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ART FOCUS: INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST, KIMATHI MAFARO

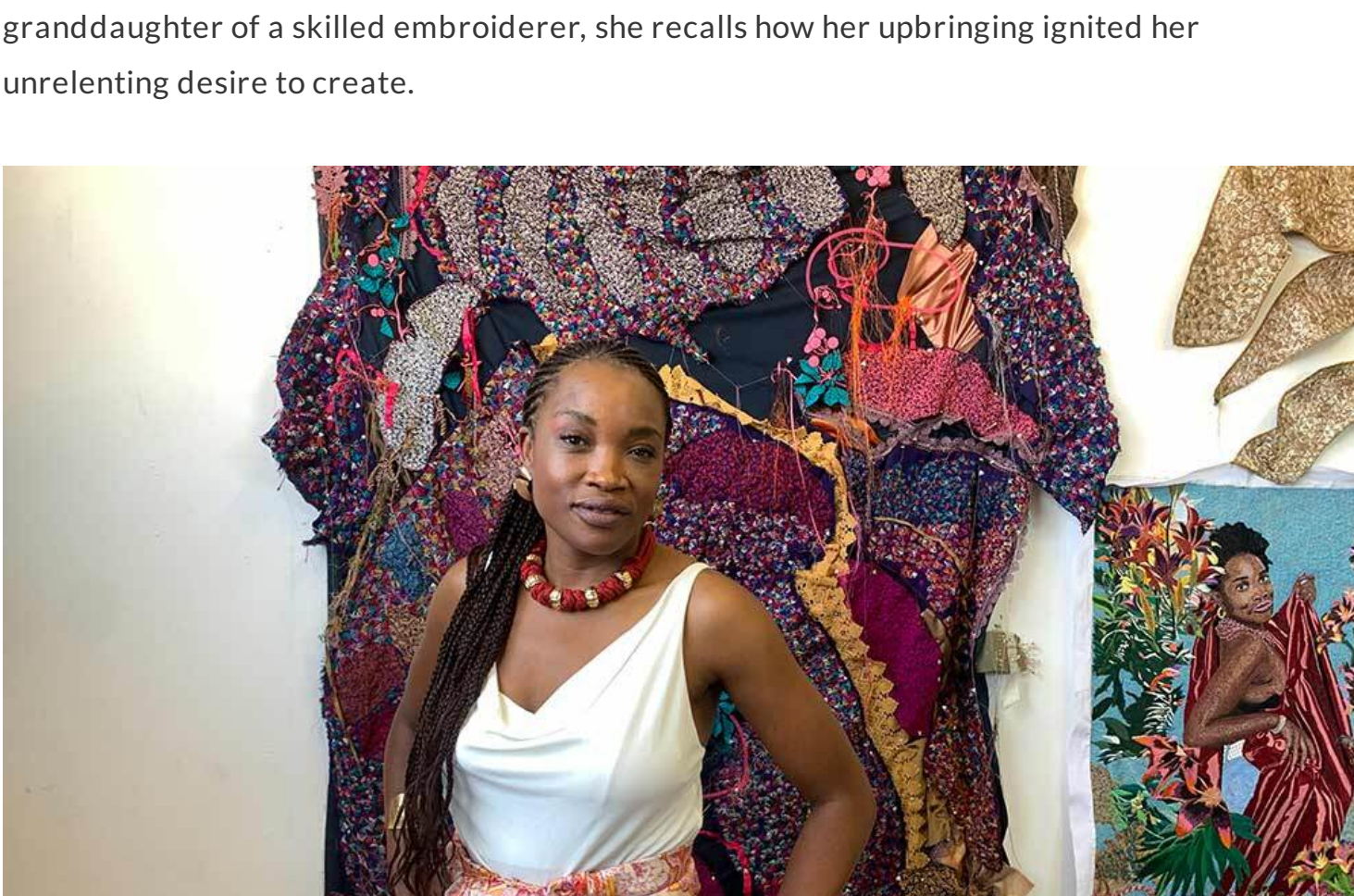
Words: Robyn Samuels March 17, 2023



Following the 10th Investec Cape Town Art Fair, we caught up with multidisciplinary artist, Kimathi Mafafo. Originally from 'The Diamond City', Kimberly, the Cape Town-based artist often depicts lush greenery in her works - worlds apart from the semi-arid province.

