

CHARACTER SKETCH

Africans are extraordinarily creative, and this is particularly noticeable in South Africa. It is worth taking time to investigate and appreciate this artistic space whenever you get an opportunity. It will give you an enduring sense of the energy of the people at the heart of the nation — and you will meet some memorable folks along the way.

WORDS AND PICTURES BY CINDY-LOU DALE

With world-class contemporary museums, vast public art spaces, abundant craft fairs and a thriving gallery scene, South Africa has become the art and design hub of the continent. International collectors have swooped in and given notoriety to local artists. All of this has only highlighted the nation's creative spirit. Everywhere you go, you can see it, feel it, smell it, taste it, hear it... you even get to wear it.

THE CAPE

In **Cape Town** there's talent from all over Africa, like Jabu, a Kloofnek-based street artist from Zimbabwe, who weaves life-sized animal heads; Martin from Malawi, who hand-carves the 'Big Five' in Noordhoek; and Bikis from Brazzaville, who creates magnificent oils of tribal art and sells them at the V&A Waterfront.

At the other extreme, there's the world-famous Zeitz MOCAA, attached to the 5-star Silo hotel, where the public spaces are dripping with African artistic talent, like the symbolic work of Soweto-born Mohau Modisaken — whose creations are entrenched with the country's political history, portraying themes of segregation, oppression and violence — and Jody Paulsen's textile collages. And behind the lobby desk is a vibrant fantastical piece by Hogsback (Eastern Cape) artist, Athi Patra Ruga.

In small towns across the Cape you'll find a wider pool of talent in everyday places. Like **Lambert's Bay**, where Bertina Engelbrecht, a skilled pâtissier and owner of Mad Hatter Coffee Shop, is adding the final touches to a glass-like cake. Peering into the cake fridge I see other works of art which could be displayed in a gallery. Waiter Chester Williams shows me the local artwork on the walls. It's startling to find such undiscovered talent. Outside, Francois 'Billa' Engelbrecht, an accomplished artist/surfer, is at work painting a lamp post onto the exterior wall of the shop.

A few blocks away is Nicolien Cordy's tiny, rustic studio which houses her exquisite paintings, bright splashes of colour applied in deep swirls and displayed in rough wooden frames.

Lachlan Matthews creates extraordinary sculptures and stoneware (celebrating San paintings)

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1: A sequin painting by Frances Goodman in the Silo hotel
2: Kloofnek street artist Jabu
3: Nicolien Cordy in Lambert's Bay
4: Figurines sculpted from wire and clay by Nico van der Merwe
5: Linda Tsanga glazing pottery bowls at The Stone Fish Studio
6: Uro Erichsen in the Paternoster Waterfront

and makes furniture from skeletal bones: "I find bones washed up on the beach and in the veld; it's a sad reminder of a once-living being with its own individuality. This would be a melancholy thought were it not that death is a moment in life, not a moment to be welcomed, but neither to be feared."

He points out that all the bones are obtained only from animals that have died from natural causes. Bones from big marine life are catalogued, so it's all monitored.

Nico van der Merwe, a Lambert's Bay eccentric, creates characters from wire and clay air-dried on cloth. "It's quite a process," he says, "as when the clay cracks it needs filler, then varnish, then more filler, and more varnish." His beautiful home studio is a world of little people going about their lives — all to the background sounds of soft jazz.

Paternoster, an old fishing village on the West Coast, is picture-postcard pretty, with whitewashed cottages, jagged cliffs and long stretches of talcum sand beaches. It's also home to one of the world's best restaurants — Wolfgang — and possibly the coolest art scene in the country.

Stepping over sleeping dogs, I gain access to At Botha's studio. A self-taught artist and an actor currently performing in a television series, At uses delicate brush strokes and vivid colour on canvas to create striking everyday scenes.

Paternoster Waterfront is a repurposed fish factory, showcasing artists like internationally-exhibited Gretha Helberg and Uro Erichsen. Next door is Die Koelkamers theatre. I arrived just in time to take in a funky jazz band.

The Stone Fish Studio and Gallery is filled with gorgeous ceramics. If you visit on a Saturday morning you can make your own pottery, then later they'll bake and glaze it. When I entered, Zimbabwean artist Linda Tsanga was glazing some bowls. →



Next door is Jem & Pantoffels, where you'll find an astounding number of must-have items – soy candles, books, sheepskin slippers, fancy soaps, fine jewellery, tin mugs, curry powder (with a health warning), oriental kettles, handmade ladies' shoes... It's all rather splendid!

