



News

South Africa Announces Team for Venice Biennale

Curated by Amè Bell, South Africa's pavilion will feature works by Lebohang Kganye, Phumulani Ntuli and Roger Ballen.



Lebohang Kganye, Phumulani Ntuli and Roger Ballen. Photos: Marguiritte Rossouw

By Olivia Buschey

11. février 2022

NEWS

The South African Department of Arts and Culture has announced their team for the 59th Venice Biennale featuring artists Roger Ballen, Lebohang Kganye and Phumulani Ntuli.

Curator: Amè Bell

Media Liaison/Project Coordinator/Spokesperson: Thuli Mlambo-James

Project Management: Grace Rapholo

Curatorial Statement

The enforced lockdown, quarantine and other restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic have had a negative impact on almost every sector, with the arts being particularly badly affected. Yet adversity often brings creative opportunity. The isolation of the individual from the routine social interactions with their peers provides the time and space for earnest introspection, re-examining who we are, what we stand for and how we present ourselves to the world. This process can unlock hidden truths which are critical to self-identity and individual artistic expression.

This is the message that South African art will be taking to the world via the country's pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2022, to be held in Venice, Italy from 23 April to 27 November 2022. Held every two years since its founding in 1895, the Biennale Arte is a highlight event on the international arts calendar and is often described as "the Olympics of the art world."

The South African stand was conceptualised around the sub-theme of "Into the Light." This integrates with the exhibition theme, adding the element that the solitude and separation of COVID-19 lockdown can be a vehicle for artists to embark on the process of focused self-evaluation.

"We wanted our national stand to be unique, to offer more than just a conventional display of artworks to the public," explains Ms. Nosipho Ngcaba, The South African Ambassador to the Italian Republic, who also serves as a Commissioner for the South African Pavilion at Biennale Arte 2022. "Each of our featured artists has undertaken a courageous journey of self-discovery, stepping beyond the bounds of physical reality into a daunting, surprising and sometimes macabre alternative realm of fantasy and imagination. We patriotically ensure that our stand celebrates that journey, as much as the artworks that resulted from it."

Three South African artists will be showcased during the Biennale Arte 2022 – namely: Dr. Roger Ballen, the photographer who was initially inspired by the etchings that women prison inmates had created by scraping off the paint used to black out the windows of their prison cells. For his *The Theatre of the Apparitions* showcase, he developed his own technique, coating glass in special paints, etching off the coating and backlighting the glass. This technique results in a monochromatic theatrical world in which fantasy figures engage with swirling shadowy apparitions in bizarre rituals.

In *B(l)ack to Fairy Tales*, Ms. Lebohang Kganye casts and photographs herself autobiographically as the protagonist in the Westernised fairy tales of her childhood but sets these one-act cameos in a South African township. The ‘happily ever after’ fantasy milieu of the fairy tale is contrasted with the grim reality of her township life as a child, challenging the pervasive effect that the mythical folklore has on our psyche and world view.

Mr. Phumulani Ntuli’s *Godide*, is a work that utilises stop-motion animation. In this photo-realistic realm, Mr. Ntuli portrays himself as an intrepid explorer, discarding his traditional African attire to shed notions of self-identity before diving beneath the paper cut-out waves. In this watery fantasy realm which is accessible only through the imagination, he experiences the vast diversity of self-identity, cultural association, places of belonging as well as states of being that are possible in the geopolitical scope.

“Just as our featured artists have undertaken their own journeys of discovery in search of artistic truth and reimagined self-identity, we want to encourage visitors to our stand to embark on their own similar journeys. Through the creative use of lighting, dressing and exhibition stand design, we aim to inspire and draw visitors into exploring unknown realms,” adds Ms. Amé Bell, Curator of the South African Pavilion.

As part of the Biennale Arte activities, the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture will also be hosting a schools art competition. This nation-wide competition will see learners from schools around the country invited to submit their own artistic interpretation of the event theme “The Milk of Dreams.” Participants stand the chance to win individual cash prizes, along with art supplies for their school’s art department. Further, the overall winner will enjoy a day spent with Dr. Roger Ballen at his photographic studio in Johannesburg. A noteworthy benefit of the

competition is that winning entrants will have their artworks displayed at the South African pavilion during the Biennale Arte. The schools art competition also dovetails with the Mzansi Gold initiative, promoting art as a career choice to pursue with the benefit of creating sustainable jobs.



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