

EVERARD READ

MMAKGABO MMAPULA MMANKGATO HELEN SEBIDI

(b. 1943 Marapyane, South Africa)

Mmakgabo Mmapula Mmankgato Helen Sebidi is undoubtedly one of the pre-eminent artists currently working in Africa. Sebidi was born in 1943 in Marapyane, in what was then the Northern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga). As her mother was working in the city for much of her childhood, she grew up with her grandmother, who taught her the values that would guide and sustain her life. This includes the channelling of spirit back into the world through hard work, the commitment of the self to the community, but most of all through acts of creativity – whether this be cooking, making mud walls, creating murals, making pots and calabashes, weaving, beading, dress-making, drawing or painting.

For Sebidi, the artist starts from a root of pain and conflict, and works her way towards the redemption of both herself and those around her through the act of making. The creator becomes invisible during this process and is the channel through which the spirit world flows. The artwork can be seen as the trace of this redemptive journey. Sebidi's art also demonstrates an attempt to go back to a pre-Christian, pre-colonial Africa – to a range of symbols, a value system and a way of making meaning of the world.

In her work, Sebidi traverses mental and physical landscapes with an eye trained on the dangerous, the discomfiting, the traumatic and the ecstatic in human experience. She is deeply grounded in her rural upbringing and traditions but also finely attuned to the rhythms of the city in which she has spent much of her adult life. Sebidi brings together these two worlds in works of great visionary and prophetic power. Her themes are wide-ranging: her cultural roots, the wisdom of the ancestors, the ravages of the modern world on the human psyche, the loss of tradition, the potential of human creativity to build relationships and restore the past.

Sebidi trained in a number of informal art institutions in Johannesburg and for many years exhibited her work – mostly ceramics, landscapes and figurative scenes drawn from her home in Marapyane – at venues such as Artists Under the Sun in Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg. But, while working at the Johannesburg Art Foundation under the tutelage of David Koloane and Bill Ainslie, Sebidi made her first semi-abstract work, a frenzied, visionary work produced in a marathon of painting that terrified the artist and prompted Ainslie to describe it as her 'miracle'. This marked a dramatic shift for Sebidi, away from her figurative works and landscapes and into a new idiom that is part figuration and part abstraction but that always seeks to escape the boundaries of both.

Sebidi's works pulsate with energy. They are dense and exuberant, both formally and thematically. Layers and layers of rich impasto are applied in painstaking detail, often on top of drip paintings. Strange figures, some fantastical and mythological, and some drawn from her own richly storied history, jostle for space on the crowded canvases. At times they evoke a sense of celebration and at other times of terror and loss.

Sebidi has participated in many group and solo shows. She won the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year Award in 1989, the year after she won a Fulbright Scholarship. She was awarded the Vita Art Award in 1990, and the Silver Award of the Order of Ikhamanga in 2004. Her work is in many private and public collections in South Africa and abroad, including Iziko South African National Gallery; the Johannesburg Art Gallery, and the Smithsonian Institute. 2026 sees her work featured at the Venice Biennale, in Koyo Kouoh's 'In Minor Keys'.

