

# Social Impact Arts Prize '22

## THE MAPULA EMBROIDERY PROJECT

Forty-one artists from the Mapula Embroidery Project are behind the large-scale embroidered textile work featured as part of the Social Impact Arts Prize. Some of whom have been conceptualising, designing and embroidering as part of the Mapula project for over thirty years. The eleven-panelled piece is composed of visual and textual reflections on environmental change and climate activism by artists from the Winterveld, located in the bushveld region on the northern outskirts of Tshwane (then Pretoria).

The intricate and sensitively rendered narratives provide valuable insights into the ways in which a particularly vulnerable community in South Africa perceives and experiences a global crisis that is more often understood from a position of authority, expertise and privilege. What can be gleaned from the experiences of those who have never had the luxury of taking basic amenities like water for granted?

Within a visual arts context, where authorship is a primary marker of value, the work of these artists is a unique embodiment of a shared discourse. The Mapula Embroidery Project is also a defiant example of how art that sits outside of a more mainstream 'fine art' tradition can transcend the narrow determinations of value reinforced by this tradition. More broadly and perhaps more interestingly, the project generates knowledge around the strategies used by South African women to navigate adversity in the face of economic, racial and gender inequality.

'Mapula' – meaning 'mother of rain' describes a project that foregrounds creativity and expression, while also providing employment and skills development to women whose circumstances have denied them access to education, employment opportunities, basic services and quality of life. What began in 1991 as a community art project, offering some income to women from the Winterveld, has grown into a platform for artists who are celebrated for their contribution to the South African art space with work represented in collections and museums locally and internationally. Three decades in existence, the Mapula project has adapted itself to the shifting needs and concerns of the multi-generational artists at its centre, who currently number 170.

The project was founded against the backdrop of an The Winterveld is an area marked by a historical displacement and dispossession, a "dumping ground" for black people who were forcibly removed from areas designated for white settlement by the apartheid government. The Winterveld was used as an unofficial relocation site under the Group Areas Act of 1948. The population was made up of people who couldn't be accommodated in newly established townships, as well as those wishing to find work and settle closer to urban centres. In stark contradiction of the Apartheid's policy of 'separate development', the Winterveld included people from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Tsonga, Pedi, Ndebele, Tswana, Zulu, Xhosa, Venda, Swazi and Southern Sotho speakers settled in the area, and were later joined by Zimbabwean and Mozambican economic migrants. Those who were relocated to the area were subsequently subject to ethnic nationalist policies as the region was incorporated into Bophuthatswana, a Tswana 'homeland' (a product of Apartheid legislation) that was granted independence from South Africa in 1977. This move released the Apartheid government from its responsibility to provide services to the Winterveld, while also serving to entrench the nationalist ideologies of Lucas Mangope, the leader of Bophuthatswana.

Under Mangope's leadership, non-Tswana speakers were prevented from working, evicted and subject to harassment by authorities for refusing or being excluded from 'citizenship' to Bophuthatswana. Harsh living conditions were compounded by inadequate access to healthcare, social support, education and employment, leaving much of the population of the Winterveld destitute. While Magope's regime was overthrown shortly before the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the Winterveld remains one of the most economically impoverished communities after enduring the effects of the Apartheid government policies for decades.

Founded in 1991, the Mapula Embroidery Project was initiated by a network of people wishing to provide artistic support to the Winterveld community. Staff from UNISA linked to Soroptimists International (notably Karin Skarwan) engaged with the Sisters of Mercy who run the DWT Nthathe Adult Education Centre, where the Mapula project is still based. Emily Maluleke, a sewing teacher at the education centre co-ordinated the project, providing training to a number of women who were involved in the early stages, including Rosina Maepa (now senior co-ordinator) and Selinah Skosana. Founding member and facilitator Janétjie van der Merwe (who continues her active support of the project, alongside Sally Currin and several other volunteers), worked with Maluleke to teach basic techniques and supply designs for embroideries. These were sold at a craft market and within the network of organisations that initiated the project. Over time, the organisational structures, subject matter and working processes of the Mapula artists changed and adapted. These developments were met with a growing market for their bold, richly detailed and idiosyncratic embroideries.

Members of the Mapula project now work in groups, either from the education centre or from home. Designers from within each group produce drawings for cloths and products, which are then embroidered, hemmed and stitched by other women in the group. As such, the process is inherently collaborative, with each design subject to the distinctive style of the embroiderers who work on it. Selenah Makwana, who joined the project in 1993, is an exception to this way of working and designs and embroiders her own work exclusively.

As much of the embroidery work is done from the artist's homes, children of Mapula artists have been exposed to the project from a young age. Several Mapula artists have grown up to become designers and embroiderers this way. A notable example is the Maepa family. Two of Rosina Maepa's children, Emmanuel and Kelelo are prominent Mapula designers, who learned to embroider and draw at the age of 10. At 28, Kelelo holds the position of Project Assistant within the organisation. Emmanuel is one of few men to have moved through Mapula and continues to embroider and design for the project while also serving in the South African Police Service.

Family narratives, Personal stories and social or community chronicles are filtered through references to local and international news, television and popular culture in Mapula embroideries, which read as highly subjective accounts of current events dating back to the dawn of democracy. When works are commissioned, designs are produced within a broad framework or theme that is interpreted variously according to the interests or concerns of the artists who design and embroider each piece.

The Mapula project has consistently sought to empower women within the community, though not to the explicit exclusion of men. While hardships experienced in the Winterveld are the direct result of policies of racial oppression and neglect, gender inequality remains a pervasive force in undermining the rights of women in the region. Gender-based discrimination, abuse and exploitation mark the life stories of many of the members of the project, who are often the sole breadwinners of large families. Beyond offering a source of income and the possibility of some independent agency, embroidery provides an outlet for issues that may not otherwise be discussed.

'Storytelling' is the term most often used by the Mapula women to describe their embroidery work. The overlapping and entangled narratives that encompass Mapula embroideries put forward a way of thinking that refuses to privilege one story over another. The stories and references run into and are piled on top of one another, presenting a vibrant world where interdependence is a given, rather than a choice.

It remains to be seen whether the perspective of a marginalised and impoverished community, whose resilience is built on a long history of enforced deprivation, may prove valuable in developing strategies for a changing environment. It remains to be seen, because it is a perspective that is very rarely seen or represented.



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