are connected that my work emerges.*

*So when I work with materials using different kinds of fiber, fabrics, jute, stones, sticks, paper, I'm alive to the idea that these mediums are vessels that help me to call attention to different social and ecological matters.*

*To my mind, these materials are co-collaborators. They are co-actants in the process that I use for creating my art and for engendering awareness about climate change and planetary problems that serve as a tool for enlivening social interactions and experiences.*

*While I'm the brain behind the art that I create, I recognize and give credit to the agencies that these materials embody and also how they invite people to engage with them through conversations in ways that I cannot.*

*The materials create a unique kind of experience. The diverse nature of materials, plus the process and the techniques of fraying the fabric, teasing the fabric, shredding, sewing, and dyeing, all enable me to connect with my materials and interweave not just the objects, the people and spaces, but also layers of history and stories and narratives that are embodied within my process and materials.*

*I often draw inspiration from my Igbo cultural heritage as a way of underpinning indigenous and independent ways of thinking and looking at the interdependent and reciprocal nature of human to earth relationships. I'm thinking of African philosophies that support the notion that cosmic harmony between humans and things are important for a balanced ecological world. Humans hold the destiny of the planet in their hands. [N.O., lecture as part of the discussion event on her work at the Stanley Museum of Art, Iowa City, Iowa, July 2023]*

### **On the Work of Bulebezwe Siwani**

(\*1987 in Johannesburg, South Africa), lives and works in Cape Town and Amsterdam

The exploration of the Black female body represents the gravitational center of Bulebezwe Siwani's artistic work. Another central focus, closely related to this, is the reinterpretation and translation into the present day of African spirituality, which is in contrast to the Christian traditions that came to South Africa during its colonization.

Intertwined in this is Siwani's examination of the patriarchal social structures and representations of the female body that asserted themselves in the Black female experience in South Africa. In these works, it is the artist's own body that acts as subject, object, form, medium, material, and language.

Siwani—who works simultaneously in performance, photography, sculpture, installation, and film—initially emerged with performances that acted out her experience as a Black artist living with one foot in South Africa and the other in Europe, works which critically exposed the stereotypical reactions of certain viewers. Another aspect of the performative works deals with her attempts to translate the spiritual traditions of her African cultural heritage in new and individual ways into her day-to-day actions in European life. Siwani places ancestral rituals into relation with modern life. In this way, she tackles social and political issues such as the history of colonization, Black communities, and experiences of alienation in a present shaped by technology and digitalization.

*“When I began my work—and it hasn't changed—it was under the umbrella of spirituality. What African spirituality really means and how it speaks to colonization, history, socio-*

*economic conditions, tradition, the Black female body. And how all of that takes effect in the present world where we have manifested ourselves as human beings. I just started thinking about the things we construct and the things that have been constructed for us and the ways in which the Black female body is through ubungoma.” (B.S.)*

The term ubungoma occupies the spiritual center out from which many of Siwani’s works have developed. Ubungoma is a deeply rooted spiritual and cultural tradition in Southern Africa. It originates in South African Zulu culture, where it refers to the healing practices of traditional medicine as well as spiritual practice in general. Those who live in and with ubungoma can act as sangoma, healers or shamans. The sangoma are able to communicate with the ancestral spirits and convey their messages to members of the community in need of advice or healing. During a kind of initiation phase, sangomas must go through periods of intense spiritual deepening.

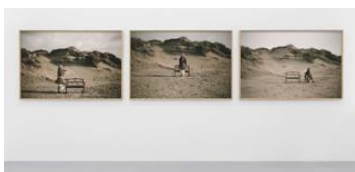
Siwani’s materials—fabrics, robes, mirrors, soap, natural objects, as well as her own body—can often be read in the context of rituals and practices concerning the processes both of becoming and of passing away, of birth and of death. As an initiated sangoma, Siwani operates in the space of the dead and the living. She explores the clash between modern faith and traditional ritual, between African spirituality and Christianity. By combining her practice as a spiritual healer with her artistic practice and her own, individual spiritual life, Siwani intentionally opens herself to questions of identity and self. Her actions, behaviors, materials, and performances reveal the associative and semantic richness through an intertwining of the indigenous practices of her homeland, ancient practices suppressed by colonial rule in South Africa, with Western forms of spirituality.

*“It’s about the direct relationship between the land, the Black body, and the spirit. I’m interested in traditions and practices centered around Black culture, particularly IsiZulu. It takes into account how Black people practice their own spiritual forms.” (B.S)*

The critical awareness out from which Siwani works is described by the artist as the “problem of Christianity having demonized our indigenous practices.” In this way, her videos and photographic works can also be understood as speaking of the disappearance of the culture, spirituality, and history that were passed down to her in South Africa.

