

The Zeitz MOCAA gallery under construction

# AN ARTISTIC ENDEAVOUR

Great modern art galleries help to define the cities in which they're built. London's Tate Modern, Bilbao's Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Pompidou Centre in Paris: ambitious, physically striking and recognisable the world over, these are all cultural landmarks which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors a year, many of whom have only a passing interest in the art itself.

Africa, including South Africa, has many very good galleries. But none have achieved that iconic, household-name status. Perhaps it's cultural elitism at work. Maybe it's because no one has really tried.

Which is why, since it was first announced in 2013, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA) has been awash with hype. Billed as a purpose-built home for modern art along the lines of the greatest international galleries, it's understood that the size and scale of collection will be unlike anything in Africa, and include Africa's biggest collection in private hands.

The museum is currently in the final stages of construction at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town. Excitement in the art world has been growing ahead of its grand opening, over four days, in September.

## IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS

Housed in the historic Grain Silo that has stood

*A new gallery in Cape Town could be a cultural catalyst, helping local artists on the global scene. EDWARD TSUMELE investigates*

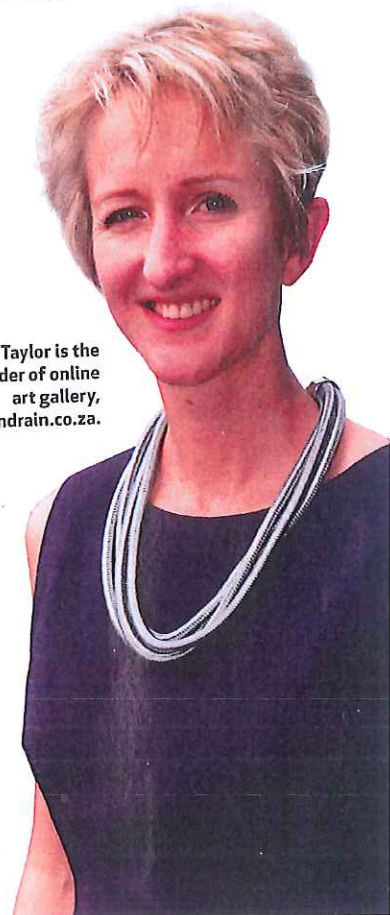
on Cape Town's V&A Waterfront since 1921, Zeitz MOCAA is a path-forging, not-for-profit institution that will look to nurture art from across Africa and the African diaspora. The building is being redesigned by architect Thomas Heatherwick (who was responsible for the Olympic Cauldron at the 2012 London Games) and comprises 9 500m<sup>2</sup> of space, spread over 80 galleries and nine floors.

It's named in honour of German businessman and ex-head of PUMA, Jochen Zeitz. Zeitz's collection of African art has been exhibited internationally and will form the basis of the MOCAA collection.

One supporter of the project is Valerie Kabov, director of First Floor Gallery in Harare, Zimbabwe, and co-founder of the Emerging African Art Galleries Association.

"Having a major contemporary museum with a mandate to collect contemporary art from the continent is very important," Kabov says. "I remember being asked by a BBC journalist at an art fair in London if London is going to be the new centre for African art, because no one goes to Africa.

Julie Taylor is the founder of online art gallery, [gunsandrain.co.za](http://gunsandrain.co.za).



## AFRICAN ART DOWN UNDER

African contemporary art is also gaining popularity in Australia. Contemporary artists from 46 countries will take part in a major exhibition specifically dedicated to African contemporary art, with a special focus on artists and art from southern Africa, running from 17 June to 22 July in Perth and Fremantle.

"Like Australia, Africa is emerging from a colonial past to forge a new contemporary cultural identity, acknowledging the pain of the past and struggles of the present, but with eyes firmly on the future with courage, honesty and optimism," says Gerald Sanyangore, the founder and co-curator of the Another Antipodes/Urban Axis exhibition.

The exhibition will present the works of over 100 artists, spanning all media, from painting to video and performance, who assert themselves not just as important new voices in the world of art, but also important interlocutors for cultural engagement and dialogue between the two continents, according to the curators.

