

Supporting disadvantaged artists through the Grassroots Art Project

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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Poor working conditions, minimum access to beneficial networks and lack of skills and resources for promotion are just a few of the challenges that disadvantaged artists face when aiming to make viable careers from their creativity.

The Grassroots Art Project, in partnership with the [Online Art Shop](#), is an initiative that aims to address these issues by showcasing local disadvantaged artists to a much wider commercial art market in a much more accessible space. Quality print reproductions of the artist's works are created, then displayed and sold via the Online Art Shop amongst more established artists.

The project was founded by Cara Esterhuysen, a fine art photographer, print reproduction specialist and Abongile Ngesi, an emerging disadvantaged artist from Khayelitsha. Currently the project is still in the beginning stages and is raising funds to help sustain and market the project via local crowdsourcing platform [Thundafund](#).



Abongile Ngesi & Cara Esterhuysen

We got in touch with founder Cara Esterhuysen, to find out how they aim to help turn creative talent into sustainable careers.

Can you explain the thoughts behind starting the Grassroots Art Project?

Youth unemployment is contributing to instability in South Africa, causing escalating crime, and a growing social crisis, which is placing an increasing burden on the state fiscus. Undereducated and uneducated young people remain trapped in disadvantaged townships and rural areas, as they have little hope of employment anytime in the future as the formal employment market continues to shed jobs. Yet, there are so many talented young people in these communities that lack the know-how to become self-employed entrepreneurs. The Grassroots Art Project is based on the belief that art

entrepreneurialism is a viable form of self-employment that could provide a decent living.



Yonela Sihle

The South African art community is poorly transformed as disadvantaged artists don't know how to promote themselves and market their work. The Grassroots Art Project creates a conduit between promising artistic talent in disadvantaged areas and the established art community which feeds the art consumption demand. The Grassroots Art Project team believes that given access to the same support and resources that established artists used to build economic success, the disadvantaged artist has a good chance of establishing a following that will lead to self-sufficiency. Since disadvantaged artists live in overcrowded, damp, and leaky shacks, which are not conducive to storing and protecting artworks, original work is seldom in a sellable condition. For this reason, the Grassroots Art Project concentrates on archival grade Giclée print reproductions as damage is cleaned up in the post-production process. Print reproductions make art accessible to the ordinary man on the street, contributing to increasing art appreciation, and expanding the art economy.



Abongile Ngesi



The Grassroots Art Project presents disadvantaged artists work in a high-quality format on the same marketing platforms used by successful artists. This increases exposure to the discerning art consumer, providing opportunities to support socio-economic development through purchase decisions. In this way, the art consumer contributes to addressing unemployment and alleviating poverty. Grassroots Art Project artists, on the other hand, join the mainstream art community which irones out the existing inequity and inequality. Bringing disadvantaged artists work to the public domain gives a voice to a sector of society which is usually forgotten and ignored. The Grassroots Art Project, therefore, plays a significant role in promoting diversity and enriching the South African art, culture, and heritage experience.



Baxolele Gqola

■ ***What would be your ultimate aim with regards to the project?***

As a socio-economic development initiative, the Grassroots Art Project's primary aim is to develop professional artists from disadvantaged areas to transform the South African art community. Art entrepreneurialism will generate self-employment opportunities and once disadvantaged artists have developed a following they will be able to earn a decent living. Flowing from the primary aim, the project's ultimate aim is to create income security through the generation of a perpetual income from print reproduction sales. Therefore the project also aims to contribute towards addressing South Africa's national priorities of unemployment, poverty alleviation, and inequality.

■ ***If you don't achieve the funds you need via Thundafund will you still be pursuing the project?***

Yes, we will be pursuing the project whether we receive funds or not. The Thundafund contribution is earmarked to bring as many artists as possible into the project. The success of the project is dependent on the quality and extent of the marketing campaign to create a demand for the Grassroots Art Project artists' work. For this reason, a significant portion of the funds will be directed towards a comprehensive marketing campaign. The degree of support we generate from the Thundafund initiative will determine how extensively and how rapidly the project gets off the ground.



Masixole Zozi



Yonela Sihle

■ ***What advice would you give to aspiring artists and entrepreneurs?***

Aspiring artists and entrepreneurs should recognise that their talent is a valuable asset that could give them financial freedom. Successful entrepreneurialism requires hard work and perseverance, so hope and optimism are important characteristics to cultivate. Art entrepreneurialism can also be lonely, so it is important to integrate oneself into a community to maintain inspiration and morale. Having a presence amongst the collective is an advantage, as higher visibility generates greater traffic which offers maximum exposure.



Abongile Ngesi

■ ***How exactly will the project work when it comes to recompensating the artists?***

All expenses are borne by the Grassroots Art Project and the artists are paid according to a profit share agreement. The same formula that applies to the established professional artists is used, except that 10% of the artists share is given to the talent scout. The Grassroots Art Project artist progresses to the professional artists' category as soon as they reach a specified income threshold after which the scout fee falls away.

■ ***How do you source the artists and can artists approach you if interested in being part of the project?***

Abongile Ngesi, an emerging artist from Khayelitsha, is the Grassroots Art Project's talent scout. He spreads the word in disadvantaged communities and directs promising artists towards the project. Artists are welcome to approach the Grassroots Art Project directly. Since the project is aimed at developing professional artists, acceptance into the project is via a panel review in order to maintain standards.

For more information or to donate to the Thundafund project go to www.thundafund.com/project/grassroots.

Follow the Grassroots Art Project on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#) . To browse and shop the artist's work visit www.onlineartshop.co.za.

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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