’Creating This Body of Works Supported the Women in Maintaining Their Courage’

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“Death of a Star” tapestry from The Universe Canticle

The Universe Canticle: Tapestries by the Women of Kopanang is a touching display consisting of 31 individual tapestry panels of embroidered fabric. The works were created by the women of the Kopanang Community Trust, which supports women living with or affected by HIV/AIDS, near Johannesburg, South Africa, by “gathering together to create a culture of sustainability and life affirming services for those affected by HIV/AIDS in South Africa’s townships.” Sister Sheila Flynn, the founder of the Kopenang Community Trust, describes The Universe Canticle in saying “The works on display are a testament of hope by the women who made them who are affected or infected by HIV/AIDS. The subject matter are the natural sciences and the incredible visual story of evolution, along with the way we walk on the earth with our carbon footprint. The underlying reality is that creating this body of works supported the women in maintaining their lives with courage. The beauty created by their hands in turn feeds their children and keeps their spirits alive both personally and within the community group itself that supports each member and walks the walk regarding the ongoing impact of HIV/AIDS.”

Visual AIDS interviewed Joyce Healy, the board chair of the Mariposa Museum and World Culture Center, the driving force behind the exhibition, which has toured throughout the United States, Australia and South Africa.

The women of the Kopanang Community Trust is profiled in a short video, viewable here.

Visual AIDS: Describe the genesis of the project--from the women in the Kopanang Community Trust in South Africa, to the Mariposa Museum and World Culture Center in New Hampshire, to Saint Joseph Church in Greenwich Village.

Joyce Healy: The Universe Canticle originated as a commission for the Faithful Fools Ministry in San Francisco for World Aids Day 1990. After the work went up on their walls, they felt it was too good to live inside a building where few would see it, and offered to loan it out to organizations that could present it to a wider audience. Visitors having the same reaction have lead to exhibitions throughout the world.

An award-winning African-American artist and author of many children's books, Ashley Bryan met the Women of Kopanang through his charitable work in Africa. While presenting his own work at the Mariposa, he showed us the tapestries, which became the centerpiece of a 2013 exhibit there on the theme of spiritual geography. Mariposa's board chair, who splits her time between New Hampshire and New York City, worked to bring the canticles to the larger world of NYC, and found a willing partner in the welcoming, inclusive, socially active parish of St. Joseph Church in Greenwich Village, affiliated with the NYU student ministry. What more appropriate place to exhibit what's been described as a "communion of science and faith" than the Center for Spiritual Life at New York University.

How are the themes of the cosmos, interrelationships and Earth pictured in the works on display?

The Universe Canticle is a joyous juxtaposition of creation stories. Most of the artists, women living in a township in South Africa, had very little education and absolutely no previous access to the natural sciences. Preparation for the work began with the women sharing their own African cultural creation stories, then a reading of the Genesis story in the bible requested by the fundamentalist Christians. The women also looked at a black and white scientific text on evolution, their first exposure to this information. They then began the work, volunteering for the aspects that they particularly wanted to depict: one took flowers, another chimpanzees, others the explosion of stars, and so on.

The African-colored flowers and beasts, the spangled cosmic dust, the beaded amoebas, (all expressed in the women's cultural terms) present the major phases in evolution sequentially in over 30 different panels. As they learned more, the women added panels warning of threats to life on earth and our responsibility to care for the planet.

Describe the ways the Kopanang Community Trust supports women living with HIV/AIDS.

In its residential community, the Trust provides

- Skills training in embroidery, bead-making, quilting, and design. Proceeds from sale of craft objects made by the women provides economic support.
- Outreach program for sick community member. Basic medical, bereavement and crisis support are provided, as is HIV/AIDS education.
- A therapy group provides a forum for members to share their life stories, particularly their sorrows and struggles.
- Recent skills development programs added include literacy and numeracy skills development, as well as financial management.

The Trust also runs large-scale feeding programs for hundreds of school children and members of the extended community.

Through links with schools in Australia, the founder of the community teaches in schools there for a month every year, and offers residential immersion programs for students to come and live with Kopanang hosts in South Africa.

How has art made an impact on the lives of the women in the Kopanang Community Trust?

All of them came from economic backgrounds where they eeked out basic subsistence through activities from selling beer in the local market to prostitution.They now earn a living by making high-quality craft objects sold throughout the world. The first impact is basic economic security.

But there is a larger effect, growing self-worth for women coming from precarious lives, abusive relationships, sickness, burying family members and babies, through creating beautiful art, not in isolation but in a supportive community. The words of some of the women of Kopanang explain this best.

From Refilwe:

I started learning embroidery skills at Kopanang and found sisters who would walk with me in my joys and sorrows. I was amazed that I could make such beautiful products. I never knew I had it in me.

From Mavis:

It has made me believe in myself, given me confidence and hope that my life will be up again once more. Also it shows me that I can make a contribution when I am with other people, to share ideas and to make something that will be recognized. Every time I look at the work I produce myself I feel happy because I know there is a

place waiting for my attentions. In 2008 life was very hard. I tested HIV+. I did not have food to take the ARV treatment so I got sicker. Now I know I can turn to Kopanang for help. This has made the difference in my life.

In what ways does HIV/AIDS figure--either literally or abstractly--in the works on display?

The Universe Canticles work doesn't talk explicity about HIV/AIDS, but about the joy, exuberant explosion, and gift of life on this earth. Through this work, the women express their hope even while living with the consequences of the disease.

As Mavis Nkosi best expressed it: "Keep yourselves busy with your hands, make your life beautiful, then your mind forgets about the pain."

How has the exhibition been received during its international tour, and what is the future of the project?

The work continues to find fans every time it appears, and their enthusiasm for the work and admiration for the mission of the Kopanang Community Trust leads them to want to take it to more locations to more audiences. One visitor to New York has already begun conversation with 10 different museums and science centers all over the U.S. for the next stops on the tour.

The Faithful Fools Ministry--the ones who commissioned it--view themselves as custodians of the Canticles, more than willing to share it before it eventually comes back home.

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