

MTN x UJ New Contemporary Awards announce finalists

The inaugural MTN x UJ Contemporary Awards have announced the selected finalists.



Natalie Paneng, Callen Grecia, Thandiwe Msebenzi, and Inga Somdyala

The awards look at developing both the curator and the artists selected to participate.

This year, Khanya Mashabela was awarded the curatorship of MTN X UJ New Contemporary Awards - and since her appointment earlier this year - she has been formulating her research, selection of artists and curatorial vision for the inaugural event to be held on 25 November 2022 at UJ Art Gallery.

The MTN X UJ New Contemporary Awards programme places an emphasis on developments in the digital art sphere, and this is where Mashabela had to focus her attention.

Under the working title *Object*, she navigates the premise that given the speed and breadth of contemporary culture, definitive statements about what it means to be an artist in the South African context will quickly be made redundant.

She looks to exploring identity as a construction which is both real and imagined, and which is communicated through objects in physical and virtual realms. Her selected artists take a variety of approaches to the project of identity construction, with the exhibition serving as a curated view of a cross-section of strategies.



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“Though the internet has radically changed us, many of the concerns navigated via digital and lens-based media have existed long before then. I don’t intend the exhibition to examine the internet as something which is external to the ‘real’ world. Rather it will explore the relationship between selfhood and objecthood, in the contemporary context; a relationship which is often mediated through technology,” says Mashabela.

“What excites me the most about the relationship between the arts and technology is the accessibility it allows the general public to interact with the arts, and how our young curators, artists, academics and specialists will be the driving force behind this crucial intervention,” states Niel Nortje, manager of MTN’s Art Collection.

The four artists selected as finalists for the MTN X UJ New Contemporary Awards Programme are Cape Town-based artists Inga Somdyala and Thandiwe Msebenzi, Callan Grecia working in George and Natalie Paneng based in Johannesburg.



Image supplied: Callan Grecia's artwork

“Mashabela’s final selection demonstrates her understanding of both the medium and the curatorial possibilities. We are excited about the work that these four artists will create for the exhibition in November. This award programme pushes the boundaries of curatorial practice; it is also about being bold, innovative and courageous”, says Thabo Seshoka, curator of the UJ Art Gallery.

Mashabela’s research was mainly conducted through artist-run online spaces including Floating Reveries and Bubblegum Club, as well as physical, artist-organised exhibitions and studio visits. Although the use of digital mediums and interactive art is established and growing, in South Africa, one of the challenges Mashabela found in making her selection was that many technologically adept artists working with digital art as their primary medium had moved into fields such as marketing and tech rather than the visual arts.

In making her final decision Mashabela was supported by the Legacy Panel which consists of four previous MTN New Contemporaries Award curators: Kathryn Smith, Portia Malatjie, Nontobeko Ntombela and Khwezi Gule with Melissa Goba as the panel convener.



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“Though Natalie Paneng and Callan Grecia use very different tools, they are both interested in mediated personal identities - the aesthetic choices we make as we represent ourselves and our environments virtually,” states Mashabela.

She continues, “Thandiwe Msebenzi takes a more historical approach in the *Radical Makaza*, a project in tribute to her aunt’s personal history, the project was prototyped on Instagram with Msebenzi using clothes and landscapes along with digital filters to recreate and invent an identity, with an atmosphere of historicity.”

“Inga Somdyala’s approach is more abstract than the other artists, but he too is exploring material culture and the ability of objects to act as a fundamental part of selfhood, though he is more explicit about his interest in a broader national identity. Somdyala’s works have more in common with early video art, which often relied on the relatively ‘low-tech’ of a lone performer engaging with the camera. Somdyala also chooses extremely tactile objects which reasserts the power of physicality,” she concludes.

Over the coming months the four artists, guided by Mashabela’s vision, will create an artwork to be exhibited at the MTN X UJ New Contemporary Awards on 25 November 2022 at the UJ Art Gallery.

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