

## ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

SANELISIWE  
NKONYANE

Sanelisiwe (Neli) Nkonyane is the first artist to join Guns & Rain from eSwatini. Drawing entirely from her own experiences as a liSwati woman growing up in a very traditional family and culture, Neli, a mother of two herself, explores the notions of self-representation, embodiment and cultural disobedience. The aim of *Londoloza Njalo*, her latest body of work, is to interrogate and question the cultural practice of *kuhlonipha*. It was incredible to be able to speak to her and gain even greater insight into the intricate thoughts and concepts behind the pieces.

**Q: When was it that you first became interested in art?**

A: I have generally always enjoyed art. Art, as a career, found me immediately after high school. I studied visual arts, and then did a teaching course as part of the art education. In 2017, I began to pursue my post-graduate course at the University of Johannesburg, and that was really the point at which my current form of art took off.

**Q: Your background is very influential on your work, and you draw on your experiences as a liSwati woman, growing up in a traditional family. The specific custom that you address is *kuhlonipha*. Can you explain what this means to you?**

A: My work address the issue of 'expected respectability', which is *kuhlonipha*. This is taught to girls at a very young age. It goes all the way from what they are and aren't allowed to do, to the way they sit, and how they present themselves in public. There is still a lot of good in *kuhlonipha*. Everything I did when I was younger was considered a reflection of who my father was. From my experiences of this cultural phenomenon, I have drawn the idea that I want to own my identity. Nonetheless, I believe that *kuhlonipha* is a cultural practice that monitors women so strictly that it largely restricts them.

Interviewed by Julia Cypcar

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**“Cultural disobedience is explored through photography, as I take ownership of how my body is viewed”**

- SANELISIWE NKONYANE

You don't really get to live freely, as your own person. In a strict Swazi home, you don't really get to express who you are, and then, you lose your identity to your husband and his family when you get married.

**Q: When you were younger, did you often find yourself feeling repressed because of things that *kuhlonipha* prevented you from doing?**

A: Yes, very often, actually. Even though my parents weren't as strict about my pursuits in life, it was still definitely something that affected me. I was raised in two very different settings: one was a traditional Swazi home, in a rural setting, and the other was greatly in an urban setting, where we studied. A simple thing that I found affected me at the time, was wearing trousers. In the rural area, this was a big no-no. Though it was more acceptable in the city, my mum was still often resistant to buying us trousers. I always just wanted to feel comfortable in my own body.

**Q: How did it feel to be, in a sense, torn between these rural and urban settings?**

A: It was a very interesting space to grow up in, because you kind of have two identities. At some point, I definitely preferred life in the city, because I felt like the various rules weren't as strict and harsh. I was even fairly rebellious at one point. As I grew older, I developed an interesting respect for the rules. They definitely meant that I had unique experiences, which shaped my character and allowed me to become who I am today. Of course, more recently, I address the concept of 'cultural disobedience', whereby I made a conscious choice not to conform to certain aspects within *kuhlonipha*.

**Q: Could you explain the title of your body of work, *Londoloza Njalo*?**

The title of this body of work is inspired by a siSwati wedding song, traditionally sung by the bride, who acknowledges her father's impact on her life, and how she has had to represent him. *Londoloza* means 'to keep safe', 'preserve', 'guard' and 'protect', while *njalo* means 'always'. The bride will preserve and maintain her father's values within her marriage and married life, and agrees to tell her father everything that goes on after she leaves the family home. The constant reflection between the father and daughter is a powerful aspect of the song. My work also addresses this. At some point in my childhood, I wanted to be my father's son. In fact, my full name is Sanelisiwe, which, for a very long time, didn't sit well with me. I eventually grew to love it. It means 'enough' or 'satisfied', which is interesting, because I am the second



*Kuhlonipha I am Woman 10*  
2019

child, with younger siblings, so it doesn't appear to fit at first. In reality, its meaning alludes to the fact that it was time for my father to have a son, a heir. I always wanted to please my father, and step up and be 'macho' to win his favour. Nonetheless, he was still like my personal 'safe' and I could always confide in him.