Represented by EBONY/CURATED and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, she shares the muse behind her previous works, as well as her most recent solo exhibition in Berlin, Germany.

While one of her previous collections titled 'Voiceless Women' captures past afflictions endured, Mafafo is set on sharing her defiant joy with the rest of the world, as she continues to celebrate the black female in all her forms. Being the daughter of a watercolourist, and granddaughter of a skilled embroiderer, she recalls how her upbringing ignited her unrelenting desire to create.

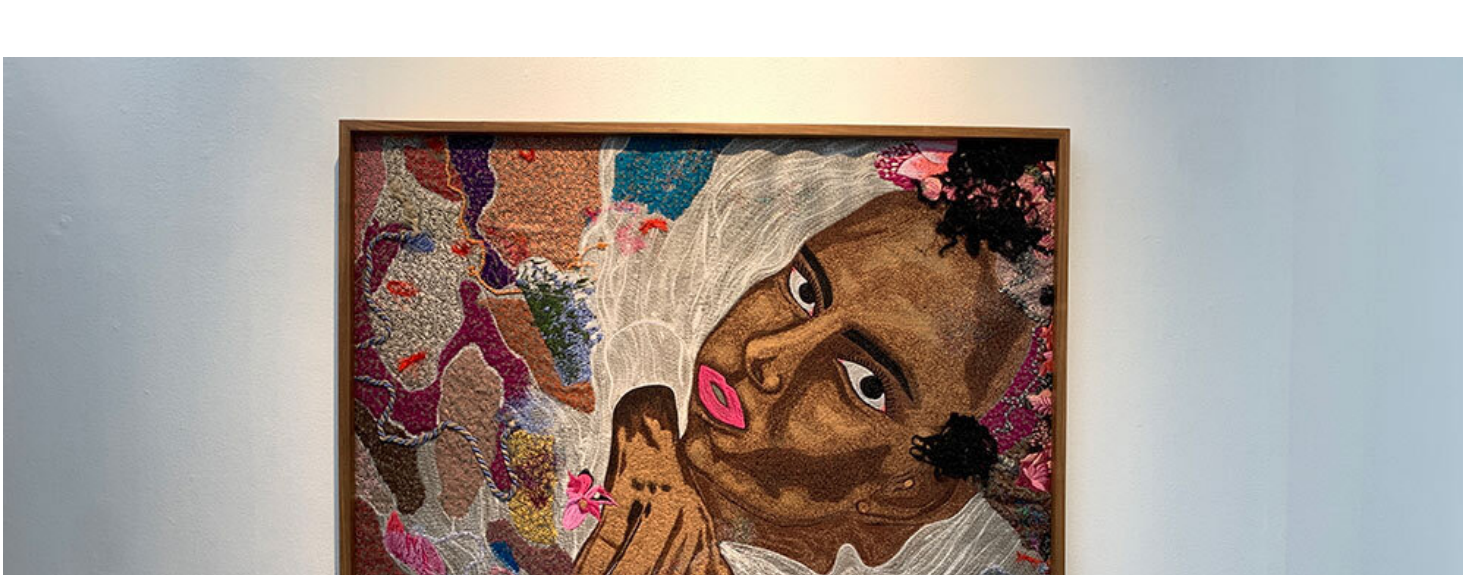


INTERVIEW WITH KIMATHI MAFARO

Although she started her artistic career as a painter, Mafafo would return to her grandmother's first love, embroidery, as she said it best - 'I didn't choose embroidery, embroidery chose me'.

