



OF AFRICAN ART

FEMALE ARTISTS CREATING
POWERFUL WORK ARE
TAKING THEIR PLACE ON THE
INTERNATIONAL STAGE.

by Percy Mabandu

The Malawian artist Billie Zangewa, photographed at her home in Johannesburg.



Photographs by Namsa Leuba



From left: Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, photographed at her studio in Johannesburg.

Nkosi's oil portrait titled *Uncle Stan (After Stanley Fanuel Nkosi)*, 2017.

Incense Burner, 2017 (pencil, gouache, and watercolor on wood panel), by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum.

international educations and careers. The Nigerian-born, Yale-educated Njideka Akunyili Crosby has earned accolades—including a 2017 MacArthur “genius” grant—for her rich, affectionate, collage-based paintings that depict Nigerian family life and complicate Western stereotypes of Africa. Lubaina Himid, who was born in the Sultanate of Zanzibar but has spent her career in the U.K., is known for colorful installations of painted human figures that comment on colonial history. Her work went largely unrecognized for decades until she was awarded the coveted Turner Prize last year, becoming the first woman of color—and, at 63, the oldest person ever—to win.

The Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola recently wowed visitors at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art with an exhibition of her portraits, which shimmer as if illuminated from within, depicting black skin not as it looks but as it feels. The surest sign of this movement’s ascendancy is the sincere flattery of imitation: the British-Liberian artist Lina Iris Viktor made headlines this winter when she accused the makers of a music video for a Kendrick Lamar song from the *Black Panther* soundtrack of ripping off her scintillating Afrofuturist aesthetic.

Perhaps most electrifying are the women who continue to work primarily on the African continent, who never left, or who were drawn back after time abroad. These are the artists we showcase here, with origins ranging from Ethiopia to South Africa. Their styles and techniques differ dramatically—some, like the Malawian tapestry artist Billie Zangewa or the Zimbabwean printmaker Virginia Chihota, are painters only in the loosest sense—but their work evinces a common desire to give form, and therefore power, to overlooked lives, and to revel in their complexity. As curator Lerato Bereng of Johannesburg’s blue-chip Stevenson gallery, which has exhibited artwork by several of these women, says, “We are in the era of #blackgirlmagic.”

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THENJIWE NIKI NKOSI

Last year, the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris presented a series of 16 oil portraits by the Johannesburg-based painter Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi. All of them were 20 inches square, showing their subjects from the shoulders up, in the manner of photo IDs. The faces, subtly rendered in warm tones



In the past few years galleries, museums, auction blocks, and private collections have been awash in figurative works. After decades of abstraction and conceptual art, painters—many of them not previously part of the art establishment—are showing refreshing new ways of depicting the world, and vibrant new worlds to depict. And in the process they have resuscitated an arguably obsolete genre by representing faces that had been conspicuously absent from museum walls.

The movement reached a sort of apotheosis last year when Kehinde Wiley and Amy Serald were, respectively, tapped to paint the official portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama, returning to the origins of their art form as a means to glorify the powerful.

The resurgence of figuration is a global phenomenon, one that has blossomed particularly among female artists of African descent, a once-neglected demographic that is suddenly being embraced by the art world. Many of these artists have roots on the continent but

against flat backgrounds, belonged to family, friends, and political figures, all of them heroic to Nkosi in one way or another. This personal pantheon, as Nkosi calls it, included her great-grandmother, who was a domestic worker for the 19th-century South African president Paul Kruger; Winnie Mandela, known as the Mother of the Nation; Mido Macia,

a Mozambican immigrant killed by South African police in 2013; and the Botswanan artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Nkosi’s former studio partner. (More on her below.) When Nkosi had shown these canvases in South Africa, audiences recognized many of these people even though they were identified only by first name. But in Paris, where museumgoers might not have readily identified the subjects, curators chose to display full names and short bios for each figure. Nkosi felt ambivalent about the decision.

