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SimilART: Illustrating Issues Faced in the Black Communities of America and South Africa
through Mary Sibande's 'Sophie' figures

Culture can be expressed as the similarities of social behavior, habits, religion, and language shared by individuals in a group. With over 3800 cultures across the globe, individuals have varying experiences. Art connects these cultures by visually depicting objects and experiences. Even with language barriers, people from around the world can understand experiences faced by a single culture. Take, for example, South Africa and America. These two countries have very different languages, religions, and belief systems; however, they share a similar historical background in the black communities. Non-white communities have been oppressed by white colonizers which continued to affect the group after the end of the colonization period. With that said, black communities of both South Africa and America share a similar historical background by facing issues of segregation, discrimination, and oppression of women. Mary Sibande, a South African-based artist, personifies these issues and more in her 'Sophie' figures. Sibande's Sophie figures are sculpted figure cast from the artist own body to resemble a lifelike figure. Sibande combines her interest with both fashion and fine arts to create the largerthan-life dresses Sophie is dressed in. For some pieces, Sibande embodies Sophie by wearing the dresses and photographing herself. By doing so Sibande is able to better

communicate her story through Sophie. SimilART displays Sibande's 'Sophie' figures and the history behind them and connects them to the African American community (2008 – current).

Mary Sibande (b. 1982, Barberton, South Africa) is a South African based sculptor who works with life-sized, multi-media installations. Sibande received her degree in Fine Arts at Witwatersrand Technikon in 2004. In 2007, Sibande completed her second bachelor's degree from the University of Johannesburg. As a part of her thesis project Sibande was challenged to create a piece that reflected her history.¹ Since Sibande was born and raised in the later years of the Apartheid era (1948 – 94), it greatly inspired her due to its impact on her family and culture. Sibande was raised by her mother and grandmother who worked as domestic workers during Apartheid. Sibande was motivated by the women in her life and created Sophie. Sophie is the sculpted figure casted from Sibande's own body to resemble a life-like figure. Sophie, who takes on several different forms, is always depicted with her eyes closed to show the dream-like state she is forever casted in. In her first solo exhibition, *I Came Apart at the Seams* (Oct 2019 – Jan 2020, United Kingdom), Sibande used abundant fabric, muted colors and her position as a curator-artist to transcend viewers of varying cultures into a similar mindset. Specifically, this research paper will look at similar issues faced by the black communities of America and South Africa as they are exemplified in Sibande's work.

In order to better understand the comparison between South Africa and America, it is necessary to understand the historical background of the Black communities. In the mid-17th century, a Dutch trading company established a halfway station in the southernmost part of Africa. The station, later known as Cape Town, was used to grow fresh food to give to sailors to

¹"Artist's Perspective with Mary Sibande." In an interview with the Frist Museum, located in Nashville Tennessee, Sibande talks about her life as an artist and the inspiration behind her works

prevent scurvy. The station remained under European control until the mid-18th century. The decade long period of European colonization introduced western practices such as slavery and capitalism to the region which set the political foundation of Apartheid.² Apartheid, meaning “apartness” in Afrikaans, was a legal system aimed to cause disparities and inequality among the Black community. Even though South Africa’s population consisted of 80% Blacks at the start of Apartheid, the South African National Ruling Party consisted of majority white males.³ The lack of inclusion in the ruling party easily allowed laws to pass which hindered the progression of the Black community. Apartheid not only limited the community physically but as well as psychologically. Laws were put in place which limited the interaction between races by placing a ban on interracial relationships, limiting funds for education in the Black community and limiting access to public spaces. In addition to minimal contact with other races, the Black community within itself was divided. Political boundaries were put in place which broke down once strong tribal organizations.⁴ By dividing up the community into individualized aspects, Blacks were unaware of the depth of disparities among themselves as compared to their white counterparts. This physiological warfare on the Black community allowed for the extended period of oppression.

Even though South Africa is located thousands of miles away from America the two cultures share similar historical backgrounds. Slavery in America was prominent since the arrival of the first slave in the early 15th century. Slavers traded rum and other materials for African slaves who were brought back to the British colonies in present-day American.⁵ African slaves

² Oliver, Erna and Oliver, Willem H. “The Colonization South Africa: A Unique Case.” *HTS: Theological Studies*, Issue 3 (2017). 4-5.

³ Lemon, Anthony. *Apartheid In Transition*. Great Britain: Gower Publishing Company. 1987. 47.

