

Absa L'Atelier 2021 winners announced

Absa in partnership with the South African National Association for the Visual Arts (SANAVA) proudly announced the four category winners of the 2021 edition of the Absa L'Atelier at an online event hosted on the Absa Art Hotspot.



Group B winning work by Ayobola Kekere-Ekun from Nigeria

Since its inception 35 years ago, Absa L'Atelier has showcased, and continues to invest, in some of Africa's finest young artists between the ages of 21 to 40. This year the competition established itself as the first African art competition to be hosted completely virtually; from entry, submission, and adjudication of the artworks, to hosting a series of masterclasses and a mentorship programme for the 2019 Absa L'Atelier ambassadors, culminating in the online awards ceremony.

After receiving a record number of registrations, hundreds of eligible entries were judged by an independent panel of adjudicators and one Ambassador per group was chosen from the three groups of African countries.

- In Group A (Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia), the winner was Adelheid von Maltitz from South Africa.

- In Group B (Mauritius, Nigeria, Seychelles and Tanzania) the winner was Ayobola Kekere-Ekun from Nigeria.
- In Group C (Botswana, Ghana, Kenya and Namibia) the winner was Blebo Michael Jackson from Ghana.

These artists now take on the title of Absa L'Atelier Ambassador 2021, while the winner in this year's Absa L'Atelier Gerard Sekoto category was Cape Town-based artist Abongile Sidzumo.

The Ambassadors received trophies that depict hands, symbolising the physical manifestation of creation, designed, and produced by established South African artist Roberto Vacarro, while the Gerard Sekoto trophy depicts a bull, representing prosperity and resilience.

The criteria for selecting the Ambassador included technical execution i.e. the artist's expert handling of material and techniques; conceptual and thematic engagement i.e. how they revealed an honest and intellectual reasoning or rationale; freshness of artistic vision within the context of the contemporary African art landscape i.e. how the artist engaged with honest and fresh ways of seeing; as well as aesthetic appeal which implies that the artist must have shown great consideration for visual quality and conceptual concerns, and whether the portfolio of artworks was a cohesive submission carrying the intended message or thematic idea.

Gerard Sekoto Award

Established 17 years ago, the Gerard Sekoto Award goes to a South African artist, aged between 25 and 35 years, who has continued to demonstrate integrity in the quality of their artwork. The Award is made possible by the Embassy of France in South Africa, the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS), which is the cultural arm of the Embassy, and the Alliance Française network in South Africa.

"With our partners Absa and SANAVA, we are proud to support the Gerard Sekoto award and to accompany young artists to share their work both nationally and internationally. We believe in this award which grants a talented young South African artist an amazing opportunity: to expand his or her horizons with a 3-month artistic residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, and, of course, gain greater exposure as a result. The artists are inspired and inspire. They learn, and they teach. They explore, and exhibit, allowing people in France and in South Africa to learn more about their individual style and vision", said Aurelien Lechevallier, who is France's Ambassador to South Africa.

The 2021 Absa L'Atelier Gerard Sekoto category winner Abongile Sidzumo was born in Cape Town, where he currently lives and works. Abongile completed his degree in Fine Arts at the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in 2019. He works with leather offcuts and repurposed materials to create works that reflect and interrogate humanity, the way we co-exist and our relationship with nature. He also revisits memories and connects them to spaces he has lived in as well as the everyday life of marginalised communities.

Leather is often associated with luxury, wealth and power. Through his process of restitching and weaving leather, Abongile proposes that we start thinking about repurposed materials. By his process of stitching, he is connecting to notions of healing trauma and in a sense, his practice also functions as a manner of interrogating the continuous healing of black communities in post-apartheid South Africa.

The adjudicators for this award were acclaimed artist and director at BKHz, Banele Khoza as well as Armelle Dakouo, independent curator and artistic director at AKAA Art & Design Fair.

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Hosting the competition digitally allowed for the removal of any barriers to entry, all the artist required was a smart phone or access to the internet. “With this year’s theme ‘The Act of Art’, we called our continent’s fearless creators to act and to enter. This years’ competition once again provided an opportunity for visual artists to respond and make their voices heard. We are committed to putting the basic building blocks in place to ensure that young artists from across the African continent can reimagine their futures and bring their possibility to life,” said Bayliss.

SANAVA President, Dr Avitha Sooful, commended her partners, Absa, for forging ahead and continuously seeking ways to impact the African visual arts scene even during the ongoing pandemic.

“The Covid-19 pandemic derailed our plans for 2020, but through some innovative thinking we were able to come back stronger this year and we actually have more entries than we have ever had for this competition. I commend the work that our partners, Absa, have done in making sure that African artists continue to reap the rewards of their hard work,” Dr Sooful said.

“We look forward to working with this year’s ambassadors and Gerard Sekoto winner and providing the next generation of young African artists with the support, recognition, and exposure they need to solidify their careers and build their brands,” concluded Bayliss.

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