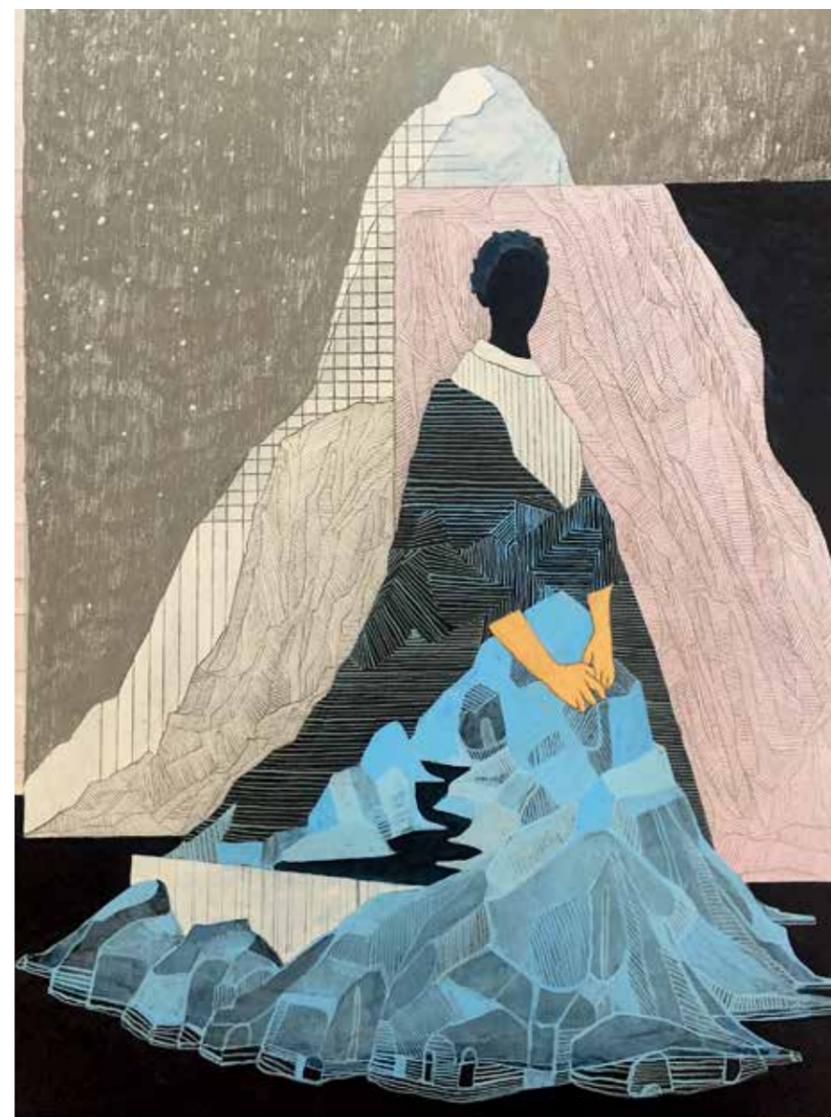
“I had questions,” she says. “I wondered, Will the work lose something?” But in the end, the moment was triumphant. “When I saw these faces hanging in this place of power, there was power that I felt,” she says. “It was kind of subversive.”

Nkosi’s artistic approach is partly political, aiming to reclaim spaces through painting. “We are going through a historic moment in the African world, especially in the global diaspora,” Nkosi says. “There’s a focus on putting images of black people on the walls of key institutions.”

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PAMELA PHATSIMO SUNSTRUM

Afrofuturism—a sci-fi-inflected aesthetic global audiences might recognize from the blockbuster film *Black Panther*—has long been a central ingredient in the drawings, installations, performances, and stop-motion films of Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum. Her multidisciplinary work has autobiographical roots, but it looks beyond her immediate surroundings, beyond Africa, beyond the planet, beyond time, charting out a cosmological realm populated by mythic human figures. Navigating this world



PREVIOUS PAGE: MAKEUP BY LESLEY WHITBY AT LAMPOST. THIS PAGE: © THENJIWE NIKI NKOSI

© PAMELA PHATSIMO SUNSTRUM

From left: Zvakandivenga Muchadenga (*Air Spirit Bird*), 2017, by the Zimbabwean artist Portia Zvavahera.

Flying Girls, 2016, Peju Alatise's contribution to the Nigeria Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale.

The artist Virginia Chihota, photographed at her studio in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Ndichiri Kutsvaga Kukuziva (*Still Seeking to Know You*), 2016, a screen print on paper by Chihota.

throughout Sunstrum's oeuvre is her fictional alter ego, Asme, a device that allows her to represent her blackness separately from any cultural context. The artist's galactic perspective can be attributed in part to her international upbringing. Born in Mochudi, Botswana, in 1980, Sunstrum spent her childhood in Southeast Asia and studied in the United States, earning her BA at the University of North Carolina and her MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art. She now divides her time between Ontario and Johannesburg, where in August she revealed her largest piece yet: a 100-foot-long glass mural installed at the new Council Chambers building.

Broken up into eight panels, the mural depicts Asme walking through time and space, striding effortlessly over the city and human concerns.

PORTIA ZVAVAHERA

The 33-year-old Zimbabwean painter Portia Zvavahera sleeps with a sketchbook under her pillow. When she remembers a dream, she captures it in a doodle. Afterward, she develops her scribbles into fuller ideas, folding in images and themes culled from waking life. The haunting results portray real-world struggles while retaining the phantasmagorical vibrancy of their subconscious origins.

