

Supporting emerging artists

The MTN New Contemporaries Award is a high profiled, biennial competition aimed at promoting gifted, young South African artists. Run in partnership with Social History Collections department of Iziko Museums of South Africa in 2012, the competition is as much about the curator as it is about the artists. "It starts with the art community nominating the most promising emerging curator. In 2012, that was Joburg's Portia Malatjie," says Philippa Hobbs, Manager of the MTN SA Foundation's Arts and Culture Portfolio. The young curator spends the first three months of the fully sponsored curatorship travelling through all nine provinces of the country in search of the top young talent.

For Malatjie, this voyage of discovery was a personal one too: "I was born in Limpopo but I had never engaged with the art scene there, because it's just so much harder to find. So it was an enlightening opportunity for me. It was also interesting to see how diverse art communities are in different parts of the country."

Malatjie, who at the age of 27 has already curated a number of exhibitions independently, took a bold step this year by electing to showcase collaborations rather than individual artists as in previous years of the Award. "These days so many more people are working together and experimenting with relational art. But the art world is oftentimes not set up for this – collaborations can't even enter most competitions! But collaborative art making is exciting as it is a merging of different ideas," says Malatjie. It was a proposal well received, and Malatjie, as well as the Foundation as a sponsor, has broken new ground in the Award with this approach.

The finalist artists came together in the eccentric, but historical, space of B-Block in the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town. As a non-purpose built venue, managed by Iziko Museums of South Africa, it provided its own set of challenges, but also layers of fascinating history for the artists to grapple with. The winning team, Unathi Sigenu and Khanyisile Mbongwa, appreciated this opportunity: "We explored the history of the room we were assigned, and found it has a rich past. We tried to bring some of those stories back into the room, and connect the present with the past."

Sigenu and Mbongwa are part of Cape Town's Gugulethu art collective. Both from Gugulethu, art wasn't encouraged in the schools they attended. Nevertheless they both felt the calling to become artists and are making great strides in their careers. Sigenu, who co-founded the Gugulethu, had always wanted to do something that was relevant to township communities. Mbongwa is balancing the demands of pursuing a degree in social science and English with her artistic endeavours.

In its twelfth year, the MTN New Contemporaries Award programme has now helped to accelerate the careers of 31 artists and six young curators. The exposure the participants gain through the Award process is invaluable and many have gone on to enjoy growing successes. Over the years, the Award has also improved prospects for the 30 interns who are recruited from local institutions or communities to assist the artists in the final stages of installation and in conducting public tours.

Malatjie, Sigenu and Mbongwa agree that participating in the Award has been rewarding. Malatjie is optimistic about her own and the artists' futures: "The MTN New Contemporaries Award has huge prestige, so this has definitely improved my reputation and given me the 'stamp of approval'. As for the artists, I am hoping from the bottom of my heart that the exposure helps to build their careers."



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Portia Malatjie, guest curator, 2012, Gauteng