In **Stellenbosch** I meet with Paul Roviss Khambue, the champion of Kayamandi, a township outside the town. He's softly spoken and tells of the early 1950s, when Kayamandi was built to exclusively house the black migrant male labourers employed on the farms.

"Although apartheid ended 30-plus years ago, its aftermath is still evident as the youth suffer the consequences which deny them progress. We need to confront and address the past, acknowledge it, talk about it, forgive it and move forward, walking the road together," Paul tells me.

His solution is to applaud life in the townships surrounding Stellenbosch through the medium of Sport and Performing Arts, creating opportunities for the young, discovering talent and giving them a platform from which to grow.

We're at Amazink, South Africa's first township theatre-restaurant, lunching on traditional spicy chicken (imagine Nando's, but better) and *pap* (maizemeal), served in cardboard boxes. You eat with your hands.

Paul speaks of the role of Amazink as the place where the community come together to celebrate performing arts – Gembe drumming, poetry, theatre, and choral music – the type made famous by Ladysmith Black Mambazo. As if on cue, Leletho Zulu, a performer and drummer of note begins singing a tribal song of forgiveness and hope.

Stellenbosch town centre showcases artists like bronze sculptor Stephen Rautenbach, contemporary artist Vincent da Silva, and numerous galleries, like Art on Church, all overflowing with talent.

"When I was a young child, I would add paint powder to mud and paint Ndebele geometric patterns onto the chicken coops. Then, when I got a little older, my mother taught me the intricate art of my heritage. In turn, I have taught my daughter, who will teach her daughter."

MPUMULANGA

Once the centre of the struggle against apartheid, **Soweto** is now an urban sprawl of 4.5 million people, the most populous residential area in South Africa and home to some of the country's most creative artists.

On a street art tour I meet Bonginkosi Thato Mavuso and Senzo Nhlapo, who have received corporate commissions and whose work sits in private collections and has been exhibited around the world. In Soweto, they're just regular guys.

Heading northeast out of Pretoria, I stop outside the bright Ndebele-style painted home of Helen Ndimande in **Mabhoko village**. She tells me: "When I was a young child, I would add paint powder to mud and paint Ndebele geometric patterns onto the chicken coops. Then, when I got a little older, my mother taught me the intricate art of my heritage. In turn, I have taught my daughter, who will teach her daughter."

We take a walk across the dusty road to the school where she teaches Ndebele art to 35 children. They begin on paper, then, when they've got the hang of it, they're allocated a small piece of wall. In the office is a photograph of supermodel Iman, from when she visited a few years ago.

LIMPOPO PROVINCE

My cooler brimming with drinks and *padkos* (treats for the road), I set off in the direction of the Limpopo Province, and the **Ribola Art Route**.

