

A LEARNER RESOURCE
ON THE ART OF

nontsikelelo veleko

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EXHIBITION

**NONTSIKELELO
VELEKO:
WONDERLAND**

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NONTSIKELELO 'LOLO' VELEKO'S AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHY ON THE SUBJECTS OF BLACK IDENTITY, URBANISATION, FASHION, GENDER AND COSMOPOLITANISM HAS WON HER LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM. IN 'WONDERLAND', HER STANDARD BANK YOUNG ARTIST AWARD TRAVELLING EXHIBITION, VELEKO EXPLORES THE WAYS IN WHICH PEOPLE USE CLOTHING AND OTHER MARKERS TO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES, HOW PEOPLE INTERPRET OTHERS BASED ON APPEARANCES, AND GRAFFITI AND PERSONAL SPACES.

Nontsikelelo Veleko was the 2008 Standard Bank Young Artist for Visual Art, and only the second photographer to win the award. The Young Artist Awards acknowledge emerging, relatively young South African artists who have displayed outstanding talent in their artistic endeavours.

Veleko achieved worldwide recognition with an early project called *www.notblackenough.lolo*, which explored perceptions in South Africa of mixed heritage. Here she used clothes as critical props deliberately to challenge assumptions of identity based on appearance and historical background.

ABOUT HER WORK, MARK STEVENS, WRITING IN *NEW YORK MAGAZINE ART REVIEW*, HAS SAID:

"IT WAS A SHOCK – AN AWAKENING SHOCK – TO COME UPON THE BURSTING CONTEMPORARY COLOURS WORN BY THE FASHION-STRUCK PEOPLE PORTRAYED BY NONTSIKELELO 'LOLO' VELEKO ON THE STREETS OF JOHANNESBURG."

Veleko relates strongly to the urban environment and its variety of people. As Tumelo Mosaka puts it:

Veleko is part of a new generation of young artists who question boundaries not long defined by a post-apartheid culture; they use portraiture to examine both public and personal identities. Working predominantly in photography, Veleko directs her camera towards individuals in the public domain and sometimes towards herself. She incorporates fashion, design and elements of popular culture to articulate the vibrant, hybrid metropolitan experiences evident in cities such as Johannesburg.

Veleko was trained at the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg, an organisation which teaches young photographers who would otherwise not have access to formal training. When she attended the workshop, photography was mostly in the documentary style, used as a means of reflecting reality, and Veleko's strength and originality was in the way she manipulated this medium to convey her own messages.

"I LOOK AT FASHION AND HOW IT CREATES IDENTITY, BECAUSE FASHION PLAYS WITH IDENTITY"

Veleko has produced various portfolios of work, each focusing on an aspect of urban culture. For her solo exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2003, 'The Ones On Top Won't Make It Stop!' she explored graffiti in Johannesburg. Another ongoing series of works, *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, begun in 2003, depicts street fashion as worn by youth on the margins of society. Here she captures young fashionistas on the streets of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, emphasising their innate sense of style and individuality. "I look at fashion and how it creates identity, because fashion plays with identity," she explains. "That's how I look at fashion in South Africa, it's fun and it's like play – my clothes aren't really me, I just have a style and I have fun."

In 'Wonderland', Veleko's Young Artist travelling exhibition, she focuses on familiar themes – people on the streets, graffiti and personal spaces, reflecting the ever-increasingly cosmopolitan nature of South African cities, with their African immigrant populations. Both the mainstream and margins of contemporary society are explored, in



Nontsikelelo Veleko, *Duval Kabeya, Green Point, Cape Town, 2007*. Pigment print on cotton rag. 109 x 81 cm

both public and personal spaces. These range from street corners to amusement parks and bedrooms. She presents a vibrant world of wonder and intrigue, touched by playfulness and sometimes humour, as in her fragments of photographed graffiti. One of these says, "I can't understand why people are frightened by new ideas; I'm frightened of old ones". Others state "Gatecrash your own fantasy" and "White people are negotiable".

Veleko has been at the receiving end of comments that made her aware that people sometimes judge others superficially – for what you look like and not for who you are. These comments might have bred Veleko's strong concern with black urban identity, black self-assertion and pride, and a post-apartheid context where, as Tumelo Mosaka writes, "black bodies no longer have to justify their existence".