⁴ Lemon, 49

⁵ Schneider, Dorothy and J. Schneider, Carl, *Slavery in America*. (New York: Facts on File), 1-2

were uprooted from their homeland and placed in an unknown foreign culture. Slaves were stripped of their name, culture and any other individualized qualities and treated as property. They were forced to work long hours in the extreme southern climate with no pay. Due to the language barrier, many slaves were forced to work on farms either as fields hands, house servants or other skilled work.⁶

Slavery in America lasted until 1863 when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring the freedom of enslaved people.⁷ Even though Black Americans were legally considered free, the community still faced racism and discrimination. Many southern white Americans had convinced themselves that Blacks could never be equal with their white counterparts so many southern states put in place laws which restricted everyday life for Blacks. Black Codes mimicked slavery by stating Blacks had to work under a white employer, typically a former slaveowner. After the establishment of the 14th amendment⁸, Black Codes were replaced with Jim Crow Laws in the South in 1877. Jim Crow Laws restricted African Americans access to public experiences from segregated benches to railroad carts. Like the impact of Apartheid, Jim Crow laws psychically caged the Black community. African Americans feared for their life if they accidentally offended a white person. Unspoken rules such as stepping off the sidewalk if a white person approached or not to making eye contact with a white person were instilled in the mindset of African Americans. The Black community feared for their lives, so they lived under the oppression of white Americans for an extended time period.

⁶ Schneider and Schneider, 110-121

⁷ Harris, Duchess with Radley, Gail. *The Impact of Slavery in America*. (Minneapolis: Abdo Consulting Group). 12

⁸ 14th Amendment gave US citizenship to former and restricted states from denying black citizens their rights (Harris and Radley, 16)

Throughout history, women have experienced social disparities with limited job options and lower pay than their male counterparts. This pattern was seen in both the Apartheid era in South Africa and segregation in America in the mid-20th-century. In both these places, many members of the black community, especially the elderly, women and children, found it difficult to find employment or could only work as field, domestic or factory workers. South African and American women were mainly employed as domestic workers in majority white homes.^{9 10} The large percentage of women in domestic work shows the limited job availability in the Black community.

In addition to limited options, the location of jobs was very restricted. In South Africa, Blacks were forced to move to designated “reserves” in order to keep the notion of a ‘white’ nation. The ‘reserves’ were far away from the urban city, so workers had to travel a long distance.¹¹ Comparably, African American women were mainly employed as domestic workers in the South. Even though white American domestic workers could be employed around the country, African American women were limited to jobs in the South.¹² White Americans in the North feared that African Americans would take jobs away from them. Therefore, many white Americans would not employ Black domestic workers in the north to keep job availability open to white Americans. This limitation not only physically restricted Black women but prevented social progression. African American women were typically employed by former slaveowners who had a similar mindset to before the emancipation.

⁹United Nations Centre Against Apartheid. “The Effects of Apartheid on the Status of Women in South Africa.” *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 1). 11–20. 1978

¹⁰ Hannah Branch, Enobong, *Opportunity Denied* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 49-51.

¹¹ United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, 13

¹² Branch, 53

Mary Sibande takes up these themes of discrimination and oppression of women in her work *They Don't Make Them Like They Use To* (as seen in figure 1). The piece is a digital photograph of Sibande dressed as Sophie. For some pieces, Sibande liked to embody Sophie by wearing the grand dresses and posing. By doing so Sibande can better communicate her story to the audience.¹³ In the print, Sophie is shown in a grand royal blue ball gown styled in the Victorian Era aesthetic with modifications. The top mimics a classic button-down blouse with a white collar decorated with Broderie Anglaise – an embroidery technique

that originated around the 16th century in Europe. The sleeves are rolled up to her elbows with an exaggerated white cuff. On top of the two-layered ball gown skirt, Sophie is dressed in a white working maid apron. The bottom layer spills from under the top layer and flows onto the floor. Sophie, with her eyes closed, is looking down and shown sewing the commercialized superman logo onto a piece of fabric made from her dress.

