

Helgaard Steyn Prize awarded to Mary Sibande for sculpture

Internationally-acclaimed South African artist, Mary Sibande, has been awarded this year's Helgaard Steyn Prize and prize money of R650,00 for her sculpture *In the Midst of Chaos, There Is Opportunity* that was judged to be the most outstanding to have been exhibited in South Africa in the past four years.



Source: Helgaard Steyn Trust <https://www.helgaardsteynpryse.co.za/eng/>

“The awarded artwork is an outstanding sculptural installation with immense visual impact. It is recognisable as Sibande, while also hinting at new avenues in her artmaking,” says the 2021 adjudicators, Jan van der Merwe of the Tshwane University of Technology, Angela de Jesus of the University of the Free State and Louisemarié Combrink of North-West University, Potchefstroom campus.

“Over the course of her career, Sibande developed an original and personal visual language and iconography in conceptualisation, process, use of material and presentation,” they add.

Sibande says she has formed a symbiotic relationship with her work throughout her career. “I work in telling stories that feed me emotionally, and the people who share their stories,” she says.

Testimony to the power of imagination

In the Midst of Chaos, There is Opportunity, completed in 2017, is a continuation of the well-known Sophie narrative represented repeatedly in her oeuvre. Sophie is her alter ego and a reference to the three generations of the artist's family who worked as domestic workers.

Using a cast of her own body, she is an equestrienne figure dressed in bright red battle garb and surrounded by aggressive mythical animals and a range of female figures on hobby horses that remind of life-sized toy soldiers.

These are elements that echo works such as *The Reign* (2010) and *Right Now* (2015). Sibande's Sophie works present counter-narratives pertaining to, amongst others, the black female body and female domestic work.

It also represents current explorations of the artist's increasingly personal narrative made manifest in her art, where the dream-world of Sophie the domestic worker in various contexts has transformed into a new dream-world: it is an allegory of personal liberation, identity formation, and possibility. While reimagining history, she is also transcending the present and flirting with what may come.

In their commendation, the adjudicators note: "The work is indeed a testimony to the power of the imagination. While the developing status of women in South Africa has always been riddled by violence, oppression and hardship, it is through the resilient qualities of hard work, strength, love, hope and imagination that women find the opportunity to 'write' their own narratives despite the odds or fate."

The work is part of an extension as well as a transcendence of the Sophie narrative anticipated in more recent works.

In the Midst of Chaos, There is Opportunity is on view at SMAC Gallery in Cape Town until mid-February 2022.



Mary Sibande, winner of this year's Helgaard Steyn Prize

About Mary Sibande

Mary Sibande was born in Barberton, South Africa in 1982, and currently lives and works in Johannesburg. She obtained an honours degree from the University of Johannesburg in 2007, after obtaining a diploma in Fine Arts from Witwatersrand Technical College in 2004.

Important highlights in Sibande's career include, among others, the 2017 Smithsonian National Museum of African Arts Award; the University of Johannesburg Alumni Dignitas Award in 2014, and the 2013 Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Arts.

Sibande is also the recipient of several residencies, fellowships and tenures, including the 2018-2019 Virginia C. Gildersleeve Professorship at Barnard College at Columbia University in New York, US, the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC VAL) in Paris, France in 2013, the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (SARF) in Washington, D.C, USA in 2011, and the Cité Internationale des Arts Residency in Paris, France in 2006.

The Helgaard Steyn Award

The Award, presented by the Helgaard Steyn Trust, is given each year for creative work that enriches the South African cultural landscape. Any South African-born artist is eligible for the prize, which is awarded alternately on a four-year cycle in four disciplines – musical composition, painting, literature and sculpture. The work must be accessible to the South African public.

The Helgaard Steyn Trust was established in the estate of Dr JH Steyn (1902-1983) and named after his father, once MPC for Bloemfontein and the youngest brother of MT Steyn, the last president of the former Republic of the Orange Free State.

“I am today honoured and privileged to have been awarded this prestigious prize for my work. My gratitude goes to the Helgaard Steyn Trust for their contribution to the work of repairing historical narratives,” says Sibande.

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