

PITIKA NTULI

AZIBUYELE EMASISWENI

Return to the Source

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW



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 THE
MELROSE
GALLERY



SUMMARY

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| Artist | Pitika Ntuli |
| Title | Azibuyele Emasisweni (Return to the Source) |
| Venue | Oliewenhuis Art Museum, The Reservoir, Bloemfontein |
| Opening | Tuesday 4 October at 17h30 for 18h00 |
| Walkabout | Wednesday 5 October at 12h00 |
| Workshop | Friday 7 October 13h00 to 14h00 |
| Online Panel Discussion | Please contact ruzy@themelrosegallery.com for more information on the online panel discussions. |
| Opening Address | Dr. Munyaradzi Mushonga |
| Artworks | 37 sculptures by Pitika created from bone. |
| Themes | Return to the Source. The Elements – Earth, Water, Air, Fire. Divining the State of the Nation. African spirituality, indigenous knowledge systems and healing at a time in which this is sorely needed. |
| Presented by | The Melrose Gallery in Association with Oliewenhuis Art Museum. |
| Award | The exhibition was nominated for a Global Fine Art Award as the best online art exhibition of the year and won a prestigious People's Choice Award that was presented in Paris in 2021. |



ABOUT PITIKA NTULI

Following in the tradition of the 'Renaissance Man', Pitika Ntuli is a true artistic, political and academic polymath. Interested in exploring the contradictory relationship between tradition and modernity, Ntuli's witty and dark reflections on our society are captivating and visionary.

He was born in 1940 in Springs and grew up in Witbank in Mpumalanga. While a teacher, artist and critical thinker living under the threat of apartheid in the sixties and seventies, Ntuli was forced into exile in Swaziland and arrested and made a political prisoner until 1978, when international pressure forced his release to the UK.

Having already completed an MFA at Pratt Institute in New York in 1977, he finished an MA at Brunel University in London, in 1985 after which he lectured art at various international and South African universities including; Central St. Martin's College of Art and Wits University. He was an artist in residence in the 1980s and '90s at schools and colleges in London. Among many other leadership appointments at South African universities, he served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the UDW.

His contribution to the development of arts and culture in South Africa has been immense. He served as director at the Sankofa Institute for the African Renaissance and, Fellow of the Mapungubwe Institute, among many other fellowships. He was awarded the Arts and Culture Trust – Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013 and the City of Johannesburg named him a 'Living Legend' in 2012.

He has curated several exhibitions. In his capacity as an artist he has staged numerous solo exhibitions in South Africa, Germany and the United Kingdom.

His works grace numerous important corporate, private – such as Paul Simon, USA, and Akufo Addo, Ghana - and public collections such as the African American Institute, New York, USA and Constitutional Court, Johannesburg, SA.

Primarily a sculptor, Pitika's work expresses a sense of haunting loneliness – a distress at the pillaging of a continent and culture through the lens of post-colonialism. His stark skeletal structures are created in any physical medium he can find: metal, wood, stone, and bone and

can range from small to monumental works in granite that weigh in excess of 19 tons.

"In Art, the creative act is a titanic battle between flesh and spirit. Each artwork is a diversion of the flesh, the body. Each time the artist dies, a new work is born, or rather the opposite: each time a work of art is born the artist dies a little. A little death invokes a greater desire to live and thus creates another artwork. When the artist dies finally, she continues to live through her offspring – her children and her artworks."

While there is an element of darkness on display in his work, there is a strong sense of wit and tongue-in-check irony present in each of his sculptures. Pitika is also a poet, often combining classical Eurocentric form and clichés when discussing the destruction and pillaging of the African culture and landscape.

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▶ [DOWNLOAD PORTRAIT SHOTS AND CAPTIONS](#)

MEDIA RELEASE

Pitika Ntuli's acclaimed exhibition to tour SA museums.

