

21 BF

Started by Robert Loder and David Koloane 21 years ago, the Bag Factory has had a substantial number of South Africa's best known artists working under its roof. Many of these artists will take part in a retrospective exhibition celebrating the art-hub's coming of age.

Lerato Shadi Mmitlwa
(2010) Still of digital video projection with sound

Reading the list of alumni – those artists who have spent time working from the Bag Factory studios in Fordsburg – is a little like browsing through Sue Williams' latest offering on the artists of South Africa, as director Sara Hallatt points out to me at our first meeting. 'From Churchill Madikida and Gerhard Marx to Dinkies Sithole, Nontsikelelo Veleko, Kendell Geers, Penny Siopis, Dominic Tshabangu, Deborah Bell, Rookeya Gardee, Verna Jooste, Claudette Schreuders, Stephen Maqashela, Alan Alborough, Ben Arnold, Tamar Mason, Kay Hassan, Tracey Rose, Fatima Fernandes and Paul Emmanuel', proclaims their website, 'a hugely diverse array of artists, each with his or her own distinctive style and voice, have passed through the corrugated garage doors that open onto the airy studios within.'

This isn't a comprehensive list, not by a long shot. Not only are there numerous other important alumni, there are also the artists currently working in the Bag Factory to consider, among them Diana Hyslop, Richard Penn - who recently was awarded the prestigious Ampersand residency in New York - and Colbert Mashile, to name but a few.

And of course, there are the central pillars of the Bag Factory: David Koloane, Pat Mautloa, and Sam Nhlengethwa, founding fathers of Johannesburg's first artist studios, and each a renowned South African artist in his own right.

Koloane, Mautloa, and Nhlengethwa have all been there since the beginning, when along with Mark Atwood of the Artist's Press, sculptor Joachim Schonfeldt, Kendall Geers, Penny Siopis, and several others, they braved the residual hessian dust, resident pigeons, and ubiquitous fight for funding. Today, the pigeons and dust have for the most part been vanquished; funding, of course, remains everybody's favourite bugbear. Indeed there were times, says Koloane, when he did not think they would make it this far.

Yet here it is, 2012, and the Bag Factory is turning 21, having long since earned its key place in the Joburg art scene. What better way to celebrate, than to hold an exhibition of works by the many and varied artists to have spent time in its environs?

Within limits, that is. In addition to its resident artists, the Bag Factory has hosted a multitude of visiting artists from around the globe; to include these - most of whom are scattered around the world - would be a logistical nightmare. This is also true of the many artists – like William Kentridge and Robert Hodgins – who came in to work with Atwood and the Artist's Press, although they too have played a role in the studio's history. 'They didn't just stop in to say "hi" to Mark and do their printing, they'd step out and visit the artists, they'd go into the studio and chat... it just enhanced what a networking node the Bag Factory really is', recalls Deputy Director James French.



Tshepo Mosopa *Untitled ink on canvas*

Instead, the Bag Factory has invited all the artists who have taken studio space throughout its 21-year history, whether for a month or several years, to submit work. At the time of writing, more than 36 artworks had already been submitted (Kendall Geers' contribution, a telegram reading 'Kicked out of the Bag Factory, 1995' – arrived some time ago).

Entitled *21BF*, the exhibition will be curated by Melissa Goba, along 'representative, rather than thematic' lines, says French, and will run for a month at the Bag Factory, after opening to the public on August 3. The work on show will be varied, a reflection of the wide range of media preferred by the artists who have inhabited the studios. From the video art of Thenjiwe Nkosi, to the paintings and drawings of Koloane, the collages of Nhlengethwa, the jewellery of Verna Jooste, the sculpture of Joachim Schoenfeldt and the prints of Richard Penn – to give but a few examples – 'the Bag Factory has always tried to have a spirit of diversity' says French. 'We can't have all painters or all collage artists within the Bag Factory. It doesn't work, because then you're just creating a camp... where the sculptors hang together, the video artists hang together, and never talk to each other. The Bag Factory would love to have representatives of every sector of the visual arts.'

Due to the nature of the exhibition, the work on show will range from pieces by established heavyweights to young, up-and-coming artists more recently associated with the Bag Factory, for example Tshepo Mosopa, the youngest artist currently working within the studio. Mosopa received the

Reinhold Cassirer award, which provides a young South African artist with a three month residency, and went on to rent his own space at the Bag Factory.

Likewise artist Benon Lutaaya – who travelled from his home in Uganda by bus to join the visiting artist programme – ultimately chose to stay on. 'He came here and saw the opportunity, with Johannesburg being such an amazing metropolis of art...' says Hallatt, noting that his journey down became 'a kind of artistic exploration, because at each border post he gauged the corruption levels, to see how much he had to bribe to get through...'

21 BF will take place at the Bag Factory, which maintains an open door policy as a matter of course. Visitors are generally welcomed, dropping by both to view the exhibitions that are constantly in progress and to visit some of the artists. 'If an artist's studio door is open, [visitors] can knock and say, "hi, I'm just here to see what's happening",' says French. Depending on the artists' time and availability, many are more than happy to show visitors around their studio and talk them through their work. In fact, notes Hallatt, for artists who are not represented through a gallery, this serves as an excellent opportunity to acquaint possible patrons with their work.

'Benon is particularly good at it,' says Hallatt. 'Mostly, what you find in Johannesburg, is that you have to be represented by a gallery to really get buying power behind you – otherwise you find it quite difficult to locate those people and bring them to your work. But Benon... literally goes on every show he can possibly be in, makes every effort

David Koloane, *Jozi Live*



Thenjiwe Nkosi, *After Vermeer II*, Acrylic on Canvas (2004)

to be shown everywhere, and through that, has managed to become commercially successful.'

BF 21 will be accompanied by a whole calendar of events, including walkabouts for both the general public and schools. This offers a wonderful opportunity for the many students who study the likes of Koloane Mautloa and Nhlengethwa – 'living legends' as Hallatt describes them – as a part of their curriculum, to actually meet the artists and see them at work.

Walkabouts for high school students are planned for 9, 23 and 30 August, while students from tertiary institutions are scheduled for the 16 August and 6 September. A walkabout for the general public will take place on Saturday 4 August, the day after the exhibition opens. Art Source will present a seminar on professional practice on 16 August; a comedy night is scheduled for 10 August; and a Fringe and Art Fair will

run for the last three days of the exhibition (7 – 9 September) to coincide with the Johannesburg Art Fair.

For readers who haven't yet acquainted themselves with the Bag Factory, *21BF* is the perfect chance to see the work, and possibly meet, some of South Africa's diverse artists, as well as to visit a key landmark in the Johannesburg's art scene.

For more information on the Bag Factory and *21BF*, visit <http://www.bagfactoryart.org.za>

In our next few issues, *Classicfeel* will speak to several of the artists who have made the Bag Factory their home about their recollections of the studio's history, a changing Johannesburg, and their experiences as artists over the last 21 years. Watch this space. **CF**