Some of the artists who will be featured at the exhibition include Mary Sibande, Athi-Patra Ruga, Mohau Modisakeng and Larita Engelbrecht, who have previously featured at MoMA NYC, Guggenheim Bilbao, Tate Modern and the Venice Biennale.

educational reasons. "It is important that art is made accessible to the public, especially for students, as in a way that is developing an audience and a market for art in the future," Taylor continues.

Because of its potential, the art world is showing a surprising amount of unity – for the time being, at least. But what needs to be done to avoid the institution becoming a white elephant?

"To many of us in the industry, it is clear that MOCAA is shaping a serious and sustainable long-term strategy," says First Floor's Kabov, "just from the amount of effort the institution has made for the past several years to assert itself in the art sector, both locally and internationally. Nevertheless, MOCAA must maintain the current momentum and the agenda of being up-to-date on everything that happens in the art on the continent, proactively, and engaging with all the players and not just the most established ones.

"If it succeeds in being open, then its future is secure." ■

## COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Earlier this year, 14 African artists' featured in Christie's Post-War and Contemporary Art Day Auction in London, with the proceeds used towards Zeitz MOCAA's endowment. The artists included El Anatsui, Roger Ballen, Yto Barrada, Peter Beard, Eamonn Doyle and Niall Sweeney, Frances Goodman, Kendell Geers, Antony Gormley, Rashid Johnson, Isaac Julien, Harland Miller, Athi-Patra Ruga, Yinka Shonibare MBE and Pascale Marthine Tayou.

We need to change that perception and reality, and having impressive institutional collections is a major step in the right direction."

Kabov says MOCAA could help to stimulate competition in other countries and be the catalyst for other significant galleries too. She adds that while there is a lot to be learned from great Western galleries, though, the key to MOCAA's success will be keeping it local.

"Institutions like Tate Modern have created some practice models for operation of very large contemporary collections, how to maintain relevance and broad-based appeal, so MOCAA does not need to reinvent the wheel," Kabov says. "[But] I believe that the institution needs to be open to, and engage in, the very important conversations which are taking place in South Africa at the moment.

"Art has been central to student protests in the past couple of years. This is a good thing. This means that art is really part of the big conversation in the country, and MOCAA cannot shy away from that if it is to stay relevant to all."

## GLOBAL INTEREST

The opening of Zeitz MOCAA happens at a time when the global art spotlight is firmly on African contemporary art. Contemporary African works are fetching handsome prices at auctions, art fairs and exhibitions. According to the *Financial Times*, interest has been helped by a thriving and well-off diaspora, and there have been many groundbreaking shows and solo retrospectives over the last few years.

One of the biggest auction houses, Sotheby's, has now established a department that will

focus specifically on African modern and contemporary art, which held its first sale on 16 May. This team is led by Hannah O'Leary, who was part of the team of the long-established African Contemporary and Modern Art Department at Bonhams, which for a

decade now has set the bar for selling African contemporary art at more-than-decent prices overseas. Well-known names on the African continent, such as Yinka Shonibare, Kader Attia, William Kentridge and El Anatsui, were part of the Sotheby's auction, ahead of which price estimates ranged from R135 000 to R14.6-million.

The prices that African art is fetching overseas is obviously good news for these artists, who often struggle at home. It does raise an uncomfortable question about the ownership of these beautiful objects that also carry African narratives, as they adorn the walls of wealthy overseas private collectors and museums.

Few African museums can afford those prices, and art collection has yet to really take hold in the growing middle classes.

## AVOIDING THE ELEPHANT

If MOCAA achieves its aims of being significant and accessible, it could help to change that.

"Institutions such as Zeitz MOCAA are important in that they will not only help to maintain the global spotlight on African art, but assist in boosting it," says Dr Julie Taylor, the founder of online gallery [www.gunsandrain.com](http://www.gunsandrain.com). "MOCAA's importance also lies in the fact that when an extensive private collection is made public, it opens other possibilities, such as being accessible to the general public for