Zvavahera, who contributed to the Zimbabwe Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, has crafted a painterly idiom that turns on the interior lives of frequently faceless human figures. Charged, monumental, and emotionally raw, her canvases tend to marshal the complex, tender stories of womanhood in a Zimbabwe still grappling with Robert Mugabe's collapsed experiment with revolution. Others, though surreal and ghostly, encode happier visions. Her 2015 series *I Can Feel It in My Eyes*, depicting passionate embraces amid colorful floral patterns in a clear nod to Gustav Klimt, captured the pains and pleasures of the romance she shared with her future husband, the sculptor Gideon Gomo.



FROM LEFT: © PORTIA ZVAVAHERA/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEVENSON GALLERY; © PEJU ALATISE



© VIRGINIA CHIHOTA/COURTESY TIWANI CONTEMPORARY

PEJU ALATISE

For most of the women in these pages, making art is an act of defiance. For painter, sculptor, and novelist Peju Alatise, it began as an act of rebellion. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, to a strict Muslim family in 1975, she was discouraged by her father from pursuing an artistic career. Her mother, recognizing that the creative fire in her daughter would not go out, offered steadfast support, but only after a spiritualist predicted Alatise would become a world-famous artist.

Though Alatise studied architecture, she quickly turned to visual art, which allowed her to comment more directly on issues that mattered to her. Steeped in Yoruba tradition, and often derived from her own fiction (she has published two novels), Alatise's work primarily addresses the condition of women and girls in hyper-patriarchal Nigeria, where forced marriages and kidnappings are not uncommon. She started with painting large portraits that cast average women in a heroic light. Her imagery has since become increasingly three-dimensional and conceptual, and she now focuses largely on sculptural installations. By draping fabric around invisible human figures, for example, or replacing heads with empty boxes, Alatise tends to highlight absence, in both a metaphorical and a literal sense—a theme that has been resonating across Nigerian society ever since the disappearance in 2014 of hundreds of teenage girls at the hands of the militant group Boko Haram.

Alatise's career reached international proportions last year thanks to two major recognitions. One was the FNB Art Prize,



awarded in connection with the 10th installment of the Pan-African FNB Joburg Art Fair. The other was the chance to represent Nigeria in the country's first pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Her installation *Flying Girls*, based on one of her stories, consisted of eight life-size sculptures of girls either heading into or out of forced servitude (it's intentionally ambiguous), sprouting wings that urge them to join a flock of birds circling above their heads.

VIRGINIA CHIHOTA

In 2013, Virginia Chihota shared wall space at the 55th Venice Biennale with her fellow Zimbabwean Portia Zvavahera. Their work occupies the same liminal zone between dreams and reality. But comparisons end there. The same year, Chihota was awarded the prestigious Prix Canson, which honors artists working on paper, Chihota's preferred medium. The distinction led to shows across Africa and Europe, including at the Saatchi Gallery in London. Chihota's drawings, prints, and silkscreens tend to cast female figures adrift into negative space, alternately vulnerable and defiant against unspecified forces, their bodies transformed into floating sites of meaning.

Chihota's works are abstracted explorations of her experiences as a woman, mother, and wife. And they reflect her itinerant life. In 2012, Chihota migrated to Libya after the fall of the Gadhafi regime. She later moved to Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, and now lives in Montenegro. Chihota says her travels have left her with a profound sense of displacement and isolation, a bit like one of her own floating ink-and-watercolor figures. But they have also acquainted her with new sources of beauty, horror, love, and resilience, which gradually fill in the empty spaces.



AIDA MULUNEH

Aida Muluneh makes photographs that borrow heavily from the language of painting. She saturates every surface in her compositions with primary colors. That includes her subjects' bodies and faces, to which she frequently applies patterns of dots that evoke the traditional face-painting of Ethiopia, her homeland. Almost all of her pieces center on female subjects—frequently herself—seemingly torn between conflicting identities. Freighted with symbolism, her work has racked up numerous awards and ended up in collections around the world, including at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C.

Muluneh likes to say that Ethiopia gave birth to her but the world raised her. She embodies the concept of Afropolitanism: Born in Addis Ababa in 1974, she grew up between Yemen, England, Cyprus, and Canada and studied at Howard University

in the United States. She remained in North America, honing her craft by working as a photojournalist for the *Washington Post*, before returning to her native country in 2007 to be part of Ethiopia's creative and industrial awakening. Muluneh has since become indispensable to the contemporary art scene in the country. She has established DESTA (Developing and Educating Society Through Art), a cultural organization that runs workshops, creative exchanges, and exhibitions. And in 2010 she founded the Addis Foto Fest, a photography biennial that has drawn global attention.

Muluneh brings her international experience to bear on her twin identities as artist and entrepreneur. But both pursuits are also efforts to rediscover the country of her birth. Her homecoming, she has said, was "a lesson in humility, and what it means to return to a land that was foreign to me."