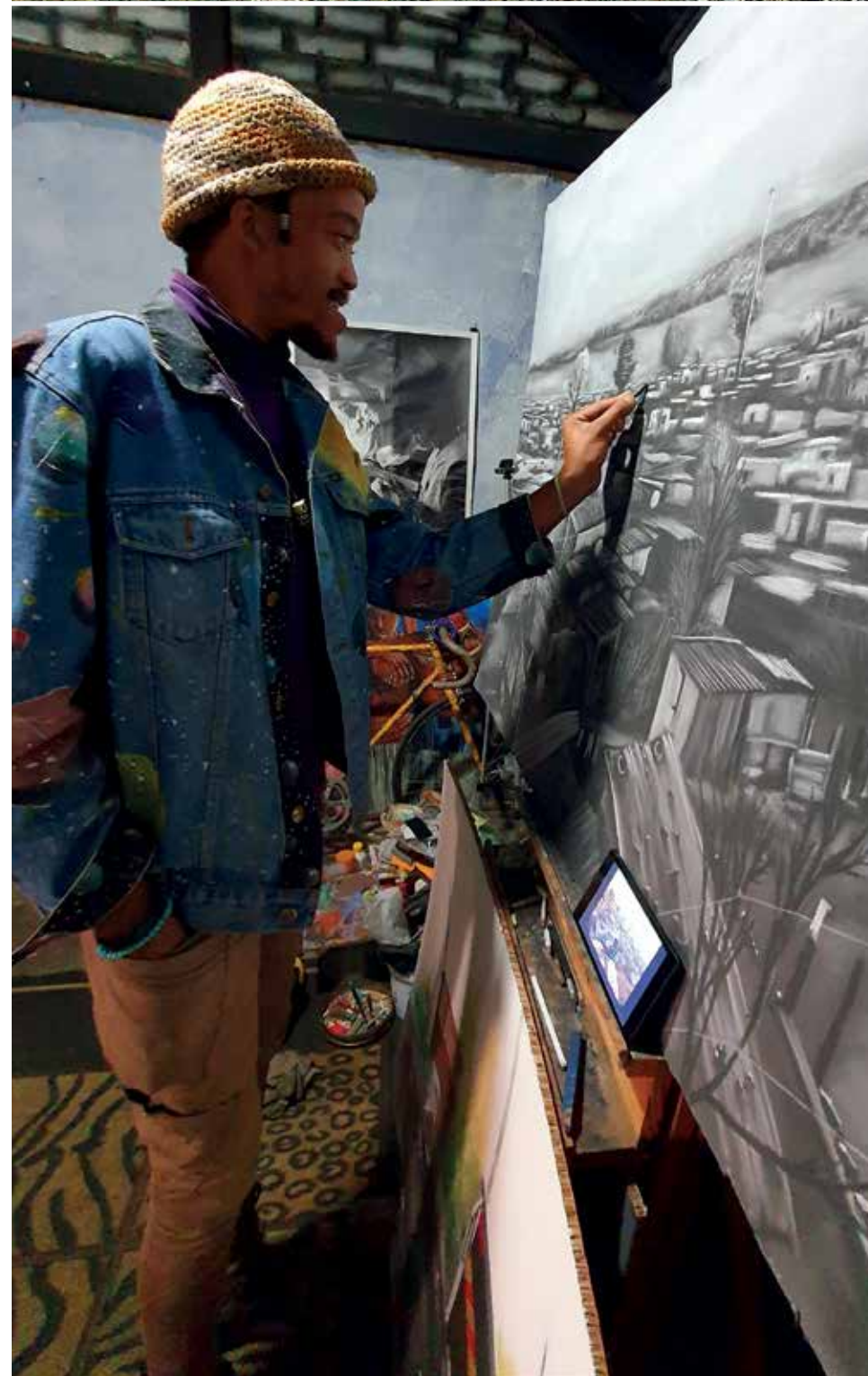
The women at Twananani Textiles create their designs on plain white cloth. Since 1983, Florence Ngobeni (head seamstress), Evelyn Makhubele and Yimisa Ngobeni have designed batik fabrics. It may sound simple – draw or trace a pattern onto the linen fabric, brush melted wax onto the pencilled lines, paint bright colours (powdered paint, water, salt) over the design, wash in hot salted water, then leave to dry flat – but I put it to the test and can safely say it's not!

When Pilato Bulala was a boy there wasn't money for toys, so he had to improvise, making his own from scrap metal. Winning a design competition at school set him on the art track. Today, his metal sculptures tell a story: Russia vs Ukraine, depicting an armoured tank with bodies lying in its path; the Soweto uprising; Archbishop Desmond Tutu; boxer Nelson Mandela; and many focused on Covid-19 and the vaccine. Pilato bought land from the tribal chief, and has since built himself a house, studio and a workshop.

Seeking sustenance, I stop at Chicken Ceasers shack for lunch. →

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7: The Stone Fish Studio and Jem & Pantoffels in picturesque Paternoster
8: Bonginkosi Thato Mavuso at work in Soweto
9: Paul Roviss Khambue on a street art tour in Kayamandi
10: Helen Ndimande outside her Ndebele-style painted home in Mabhoko village
11: Pilato Bulala with some of his scrap metal sculptures, on the Ribola Art Route in Limpopo Province



Sara Hlungwani preps the *pap*, spinach, cabbage and *chakalaka*, while Oscar Mbedzi barbecues the chicken, lathering it with hot sauce. Dining like a local, I dig into the deliciousness with my fingers.

