

# DR. ESTHER MAHLANGU

## WHEN HEART AND MIND AGREE

MARCH 15 - MAY 3, 2025

### Opening Brunch Reception

Saturday, March 15, 2025, 11 am - 2 pm

### Special Presentation 12 pm

**Natasha Becker**, Curator of African Art,  
the de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of  
San Francisco

“I paint what is in my heart and what my heart tells me. I also paint what my brain tells me because I know it comes from deep down in the ancestral pools. When heart and mind agree, I know my spirit is in the right place.”

– Dr. Esther Mahlangu, in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in *Esther Mahlangu: To Paint Is In My Heart* (2025, Thames & Hudson).

Jenkins Johnson Gallery is pleased to present *When Heart and Mind Agree*, a solo exhibition of legendary South African artist and cultural ambassador Dr. Esther Mahlangu. The exhibition opens Saturday, March 15, from 11 am to 2 pm, with a presentation by fellow South African Natasha Becker, Curator of African Art, de Young Museum, Fine Art Museums of San Francisco.

In 2008, archeologists discovered paint-making kits in Blombos Cave, South Africa. These kits were estimated



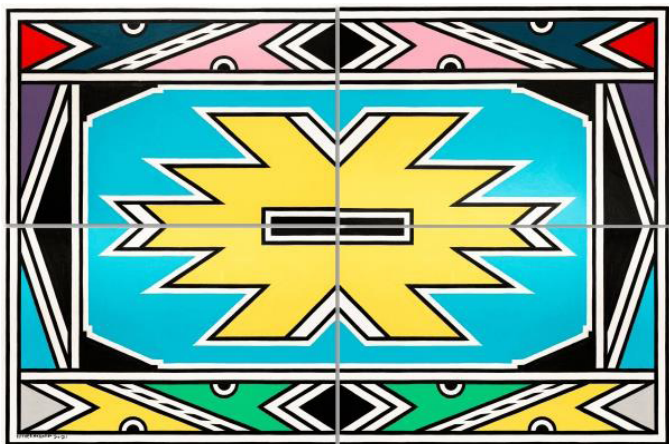
Dr. Esther Mahlangu. Photo: Patrick McMullan.

to be approximately 100,000 years old. Until the Blombos artifacts were found, experts believed that human creativity emerged just 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. The paint kit that was found in South Africa is a testament to the ancient and vital essence of human creativity, and it is important to Esther Mahlangu’s story, a national treasure of South Africa.

Dr. Esther Mahlangu (b. 1935) was taught painting by her mother and grandmother, as is the tradition of the Ndebele people of South Africa. The Ndebele are known for their distinctive painted homes, each covered in vibrant, geometric murals. These designs are composed and maintained by women of the household and are imbued with specific but elusive meaning—secret codes to share personal prayers, emotional journeys, and collective values.

Mahlangu has maintained the discipline for more than 70 years: painting freehand, without the use of a straight edge or prior sketches, utilizing a chicken feather brush. The philosophy of Ndebele mural painting emphasizes clean lines, rhythm, symmetry, balance, and contrasting but harmonized colors. Growing more colorful and complex with the advent of contemporary paints, Ndebele murals synthesized traditional techniques with new material to create a culturally unique position on “modernity,” with Mahlangu at the forefront of these innovations.

Mahlangu’s transition from mural painting to working on canvas was a bold new direction, introducing the work to new audiences outside South Africa. As her practice



Dr. Esther Mahlangu, *Ndebele Abstract*, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 94.5 x 141.75 inches (240 x 360 cm).



Dr. Esther Mahlangu, *Ndebele Abstract*, 2025, Acrylic on GRP, 31.5 x 15.75 x 15.75 inches (80 x 40 x 40 cm)

has grown, Mahlangu has further explored how sculptural surfaces hold the potential for her painting, ranging from abstract three-dimensional forms to mundane household objects, all surfaces holding aesthetic potential unbounded. In addition, Mahlangu remained committed to the mural practice, continuing to explore the art form with projects such as the Serpentine Gallery outdoor mural, on view through September 28, 2025; as well as the current Louvre Abu Dhabi video mural, on view through May 25, 2025. At night visitors can enjoy the stunning work *Projection of harmony* against the museum’s architecture.

Mahlangu gained international recognition in 1989 when she participated in the landmark exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, France. Subsequently, in 1991, Mahlangu was selected as the first woman and first African to participate in the BMW “Art Car” program. The program began in 1975 with Alexander Calder, and continued in subsequent years with Stella, Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Rauschenberg, among others; Mahlangu’s car was thereafter shown at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C., and has traveled extensively to museums around the world. The program continues to this day, and most recently featured Julie Mehretu.