The piece was a part Sibande's first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom titled *I Came Apart at the Seams*. The exhibition was on view at the Somerset House starting October 3rd, 2019, until January 5th, 2020. The Somerset House is set in the large Neoclassical styled complex designed by Architect William Chambers in the 18th century. Standing in the heart of the capital,



Figure 1. *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To* (2008)

Digital Print

41 1/10 x 27 2/5 in

¹³ "Artist's Perspective with Mary Sibande."

the building functions as a premiere working arts center where many public events are held outside in the beautiful courtyard. Throughout the year, several temporary exhibitions are showcased within the building which recently have touched on issues of climate change and the Black presence. The original function of the Somerset House was intended as living quarters, so the building does not take on the traditional white cubed exhibition space. Rooms kept their original layout and artwork is placed throughout. Sibande's exhibition included both two and three-dimensional pieces from her three phases carefully arranged within the Terrace Rooms in the south wing. While some of the three-dimensional pieces consumed an entire room, digital prints were placed at varying heights around the rooms. In *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To*, the digital print was placed above a fireplace, so viewers had to gaze upward.¹⁴

In an interview with Isabella Rose Celeste Davey, Sibande speaks about the intended interruption of her solo exhibition, *I Came Apart at the Seams*. Sibande wanted to show the multiple phases of Sophie in one location to show the phases of the Apartheid era. As Sibande progressed as an artist, she altered Sophie to reflect the state-of-mind of the South African people with her usage of color. The blue phase (2008-13) depicted the rise of the Apartheid system. The purple phase (2013-17) shows the period of revolution against the government. Lastly, the red phase (2017-current) shows the anger of the South African people after the fall of Apartheid.¹⁵ Each phase consisted of multiple two- and three-dimensional pieces which demanded the viewers' attention. Sibande explains the importance of communicate this experience with others. Sibande said "...it is impossible to represent the struggles and desires of an entire country,

¹⁴ Ibrahim, Hodan. *Creative Careers Academy Insights: Mary Sibande*. Somerset House. 2019. <https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/blog/creative-careers-academy-insights-mary-sibande>

¹⁵ Davey, Isabella Rose Celeste. "South African Artist Mary Sibande Talks on the Power of the Black Female Body." *Love Magazine UK*. 2019.

especially one as fraught with political and social turmoil as South Africa, I have always tried to be true to my own history, and ... I know I am not alone in the challenges I face.”¹⁶ Sibande researched other cultures who experienced similar issues for inspiration. In the interview with the Frist Museum¹⁷, Sibande spoke about her trip to America during Black History Month. There, she learned about the struggle and triumph African Americans faced which later inspired a piece modeled after Madame CJ Walker, the first female African American millionaire. Sibande uses Sophie to communicate the issues faced by not only the South African people but other cultures as well.

Sibande uses excess fabric in the dresses to transport herself to a neutral space by eliminating boundaries between artwork, space and viewer. In the piece *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To*, Sibande who is dressed as Sophie blurs the line between the artwork and space with the blue dress consuming a majority of her body. Sibande uses a large quantity of fabric when creating Sophie's extravagant dresses which spill out and fill the space around her. Sibande designed and constructed Sophie's dress and then photographed herself embodied as the figure. For some instances, Sibande liked to embody Sophie to give her a more life-like presence. By performing as Sophie in her work, Sibande eliminates the line between artwork and space around it.

Sibande's usage of muted colors further eliminates the line between artwork and viewer. In the print, Sophie stands in a one-toned light grey room alone. The dress covers a majority Sophie's body, only leaving her face, neck and arms to be seen by the viewer. The muted grey background along with the limited view of Sophie's body communicates to the viewer that the

¹⁶ Davey, Isabella Rose Celeste

¹⁷ "Artist's Perspective with Mary Sibande."

dress tells the story. In the article, "Sartorial Excess in Mary Sibande's 'Sophie'", Mary Corrigan discusses the relationship between mannequin display and consumers.¹⁸ By definition, a mannequin is 'a form representing the human figure used especially for displaying clothes.'¹⁹ Typically, retailers use solid-colored mannequins to allow viewers to see themselves in the clothing which can be summarized as the practice of embodiment. Mannequins act as a mirror where consumers can visualize themselves in the place of the mannequin wearing the clothing.²⁰ Sibande uses this theory in Sophie by eliminating her presence from the figure. Sibande purposely darkens her skin in the print to mirror the dark matte Fiberglass material. The dark color makes it harder to see individualized features on Sophie's face resulting in the illusion of a faceless mannequin. Sibande mimics the practice of neutral colors to allow her audience to envision themselves in Sophie. Like a consumer entering a store, viewers enter the mindset of Sophie and become an active part in the installation as intended by Sibande.

