

# It's About Art

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Introducing you to *your* collection.

See you at walkabouts re-opening soon,

Koulla Xinisteris  
Curator

## SENZENI MARASELA (1977-)

## MARASELA CHANNELS THE BIOGRAPHIES OF WOMEN



This month South Africa commemorates Women's Month in tribute to the more than 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 in protest against the extension of Pass Laws to women. As we honour the extraordinary strength and endurance of South African women, often against great odds and what feels like increasing structural inequality, the SABC Art Collection honours three powerful artworks by artist Senzeni Mthwakazi Marasela.



August is also the last month for audiences to experience Marasela's major solo exhibition, *Waiting for Gabane*, which will be showing at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town until the 29th.



This epic and deeply moving exhibition spans a vast range of materials and approaches, from textiles to embroidery, photography and painting. It is the culmination of the artist's sustained durational performance of her fictional alter ego, who is based on her mother, Theodorah's stories about her travels from the rural area of Mvenyane to Johannesburg, a journey of 11 hours. Like many young black women in the city, Marasela's mother was traumatised by events that took place during apartheid in the 1960s.

Working almost exclusively in red and using historically inscribed fabric like *ishweshwe*, Marasela traces both intensely personal and collective experiences of womanhood through Theodorah.

The exhibition text reads: 'When Theodorah's husband, Gebane Hlongwane, leaves her in the rural town of Mvenyane in the Eastern Cape to look for work in Johannesburg, he gives her an ishwehwe dress. In Xhosa culture, this garment signifies her married life. Theodorah holds onto this dress, wearing it every day to show her faithfulness to her husband. When he does not return after many years, Theodorah leaves home to search for him.'

For 16 years, beginning in 2003, Marasela inhabited her mother's dresses as Theodorah, starting with a yellow dress, which she wore every day, to the point that her performed and actual identities became indistinguishable. Responding to its symbolic weight and the fabric as a document of history, her performance embodies and centralises the micro-histories of women in her family and the collective experience of womanhood more broadly.

'Marasela channels the biographies of women like Sarah Baartman and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, as well as those of fictional and mythological women like Miss Havisham (Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, 1861) and Penelope (Homer's *Odyssey*, c. eighth century BCE), to illustrate the social disregard and abandonment of these women,' reads the Zeitz MOCAA text.

The SABC Art Collection is honoured to include three of Marasela's Theodorah works, which hint at the vast range of materials, moods and approaches Marasela has brought to her singular empathic vision. The figure of the woman in the linocut triptych *Theodorah I, II, III* is conveyed through a minimum of mark-making. Her form borders on abstraction. She seems at once to be hovering in the empty picture plain, while simultaneously holding the weight of history in her prostrated body. She lies stretched out with her face on the ground in surrender or submission, reduced to a state of exhaustion. At the same time, it is as if she is levitating—the recognisable, everyday figure of a working-class Black woman made strange, suspended in a space and time. Her body takes on different gestures and shapes in each plain of the triptych, as if she is caught in a state of fitful insomnia, tossing in the empty night with her troubles. The small white stitches in the woman's dress are an intertextual reference to Marasela's embodied connection to fabric as a medium and to embroidery as an artistic approach.



The comforter in conversation with Theodorah Linocut 2009 560 x 758mm Edition: 1/10

*The comforter in conversation with Theodorah* is more classic, detailed and representational in style, echoing the linocut lineage wrought by some of South Africa's central figures in printmaking, who graduated from art centres like Rorke's Drift in northern KwaZulu-Natal, Artist Proof Studio in Johannesburg and Dakawa and Egazini in the Eastern Cape. In this poignant depiction of the generation gap and families wrought asunder by forced migration and the politics of domestic labour, the figure of a young woman embracing a child is set in dialogue with the figure of an older woman. But there is nothing but empty space between them; the older woman's face is turned away from both the viewer and the younger woman. It is as if she is uncontactable—far away in a distant world of her own. Far from a fantasy, this work is a lived reality for many mothers and daughters in South Africa.

Born in Thokoza, Senzeni Marasela is a cross-disciplinary artist who explores photography, video, printmaking and mixed-media installations involving textiles and embroidery. Her work deals with history, memory, and personal narrative, emphasising historical gaps and overlooked figures. Marasela graduated with a BA Fine Arts from the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in 1998, and shortly thereafter completed a residency at the South African National Gallery, culminating in her work for the Gallery's Fresh exhibition series. Marasela's work has been widely exhibited in South Africa, Europe and the United States, and features in prominent local and international collections, including MoMA, New York. –Alexandra Dodd

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