



For Immediate Release  
August 9, 2023

## UBUHLE WOMEN: BEADWORK AND THE ART OF INDEPENDENCE

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### TRAVELING EXHIBITION OF STUNNING BEAD-ART FROM SOUTH AFRICA TELLS A LUMINOUS STORY OF INDEPENDENCE, MIGRATION, AND MEMORY



Zondile Zondo, *I am ill, I still see Color and Beauty: Jamludi The Red Cow*, 2012, glass beads sewn onto fabric.

Godwin-Ternbach Museum in Flushing, NY is pleased to announce *Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence*, a spectacular overview of a new form of bead art, the *ndwango* ("cloth"), developed by women with a shared vision working together in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The plain black fabric that serves as a foundation for the Ubuhle women's exquisite beadwork is reminiscent of the Xhosa headscarves and skirts that many of them wore growing up. By stretching this textile like a canvas, the artists use colored Czech glass beads to transform the flat cloth into a contemporary art form of remarkable visual depth. Using skills handed down through generations and working in their own unique style "directly from the soul" (in the words of artist Ntombephi Ntobela), the women create abstract as well as figurative subjects for their *ndwangos*. *Ubuhle Women* is on view at Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, CUNY, from October 4, 2023 through January 11, 2024.

A public opening reception will take place on Wednesday, October 4, from 6 to 8 pm at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum. Please RSVP for the opening by October 1, by emailing [gtmuseum@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:gtmuseum@qc.cuny.edu). Visit [www.gtmuseum.org](http://www.gtmuseum.org) for museum hours, location, and directions to campus.

*Ubuhle* means "beauty" in the Xhosa and Zulu languages and well describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that for the Xhosa people has a special spiritual significance. From a distance, each panel of the *ndwango* seems to present a continuous surface; but as the viewer moves closer and each tiny individual bead catches the light, the viewer becomes aware of the meticulous skill that goes into each artwork and the scale of the artist's creative ambition: a single panel can take more than a year to complete, depending on size, complexity of the design and the size of beads used.

Migration has defined the history of modern South Africa. The late-19<sup>th</sup>-century discovery of gold and diamonds—and, to a lesser extent, the cultivation of sugar cane—transfigured South African society with its demands for a large, flexible workforce of able men.

In KwaZulu-Natal, the cane-cutting workforce was initially made up of indentured laborers from the Indian subcontinent, but from the late 19th century onwards, Xhosa migrant laborers began to replace those workers. Seasonal migration adversely impacted on family life and traditional values. There was no employment for women. This resulted in a breakdown of family life and of traditional values.

Bev Gibson and Ntombephi Ntobela created Ubuhle in response to this situation. Ubuhle was established in 1999 on a sugar plantation north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, when Ntombephi Ntobela [Induna] and Bev Gibson became friends and shared a vision of combining skills to create a platform for women, denied a western education, that could reach national and international markets.



(from the left) Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela, *Tribute to My Sister Bongiswa*, 2010, glass beads sewn onto fabric.  
Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela, *Sangoma Bull*, 2012, glass beads sewn onto fabric.  
Zondile Zondo, *My Mothers Peach Tree*, 2012, glass beads sewn onto fabric.

Since 2006, 5 artists have passed away. Many of the artworks thus function as memorials to family member and friends who have lost their lives. Remembering the dead is a key motivation for the creation of many of these artworks, and it imbues them with a spiritual significance.

Due to the slow, meticulous process of creating a ndwango, the act of beading itself becomes a form of therapy: a way of setting down the issues that are closest to the artists' hearts; a way of grieving; and a place to encode feelings and memories. In a sense—through their presence in the artist's thoughts during the act of creation - the deceased enter the very fabric of the work, and so the ndwango becomes a site of memory.

*Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence* was developed by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, Washington, DC, in cooperation with Curators Bev Gibson, Ubuhle Beads, and James Green, and is organized for tour by International Arts & Artists, Washington, DC.

Please visit <https://www.artsandartists.org/exhibitions/ubuhle-women/#tour-schedule> for updated tour dates.

Ubuhle: Beautiful Beads exists today because of the determination of two women. Ntombephi Ntobela and Bev Gibson who co-founded Ubuhle in 1999. Ntombephi is a master beader from the Eastern Cape whose tremendous skills, as an artist, a teacher, and a leader are the foundation blocks of Ubuhle: Beautiful Beads. Ntombephi is known as Induna which means leader. Bev has a formal academic education and has used her skills to enable the artist to access the international art world as well as create the space for the artists to explore, experiment, and develop this traditional art form. Gibson has also been a source of energy and persistence behind the emergence of Ubuhle's growing vision. They both bring different skills to the recognition of the *ndwango* as a contemporary art form, and it is thanks to both that these works exist at all. Since 1999 Ntombephi has taught Bev to bead and in return Ntombephi has gained literacy skills.

International Arts & Artists in Washington, DC, is a non-profit arts service organization dedicated to increasing cross-cultural understanding and exposure to the arts internationally, through exhibitions, programs and services to artists, arts institutions and the public. Visit [www.artsandartists.org](http://www.artsandartists.org)



Tshengi Duma, Sthembile Majola, Nontanga Manguthsane, Nonhlakanipho Mndiyatha, Kalipha Ntobela, Ntombephi Ntobela, and Thembani Ntobela, *The African Crucifixion*, 2008, glass beads sewn onto fabric.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

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We prefer you tag us in Instagram/Facebook posts with our full name and tag

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Just our tag (@artsandartists) is appropriate for Instagram/Facebook stories.

For questions related to social media posts, please contact IA&A's Exhibition Project Manager ([projectmanager@artsandartists.org](mailto:projectmanager@artsandartists.org))

For exhibition information and publicity images, please contact Louise Weinberg, [louise.weinberg@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:louise.weinberg@qc.cuny.edu).

For education and public programs, please contact Maria Pio, [maria.pio@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:maria.pio@qc.cuny.edu).



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## About the Godwin-Ternbach Museum

The Godwin-Ternbach Museum, a part of Queens College's Kupferberg Center for the Visual and Performing Arts, presents contemporary and historical exhibitions and programs that provide exciting educational opportunities and aesthetic experiences to the college community and residents of Queens, Manhattan, and Long Island. As the only museum in the CUNY system, and the only encyclopedic collection of art and artifacts in the borough housing over 7,000 global objects that date from ancient to modern times, the museum introduces visitors to works they might not otherwise encounter. Virtual and in-person programs complement and interpret the art on view to serve the needs and interests of local and international communities. All exhibitions and programs are free.

## About Queens College

Queens College enjoys a national reputation for its liberal arts and sciences and pre-professional programs. With its graduate and undergraduate degrees, honors programs, and research and internship opportunities, the college helps its students realize their potential in countless ways, assisted by an accessible, award-winning faculty. Located on a beautiful, 80-acre campus in Flushing, the college has been cited by Princeton Review as one of America's Best Value Colleges for five consecutive years, as well as being ranked a U.S. News and World Report Best College and Forbes Magazine Best Value College thanks to its outstanding academics, generous financial aid packages, and relatively low costs. Visit our homepage ([www.qc.cuny.edu](http://www.qc.cuny.edu)) to learn more.