Few online exhibitions grabbed attention during the height of Covid. Pitika Ntuli's *Azibuyele Emasisweni*, (Return to the Source) stood out, for not only had the eighty-year-old artist produced 45 new sculptures from bones and other materials, but in relaying their full significance, some of the country's most esteemed poets and musicians responded to the body of work with songs and poems. This made for an incredible online programme, however, as with all art, the works are best enjoyed in person. A national tour of Ntuli's *Azibuyele Emasisweni*, which will show at Oliewenhuis Art Museum and then the Durban Art Gallery from October, will give the public a chance to appreciate these extraordinary works up close.

Azibuyele Emasisweni, (Return to the Source) was first opened at the National Arts Festival in June 2020 by Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations. It was part of the main programme of this arts festival and challenged fixed definitions of 'contemporary' and 'traditional art'. The exhibition was curated by Ruzy Rusike.

As a *Sangoma* it is no surprise Ntuli turned to animal bones as the medium, for this body of work - 45 bone sculptures all paired with praise songs. This makes for an unexpected contemporary art exhibition; African spiritualism and contemporary art are rarely bedfellows and his use of animal bones (elephant, rhino, giraffe and horses), which are gently coaxed into anthropomorphic shaped sculptures make for striking works.

Using the approach of a Sangoma, by allowing the material to guide him, Ntuli invokes ancient African indigenous and spiritual knowledge systems, which he believes can 'treat' contemporary problems.

Ntuli has been circling pertinent socio-political issues as an academic, writer, activist and teacher but as the title of the exhibition suggests, he is returning to 'the source' of expression. In turn, he is encouraging society to return to the 'source' of African spiritualism and knowledge as the means of resolving corruption, greed and poverty. Above all, the bone sculptures –a result of Ntuli teasing out human features from the animal skeletons – articulate his desire for humankind to reconnect with nature.

"I do not copy nor work like nature. I work with nature! Bones are vital, as in imbued with life, and it this life that they possess that possesses me when I work. We are partners. Bones, like wood, have definite forms to work with. I do not oppose their internal and external directions, I externalise their inherent shapes to capture the beauty and the truth embedded in them, in other words I empower the bones to attain their own ideal," observes Ntuli.

The works were so inspiring that musicians, poets, writers and thought leaders such as Sibongile Khumalo, Zolani Mahola, Simphiwe Dana, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Gcina Mhlope to Ngugi wa Thiongo, Homi Bhabha, Albie Sachs, Shado Twala and Ari Sitas and many others contributed songs, words and discussions for the exhibition's online debut.

This flurry of '*artistic replies*' substantiated the impact of Ntuli's sculptures and their poetic qualities. Ntuli attributes this to his main medium – bones, which are highly evocative.

"Bones have a special potency and subtle spiritual energies; their endurance is legendary. We know who we are, and where we come from as a result of studying bone fossils. Bones are the evidence that we were alive 3.5 million years ago, and they are carriers of our memories," says Ntuli.

Azibuyele Emasisweni doesn't only lead the viewer back in time but through a unique and original use of material, form and symbolism reflects on the spiritual wasteland that might define this era, thereby collapsing those hard lines that were thought to divide ancient and contemporary concerns and art.

Azibuyele Emasisweni will open at Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein at 17:30 for 18:00 on Tuesday, 4 October 2022 and will be show until Sunday, 4 December 2022. A walkabout of the exhibition will be conducted by the artist at 12:00 on Wednesday, 5 October 2022. *Oliewenhuis Art Museum* is located at 16 Harry Smith Street, Bloemfontein and is open to the public from Monday to Friday between 08:00 and 17:00, and on Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays between 09:00 and 16:00. Entrance is free and secure parking is available for visitors. The exhibition can be viewed on www.themelrosegallery.com

