

MARY SIBANDE

BLUE PURPLE RED

October 8, 2021–January 2, 2022

In the United States, *blue* and *red* denote opposing political positions, with purple occupying the middle ground. For South African artist Mary Sibande, these colors reflect her responses to stages of her own nation's political history. With their changing chromatic motifs, her hyperrealistic sculptures and photographs lead us on an emotional path from melancholy through hope to rage.

Whatever meaning may be associated with blue, purple, and red, it is *Black* that remains a constant in Sibande's work. The darkness of her mannequins' skin can be seen as a critique of the negation of identity, as when white people do not see the individuality of people of color. Conversely, it can refer to a concentration of all humanity—black as the merger of every other color, a sign of a complex identity.

Cast from Sibande's face and body, the mannequins are dressed in elaborate and fantastical costumes of her own design. She has named them "Sophie," a reminder of colonial times, slavery, and apartheid, when Black children were given European names as a means of control. The practice declared that, before you are Zulu or Xhosa, or any of South Africa's many other ethnic groups, you are someone whose self, family, and language do not matter to the colonizer.

Sophie's eyes are always closed, indicating both defiance and dreaming. Sibande says that "dreams are different from one generation to another." Blue-clad apartheid-era Sophie dreams of transcending her circumstances; purple-clad Sophie from the early years of South African democracy dreams of achieving full self-empowerment. Today's red-clad Sophie dreams that there can be no peace without justice. In the future, whatever color the dreamers wear, the unifying thread will continue to be Blackness, celebrating the women who for Sibande embody the promise of hope and transformation.

About the artist

Born in Barberton, South Africa, in 1982, Johannesburg-based artist Mary Sibande earned degrees at the Technikon Witwatersrand in 2004 and the University of Johannesburg in 2007. In addition to representing South Africa at the Venice Biennale in 2011, she has exhibited in museums, art fairs, and galleries around the world, including the British Museum, London; the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town; the Lyon Biennale, Lyon; The Met Breuer, New York; the Musée d'Art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Paris; the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki; the Niterói Contemporary Art Museum, Rio de Janeiro; Somerset House, London; and the World Festival of Black Arts, Dakar. Sibande has been the recipient of several residencies and fellowships, including the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship in Washington, DC, the Ampersand Foundation Fellowship in New York, and the University of Michigan Fellowship.

Blue

In Sibande's early work, Sophie is dressed in blue and white, colors associated with the uniform of maids—one of the few jobs available to poor Black women in South Africa during apartheid (and still today). She wears the apron and headscarf of a domestic worker. But stylistically, her dresses are not those of a person who scrubs and polishes. Confections of Victorian excess, ripe with ruffles, lace, and chiffon, they recall the fancy attire of white women of leisure in nineteenth-century British South Africa. When she was growing up, Sibande wanted to be a fashion designer. Her textile fabrications show her familiarity with fashion history, which she both honors and caricatures to skewer political history.

Despite Sophie's low social status, she does not have the demeanor of victimhood. An avatar of Sibande herself, her almost angelic expressions and graceful gestures convey self-possession and inner strength.

***Sophie-Merica*, 2009**

Mixed media installation

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Annie Laurie Aitken Endowment, 2015-10-1

The Sophie character is loosely inspired by Mary Sibande's mother and women of even earlier generations who had struggled to survive through domestic work. Sibande writes, "I tasked myself with creating this mythical figure that I imagined from stories that my forebears used to share with me. Their stories were the result of the political system of apartheid that determined a particularly impoverished station in life, lives of servitude." *Sophie-Merica* combines the name of Sibande's alter ego with that of her grandmother, Merica.

***Her Majesty, Queen Sophie*, 2010**

Color print, edition of 10 + 3 AP (exhibition copy on fabric)

Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

***I Have Not, I Have*, 2010**

Color print, edition of 10 + 3 AP (exhibition copy on fabric)

Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

***I'm A Lady*, 2009**

Color print, edition of 10 + 3 AP (exhibition copy on fabric)

Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

***Silent Symphony*, 2010**

Color print, edition of 10 + 3 AP (exhibition copy on fabric)

Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

***The Wait Seems to Go on Forever*, 2009**

Color print, edition of 10 + 3 AP (exhibition copy on fabric)

Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

Purple

Sibande notes that in the royalty and clergy of Europe, purple signified majesty, spiritual attainment, and power, as it does in her own purple-hued imagery. But purple also references a freedom march held in Cape Town in 1989, in the late years of apartheid. During the demonstration, police sprayed purple dye onto protesters so that later they could be easily identified and arrested. After the protest, the phrase “the purple shall govern” appeared in graffiti throughout Cape Town. A play on the words “the people shall govern” in the African National Congress’s 1955 Freedom Charter, this phrase anticipated the seismic shift that occurred with the formation of a democratic government in 1994. This was a period of great optimism in South Africa.

***A Terrible Beauty is Born*, 2013**

Color print, edition of 10 + 3 AP (exhibition copy on fabric)

Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

Mary Sibande’s purple costumes are less reliant on historical models and are more bizarre and otherworldly. In *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, strange fetal shapes, tumorous forms, and writhing roots and vines grow out from the body of a shaman-like woman as if she is generating a new and wholly marvelous garden. Even though her eyes are still closed, Sophie’s passivity has been shed along with her apron and scarf, replaced by a fierce determination to unite the generative force of nature with her own impulse toward self-renewal. The photograph defines the spirit of revolutionary transformation felt by Black South Africans immediately after apartheid ended.

Red

Like many South Africans, Sibande was optimistic at the idea of a state built on newly elected president Nelson Mandela’s ideals of freedom, justice, and reconciliation. Yet despite these lofty aspirations, social instability, violence, and class inequities continue to vex the nation almost thirty years on. “In South Africa violence is always around the corner, it is always lurking,” says Sibande. “I feel like South Africans are angry, there’s something that they’re not happy with and a lot of people need answers. . . . When Mandela came out of jail he said ‘No fighting,’ but people had spent years learning how to fight.” For her, this abiding anger is an inheritance that may take generations to overcome.

Right Now!, 2015

Color print, edition of 10 + 3 AP (exhibition copy on fabric)
Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

Here, Mary Sibande's protagonist does not wait for change, dreaming instead of more immediate action. Her arm is thrust forward as if directing a pack of snarling red dogs to attack (in Zulu idiom, an angry person is described as a red dog). Her eyes still closed, we remember that she is a stand-in for a dreaming Sibande, who now expresses many South Africans' fury at exploitation, injustice, and the continuing disregard of the rights of women.

The Domba Dance, 2019

Fiberglass, bronze, cotton fabric, and silicone
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago

The regal woman at the center of this work has terrifying multiheaded red dogs at her command. They call to mind the myth of Cerberus, the protector of the underworld in Greek mythology. She holds in her right hand a human heart, a symbol in Zulu culture for intense emotions, especially anger when tolerance and patience come to an end.

The work is named for the *domba dance*, or python dance, a fertility rite performed by young women of South Africa's Venda region as they enter puberty. Initiates form a line and dance in a weaving pattern, with their shoulders, arms, and elbows moving in unison. The arms on the wall show the three colors of Mary Sibande's dreamers, posed in gestures of grace and deference. While traditionally the dance is an introduction into the mysteries of adult sexuality, this variation pictures a generation of young women absorbing a fiery feminist consciousness from the righteous oracle at center.

Good is bad and bad is good, 2020

Oil on bronze, edition of 6 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

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