Sibande's ability to blur the lines between artwork and space with her usage of dress fabric allows the audience to experience Sophie's triumph over women's oppression. Instead of creating everyday simple dresses commonly seen in modern times, Sibande takes inspiration from the grand colonial style dresses of the Victorian era. Victorian style dresses typically consisted of structured hoop skirt overlaid with layers of tulle and expensive fabric. In the article, "Dressed to Thrill: The Victorian Postmodern and Counter-Archival Imagining in the Works of Mary Sibande", author, Alexandra Dodd, speaks about the influence of Victorian style on Sibande's work. Sibande overcomes the suppression of women in her culture by placing Sophie

¹⁸ Corrigan, Mary. "Sartorial excess in Mary Sibande's 'Sophie'." *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies*, no. 2, 146-164.

¹⁹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "mannequin," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mannequin>.

²⁰ Engdahl, Emma, and Marie Gelang. "The Changing Ethos and Personae of Shop-Window Mannequins within Consumer Culture: Expressions of Gendered Embodiment." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 19, no. 1

in a Victorian-era dress worn by the higher-class white women. Dodd describes Sophie as “a working-class black heroine, whose potency lies in the symbolic strides she takes for contemporary feminist, class and race struggle.”²¹ The dress is royal blue which is the color worn by the hard laborers in the streets of South Africa. Even though Sophie is shown doing domestic work saved for maids, she is dressed in a grand outfit made mostly for white women to counteract the action. Sibande’s decision to scale Sophie to life size and dress her in these grand dresses establishes a strong presence which viewers cannot ignore.²²

In conclusion, the combination of color and fabric usage, Sibande is able effectively transmit herself with the use of color and dress fabric to a neutral space. The lack of color within Sophie, makes it difficult to viewers to pick out individualized features giving the illusion of a mannequin. The over usage of dress fabric makes it difficult for viewers to distinguish the boundary between Sophie and the space around her. Lastly, the elimination of art-and-viewer boundaries further allows viewers to be encapsulated in Sophie. Sibande can communicate to viewers from varying cultures and background. By eliminating cultural barriers, the world can become more connected.

Thank you

²¹ Dodd, Alexandra. “Dressed to Thrill: The Victorian Postmodern and Counter-Archival Imaginings in the Work of Mary Sibande.” *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 24, no. 3. 467–74.

²² Dodd, 470

Exhibition Words

Introduction

Culture can be expressed as the similarities of social behavior, habits, religion, institutions, and language shared by individuals in a group. With over 3800 cultures across the globe, individuals have varying experiences. Art connects these cultures by visually depicting objects and experiences. Even with language barriers, people from around the world can understand experiences faced by a single culture. Take, for example, South Africa and America. These two countries have very different languages, religions, and belief systems; however, they share a similar historical background in the black communities. Non-white communities have been oppressed by white colonizers which continued to affect the group after the end of the colonization period. With that said, black communities of both South Africa and America share a similar historical background by facing issues of segregation, discrimination, and oppression of women. Mary Sibande, a South African-based artist, personifies these issues and more in her 'Sophie' figures.

Sibande's Sophie figures are sculpted figure cast from the artist own body to resemble a life-like figure. Sibande combines her interest with both fashion and fine arts to create the larger-than-life dresses Sophie is dressed in. For some pieces, Sibande embodies Sophie by wearing the dresses and photographing herself. By doing so Sibande is able to better communicate her story through Sophie.

Instruction

The SimilART Exhibition is intended to be interactive. Images placed around Sibande's work are historical pictures taken from South Africa and America. The images, though

taken from different locations and years, eerily mirror each other. From there, viewers can connect the issues faced in South Africa and America to other cultures around the world. Please take a moment to walk through the exhibition. As you walk through, try to connect the issues personified by Sibande's 'Sophie' figures to other cultures from around the world. Take a sticky note to write your answer and post it on the wall.

SimilART is intended to bridge cultures through their shared historical ties.

Blue Phase

“They Don’t Make Them Like They Use To”

In her blue phase, Sibande explores Sophie as a domestic housemaid. During the apartheid era, many black South African women were employed as domestic house workers. Sibande experienced this firsthand with her mother and grandmother working as maids in white homes. Sophie, molded after the women in her family, is wearing a blue colonial-style dress. Sibande uses a couple of visual elements in this piece to illustrate empowerment. Despite the deceiving name, royal blue was the color of the uniform worn by the hard laborers. The color along with the white apron and headscarf signify that Sophie is a working woman; however, the dress style is typically worn by higher-class women. Combining these two elements, Sophie can be seen as something bigger than just a housemaid. She is a symbol of overcoming the years of hardship Apartheid has on black South Africans.