Inspired by her father, Rocky Mafafo's philanthropic nature, Kimathi collaborates with members of the community to help bring her tapestries to life and hopes to inspire other women, while facilitating conversations about gender-based violence, through her influential textiles.

When asked about her medium, Kimathi aptly mentions that she 'paints with thread'. The intricate detail and soft shadows of her technicolour tapestries reveal that she doesn't simply peddle patterns, but rather weaves personal stories through the eye of her needle.



In her private studio, Kimathi stands barefooted while working on her embroidery panels, as the sounds of Fela Kuti fill the room. At first glance, she seems timid in nature, but much like her artwork 'her gaze tells a story'...

...join us as we get to know artist, Kimathi Mafafo.

DID YOU ALWAYS KNOW YOU WERE DESTINED TO BE AN ARTIST?

From a young age, I knew that creativity was in my genes and that it was something that I would like to follow. I was highly inspired by my father and grandmother, so I would say that artistic presence made an early impression on me.

I often made small paintings when I was about eight/nine years old - so the desire to create was pretty clear early on in my life.

Watching my father work closely with the community, especially with women, gave me a clear vision of what I wanted to achieve with my art. It inspired me a lot in my career, and I'm grateful that I have women assisting me, to help bring my pieces to life.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE COMMUNITY THAT YOU WORK WITH?

In my practice, I've got four ladies helping me. They don't work with me consistently, it depends on the amount of work, but I've got a lady from Zimbabwe and a Xhosa lady from the Eastern Cape. And then I've got, uh, some masculinity - a man from Nigeria/Ghana.

Having different voices helps me to create beautiful works with more depth. I feel like I'm creating a song but in a medium of embroidery, using different voices and backgrounds.



Image courtesy of EBONY/CURATED, Dillon Marsh

YOUR WORK WAS RECENTLY FEATURED AT THE 10TH INVESTEC CAPE TOWN ART FAIR. WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT SOUTH AFRICAN ART?

I was honoured to be one of the 10 artists to share their 'Reflections on Legacy' for the Art Fair. For the artist in Cape Town and Africa, it's a huge honour that we have such a bright spotlight. I feel like art is one of the resources we need to invest in to strengthen our country's economy, be it South Africa or the African diaspora.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR MOST RECENT COLLECTION AND THE INSPIRATION BEHIND IT?

I've just finished working on my solo show, which was exhibited in Berlin, Germany. I'm creating something coming from a happy space. When you look at my previous work it came from a space of pain. Because I work from my personal experience, my work is always reflective of what I go through in life.

As women, we go through a lot; I try to reveal that through my art to inspire other women that might share a similar story. At this moment, I'm in a space of rediscovering joy, through finding and reinventing myself. So this particular body of work explores what that happy place resembles while touching on finding strength as a woman.

I've always had lush greenery in my work, inspired by nature. The greenery also represents the concept of healing as a human being.

I IMAGINE IT QUITE CATHARTIC TO USE ART TO WORK THROUGH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, BUT ALSO AN EXTREMELY VULNERABLE ACT. HOW DOES IT FEEL TO REVEAL YOURSELF AND YOUR ART TO THE REST OF THE WORLD?

Referencing my previous work, I would say one of the series that I did, titled 'Voiceless Woman', was inspired by what was happening in my life at the time. It was rather dark, but I found an escape through my artwork. Expressing my pain in that work, in the hopes that it would touch other women or enlighten them was a necessary emotional release.

With time, I was able to heal, and that experience helped me to find myself and recognise who I am as an artist, and as a woman.



With my current collection, it's not coming from a dark place, but rather from a happy space. I feel that it's important to not only share your painful moments in life with others but joyous moments too.

YOU CELEBRATE BLACK WOMEN IN YOUR ART; WHO ARE YOUR MUSES?

Black women are what I know and it's part of who I am. My earliest examples are my mother and grandmother, who raised and inspired me. Besides them, there was another woman that influenced me - mama Helen Sididi - a close friend of my dad and a beautiful artist.