▶ DOWNLOAD THE MEDIA RELEASE

QUOTES

1. "Bones are vital to healing as well as for the process of divination. I am a healer. I throw bones to divine the State of the Nation in the season of anomie!"
- *Pitika Ntuli*
2. "In Art, the creative act is a titanic battle between flesh and spirit. Each artwork is a diversion of the flesh, the body. Each time the artist dies, a new work is born, or rather the opposite: each time a work of art is born the artist dies a little. A little death invokes a greater desire to live and thus creates another artwork. When the artist dies finally, she continues to live through her offspring – her children and her artworks!"
- *Pitika Ntuli*
3. "I do not copy nor work like nature. I work with nature! Bones are vital, as in imbued with life, and it this life that they possess that possesses me when I work. We are partners. Bones, like wood, have definite forms to work with. I do not oppose their internal and external directions, I externalise their inherent shapes to capture the beauty and the truth embedded in them, in other words I empower the bones to attain their own ideal."
- *Pitika Ntuli*
4. "Art is about exploring potentialities both of the material and the Self in its emotional, rational and spiritual dimensions of Being! Is it foolishness, obstinacy, foolhardiness, or is it crass perversity to continue to carve a delicate bone piece for hours and hours, for months on end, knowing that it could break into pieces at any time? Is the agony of the thought, the ecstasy of achieving an accomplished work of Art, as a step toward creating the ultimate masterpiece, worth it?"
- *Pitika Ntuli*
5. "The influence of Jazz runs through my bloodstream. Improvisation, as in melding different objects on a single work of art, comes naturally to me."
- *Pitika Ntuli*
6. "As an artist, Pitika, you release the spirit and the story that has rested deep in the bones, and you make the silence of bones – which have no fleshy parts like eyes, mouths, tongues --- speak and sing."
- *Homi Bhabha*
7. "This exhibition is in the tradition of our ancestors and the vision of the Biblical prophet. Pitika Ntuli has made his creative breath enter discarded bones, and they come to life. Pitika is the poet of resurrection, the spirit that once imbued all the great sculptures and pyramids of the ancient Egypto-African Civilization."
- *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*
8. "From unwanted animal bones and other remains, Pitika Ntuli has articulated remote forms of spectral lives with outstanding clarity. The ancestral past has returned to challenge both the artworld and artists, urging them to consider the fragile state of the contemporary."
- *Shaheen Merali*
9. "Azibuyele Emasisweni (Return to the Source) is a significant exhibition for many reasons. It is in essence an important museum show engaging on African spirituality, indigenous knowledge systems and healing and yet it is to be presented online. It presents 45 sculptures created by Pitika Ntuli, the artist and spiritual healer created from the bones that he uses to 'divine the state of the nation in anomie'."
- *Ruzy Rusike*

THE SCULPTURES

The exhibition features 37 sculptures created by Pitika from bone. Although the dominant material used in this show is Bone (elephant, rhino, giraffe and horses), beads, shells, chains, computer circuit boards, pins, animal skins, and marbles were also integrated in the works, a deliberate act of 'picking up' interrupted African creative traditions.

PITIKA'S POEMS

Pitika has written and recited 37 poems, one for each artwork. These will be presented as part of the exhibition.

▶ [DOWNLOAD SOME OF PITIKA'S POEMS](#)

THE COLLABORATIONS

Pitika invited 33 thought and creative leaders to engage with him on the exhibition and its themes. These valuable contributions will be presented as poems, songs, thought notes, essays and dialogues in the online viewing room.

The high profile list of collaborators includes Naledi Pandor, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ahmed Rajab, Philippa Yaa de Villiers, Shaheen Merali, Ari Sitas, Zolani Mahola, Eugene Skeef, Kwesi Owusu, Simphiwe Dana, Napo Masheane, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Ela Gandhi, Albie Sachs, Nalini Moodley-Diar, Sibongile Khumalo, Florence Masebe, Gcina Mhlophe, Shado Twala, Homi Bhabha, Juwon Ogungbe, Felix Konina Venter, Bheki Gumede, Antoinette Ntuli, Don Mattera, Lalitha Jawahirilal, Zee Ntuli Sophe Maithufi, Nduduzo Makhathini, Shaheen Merali, Buti Manamela supported by Monthati Masebe, Basetsana, Bontle ba Morena Kumalo, Lerato Zah Moloji, Sthandiwe, Zanda Kgoroge, Rami Chuene with daughters Botshelo and Nthateng.