**Q: Would you say that your father was a seminal influence on your work?**

A: Yes, absolutely. My dad was raised very traditionally, and lived a very traditional life. In high school, he attended a colonial school in the city, which was predominantly white, with sponsored Swazi boys. In that space, he was definitely somewhat influenced by western culture. He also went to university overseas. He was an inquisitive character, who questioned traditions, and this trait, paired with being exposed to both a traditional and a western upbringing, meant that he balanced out the two, and inspired us to question traditional cultural practices too. Through my artwork, I attempt to show the contradictory relationship between traditional siSwati cultural practices and my family's adopted westernised cultural practices, in an attempt to make meaning of the paradoxes of these experiences.

**Q: How did you find *kuhlonipha* was affecting your adult life?**

A: I struggled a lot when I got married, especially with my in-laws' expectations at family gatherings. They really wanted me to be an ideal Swazi woman, from my clothing, to covering my hair. All of these things became issues at some point: when I changed my hairstyles, people would always ask if my husband gave me permission. I just wanted full autonomy over my own body. I am working around the issue of the ownership of the human body.

**Q: You mention another wedding song *Ubolalela Lapho Ugane Khona*, can you explain how this relates to this concept?**

A: I would say that this song is a strict order. It means "you must listen at your marital home". The song is sung at weddings, to the bride, as a reminder that she is an outsider in that family and has to adapt to her in-laws' way of life, not do as she pleases, as this will shame her own family. Many of the things I ended up doing would be viewed as disrespectful. My body of work opposes what this song teaches.



**Utobya Nesisu**  
2019



**Kuhlonipha I am Woman 4**  
2019

**“Most African cultures, including my own, promote the tradition of silence.”**

- SANELISIWE NKONYANE

**Q: How do the set-up of your installation relate to your personal experiences?**

A: The purpose of the installation is to take the viewer on a journey that begins in my childhood experiences, creeps into self-awareness, and lands in ownership of my identity. First, the viewer enters an installation of sculptural fragments of the lower body, highlighting the invasiveness of culture that is imposed on a woman's body. Even though Swazi's don't practice invasive virginity testing, they do practice it to a certain extent. When I was younger, my grandmother and aunts would be 'testing' me, without me even being aware of the purpose behind their actions. The sculptures expose female private parts, but only to a limited extent. The viewer is drawn to look, but feeling uncomfortable, pretends to not be looking, it is almost like a 'controlled gaze'.

Next is a sculpture that depicts three figures, kneeling away from each other, with their hands tied behind their backs. This signifies conforming to cultural traditions that we do not choose, but that we find our identities bound by, kneeling before authority. Even though I was raised quite liberally, there were still times in my life, when I had to conform to tradition. The use of the three figures represents myself, and my two sisters, who have similar experiences to me. Up until this point, the sculptures have no specific identity. Then, at the end of the viewer's journey, is my digital photographic body of work. This is my bold stand: I get to control how the world sees me.

**Q: I can imagine that it was quite a journey for you to reach this point. Could you delve into the process further?**

A: It was definitely quite a journey. I had to deal with the process of body building, and working my body to a position where I could use it in my art to blur gender dichotomies. I actually ended up participating in a bodybuilding event, and the response was huge: it ended up making national news. Many people commented on how crazy it was for my husband to allow me to do such a thing. It was really insane, but it really made it even more apparent to me that society dictates how we display our bodies. I aim to represent the notion of 'cultural disobedience' and subvert mainstream gender norms. I challenge *kuhlonipha* through photographic explorations of self-representation. I wanted to show aspects of masculinity, without distorting my femininity, but rather, working the two together.

**Q: Did your placement of the digital images have any significance?**

A: Yes, some of the self-portraits are unobtrusive, depicting my submissive behaviour, dressed in traditional female clothing, as would have been expected of me in the rural home I was raised in, and in line with the expectations of my in-laws. Other images are confrontational, and challenge the viewer. I wear women's garments inappropriately, how male garments might be worn. The images are arranged in such a way so as to oppose each other. They exhibit these two sides to my identity.

