

For Immediate Release

**IZIKO MUSEUMS OF SOUTH AFRICA PRESENTS:**  
***THEN I KNEW I WAS GOOD AT PAINTING:***  
***ESTHER MAHLANGU, A RETROSPECTIVE***



Esther Mahlangu. *Ndebele Abstract*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 180cm diameter

**Cape Town, South Africa, January 31, 2024** – Iziko Museums of South Africa is pleased to announce “*Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting*”: *Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective*, opening February 17, 2024. The exhibition, curated by **Nontobeko Ntombela**, highlights **Dr Esther Mahlangu’s over 50-year-long career and her meteoric rise as a contemporary artist**, earning her global acclaim. The retrospective will be on view at Iziko Museums of South Africa from February 18, 2024, until August 11, 2024. From there it will then begin its global tour, stopping first at **Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa**, before moving to the United States in early 2026. **The Melrose Gallery**, Esther Mahlangu’s global representative was tasked with implementing her Retrospective Exhibition.

Through the language of color and form, the exhibition charts Mahlangu's contribution to contemporary art for close to seven decades. More than 100 artworks have been gathered from global collections. They have been carefully curated alongside historic photographs and a short film. Also included in this exhibition will be the historic return to South Africa of Mahlangu's BMW 525i Art Car for the first time in over 30 years. Mahlangu became the first African and woman to paint a prestigious BMW Art Car in 1991. This diverse collection from Mahlangu's expansive oeuvre which features in "***Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting***": ***Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective***, will offer a comprehensive yet intimate insight into her vast and vibrant career.

*"Mahlangu's journey is a testament to passion, innovation, and resilience,"* **Curator Nontobeko Ntombela** remarks. Continuing, *"The retrospective pays homage to Esther Mahlangu's unique approach to art, which intersects African cultures with modernity and the contemporary. The exhibition celebrates Mahlangu's voice, agency, and pioneering spirit, symbolizing her self-enunciation, self-determination and creativity"* she says.

Recounting how her artistic journey began, Mahlangu often tells the story of being trained by her grandmother and mother in the early 1940s, saying: *"I would continue to paint on the house when they left for a break. When they came back, they would say: 'What have you done, child? Never do that again!' After that, I started drawing on the back of the house, and slowly my drawings got better and better until they finally asked me to come back to the front of the house. Then I knew I was good at painting."* The retrospective exhibition draws its inspiration from Mahlangu's remarkable story of how she discovered her extraordinary artistic talent as a young girl of just 10 years old. It is in this self-assertive stance that the retrospective exhibition is framed, which is conveyed through her own voice and self-positioning.

The retrospective is a landmark achievement for South African art. It recognizes Mahlangu as one of the few South African artists who have had the opportunity to present a Retrospective Exhibition in world-renowned museums. Of the exhibition, **Dr Bongani Ndhlovu, Acting CEO, Iziko Museums of South Africa**, says: *"Iziko Museums is honored to celebrate the living legend, Dr Esther Mahlangu, and to host this colossal showcase where creativity, culture, and aesthetics are fused."* He continues, *"Dr. Mahlangu is a living symbol of triumph against adversity. Her approach to art has inspired generations and is a re-affirmation of calls for Africa-centred innovations."*

Transcending the boundaries of canvas and mural, Mahlangu's work displays an inimitable fluency across diverse mediums, from small, treasured keepsakes, to vast public installations and murals. With its main point of departure in traditional Ndebele practices of wall paintings and beadwork, her artistry finds expression in the most unlikely places, extending to novel surfaces such as sculptures, ceramics and everyday *objet trouvés*. Her unparalleled mastery in transforming space and form invites contemplation on complex themes, ranging from the nexus of art and society to the resonances of historical warfare and land reclamation.

Of the retrospective, **Peter van Binsbergen, CEO of BMW Group South Africa** says "The BMW Group's commitment to this exhibition is a testament to our respect and admiration for Dr Esther Mahlangu's pioneering spirit and remarkable contribution to the world of art. This exhibition not only celebrates the incredible journey and legacy of Mam' Esther but also symbolizes a cherished collaboration that dates back over three decades. We are especially



excited about the return of the BMW Art Car to South African soil – a significant symbol of our shared history and appreciation for art that transcends boundaries.”

*“Painting has always been a part of me. I cannot separate it from myself, and neither would I want to. I look forward to sharing my practice and long and colourful story with you on my upcoming Retrospective Exhibition,”* Dr Esther Mahlangu.

*Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective* has been made possible with the generous support of the National Arts Council and BMW. The celebration of the life and art of Dr Esther Mahlangu will be open to the public from February 18 – August 11, 2024.

