

## REVIEW OF AN EXHIBITION

*“THEN I KNEW I WAS GOOD AT PAINTING” a retrospective by Esther Mahlangu*, curated by Nontobeko Ntombela, held at

Wits Art Museum cnr Jorissen & Bertha str. Braamfontein, Johannesburg

(Exhibition duration 20 November 2024 – 17 April 2025)

Review written by: Lerato Mojapelo

*“Then I knew I was good at painting” a Retrospective* by Esther Mahlangu is a world-wide touring exhibition by renowned international contemporary artist Dr. Esther Mahlangu. Curated by Dr. Nontobeko Ntombela, the exhibition celebrates Mahlangu’s artistic journey that stretches over 70 years. The exhibition showcases over 150 original artworks loaned from global collections, historic and current photographs, a short film and the iconic BMW 525i art car. The retrospective pays homage to her unique approach to art, which is rooted in her Southern Ndebele culture, heritage and life story (Ntombela 2024:2)

Upon entering the gallery space of the exhibition at the Wits Art Museum, the aesthetic appeal of Mahlangu’s work elevates and invites your senses into a rich cultural experience like no other. Mahlangu’s works of brightly colored geometric shapes cover unconventional surfaces such as mannequins, ballroom shoes, beadworks, vases, bottles and the BMW 525i art car that makes its return to South Africa after 3 decades. Dr. Mahlangu’s adaptation to translate her artistic practice beyond traditional surfaces such as canvas’s and walls exhibits her innovative ability to use any surface as a canvas.

As audiences make their way to the Gertrude Posel core gallery, the artistic journey of Dr. Mahlangu that began at the tender age of 10 unfolds into an educational experience that begins with a reproduced model of her home. The reproduced model of her home exhibits Mahlangu’s exceptional mastery of using artistic principles such as symmetry, balance, pattern and rhythm that intersect with her cultural identity and heritage. Dr. Mahlangu’s cultural influenced mastery extends itself to various works on canvas that occupy the entire core gallery space. The various works that come in different shapes and sizes vividly exhibit Mahlangu’s much deserved international acclaim and influence in contemporary art, making her a custodian of the Southern Ndebele culture and heritage.

The curator of the exhibition, Dr. Nontobeko Ntombela successfully accomplishes the visual narrative of Mahlangu’s artistic journey through meticulous consideration of where the works are placed in the gallery space. The artworks that are displayed in the core gallery space are installed in a manner that renders each artwork a sense of individuality that cohesively flows with the next artwork on display. The Retrospective exhibition validates Dr. Mahlangu’s mastery, legacy and boundary-pushing innovative ability in creating art. The exhibition exemplifies her profound impact as an international contemporary artist and her custodianship of the southern Ndebele culture and heritage. Making her a living treasured legend (see below for images).



Figure 1: *Then I knew I was good at painting: A retrospective* by Esther Mahlangu at the Wits Art Museum. Images courtesy of The Melrose Gallery



Figure 2: *Then I knew I was good at painting: A retrospective* by Esther Mahlangu at the Wits Art Museum. Images courtesy of The Melrose Gallery



Figure 3: *Then I knew I was good at painting: A retrospective* by Esther Mahlangu at the Wits Art Museum. Images courtesy of The Melrose Gallery



Figure 4: *Then I knew I was good at painting: A retrospective* by Esther Mahlangu at the Wits Art Museum. Images courtesy of The Melrose Gallery



Figure 5: *Then I knew I was good at painting: A retrospective* by Esther Mahlangu at the Wits Art Museum. Images courtesy of The Melrose Gallery



Figure 6: *Then I knew I was good at painting: A retrospective* by Esther Mahlangu currently on show at the Wits Art Museum. Images courtesy of The Melrose Gallery