© AIDA MULUNEH

From left: *Lest We Remember*, 2017, by the Ethiopian photographer Aida Muluneh.

Return to Paradise, 2017, a silk tapestry by Billie Zangewa.

BILLIE ZANGEWA

Born in Malawi, raised in Botswana, and now living in Johannesburg, Billie Zangewa cut a path to prominence thanks to her unique approach to art making: In lieu of paint, she sews exquisitely detailed tableaux out of raw silk. Her tapestries, typically domestic scenes that explore femininity in contemporary Africa, have been displayed around the world, including at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Houston's Menil Collection, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. In its focus on the poetry of the everyday, and its attention to the texture of black skin, Zangewa's work is reminiscent of the African American painter Kerry James Marshall, whom she cites as an influence. Its fascination with female sensuality recalls the photography of Ellen von Unwerth, another inspiration. But the life it illuminates is Zangewa's alone—almost all of her tapestries are autobiographical.

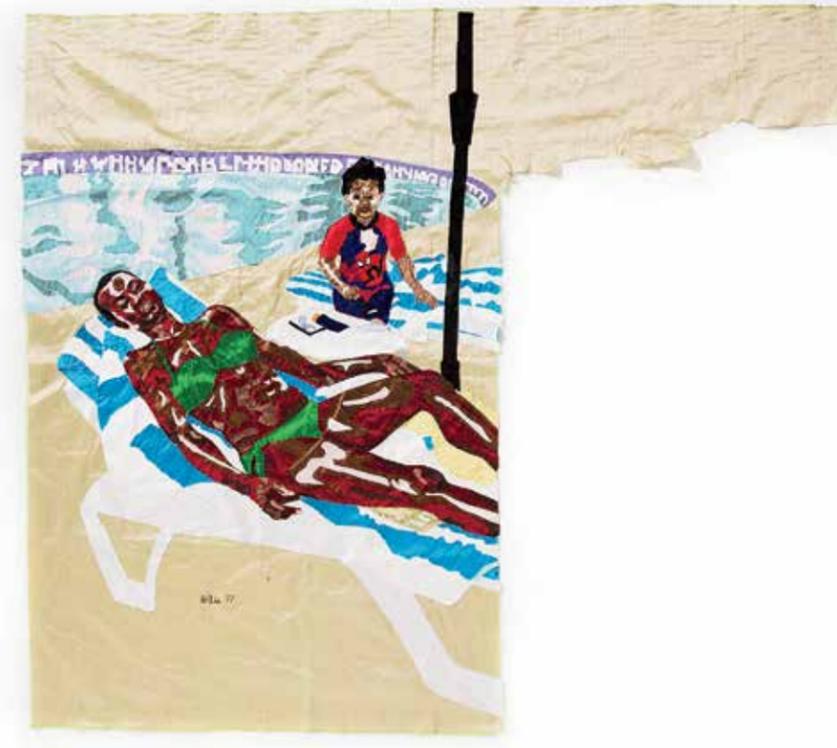
The story of how she settled on her signature style is itself a kind of autobiography. It begins with her mother's sewing group in suburban Malawi. "Sometimes the women in the neighborhood would meet at our house for tea, scones, gossip, and sewing," she says. "As a young child, I observed them and saw how one could find healing through sewing." As a teen, she developed an insatiable appetite for *Vogue* magazine, coveting the luxurious fabrics of haute couture and relishing the drama of the catwalk. With the guidance of her art teacher, Zangewa made collage versions of imagined *Vogue* covers, the earliest recognizable antecedents of her current work.

After receiving her BFA at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, in 1995, Zangewa moved to Johannesburg, where her craft and her sensibility coalesced. "I had never lived in a city before, and I was struck by the scale and also the texture of urban decay," she says. "Fire escapes being a particular source of delight."

While accompanying a friend on a fabric-sourcing excursion, she rediscovered her childhood obsession with

textiles and brought home swatches of raw silk, a material she found particularly glamorous. "When I got home I had a look at them and they recalled to me the glass surfaces of the buildings that I saw downtown." That observation inspired her to stitch the city out of silk, creating fantastical urban scenes first on handbags, then in two dimensions. Ever since, she has applied the technique to document her life—love, motherhood, and the quiet moments in between—in a kind of rolling graphic novel, complete with occasional speech balloons.

Zangewa's textile confessionals reveal a woman in full, which in her estimation makes them political statements aligned with a broader movement. "Historically, black female experiences and feelings were being narrated by someone else," she says. "Now the world has opened up and individual and collective voices can be heard. Now we can speak our experiences, feelings, and views ourselves. What better way to do that than to use your own body?"



© BILLIE ZANGEWA/PHOTO BY JURIE POTGIETER