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### **About Esther Mahlangu**

Dr Esther Nostokana Nagiyana Nikwambi Mahlangu is a celebrated South African contemporary artist known for her innovative work that pushes boundaries beyond the traditional mural. Widely recognized as one of the most influential artists across generations, Mahlangu began her artistic journey at the age of ten under the guidance of her grandmother and mother, learning the traditional techniques of isiNdebele mural painting. Her contemporary works which span a wide variety of non-traditional surfaces, found objects as well as automobiles, build upon this rich tradition.

Mahlangu’s participation in the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) in Paris, shot her to fame, marking the launch of her transition from a communal practice into her own agency as a contemporary artist. Shortly thereafter, in 1991, she became the first woman artist and African to paint a BMW Art Car. Mahlangu has exhibited in over 20 different countries, sometimes with multiple solo shows in at least seventeen different cities. She has painted murals across eight different countries and participated in residency programmes with institutions like Project Row Houses (2005), L’Associazione Culturale Colonos (2009) & Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (2014). Some of her more significant engagements include Documenta IX (1992), the 5th Biennale of Contemporary Art (2000), the 1st Malindi Biennale (2006), the 3rd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2009) and Art Basel (2023) through her collaborations with BMW Group on the *1991 BMW 525i Art Car* and the *Electric AI canvas* respectively. Mahlangu has also worked on projects with fashion brands like Comme des Garçons (1991), shoe companies Melissa (2009) and EYTYS (2015). She created the Belvedere (RED) bottle design, which helped fund a campaign against HIV/AIDS (2016). Mahlangu’s works are represented in well over 27 public institutions’ collections. And she has been collected by many more private individuals worldwide. She continues her artistic career to this day.

### **About Nontobeko Ntombela**

Nontobeko Ntombela is a member of faculty at the Wits School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Her academic and curatorial work focuses on modern and contemporary South African art, with a particular interest in, but not limited to, early modern Black women artists. Prior to starting her academic career in 2012, Ntombela worked as a curator for more than a decade in organisations such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery (2010- 2020), Durban University Art Gallery (2005-2010), BAT Centre (2001-2005), and Art for Humanity (2000-2001). Some of Ntombela’s most well-known curatorial projects include, *When Rain Clouds Gather: South African Black Women Artist 1940 - 2000* (2022-2023), co-curated with Portia Malatjie at Norval Foundation, *The Burden of Memory* (2019) –



a multiple-site event in the city of Yaoundé Cameroon - co-curated with Rose Jepkorir and Princess Marilyn Douala Bell, *Solo* at the Cape Town Art Fair (2018), *A Fragile Archive* (2013) at JAG, *Spectaculaire* (2013) Frac des Pays de la Loire Carquefou France, MTN New Contemporaries (2010) at the KwaZulu-Natal Society of Art and *From Here to There* (2007) co-curated with Storm van Rensburg at the Association of Visual Arts (AVA) as part of the CAPE07 fringe programme. She is the co-editor of *The Yoni Book*, in collaboration with artist Reshma Chhiba (2019). Ntombela has served on various boards and committees for organizations such as the Department of Arts and Culture, VANSAs Visual Arts Network of South Africa, National Arts Council, KZNSA KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts, Art for Human Rights Trust, Johannesburg Art Gallery, and UNISA Art Gallery. In 2019, the Melrose Gallery invited Ntombela to curate a worldwide touring show of Dr Esther Mahlangu's work, which begins with this exhibition: *Then I knew I was good at painting: Esther Mahlangu, A Retrospective* at Iziko Museums of South Africa in Cape Town.

### **About Iziko Museums of South Africa (Iziko)**

Iziko operates 11 national museums, the Planetarium and Digital Dome, the Social History Centre and three collection-specific libraries in Cape Town. The museums that make up Iziko have their own history and character, presenting extensive art, social, and natural history collections that reflect our diverse African heritage. Iziko is a public entity and public benefit organisation that brings together these museums under a single governance and leadership structure. The organisation allows \*free access to all individuals on commemorative days, (\*excluding the Castle of Good Hope, Groot Constantia and Planetarium and Digital Dome).

Visit our webpage at [www.iziko.org.za](http://www.iziko.org.za), join our online community on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/IzikoMuseums](https://www.facebook.com/IzikoMuseums)), Instagram (@izikomuseumssa) or follow us on Twitter (@Iziko\_Museums) for regular updates on events, news and new exhibitions.

### **About The Melrose Gallery**

The Melrose Gallery is a leading Pan African Contemporary gallery located in Johannesburg, South Africa. The gallery represents established and emerging artists whose voices speak to issues of significance to the Continent of Africa on a global basis. We are passionate about ensuring that the elders who have made a valuable contribution to African Contemporary Art are recognised and continue to be heard. These inspiring stalwarts provide a stable foundation to an exciting young guard of artists who are swiftly emerging from the African Continent and Diaspora to establish themselves globally. We run a curated programme of exhibitions, participate in respected art fairs, support many of our artists in their participation at Biennales and conceptualize and implement significant non-commercial exhibitions in association with leading museums.

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