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SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2026 Whispers of the Past, Wisdom of the Future, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
- 2024 Women in Conversation, FNB Art Joburg, with Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
Ntlo e etsamayang (The Walking House), with Everard Read & the Swedish Embassy, University of Johannesburg Gallery, Johannesburg; Everard Read, Cape Town, SA
- 2018 Batlhaping Ba Re!, Norval Foundation, Cape Town, SA
Tears of Africa, Everard Read, Cape Town, SA
- 2017 They Are Greeting, Standard Bank Gallery, Albany Museum, Makhanda, SA
- 2016 Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi: An exhibition of paintings and prints, Michaelis Galleries, Cape Town, SA
They Are Greeting, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
- 2005 Solo, Oman
- 2003 The Artificial Shelter Foundation, Tilburg, Netherlands
- 1990 Helen Sebidi, Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, SA
Irma Stern Museum, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, SA
Association of Arts, Namibia
- 1989 Standard Bank Young Artist Award Winner exhibition, toured South Africa, Namibia & Zimbabwe until 1992
Solo, London, UK
Solo, Hamburg, Germany
Solo, Museo Contemporaneo, Santiago, Chile
- 1986 Federated Union of Black Artists, Johannesburg, SA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2026 In Minor Keys, curated by Koyo Kouoh, Venice Biennale, Venice, IT
Does it end in a miracle?, Everard Read, Cape Town, SA
ArtParis, with Everard Read, Paris, FR
The Armory Show, with Everard Read, New York, USA
Whose Waters Do We Drink?, BMW Art Haus, Johannesburg, SA
- 2024 The Armory Show, with Everard Read, New York, USA
Investec Cape Town Art Fair, with Everard Read, Cape Town, SA
EXPO CHICAGO, with Everard Read, Chicago, USA
When we see us: A century of Black figuration in painting, Kunstmuseum, Basel, CH
- 2023 When we see us: A century of Black figuration in painting, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, SA
Investec Cape Town Art Fair, with Everard Read, Cape Town, SA
When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists 1940-2000, Norval Foundation, Cape Town, SA
Mapping Another Route, Goodman, London, UK
Rembrandt in the Karoo, Jan Rupert Art Centre, Graaff-Reinet, SA
- 2022 Ancestors & Dreams in African Art, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa & Jacaranda, New York, USA
Her..., Sanlam Art Gallery, Bellville, SA
Yakhal' Inkomo, the Bongi Dhlomo Collection, Javett-UP, Pretoria, SA
- 2021 My whole body changed into something else, Stevenson, Cape Town & Johannesburg, SA
Oasis: 25th anniversary exhibition, Everard Read, Cape Town, SA
Bag Factory 30 Years: So Far, The Future, FADA Gallery, Johannesburg, SA
- 2020 Staring Straight to the Future, online exhibition, Everard Read, UK & SA
The Portrait Show, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
We've Come to Take You Home #1, Michaelis Galleries, Cape Town, SA
- 2019 Mellon Foundation Residency exhibition, Javett-UP, Pretoria, SA
- 2018 Crossing the Night, Idris Naim Foundation and the National Institute of Fine Arts, Oaxaca, MX
Investec Cape Town Art Fair, with Everard Read, Cape Town, SA

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- 32nd Biennial of São Paulo, BR
The People's Art, collaboration between Iziko South African National Gallery and Orms, Cape Town, SA
- 2017 FNB Art Joburg, with Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
A Painting Today, Stevenson, Cape Town, SA
- 2016 The Quiet Violence of Dreams, group exhibition, Stevenson, Cape Town & Johannesburg, SA
Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 2013 Centenary Exhibition, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
- 2009 Great South African Nude, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
- 2008 Joburg Art Fair, with Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
- 2006 Mapping the Route from the 60s, Goodman, Johannesburg, SA
- 2005 Telkom exhibition, SA
Artists in Conversation, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria, SA
- 2004 Visible Visions, Hagen, Essen, Berlin, Osnabrück (Germany); Tilburg (Netherlands)
Resistance, Reconciliation & Reconstruction, MTN Collection, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria, SA
- 2002 Visible Visions, Electric Workshop, Johannesburg, SA
- 2001 The Markers, Venice Biennale, Venice, IT
Land, group exhibition, Unisa Gallery, Pretoria, SA
- 2000 Axis Gallery, New York, USA
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Krannert Art Museum & Kinkead Pavilion, USA
- 1999 Human Rights Institute Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Durban, SA
Changing Screens Exhibition, The Firs, Rosebank, SA
Judging of competition at Wits University, Johannesburg, SA
- 1998 Lisbon Expo, Lisbon, SA
World Wide Workshop & Exhibition, Sydney, Australia
- 1996 Thupelo Art workshop and exhibition, Cape Town, SA
Biennale in Museum Africa, Johannesburg, SA
Finders Keepers, Sunday Times, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, SA
The Laager included in a group exhibition, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Santiago, Chile
Centre of the Arts, Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco, USA
South Africa's Finest Painters, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
Common and Uncommon Ground, South African Art to Atlanta, City Gallery East, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
Origin, Hamburg, DE
- 1995 Objects of Defiance, Spaces of Contemplation, Africus: Johannesburg Biennale, Museum Africa, Johannesburg, SA
Women's Day exhibition, Paarl Museum, Paarl, SA
Siyawela: Love, Loss & Liberation in Art from South Africa, Birmingham Gas Street Museum, Birmingham, UK
Africa95, Royal Academy, London, UK
- 1994 Six Women from Southern Africa, Lisbon, PT
Civic Gallery, Johannesburg, SA
- 1993 Il Croce del Sud, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
Graphics Exhibition, Jyväskylä, Finland; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Il Croce Del Sud, Rome, IT
African Hei-ti-@e, Uranienborgveien, Oslo, Norway
Women From Africa, Savannah Gallery of Modern Art, Bethnal Green, London, UK
Three person show with Noria Mabasa & Lucky Sibiyi, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
- 1992 Future Realms, The Africa Futuristic Gallery, Johannesburg, SA
Art from South Africa, South Africa National Gallery, Cape Town, SA
- 1991 A Grain of Wheat, Art Gallery of the Commonwealth Institute, London, UK
The Challenge of Colonisation, 4th Havana Biennial, Havana, Cuba
- 1990 Art from South Africa, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, UK
National Art Museum, Maputo, MZ
Zabalaza Festival, South African Festival, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK

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- 1989 Ten Years of Collecting, Wits University, Johannesburg, SA
Pachipamwe II: the avant garde in Africa, Cyrene Mission, ZW
Johannesburg Biennale, Museum Africa, Johannesburg, SA
Finders Keepers, South African National Gallery, Cape Town; Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria, SA
South Africa's Finest Painters, Everard Read, Johannesburg, SA
Art Images in Southern Africa, Kulturhuset, Stockholm, SE
Common and Uncommon Ground, City Gallery East, Atlanta, USA
- 1988 The Neglected Tradition, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, SA
SA Potters Association, SA
DPSC exhibition, artists protesting against detention without trial, Market Galleries, Johannesburg, SA
Cape Town Triennial, toured SA
- 1987 Vita Art Now, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, SA
Delfiri/FUBA Creative Quest Exhibition, FUBA, SA
FUBA (Seven Woman Artists), SA
Thupelo Workshop exhibition, Johannesburg Art Foundation, Johannesburg & NSA Gallery, Durban, SA
Economic Contemporary Artists Fund exhibition, USA
- 1986 Art for Alexandra, Johannesburg Art Foundation (Sotheby's South Africa Limited), Johannesburg, SA
Thupelo Workshop Exhibition, Johannesburg Art Foundation, Wits University, Johannesburg, SA
Rembrandt Gallery, Johannesburg, SA
- 1985 South African Potter's Association, Johannesburg, SA
1980-8 Brush and Chisel Club, Johannesburg, SA
1980-1 Washington, USA (organised by a private collector)
1977-88 Artists under the Sun, Johannesburg, SA

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Africana Museum, South Africa
Art Workshop, UK
Sasol, South Africa
Unisa, South Africa
North-West University, South Africa
University of Cape Town, South Africa
Tatham Art Gallery, South Africa
Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa
Centre for Africa Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Iziko South African National Gallery, South Africa
1820 Settlers Foundation, South Africa
Standard Bank Collection, South Africa
Pretoria Art Museum, South Africa
The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, USA
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
Price Forbes, South Africa
Federated Insurance Co., South Africa
Department of Education and Training, South Africa
Galerie Adriana Schmidt, Germany
University of Wolverhampton, UK
H. Roque Investments, South Africa
ABSA Bank, South Africa
World Bank, South Africa
South African Broadcasting Corporation, South Africa

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Gencor, South Africa
First National Bank, South Africa
SA Permanent Bank, South Africa
Government of Australia
Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, USA
Aboriginal Art Museum, Australia
Art Bank, South Africa
Spier Art Collection, South Africa
Bongi Dhlomo Collection, South Africa
Jorge M. Perez Collection, Miami, USA

AWARDS

2025 National Arts and Culture Life Time Achievement Award, South Africa
2016 Goethe-Institut Vila Sul residency, Brazil
2015 Mbokodo Award, South Africa
2011 Arts and Culture Trust Lifetime Achievement Award for Visual Art, South Africa
2005 Nomination for ILKSSA: National Heritage Council, National Living Treasure Award, South Africa
Oman Association of the Arts Award, Oman
2004 Order of Ikhamanga Silver Award given by the Presidency, South Africa
2002 Nomination for the Human Sciences Research Council Living Treasure Award, South Africa
1990 Vita Fine Art Award, South Africa
1989 Fulbright Scholarship, USA
Standard Bank Young Artist Award, South Africa
1988 Star Woman of the Year finalist, South Africa