Continuing her storied career, in 2024 Mahlangu participated in the Venice Biennale, and her retrospective opened at the Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, following its debut at the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town. A new publication, *Esther Mahlangu: To Paint Is In*

*My Heart*, featuring contributions by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Azu Nwagbogu, was released in January 2025 by publisher Thames & Hudson. Forthcoming, a multi-venue retrospective titled *Esther is Here! Esther Mahlangu and the Ndebele Painting Tradition*, curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah and organized by the American Federation of the Arts (AFA).

Additional global presentations include Documenta IX (1992), the 5th Lyon Biennale (2000), the 3rd Moscow Biennale (2009), where her work was presented at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, and the 60th Venice Biennale (2024). She held institutional exhibitions in more than 20 countries, including the British Museum, London, UK; Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., USA, and Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain. Mahlangu’s works are in international permanent collections, including Centre Pompidou, Paris; South Africa National Gallery, Iziko Museum, Cape Town; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Pérez Art Museum, Miami, FL; and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, VA. Mahlangu has received numerous awards for her lifetime contributions to the arts, including being inducted as Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters in France. Turning 90 this year, Mahlangu continues to live and work in Mpumalanga province, South Africa.

“While I may be seen as a pioneer, I am simply carrying on the traditions that have been entrusted to me,” Mahlangu explained, “My innovations are a natural progression of the ancestral knowledge passed down through generations. We rejoice for those who have paved the way for us in life.”



Dr. Esther Mahlangu, *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, 2024. Serpentine Galleries, North Garden, London, UK. 2024-25. Photo: George Darrell.





Natasha Becker

**About Natasha Becker’s presentation**

On Saturday, March 15, at 12 pm, during the opening reception, we will be hosting a special presentation by Natasha Becker, curator of African Art at the deYoung Museum, of the Fine Art Museums, San Francisco. This presentation will further detail Mahlangu’s history and the context around Mahlangu’s practice.

Natasha Becker is the inaugural Curator of African Art at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. With a deep commitment to changing how African art is seen and understood, Becker oversees the Museum’s collection of African art, curating exhibitions that highlight the continuous evolution of African artistic traditions. Since her appointment in 2020, Becker has energized the Arts of Africa gallery with a series of transhistorical exhibitions that position contemporary artists within the broader history of African art represented in the collection. This began with *Lhola Amira: Facing the Future* (December 2022 – May 2024) and continues with *Leilah Babirye: We Have a History* (on view through October 2025). She is dedicated to expanding the Museums arts of Africa collection, acquiring works that reflect the global significance of African art. Recent additions include remarkable artworks by artists like Yinka Shonibare, Lhola Amira, Elias Sime, Ranti Bam, William Kentridge, Ivy Brandie Chemutai Ng’ok, Paulo Nazareth, bringing

new voices and perspectives to the collection.

Originally from South Africa, Becker’s work has always been driven by a passion for art from Africa. She has spent over a decade working across Cape Town and New York City, developing a rich expertise in the presentation of modern and contemporary African art, as well as art from the broader African diaspora. As an independent curator, she has organized numerous exhibitions and international initiatives, creating opportunities for both established and emerging voices to be heard on the global stage. Her professional journey reflects her belief in collaboration and innovation. She co-founded Assembly Room, a curatorial platform in New York City, and The Underline Show in Johannesburg, both of which fostered curatorial collaboration and challenged traditional modes of exhibition-making. Previously, she served as Assistant Director for Mellon Initiatives in Global Art History at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, where she advanced scholarship on global art histories and championed curatorial practice as a mode of inquiry. Becker holds a Master’s degree in History from the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and has furthered her studies in the history of art at Binghamton University in New York.

*When Heart and Mind Agree* opens Saturday, March 15, 2025, from 11 am to 2 pm, at Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco. Installed at the former McEvoy Foundation space at 1150 25th Street, a 6000sqft venue, the exhibition remains on view through May 3, 2025. The exhibition will be open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10am - 6pm. For more information please contact the gallery at [press@jenkinsjohnsongallery.com](mailto:press@jenkinsjohnsongallery.com). All photos courtesy Jenkins Johnson Gallery.



Dr. Esther Mahlangu, *Untitled*, 2024, Acrylic on canvas, 19.75 x 63 in (50 x 160 cm)

