



S A B C A R T

Sebidi's work featured as part of *When We See Us*

Mmakgabo Mapula Helen Sebidi is among the stellar selection of artists whose work is included in the watershed exhibition, *When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting* that was recently launched at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA) in Cape Town.

Curated by Koyo Kouoh and Tandazani Dhlakama, the exhibition 'celebrates global Black subjectivities and Black consciousness from pan-African and pan-diasporic perspectives' and brings together artworks from the last 100 years with the words and ideas of leading Black thinkers, writers and poets who are active today.

When We See Us celebrates the resilience, essence, and political charge of Black joy. The title is inspired by the 2019 miniseries by Ava DuVernay *When They See Us*. 'Flipping "they" to "we" allows for a dialectical shift that centres the conversation in a differential perspective of self-writing, as theorised by Cameroonian political scientist Professor Achille Mbembe,' reads the curatorial statement.

The exhibition is accompanied by a sonic translation compiled by South African composer and sound artist Neo Muyanga.

Designed by Wolff Architects, *When We See Us* features more than 200 artworks 74 institutional and private lenders located in 26 countries. Sebidi is in fine company alongside works by artists such as Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Zandile Tshabalala, Jacob Lawrence, Chéri Samba, Danielle McKinney, Archibald Motley, Ben Enwonwu, Kingsley Sambo, Sungi Mlengeya, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Cyprien Tokoudagba, Amy Sherald, and Joy Labinjo, to name a few, in many instances bringing these artists and their practice into dialogue for the first time.

The SABC Art Collection is honoured to have in its holdings no less than four artworks by Sebidi. Two of these works have recently been reframed as part of the Collection's extensive conservation project. *We have worked it is enough* (1994) and *Celebration After Initiation* (1999) are both figurative works, which show human bodies entwined with one another and with the bodies of non-human animals. A feeling of collectivity, physicality, and togetherness prevails, with faces and limbs merging with one another in spirited moments of unfettered comingling. The resplendent palette of blues, greens, and yellows in *We have worked it is enough* suggests an altered reality, as does the tender closeness between humans and other creatures.



MMAPULA MMAKGABO HELEN SEBIDI (1943–)
We have worked it is enough
oil paint
1994



MMAPULA MMAKGABO HELEN SEBIDI (1943–)
Celebration After Initiation
print
1999

Sebidi's proclamation that, "our education tells us that the first true gods are spirit animals" invites us to think through the spiritual meaning of animals, and the metaphor of animals in everyday life,' reads the curatorial statement that accompanied *Batlhaping Ba Re!*, the solo exhibition of Sebidi's work that was hosted by Norval Foundation between 2018 and 2019.

A similar animistic mood pervades *Celebration After Initiation*, with a tangle of birds and otherworldly creatures inhabiting the darkened space behind the three dancing figures. The painting conveys the mood of a dream, a vision or an ecstatic celebration during which everything melts into one. Both paintings affirm the human capacity to transcend the ongoing strife of material conditions and find faith in transcendent moments of togetherness

'Deeply concerned with the effects of the removal of spiritual considerations in modern day life, Sebidi at once advocates for continuous spiritual immersiveness, as well as warning of the dangers of a loss of tradition,' writes researcher and curator Portia Malatjie in the catalogue that accompanied *Batlhaping Ba Re!*.

Portrait of Sarah Tabane is another work in which Sebidi invites viewers to contemplate different forms of personhood – in this case, womanhood, and the strength and power of the female body. Flipping the western male gaze, which has commonly resulted in depictions of women lying prone and receptive, in this vigorously sketched portrait, Sebidi depicts fellow artist Kedibone Sarah Tabane (1968 –) at work. Behind the artist is a canvas filled with doodles, which echo and extend the vigorous mark-making that constitutes Tabane's form. Her arm is outstretched, giving the impression that she, too (like Sebidi), is in the act drawing or painting. Here, Sebidi depicts a fellow black female artist in the naked act of doing what she loves best. The mood is at once intimate and affirmative.



MMAKLABO HELEN SEBIDI (1943–)
Portrait of Sarah Tabane
charcoal and pastel on paper
89 x 60.5cm
2003

Another perennial theme that runs through Sebidi's work is the politicisation of land and its material and spiritual impacts on black experience. Her love for the land and plant life is clearly evident in the landscape painting, *Little Landscape Near Bloemfontein*, in which the trunk of the tree in the foreground appears animated with a force of upward striving.

– Alexandra Dodd



MMAPULA MMAKGABO HELEN SEBIDI (1943–)

Little Landscape Near Bloemfontein

painting

1988

When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting is on show at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA) in Cape Town until September 2023.

BIOGRAPHY

Mmakgabo Mapula Helen Sebidi was born in Marapyane, near Hammanskraal in 1943. Her call to artmaking was initially sparked by her grandmother, who was a traditional wall and floor painter. Material circumstances forced Sebidi to seek work as a domestic worker in Johannesburg as a teenager, as her mother had done before her. But in private, she pursued her artistic calling to be a painter. In 1970, she enrolled at the White Studio in Sophiatown, established by the pioneering black painter John Keonakeefe Mohl, where she acquired a firm grounding in the fundamentals of painting technique and composition.

The *Johannesburg Artists under the Sun* exhibitions in the early 1980s represented a commercial breakthrough for her. In 1985, Sebidi took up a teaching position at the Katlehong Art Centre near Germiston. Between 1986 and 1988 she worked for the Johannesburg Art Foundation, while teaching at the Alexandra Art Centre. She also participated in numerous art projects with community organisations such as the Funda Art Centre and the Thupelo Art Workshop.

In 1986, Sebidi had her first solo exhibition at the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA), arguably the first solo exhibition for a black female artist in the country.

In the late 1980s, Sebidi was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship, and in 1989, she was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist Award. Her work is exhibited regularly in major galleries across the country and abroad, and has been featured in numerous books on South African art.

In 2004, the South African Government bestowed the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver on her for her contribution to the field of visual and traditional arts and craft.

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