

Exhibition Review

Review of *Bearing Witness: Embroidering History in Post Apartheid South Africa*

Fowler Museum at UCLA, September 7th – December 7th, 2014

By Elaine Ericksen Sullivan

Twenty-two embroideries hung in the galleria surrounding the brick-walled fountain courtyard of the Fowler Museum at UCLA, where the small exhibition *Bearing Witness: Embroidery as History in Post Apartheid South Africa* was on view from September 7th to December 7th of this year. The exhibition, curated by Gemma Rodrigues, Curator of African Arts at the Fowler Museum, presented the work of artists from two South African community art groups, the Mapula Embroidery Project and the Kaross Workers.¹ The embroideries were all made within a few years of the year 2000, about six years after the fall of Apartheid, and respond to various current and historical events, from terrorism to Mandela's birthday.

Three walls are dedicated to embroideries from the Mapula Embroidery Project, an all-female organization founded in 1991 in the Winterveldt area outside of Pretoria. Though all the embroideries are made with bright thread sewn into black cloth, each piece reflects that particular artist's style. The variation in subject matter is even more striking than the variation in style, with tableaux portraying important local and world events. Most of the Mapula embroideries focus on current events and scenes from the media, translating photo and video images into embroidery. The embroideries on display include Mandela celebrating his 85th birthday, Mozambicans escaping the floods of 2000, and the planes hitting the twin towers on September 11th, 2001.

One of the most memorable of the Mapula embroideries commemorates the 1976 Soweto Uprising (pictured next page). The unknown artist not only depicted the famous Sam Nzima photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying his friend Hector Pieterse as his sister runs next to them, but she also presented information beyond the photograph's frame. For example, a uniformed officer holding a rifle stands to the left, turning away from the central scene. More explicitly, Hector Pieterse's body drips red-stitched blood, which is clearly labeled by the word "blood" stitched in white thread against the embroidery's black





Bearing Witness: Embroidery as History in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Fowler Museum at UCLA. September 7–December 7, 2014

For more information, please contact: fowlerinfo@arts.ucla.edu

Photographs by Don Cole and courtesy Fowler Museum at UCLA.

(opposite, top)

Artist's name unknown. Embroidered Textile. The Mapula Embroidery Project, Winterveldt, Gauteng, South Africa. Circa 2000. Cotton. 86 × 140 cm
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2011.8.3; Gift of William H. Worger and Nancy L. Clark

(opposite, bottom)

Pinkie Nkami Resenga (b. 1970, Winterveldt, Gauteng, South Africa). Wall hanging, 2001 (?). Mapula Embroidery Project, Winterveldt, Gauteng, South Africa, Cotton thread. 91 × 116 cm.

Fowler Museum at UCLA X2011.8.19; Gift of William H. Worger and Nancy L. Clark

(above)

Calvin Mahlauli (1983- 2012, Malamulele, Limpopo, South Africa). Wall hanging, circa 2000. Kaross Workers, Tzaneen, South Africa. Cotton. 112 × 147 cm
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2011.8.39; Gift of William H. Worger and Nancy L. Clark

background. The artist also stitched a caption, “Police open fire on protester on 16 June 1976 in Soweto Hector Petersen [*sic*] You’ll Always be remembered as a ‘hero’” as well as the words “Hector Petersen carried by Mbuyisa Makhubu” underneath the image. While the image of Hector Pieterse’s body carried by Makhubu became globally recognized around the world, the artist included the names of the individuals in the image, ensuring that they are not forgotten. Furthermore, on the bottom left of the fabric, the artist stitched a portrait of Sam Nzima (also labeled), bringing the photographer into the scene. While Nzima’s photograph powerfully communicated the violence that occurred in Soweto to the world, the embroidery emphasizes the individuals who were present on June 16th, 1976.

A large wall panel divides the embroideries focusing on current events from those dealing with social and public health issues. The panel features large photos of some of the artists at work and some proudly holding their completed wall hangings. It also gives details on the Mapula Embroidery Project, highlighting its beginnings as an adult education center in Bophuthatswana, one of South Africa’s disenfranchised “homelands.” Nearby, the curator has grouped several smaller embroideries addressing issues of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and violence against the elderly (“Don’t do crime to your granny” one warns).

Only one wall is dedicated to the Kaross Workers, whose embroideries address the topic of HIV/AIDS. Several small square embroideries encourage the use of condoms, but all eyes are drawn to Calvin Mahluli’s large-scale embroidery (pictured previous page). The wall hanging contains seven separate scenes, tightly woven sewn in shimmering jewel tones. Six scenes across three registers address various aspects of everyday South African life, including the suffering of those living with HIV and of their loved ones. At the center of the panel, dividing the two columns of scenes, a large tree grows from bottom to top, flanked Adam- and Eve-like figures covered in red spots, connoting disease. Like the smaller Kaross hangings, not one inch of fabric is left unembroidered, with backgrounds of deep teal or burnt yellow enveloping the scenes’ protagonists. Mahluli captures the beauty, complexity, and sadness of living in the country with one of the highest rates of HIV infection in the world.

This exhibition comes a little more than a year and a half after the Fowler presented *Ernest Cole Photographer* and *Mandela for President: South Africa Votes for Democracy*, two 2013 shows that also focused on South Africa. Two of the Mapula embroideries were also featured in *Mandela for President*, though in that exhibit the two embroideries were surrounded by posters and election ephemera from 1994. Continuing the Fowler's long history of blending art, history, and political activism, *Bearing Witness* beautifully presents the work of talented artists responding to the historic events of their time on a global and local scale.

Editor's Note: For a more comprehensive discussion of the Mapula Embroidery Project, see Brenda Schmahmann's 2006 book *Mapula: Embroidery and the Empowerment in the Winterveld* (David Krut Publishing).

Endnote

¹ All the embroideries on view were collected and donated to the Fowler by William Worger and Nancy Clark, both of whose articles appear in this issue of *Ufahamu*.