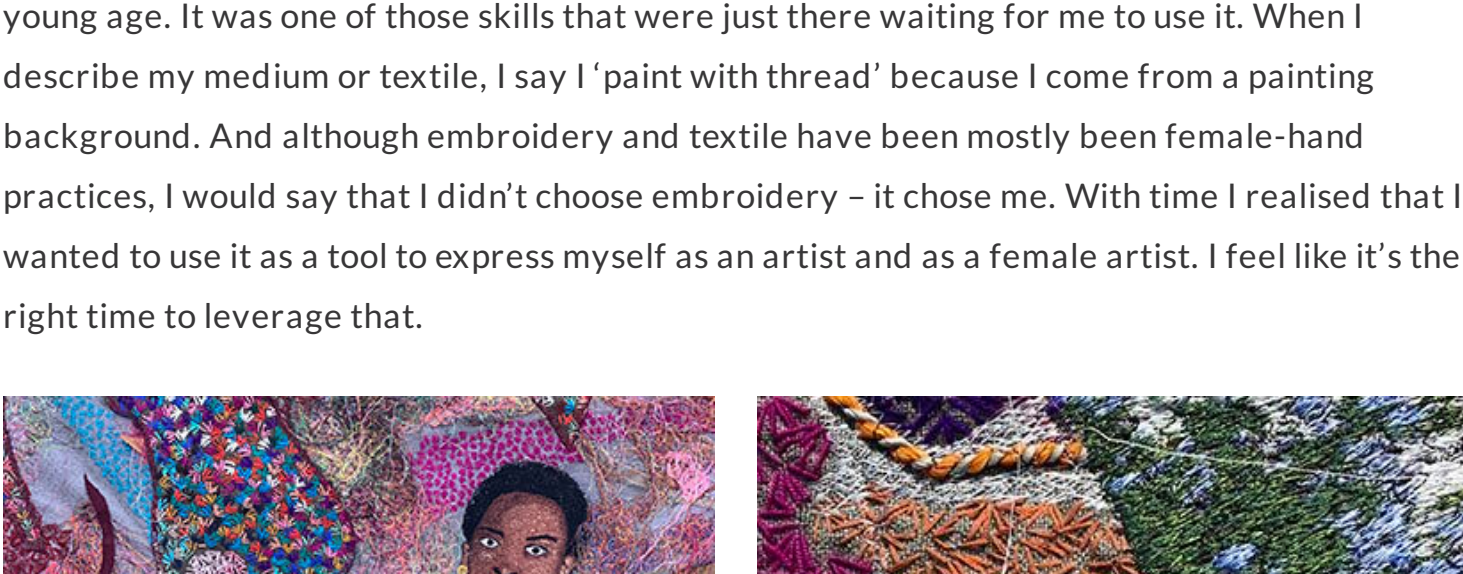
I remember her coming to my house often to collaborate with my father.

To have witnessed that at the age of six/seven was pivotal to my journey as an artist. I once visited the Cape Town Art Fair, and remember having experienced her work at such an international platform; knowing that she used to visit my childhood home all those years ago and that we shared meaningful interactions made a huge impact on my life.

AS SOMEONE WHO ADVOCATES FOR WOMEN TRAPPED UNDER THE BLANKET OF TRADITION, WHY HAVE YOU CHOSEN A TRADITIONAL MEDIUM LIKE EMBROIDERY TO CONVEY A NON-CONFORMATIVE NARRATIVE?

I would often watch my grandmother doing her embroidery, so it was embedded in me from a young age. It was one of those skills that were just there waiting for me to use it. When I describe my medium or textile, I say I 'paint with thread' because I come from a painting background.

And although embroidery and textile have been mostly been female-hand practices, I would say that I didn't choose embroidery - it chose me. With time I realised that I wanted to use it as a tool to express myself as an artist and as a female artist. I feel like it's the right time to leverage that.



MANY OF THE CHARACTERS IN YOUR ART ARE INTERWOVEN AND THEMES TREAD BETWEEN 'BEING AND BECOMING, CONCEALING AND REVEALING' - CAN YOU EXPLAIN THIS TENSION OF TRANSFORMATION?