In both the Apartheid and Post-slavery eras, black women were kept in a lower class than anybody else. By not allowing a group of people to advance themselves in society, generations

afterward will have a disadvantage. Can you think of any other culture where a group had (or still has) limited job opportunities?

Purple Phase

“A Terrible Beauty is Born”

In her purple phase, Sibande was inspired by the anti-apartheid movements in South Africa. In 1948, the White Afrikaner National Party took control of the region and established the Apartheid system. The apartheid - meaning Apartness - was a system that legally and mentally caged black South Africans. Blacks were denied basic rights to public spaces and equal education. If they were found breaking a law, they could suffer beatings, jail time, and even death. After suffering two years of the unfair system, the black community began to protest and fight the unfair treatment. The color purple became a symbol of power for the African people. South African police would use colored dye to spray onto protestors so they could be identified and arrested later. In the beginning, the African people protested with peaceful marches but they were met with violence from the South African police. The peaceful approach changed in 1976 when police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration, later known as the Soweto Uprising, killing over 50 people, most of whom were children. The massacre shocked the nation and people became angry causing the country to enter a war-like state. In *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, Sibande illustrates the shift in the African people. Pouring from Sophie's womb, purple tentacles spill out onto the floor and fill the room. The limbs rip the apron and headscarf from Sophie, symbolizing the change in the mindset of the people. Instead of bowing her head in contentment, Sophie is looking upward to challenge the government.

Throughout history, protests have jump-started the path to change and equality for many cultures. The Civil Rights Movement started the path to equality for African Americans. Are there any other cultures you can think of who's had (or has) movements for equal rights?

Red Phase

“The Locus”

In her red phase, Sibande personified the raw emotions felt by the African people. In an interview with the Frist Museum for her feature exhibition, Blue Purple Red, Sibande speaks on the meaning behind this piece. In African culture, the combination of the heart and color red represents the source of courage as well as frustration. The color red symbolizes anger while the heart symbolizes the source of all emotions. After the end of the apartheid era, the African people still faced disparities as compared to their white counterparts. Even though the apartheid system was abolished, black South Africans still had to fight for equality due to years of low-paying jobs and a lack of education. Sibande illustrates the emotions felt by the African people due to the years of mental oppression. Enclosed in an all-red background, Sophie is holding her heart in an outstretched arm dressed in all red. Her red braids encapsulate her head to form a helmet of protection. With the mixture of color along with the symbolization, viewers can see the origination of the anger from the South African people.

In times of high pressure, People tend to think with their heart instead of their mind. After the assassination of Civil Rights Leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., African Americans rioted in the street. Sadden and hurt by the action, black Americans' anger of the moment overtook them. Can you think of a group where the anger of the moment changed the course of the movement?

About the Artist: Mary Sibande

Mary Sibande is a South African- based sculptor, photographer, and visual artist. Sibande was born on April 11th, 1982 in Barberton, South Africa. Sibande received her degree in Fine Arts at Witwatersrand Technikon in 2004. In 2007, Sibande completed her second bachelor's degree from the University of Johannesburg. As a part of her thesis project, Sibande was challenged to create a piece that reflects her history of herself. Sibande was born and raised in the later years of the Apartheid era. The Apartheid era greatly inspired her due to its impact on her family and culture. Sibande was raised by her mother and grandmother who worked as domestic workers during Apartheid. Sibande was inspired by the women in her life and created 'Sophie'. Sophie is the sculpted figure cast from Sibande's own body to resemble a life-like figure. Sibande combines her interest with both fashion and fine arts to create the larger-than-life dresses Sophie is dressed in. Sibande's figures are categorized in three distinct phases: Blue, Purple, and Red. The blue phase represents the South African people during the apartheid. The purple phase represents the period of revolution with the Anti-Apartheid movement. Lastly, the red phase represents the anger of the South African people after the Apartheid. Sibande has been featured countrywide with her 'Sophie' figures. She has been featured in several museums including the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town; the Kiasma Museum for Contemporary Art in Helsinki, the Lyon Biennale, and the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne in Paris. Today, Sibande resides in Johannesburg where she continues to work on her 'Sophie' figures.

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