"VELEKO PRESENTS A VIBRANT WORLD OF WONDER AND INTRIGUE, TOUCHED BY PLAYFULNESS AND SOMETIMES HUMOUR"

Mosaka points out that the majority of portraiture in art does not include images of black people, unless they are framed in the context of poverty or crime. Veleko's photography features ordinary black people in recognisable places around the country, such as Long Street in Cape Town, Gugu Dlamini Memorial Park in Durban, and Miriam Makeba Street in Johannesburg. In doing so, says Mosaka, she "attempts to refocus the attention towards a more positive reading of black images". John Fleetwood calls this defiance of stereotypes "a form of subtle cultural activism", a backlash against rigid, demarcated identities and against the animosity with which attempts at individuality are often met.

"VELEKO ATTEMPTS TO REFOCUS THE ATTENTION TOWARDS A MORE POSITIVE READING OF BLACK IMAGES"

RIGHT: Nontsikelelo Veleko, *Danni Segerman, Cape Town, Western Cape (working title), 2007*. Pigment print on cotton rag. 109 x 81 cm

BELOW: Nontsikelelo Veleko, (detail) *White People are Negotiable* by William Pope L., Kathryn Smith's Office, University of Stellenbosch, Fine Art Department, Stellenbosch, Western Cape, 2008. Pigment print on cotton rag. 52.5 x 35.2 cm



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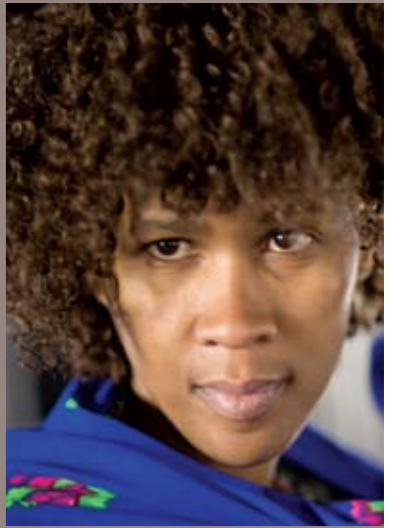
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BOTTOM: Nontsikelelo Veleko, *Andiqondi, Uyaqonda! FDB Fashion Studios, Rockville, Soweto, Johannesburg, Gauteng, 2007*. Pigment print on cotton rag. 60 x 81 cm

biography

Nontsikelelo 'Lolo' Veleko was born in Bodibe in North West Province in 1977, but grew up in Cape Town, where she matriculated at Luhlaza High School in Khayalitsha. She studied graphic design at the Cape Technikon (1995) but left, as she was unable to afford the fees. She then moved to Johannesburg, where she studied at the Market Theatre Photo Workshop (1999-2004), under the guidance of John Fleetwood. Johannesburg is where she now lives and works.



Nontsikelelo Veleko, 1998, Suzy Bernstein

In 2003 Veleko was nominated for the MTN New Contemporaries and was awarded a two-month residency with the International Photographic Research Network (IPRN) in the UK, where she explored notions of work, identity and clothes. In 2007, she won the jury prize for the only Photography Encounters which take place in Bamako, Mali. Since her return, she has exhibited internationally on important shows that have enhanced her reputation considerably. Among these, all from 2006, are 'Personae & Scenarios – the new African photography' at Brancolini Grimaldi Arte Contemporanea in Rome, Italy; 'Olvida Quien Soy – Erase Me from Who I Am' at the Centro Atlantico de Arte Mordeno in Las Palmas, Canary Islands; and 'Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography', at the ICP in New York.

On the home front, Veleko showed on 'Second to None', curated by Gabi Ngcobo and Virginia MacKenny at Iziko South African National Gallery (Iziko SANG) in Cape Town (2006); and her work also featured in the book, *Women by Women: 50 years of Women's photography in South Africa* (2006), edited by Robin Comley, George Hallett and Neo Ntsoma.

2007 was a busy year for Veleko. Her work was included on 'Reality Check', an exhibition of contemporary South African photography at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (NBK) in Berlin, curated by Pam Warne of Iziko SANG. In addition, her portraits featured alongside the acclaimed late Malian photographer, Seydou Keita, at Danziger Projects, New York, in 'Seydou Keita and Lolo Veleko Fashion'.

On accepting the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art, Veleko said, "It's an affirmation to me that when I self doubt the work I do, I AM NOT ALONE! This award means that someone in my own country has noticed and acknowledged my ideas that I would like to convey to the world about Africa and Africans. Therefore I am looking forward to collaborating with many Africans to tell our side of the story. I know that Wim Botha, Kathryn Smith and William Kentridge have won it in the past, so it shows me that I am on the right path," says Lolo.