It is anticipated that these 'artistic replies' will greatly enrich the viewers' experience of the exhibition. We also expect, in light of the pandemic which is impacting so profoundly on every living thing on the planet, that some of the responses will contribute to ongoing discussions and debates about healing, and how we deal with it to come out stronger in the long term.

▶ [CLICK HERE TO VIEW ZOLANI MAHOLA'S COLLABORATION](#)

▶ [CLICK HERE TO VIEW YVONNE CHAKA CHAKA'S COLLABORATION](#)

▶ [CLICK HERE TO VIEW GCINA MHLOPHE'S COLLABORATION](#)

THE FILMS

Two short films will be presented as part of the exhibition.

Title: Solitary

"Art and Solitary confinement carry the same birthmarks." – Pitika Ntuli.

This intimate short film provides the viewer with a personal insight into Pitika's mind and journey as an artist. He explains that art is like solitary confinement, where time seizes to exist, and that "Art exists in order to conquer time".

Duration: 03:30

Shot by: Zee Ntuli & James Reynolds

Directed and edited by: Zee Ntuli

Sound design by: Lorens Persson at Sterling Sound

Colourist: Terry Simpson

Music by: Chris Letcher

Title: History Written in Stone

Through Belfast Black Granite Pitika Ntuli tells a story. A story that attempts to capture the crucial steps in our revolutionary struggles. The six individual sculptures write our history in stone, and trace the painful steps we took towards finding justice in our beloved land!

Shot & Directed by: Galerekwe Maimane & James Reynolds

Edited by: Zee Ntuli

Music by: Chris Letcher

THE TALKS PROGRAMME

For more information on the talks programme, please contact ruzy@themelrosegallery.com

THE MUSEUM TOUR

The exhibition will tour exhibitions in South Africa, beginning with Oliewenhuis Art Museum, then Durban Art Gallery, and then venues in Cape Town and Gauteng which are still to be confirmed.

THE MELROSE GALLERY (PROFILE)

Dubbed *'The Gallery of the People'*, The Melrose Gallery is a leading Pan African Contemporary space located in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Passionate about African culture and traditions, the gallery has become a home in which artists, collectors and the public gather as a community to present and celebrate their stories, lives and creative practices in contemporary ways.

Firmly grounded in our African identity, and mindful of the value and importance of indigenous knowledge systems and African spirituality, we sit comfortably as part of the global community realizing the significant contribution that our artists and programme offers to the future. We see ourselves as a vessel that supports talented artists by providing a platform to tell their stories, freely express their opinions and to engage with audiences.

For these reasons our space is dynamic, constantly adapting and challenging preconceived ideas and limitations to creative practice. Our spaces often pulse with the energy of dance, poetry and song mirroring the multi-disciplinarity that characterises African Art, as well as lively dialogues around issues that are pertinent and sometimes not so easy to hear.

Our stable boasts iconic names of the likes of Dr Esther Mahlangu, Mam Noria Mabasa, Dr Willie Bester and Pitika Ntuli amongst others. These globally celebrated stalwarts provide a stable foundation for an exciting group of young guards who are swiftly rising from the African Continent.

The Melrose Gallery hosts a programme of solo and group exhibitions each year with well attended openings that are a highlight of the South African arts calendar. We participate in respected art fairs, support many of our artists in terms of biennales and conceptualize and regularly implement important non-commercial exhibitions in association with museums and national galleries.

We pride ourselves in providing a warm and yet professional service to our large and loyal global collectors base.

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