

AFRICAN ARTISTS CAN BRING SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY TO EUROPE

Nomaza Nongqunga Coupez with her company Undiscovered Canvas is promoting African art in Europe, especially in France, where she has been based for the past 10 years. She was also a member of the Presidential Council for Africa CPA, initiated by President Emmanuel Macron, and she advised him in bridging the gap with Africa through culture.

You just returned from Nigeria, from Lagos to be more precise. What is your impression?

Lagos without a doubt is the heart of Africa, especially for the creative industries, so I went there to investigate some future collaboration. It's my objective to exhibit my artists not only in France but also in Lagos that represents an economy that is growing, with a population that is very cultured. Therefore, I talked to potential partners and I'm proud to say that it will start happening from next year.

Originally, you come from South Africa and on your website, it says you are promoting art from there. Does that mean you now focus on entire Africa?

I was born in the Eastern Cape, but I grew up in the Free State as my dad worked in the mines. I studied Biomedical Technology and later on I worked as a Medical Representative for Novonordisk. I moved to France in the age of 28. To be honest, when I arrived here, I had no interest in doing what I was doing before. I wanted to redefine myself. I was quite lucky, when we arrived, we lived in a small village on the mountain side next to Avignon. Almost immediately after I arrived the famous Avignon theatre festival started. It's located in the street everywhere and it became evident to me what impact culture has on the economy. Within a day Avignon changed from a small town that was literally dead to a place where thousands of people from all over the world filled the streets and all the restaurants and shops were crowded. All the artists that also came from all over the world were able to perform in front

of these people. For me it was a revelation! I also realized that African artists were very few and not represented enough, this is when the idea of Undiscovered Canvas was born. I thought with more representation, France and Europe could see more African narratives, and young artists from the continent could have a bit of the European market share.

The idea, of Undiscovered Canvas, already emerged nine years ago. But it took me five years to really get started. The reason was when I arrived, I didn't speak any French and had not worked here, didn't know the French culture and the French market. I first had to take certain steps. But when I was ready to go, I was able to really contribute to the French market. The idea was to provide my service to all African artists. You must know, South Africa is a "pool"



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where people are living from all parts of Africa, especially from Zimbabwe, Tanzania and even Nigeria. The artists in South Africa are coming from all over the continent. Therefore, it was easy to take a wider approach.

The artists from these countries have huge potential but no budget to travel. They have the capacity to bring something to Europe that's extraordinary!

Obviously, it was worth the effort. You were an official part of the Macron Africa initiative. How did this come about? Yes, I was part of the CPA until last June, where I was asked to work on the Africa2020, a cultural initiative that came from the suggestions of the CPA. Last year, I travelled to Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Ethiopia, talking to prominent businessmen and women, and discussing the President's vision on bridging the gap between France and different countries in Africa, by inviting African creatives to showcase their creativity and tell their own stories to the French population in 2020. This came about through my work, as I was in Paris visiting ambassadors from different African countries. There I met someone who was assigned by the President to bring together a group of young individuals that could give advice to the President

on contemporary Africa. He wanted people with a link to the continent that also were rooted in France. I had that experience since I had already been educating the French Market through my events in the South of France and had organized my first exhibitions in South Africa where, of course, I also talked about the opportunities in France. It's an honor and privilege to help in this matter and it was a big boost to my business.

There seems to be quite an interest in African art here in Europe. Please, describe the opportunities you see for Africa.

There sure is! There are predictions that it will become the next big thing for the next 10 years. If we look at the statistics, there is more money in the creative industries than in automotive in Europe. Globally, creative industries generate about 2,250 billion USD. It employs over 30 million people globally. Asia - Pacific is the biggest market with about 33 percent, followed by Europe with 32 percent. And there is Africa with only less than 1 percent. There are reasons for that: It's a highly fragmented market that to this point made it difficult to grow. And there are a lot of issues to solve -from Policy making to intellectual rights issues



that need to be tackled by the governments. Regardless, the creative industries are the ones creating the most jobs—especially for the youth. And also for women, that are the drivers of the creative industries in Africa.! With less than 1 % market share Africa is under performing, meaning, there is huge space for growth in Africa.

You are already doing well with your exhibitions here in France?

The market is big. Europeans consume the creative industries. There needs to be an element of education to understand the African cultures to create understanding for the modernity that this art also has. That's the biggest challenge! Now I get interest from the collectors and I am growing young African artists to be bankable. Yes, the European market is important for me, but I'm aware that Africa collectors are growing and that I need to invest in showcasing African artists in Africa, because as a creative your biggest marketplace needs to be your local market. So, I am giving my attention to both continents in growing and working together.

What are your next goals?

In Europe buying art is a form of investment. Undiscovered Canvas is currently working on establishing that we are capable to find the right talent, to identify and to develop the right program to make them grow. If artists are

socialized within an environment, they are used only to be creative within this environment. You must take them out of this environment to make them grow. I bring artists into Europe so they can learn new techniques and be inspired by the European culture. The more that happens the more interesting they get for the collectors. Another important issue for us at this point is the art advisory to help identifying new trends.

What is the role of the diplomatic community to support your work?

They have a huge role. That was the reason why I went to Paris: to talk to them! They can provide a widely visible platform for artists to express themselves. That makes them very important for us. Another thing is, if we arrive in a new country, we know nobody, but we have the energy and ambition. Next thing is networking because they can provide the connections. Networking is more important than financial assistance. Therefore, it's important in the diaspora to talk to them and see how they can help when we create events and exhibitions. For instance, when going to South Africa I asked my ambassador what companies are available to support my exhibition. In return, we can be part of their events, representing the African cultural diversity and become informal ambassadors of our countries!

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