Humans are far from simple; we're layered beings - especially females. So if you look at my work, you would see that character growth or transformation depicted. If I'm trying to tell a story with a sad background, you'll feel that in the form of a woman wearing a veil.

As the viewer, I hope you'll absorb the work, and also be inspired by the lush greenery and nature in certain pieces and use it as healing. I feel like, in the world, there's so much healing that's needed to be done. It's not always easy to mimic emotions, and as much as I try to translate them through detail, it's up to the viewer to experience my work. I can only hope that the more you look at it, the more you'll move with it.

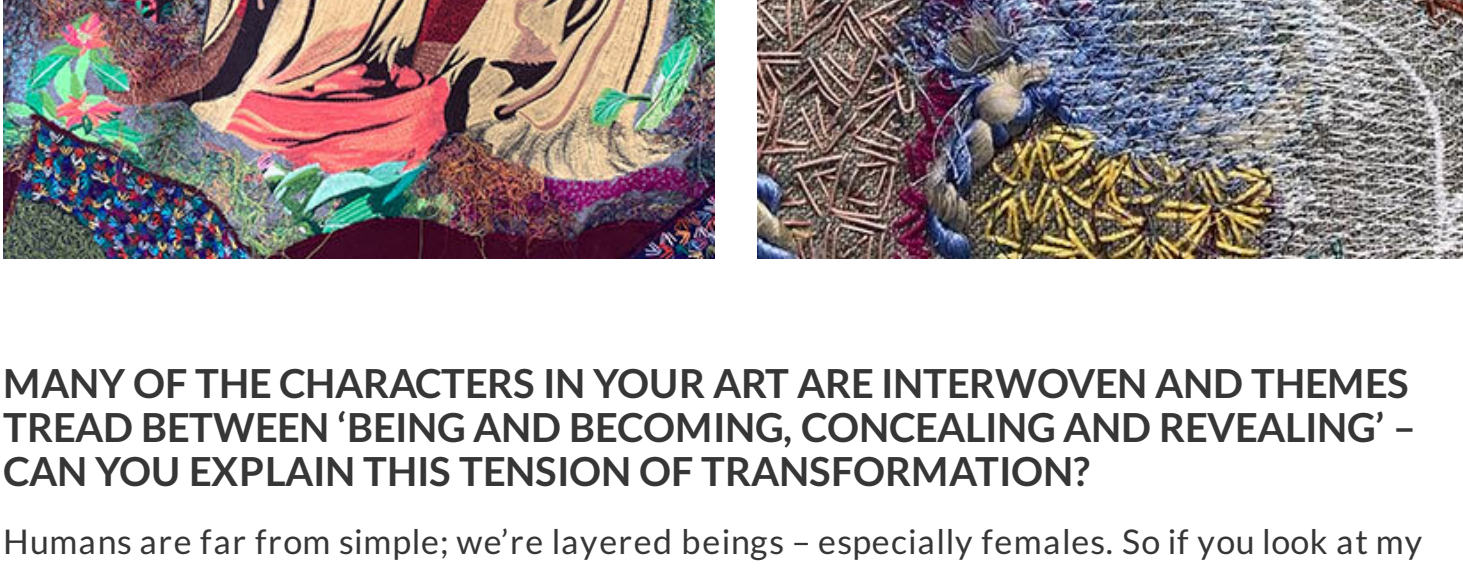


Image courtesy of EBONY/CURATED, Dillon Marsh

HOW DO YOU HOPE TO INSPIRE SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN WITH YOUR ART?

I mostly create from personal experience or try to mirror what's happening in my life to express myself and inspire other women. I feel that as an artist, part of your role is to enlighten your community and teach others. I talk about my experiences to teach other women and younger generations, especially at this time in South Africa.

