

# MARY SIBANDE

BLUE PURPLE RED



In the United States, *blue* and *red* denote opposing political positions, with purple occupying the middle ground. In the works of South African artist Mary Sibande, the colored garments worn by mannequins symbolize stages of her own nation's political history. They are not ideological stances so much as emotional motifs reflecting the transition from resignation to hope and finally to anger.

For both countries, whatever meaning is associated with blue, purple, and red, it is *black*, or rather Black, that occupies a contested arena. As with the very black silhouetted figures of Kara Walker, the darkness of Sibande's mannequins can inspire a range of readings, from a critique of the negation of identity, as when white people do not see the individuality of people of color, to a concentration of all humanity—black is the merger of every color and represents humanity's point of origin in Africa. Cast from Sibande's face and body, the mannequins are dressed in elaborate and fantastical costumes of her own design. They are the focal characters in sculptures and photographs in which escape from constraints of race, gender, and class are imagined.

Sibande's stories center on a persona she has named "Sophie." The name is itself a reminder of colonial times, slavery, and apartheid, when Black children were given names that were easy for white people to pronounce. More insidiously, the practice was also aimed at subduing cultural identity: to the colonizer, it meant that before you are Zulu or Xhosa, or any of South Africa's many other ethnic groups, you are a being whose true self, family, language, and customs do not matter.

The Sophie character is loosely inspired by Sibande's mother, who, like many women in her family, had been a domestic worker struggling to survive at the lower end of the economy. 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."<sup>1</sup>

In early works such as *Sophie-Merica* ([cover](#)), the woman 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. 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, with skirts billowing outward in stunning impracticality, they recall the fancy attire of white women of leisure in nineteenth-century British South Africa. Sophie's eyes are always closed—"not-seeing" is both a symbol of defiance and dreaming of escape from her oppressive conditions. She does not have the demeanor of victimhood. An avatar of Sibande herself, Sophie's calm, almost angelic facial expressions and graceful gestures convey self-possession and inner strength. Hard reality is momentarily softened in her state of reverie.



fig. 1

When she was growing up, Sibande wanted to be a fashion designer. The blue dresses she creates show her deep familiarity with fashion history, which she both honors and caricatures to skewer political history. In her purple-clad figures, her costumes move from being riffs on nineteenth-century styles toward a more freeform organicism. In the photograph *A Terrible Beauty is Born* (fig. 1), strange fetal shapes, tumorous forms, and writhing roots and vines grow out from the body of a shaman-like woman. Even though her eyes are still closed, Sophie's passivity has been shed along with her apron and scarf; she has the strength and freedom to determine her own path through the forest.

If blue is sometimes thought of as the color of sorrow, purple has for Sibande different connotations. She notes that in the royalty and clergy of the colonizing nations of Europe, purple signified majesty, spiritual attainment, and power, as it does in her own purple figures. 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 at Cape Town's Greenmarket Square and elsewhere across the city. A play on the words "the people shall govern" in the African National Congress's 1955 Freedom Charter, this incident anticipated the seismic shift that occurred with the formation of a democratic government in 1994, when the former dissident Nelson Mandela became the liberated nation's first president. The woman in *A Terrible Beauty is Born* defines the spirit of revolutionary change and renewal after apartheid ended.

Like many South Africans, Sibande was optimistic at the idea of a state built on 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," she says. "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."<sup>2</sup> For Sibande, this abiding anger is an inheritance that may take generations to overcome.

In the photograph *Right Now!*, Sibande's purple-clad protagonist does not wait for change. She dreams instead of more immediate action. Her arm is thrust forward as if directing a pack of snarling red hounds 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 shows fury against exploitation, injustice, and the continuing disregard of the rights of women (fig. 2).



fig. 2





fig. 3

The regal woman at the center of the installation *The Domba Dance* (fig. 3) similarly has red dogs at her command, including a terrifying multiheaded monster that evokes Cerberus, the protector of the underworld in ancient Greek mythology. The woman 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.<sup>3</sup>

The installation 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. In this dance, initiates form a tight procession and dance in a weaving pattern, with their shoulders, arms, and elbows moving in unison. The blue, purple, and red arms on the wall show the three colors of Sibande's dreamers lined up, arms and hands held 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.

Sibande says that "dreams are different from one generation to another."<sup>4</sup> Blue-clad apartheid-era Sophie dreams of escaping her poverty; purple-clad Sophie dreams of achieving full selfhood in the early years of democracy. Today's red-clad Sophie dreams that there can be no peace without justice. But what will be the color of the future? Sibande has teasingly suggested that she just might use a shade of green to signify utopia, that unreachable place.<sup>5</sup> But whatever color the costumes turn out to be, the constant will certainly be the Blackness of the women who for Sibande embody hope and transformation. This will be the thread that connects the generations: dreams first, then actions, and then more dreams.

Mark Scala  
Chief curator

#### Notes

1. Shraddha Nair, "South African artist Mary Sibande discusses *Sophie*, her alter ego," *Stir World*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-south-african-artist-mary-sibande-discusses-sophie-her-alter-ego>.
2. Johanne Affricot and Celine Angbeletchy, "Blue, Purple, Red | Women, Blackness, Injustice And Revolution In Mary Sibande's Uk Solo Show," *Griot*, November 11, 2019, <https://griotmag.com/en/blue-purple-red-women-blackness-injustice-and-revolution-in-mary-sibandes-uk-solo-show/>.
3. For the artist's explanation of the work, see "The Domba Dance," *Widewalls*, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://www.widewalls.ch/artwork/mary-sibande/the-domba-dance-Kc4P>.
4. Conversation with the author, March 23, 2021.
5. Ibid.

#### Illustrations

Cover

*Sophie-Merica*, 2009. Mixed media installation, 74 x 120 in. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Annie Laurie Aitken Endowment, 2015-10-1. © 2009 Mary Sibande. Photo: Franko Khoury

Fig. 1

*A Terrible Beauty is Born*, 2013. Color print, edition of 10, 43 3/8 x 126 in. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa. © Mary Sibande

Fig. 2

*Right Now!*, 2015. Color print, edition 5/10 + 3 AP, 39 7/8 x 92 5/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa. © Mary Sibande

Fig. 3

*The Domba Dance*, 2019. Fiberglass, bronze, cotton fabric, and silicone, 157 1/2 x 98 3/8 x 118 1/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago. © Mary Sibande. Photo: Anthea Pokroy

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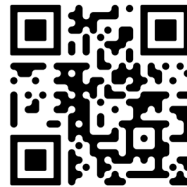
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