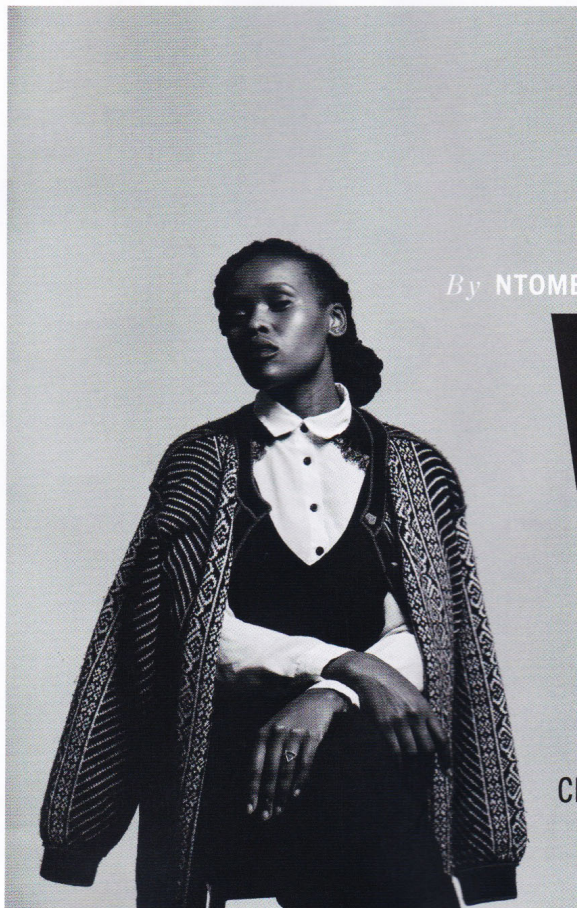




By NTOMBENHLE SHEZI

WONDER WOMEN

This month we get to know three women whose creative work continues to shape and redefine South African pop culture, art and activism

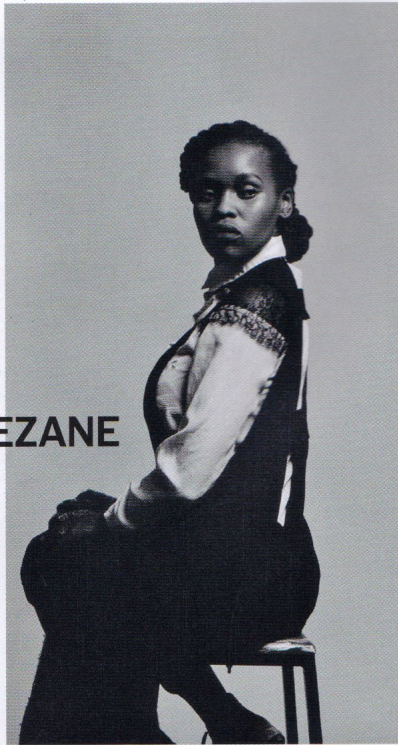
Q&A: SETHEMBILE MSEZANE

Artist Sethembile Msezane explores issues around spirituality, commemoration and African knowledge systems. Part of her work has examined the processes of mythmaking, which are used to construct history, calling attention to the absence of the black female body in both the narratives and physical spaces of historical commemoration. Msezane's work has been showcased at the FNB Art Fair, Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, and more recently, at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in New York.

How have your experiences shaped your thinking and the work? My observation of statues in Cape Town intensified my awareness of the erasure of black women's histories, particularly in public spaces. If young black women don't grow up with positive images of themselves, and all that remains are negative stereotypes, this affects not only their self-image, but also how society sees them. I wasn't comfortable with this. Using my body to highlight women's histories, I did endurance performances in public spaces in relation to other histories, symbols and public holidays. Now, I'm looking to find answers and grow within the spiritual realm, which has always been subtle, yet present in my work. I'm working on a solo with Tyburn Gallery titled *Speaking Through Walls*, which signals a transition and spiritual awakening in South Africa in relation to land.

How do you see yourself developing as an artist? I hope to have a better understanding of my spiritual journey through my practice as an artist, how it can be of service to those who require answers in their own lives and how it can also help me navigate the world around me.

What do you think we need to do as a country to ensure gender equality? Gender, and its norms, is understood to be quite complex in society. To break down these walls of complexity, gender studies, at various stages from early child development schools right through to tertiary education, need to be taught. We also have to account for African cultural or traditional spaces through which a strong sense of gendered identity is formed. Traditional initiation schools for both genders must have regulated courses in gender studies. In this



way, young adults who are being ushered into woman- and manhood not only understand what it means to be an adult in society, but how their presence and power can affect or shape that society. In order to ascertain gender equality, the layers and histories of gendered identities need to be understood.

Five people, dead or alive, with whom you'd love to have a conversation? I think I'd only want *Umvelinqangi* (The Creator). I have a number of questions that neither those dead nor alive can answer. Also, I could ask *Umvelinqangi* to introduce me to more than five people alive and dead! (*laughs*).

Who has been an inspiration in your life? My great-grandmother Gog' Mashange. She passed away while I was very young, but I still have memories of our time together. The two nicknames she gave me highlight her hopes for me, one being an educated woman who can navigate various spaces and the other – a term of endearment signifying our relationship – her rose. We're very much alike: we're both determined women who can be perceived as being harsh at times but, there is truth to our words, even though the delivery may not always be polished. I still feel her presence and acknowledge her in different ways through my work.

What are your key lessons for success? To constantly reflect on yourself, your mistakes and victories. Take the time to speak to mentors in your field, your family, spiritual guides and pray. This holistic awareness of self helps you strategise where you need to be. The second one would be to remember to be thankful. Show your gratitude to people who've helped you along the way. Surprise your mom with a gift for the advice she's given you that helped soothe your worry. Send that e-mail at the end of the year or project, thanking your clients or people you've worked with. Offer tithes or just thank God, if you're religious. Have a thanksgiving for your ancestors – they, too, have your back.

Who is on your top creative women-to-watch list?

- The individual members of iQhiya (Thandiwe Msebenzi, Thulile Gamedze, Sisipho Ngodwana, Asemahle Ntlonti, Charity Kelapile, Bonolo Kavula, Buhlebezwe Siwani, Pinky Mayeng, Lungiswa Gqunta and Bronwyn Katz)
- Tankiso Mamabolo (musician and actress)
- SZA (musician)
- Nicole Amarteifio (producer and director)
- OluTimehin Adegbeye (writer and public speaker)
- Gabi Ngcobo (curator)