**Q: Can you expand on the meaning behind the traditional attire?**

A: Of course; I wear female traditional garments (*sidziya*) in a way in which male garments (*lijobo*) should be worn. Female garments are made of domesticated animal skin, whilst males wear the skins of wild animals or

game. By wearing a domesticated animal skin as a male garment, I really want to push the boundaries of what is right and wrong. I subvert to the cultural practices.

**Q: And what is the role of lighting that you use?**

A: In some of the photographs, A strong light illuminates part of my body, while the other half of my body is consumed by the shadow. You can't see half of my face, even though I'm looking directly at the viewer. This addresses the notion of being 'unseen', but looking out into the world. There are so many things that others aren't aware of that I had to do to claim my identity. Even now, this body of work hasn't yet been seen in eSwatini, and I'm really not sure about how it would be received. There are still very strong male and female binaries. I do still think it is important for me to bring it in at some point. There are a lot of young artists in eSwatini, and I think it would be a good channel to open up.

**Q: You are depicted knitting with broomsticks in some of the pieces; what is this a metaphor for?**

A: As a child, I really wanted to defy male/female structures, as I sought to perform masculine roles and duties. Ironically, I was instead thriving in female crafts, through my love of knitting, crocheting and needlework. In the work titled *Hlala Ngentfombi 2018-2019*, I use broomsticks as knitting needles as a metaphor for the ideal woman and her work within the home. At the same time, they also become weapons, acting as a sort of defence between you and the world. The broomsticks are difficult to use, and represent the weight of conformity and traditions that at times, becoming overwhelmingly difficult to bear, but I need to live with. I have also chosen to use knitting as symbolic for the act of me piecing together and negotiating my identity, within the cultural set up, in which eSwatini is still very much entrenched.

**Q: Some of your digital prints are on handmade paper; what is the meaning behind this?**

A: Paper making draws on the idea of women's work. Women decorate the home. I am able to mould the paper over my body to tell my story, or print my story on it. The handmade paper has a sense of frailty and fragility, which relates to the emotions that are attached to my work: I felt fragile, and torn between how the story is perceived. The paper becomes a metaphor for the emotions attached to the art. Furthermore, paper needs to be wet to be cast into moulds, which relates to the proverb *ligotjwa lusemanti*, that one is best-shaped and malleable when young and teachable. I recall hearing this many times when I was younger. This also links to the woman's work of building huts, which are made of young and wet wood, to manipulate them into structures. Sisal fibres are traditionally used, and now I use them to make art.

**Q: Is the entire body of work based on your personal experiences?**

A: Yes. I found it far easier to tell my own story, rather than trying to tell someone else's story and not being sure how exactly to

frame it. I really resonated with the work of Ijeoma Umebinyuo; she writes about ownership of the story. If I don't tell my story, who will? In a sense, someone out there is living my story, and will resonate with it.

**Q: Has the way in which you make art changed over time?**

A: Definitely. My earlier pieces were really nothing to do with my story or personal journey. Thanks to art, I've really learnt how to deal with the issues I grapple with, and my identity is a big part of this. This body of work is really a channel for me to express my issues. For years, I was taught to fear my body, "*your body is sacred*", but "*sacred is shameful*", they were very confusing notions. Taking control over what happens with my body is very empowering, and I really enjoy exploring my self-expression, whether sculpturally or through photography.

**Q: What are your future goals with regards to art?**

A: I'm currently planning my next body of work. It will still use my body, but I really hope to address the masculine side of things. Culturally, cross-dressing for women in eSwatini is taboo, but funnily enough, when men become traditional healers, they cross-dress in women garments. I find this very interesting. In the traditional healing community, there are no gender binaries. I really want to explore this area and push the boundaries on wearing my garments, but not in the sense to *become* male, but rather showing my autonomy as a woman.

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**"It's about ownership: owning my identity, owning the gaze, and owning how others see me."**

- SANELISIWE NKONYANE