Mukondeni Village Potters is composed of twelve women – Flora Randela is their champion, and her mother-in-law, Angelina Selapyane, her guide. They unearth black clay from a nearby gorge then mould it into bowl or vase shapes.

This is dried indoors, covered with blankets, then fired in the kiln and smouldered under firewood, grass reeds, zinc and more firewood. It's left to slow bake for 24 hours, at which point the clay turns brown. Sometimes shapes and swirls of ground black graphite are added for design effect. Through her art, Flora has put her children through university. In thanks, they built her the new, modern home we stand in.

Traditional musician Thomas Kubayi, from Vhutsila Arts and Crafts Centre, has been teaching local youth the art of indigenous drumming since 2006 – as well as the intricacies of producing wood sculptures. I step into his studio and am astounded at the detail and finesse of his work. Four of his students stride in, carrying an assortment of animal-hide drums that had been warming by the fireside. Within moments an infectious rhythm fills the room. It's impossible to keep still.

Kenneth Nonyana is a former sculpture student of Kubayi's. His genre is redwood and ironwood. The common thread running through all his sculptures is nurture: an elderly fisherwoman adorned with an abundant necklace; a husband caressing his wife; a man whistling; a woman singing; others embracing... The detail is intricate: there's so much to read in their postures and facial expressions, even the eyes.

Housed in a double garage attached to Louise Maepa's modest home is Mocheudi Dressmaking. She's been at her sewing machine

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since 1983, making school uniforms for several local schools and outfits for special occasions (which she often caters for too).

"Here in Mamaila Kolobetona village, we are far from the city shops. It's easier to come to me. Nothing is cut with the machines. No patterns. It's all done by the eye and hands." She shows me a shirt that would've made Nelson Mandela proud. Her nephew, Imani Maepa, is busy sewing a zipper into a school tracksuit.

Johanna Lerisa Mabunda displays her brightly-coloured beaded accessories – headbands, necklaces, belts, bracelets and bangles – on a reed mat. As a girl she worked on a tea farm and began making her own accessories with beads bought from Khoja's Modern Store, a general dealer. Her colleagues loved her traditional creations and orders started flooding in. Her children found it hard to believe that she funded her house and their schooling from what they thought was a hobby.

"My children helped me extend my house by adding two extra bedrooms and this double garage. We would go down to the river, fill the *bakkie* (pickup truck) with sand and mix it with cement. Then we'd make the bricks for building the walls." She looks around proudly.

Amukelani Maluleke unpacks her beaded shirts and *nceka* (sarong). She's been redesigning clothes since 2012 and learned her art from her mother, Evelyn Makhubele, whom I'd met previously at Twananani Textiles. She shows me what once was a pair of closed canvas shoes, now turned

into glamorous sandals by cutting away some of the fabric, sewing on an assortment of colourful glass beads, and adding bright laces for tying around the ankles.

Of all the talented artists I've met, Gift Rhulani is something else. His uncle was a hip-hop musician and as a child Gift was inspired when witnessing the creation of his music. In 2011 he started his home recording studio and, together with Isaac Chuma and now Vakosi Chuma, the Afro Pop band MBK Boyz was born.

He plays a song he wrote, called *Ntombhi yale joni* ("a girl from the city"). It's a love story of a girl he met in Johannesburg, then learned she was originally from his own village. It starts with a slow rhythmic hop-hop beat, with a few twangs of Indian sitar thrown into the mix. Very soon my head is nodding in agreement with every beat. Then comes the haunting harmony. This is a new, smooth genre of hip-hop and the kind of music you could never tire of. Whether you can understand the lingo or not is irrelevant – music is a universal language.

What South Africans have in spades is passionate kindness, genuine hospitality and unreserved humour. If you're sitting alone at a dinner table, others join you, for "in Africa you are not alone." Ask for help and the whole village lends a hand. And everyone is keen to explain why their part of the country is best. What you'll experience here will attest to the fundamental goodness in mankind, which will gladden your heart.

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12: Thomas Kubayi, at Vhutsila Arts and Crafts Centre
13: Batik making at Twananani Textiles
14: Louise Maepa at Mocheudi Dressmaking in Mamaila Kolobetona village
15: Beaded-accessory wizard Johanna Lerisa Mabunda
16: Hip-hop artist Gift Rhulani
17: Flora Randela and Angelina Selapyane shaping black clay at Mukondeni Potters