*“Being a sangoma is very much a part of my spiritual journey and my art-making journey. I think that part of my ancestral calling is to make work about this, so that people can see another side. We’re constantly dealing with the politics of identity, but not thinking through the politics of the spirit that has to do a lot with identity: identity is linked very much to the spirit, when the spirit is gone, what identity do you have left? All my work has to do with the journey of finding oneself through indigenous practices, looking at history, looking at culture, through who I am: a Black female body.” (B.S.)*

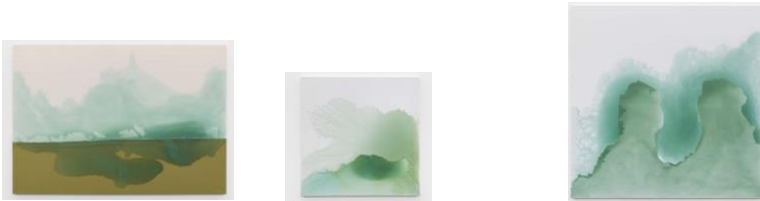
### **On the Works by Bulebezwe Siwani in the Exhibition**



*Mnguni*, 2019

In the 3-part photo work *Mnguni* the artist herself is depicted in three positions during a performance on a beach in the Netherlands, showing the attitudes of a ritualized action. As the work title *Mnguni* suggests, the performance refers to the Nguni, an indigenous community in South

Africa. Siwani links historical, economic, and colonial relationships between South Africa and the Netherlands. Mnguni is a mythical figure that serves as a symbol of the origins and cultural unity of the Nguni peoples, which in South Africa include the Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, and Ndebele. Siwani herself translates this term as “The child returned to the mother.” Siwani explains that “the land speaks volumes about who we are and how things evolve and who has been there. It speaks about the trials and tribulations. Especially in South Africa, where people have been uprooted and land taken from them, how do you say home if you have always known home to belong to a former master?” (B.S.) In *Mnguni*, the artist’s body, movement, and clothing evoke relationships and conflicts, but also the power of her connection as a sangoma to her ancestors.



*Izintaba*, 2023

In a new group of canvas paintings, Siwani works with a greenish soap on light, occasionally earth-colored backgrounds. The title of the series, *Izintaba*, a word in the South African Zulu language, means “mountain/mountains”. However, the word is also used symbolically in the sense of facing obstacles and challenges with strength. In her works, Bulebezwe Siwani has repeatedly referred to rituals of mourning, leave-taking, and commemoration of the deceased, which she experienced in South Africa in the context of religious communities. This becomes materially vivid via the specially designed ceramic bowls, as well as the soap, sacred ashes, clay, oil, and other elements she uses in her installations and films. These are objects, items, and organic materials that are stand-ins for things absent: they are simulacra. Existing beyond the confines of figurative depiction, these materials act as representatives, as cathartic elements that can reveal a reality apart. Based on this artistic-spiritual practice, Siwani has worked in recent years on life-size sculptures of her own body constructed from soap as well as on *Izintaba* series, landscape-like paintings using soap with a watercolor-like technique.



*Bageze ngobisi 1*, 2022

In her work, Bulebezwe Siwani repeatedly deals with patriarchal social structures and the depictions of the female body that emerge as a result. In *Bageze ngobisi 1*, Siwani’s body becomes the visual arena of the male gaze, which she confidently confronts, only to, in a next step, reject and deflect such projections through her own gaze and the position she occupies therein. The photograph—one in a series of self-portraits and group portraits of nude Black women—evokes the iconic motif of the female supine nude in art history. The reclining or seated female nude is a motif that has been firmly anchored in the classical artistic repertoire for centuries. Two oft-mentioned examples from the Renaissance models immediately come to mind: the *Pastoral Concert*, ca. 1510, which has

been attributed to both Giorgione and Titian, and Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, 1538. Three direct references for Siwani's photograph could be Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Grand Odalisque*, from 1814, Édouard Manet's scandalous *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, from 1863, as well as Amedeo Modigliani's *Nu couché (sur le côté gauche)*, from 1917, which itself in turn refers back to Ingres. In all three of these paintings, the woman turns confidently and with direct eye contact towards the painter and we the viewers. In this way, the model can be seen to reject her status as the object of our voyeurism and instead enacts her own self-determined femininity. In the 19th century, another aspect was added: the reclining female nude was joined by Black servants, slaves who emphasize in this visual confrontation the differences in skin color and social status depicted. The painting by Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, is well-known, but Black servant figures also appear in paintings by Gérôme, Ingres, and Delacroix. Here, too, Siwani inverts the history of this motif by taking the place of the sitter with her own (Black) body. The title of her photograph, *Bageze ngobisi*, adds a further ironic accent. In the South African Zulu dialect, it means "They have bathed her in milk," a phrase that expresses qualities of beauty and flawlessness in a body.

*"I think women in positions of power have been broken to take away their power and make them more accessible. It's not fair to expect women to be so accessible. Let the woman be who she is. And if she's powerful, let her be powerful. It's really important for me to bring that to the forefront, especially in photos or in videos: I will look back. It's important to look back because not many women have gotten that opportunity." (B.S.)*



Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres | *Grand Odalisque* | 1814 | 88,9 x 162,5 cm | Paris Louvre

Édouard Manet | *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* | 1863 | Öl auf Leinwand | 208 x 264 cm | Musée d'Orsay Paris

Amedeo Modigliani | *Nu couché (sur le côté gauche)*, 1917

Édouard Manet | *Olympia* | 1863 | Öl auf Leinwand | 130,5 x 190 cm | Musée d'Orsay Paris