There's a crisis of gender-based violence and women are being targeted. Even though it may seem like a political concern, as an artist, I need to play my part in the community and inspire other women to talk about issues that are happening at home.

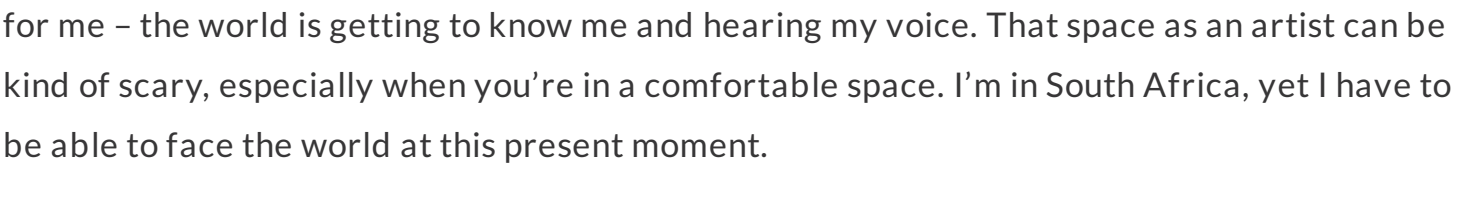
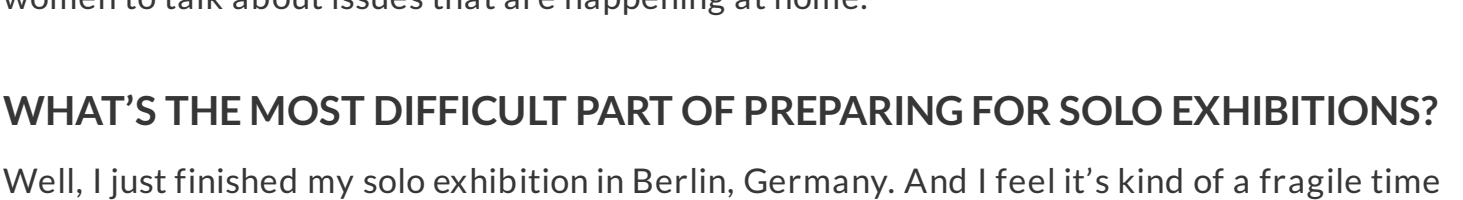
WHAT'S THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF PREPARING FOR SOLO EXHIBITIONS?

Well, I just finished my solo exhibition in Berlin, Germany. And I feel it's kind of a fragile time for me - the world is getting to know me and hearing my voice. That space as an artist can be kind of scary, especially when you're in a comfortable space. I'm in South Africa, yet I have to be able to face the world at this present moment.

You also have to trust people to help bring your vision to life - sometimes you don't know how your artwork is going to be perceived or received or whether it is going to be sold, you know? But I have to explain to my assistants that we're on the right track with the art that we are creating and we should just keep on going. At the end of the day, you have no choice but to trust in your creation.

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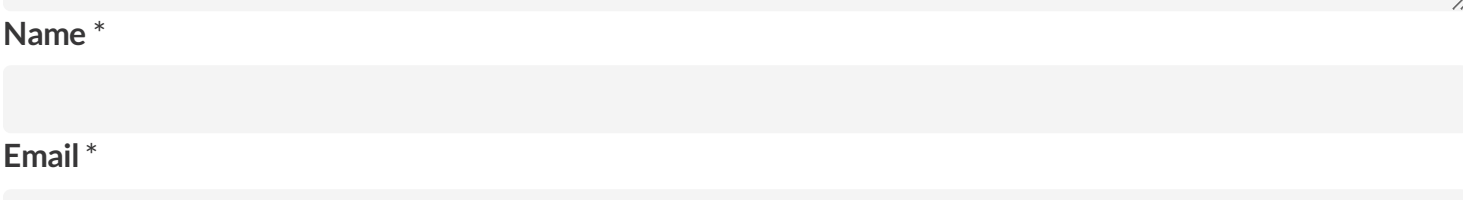
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