Johannesburg has grown into the cultural capital of Africa, a beacon of creativity that has beckoned to talents of all backgrounds and genres, and hatched the continent’s biggest art fair, alongside a patchwork of pioneering galleries. Here, we call on eight artists who have made the city their home, and discover how they square its troubled past with future promise.

Nicholas Hlobo

Among South African artists who came of age around the fall of apartheid, Hlobo has perhaps had the most rapid ascent. His large sculptural works, often created from ribbon, leather and rubber, are a powerful comment on the growing pains of democracy. In 2008, just six years after he graduated with a fine art degree from Technikon Witwatersrand, he had a solo show at Tate Modern; two years later, he was mentored by Anish Kapoor in the Rolex Arts Initiative. But having tasted success, Hlobo has taken a more considered, slower approach to art – ‘It’s not fame or positive regard that I stand for,’ he muses. Rather, he makes art to tell his own story, and the story of South Africa. Since 2017, he has been creating sculptures in copper; specifically, industrial tubing joined with floats from water cisterns, which he hammers until they resemble ripe pomegranates. Coiled into expressive forms and stitched together with an alloy thread, they resemble tumbleweeds or perhaps barbed wire. Surveying a group of these works about to be shipped out to Georgia, in the US, for a solo show at SCAD, he says the idea is of ‘traversing a field’ and points out that, whether in South Africa or the American South, people are still trying to move on from the wounds of history. Similarly, in his canvas works, he will cut through pristine surfaces, then stitch them back together with ribbon. It’s about ‘disturbing beauty, but having done that, trying to heal it again in a way that I’m conscious of the pain I’ve caused.’ Johannesburg, Hlobo’s home for more than two decades, is ‘devoid of natural beauty, and architecturally speaking one of the ugliest’, he admits. Still, he has found much to love about it. ‘Imagine New York on a smaller scale and slightly impoverished. That’s Johannesburg. A city that is diverse and constantly on the move. It’s going to grow into a wonderful city.’
Blessing Ngobeni

Ngobeni’s large-scale paintings, with their memorably grotesque figures, often invite comparisons to the work of Basquiat. Like the late American prodigy, the artist had a tumultuous youth. Raised in Limpopo, South Africa, by an abusive uncle, he ran away as a small boy, ending up on the streets of Alexandra Township in Johannesburg. At 15, he was arrested for his role in an armed robbery and sentenced to nine years in prison. Incarceration proved to be his salvation. He discovered he could draw and took some art courses. Once paroled, he enrolled on a printmaking programme and began to develop his distinctive visual style. Ngobeni’s work retains the violent undertones that reflect his past: a 2017 installation, Queen of the Scavengers, shows a parade of black dolls tethered to the titular queen, a masked puppeteer who seems to control their fates. And while Ngobeni does not consider himself a political artist, his work often exposes the ways in which South Africa continues to be mired in inequity, as seen in his recent ‘A Note from Error’ exhibition, shown in London and Johannesburg. On electrifyingly colourful canvases that belie their weighty subject, he asks why corruption is still rampant and the gap between rich and poor broadening in an age of democracy.

Io Makandal

Makandal is an obsessive collector of things. Her studio at Wits University (where she is currently pursuing an MFA) is packed with crates of material sourced from abandoned stretches of the city. ‘I’m interested in the spaces in-between the natural and the artificial, between chaos and order,’ she says. In her hands, stray pieces of concrete, glass, wire mesh, plastic tubing and tiles are strewn into immersive installations. They are an ode to urban living, their vibrant hues and varied textures reflective of the push-and-pull of landscape and civilisation. A ruddy red, for instance, comes from a chalky soapstone she sources from her neighbourhood, Braamfontein (‘It’s the colour of Johannesburg,’ she says), while the synthetic orange of traffic cones suggests construction and industrial development. Her installations also meditate on consumerism. ‘We have all this material that we are very carelessly using. I’m trying to draw attention to what we do with this material afterwards.’ A Johannesburg native, Makandal lived in Cape Town during her undergraduate studies but moved back here for the more stimulating creative environment. ‘Johannesburg has these complex contradictions and is very much present and in your face. It’s a crazy, ugly, beautiful city.’
Early in his career, Subotzky trained his lens on the lives of marginalised populations in places such as Cape Town’s Pollsmoor Prison, where Nelson Mandela had once been incarcerated, shining a light on black dispossession in an ostensibly post-apartheid nation. His images of another prison, Beaufort West, became the subject of a show at MoMA in 2008, the same year he joined forces with British artist Patrick Waterhouse on a project on Ponte City, one of Africa’s tallest buildings. Completed in 1976, Ponte was a modernist landmark that stood for Johannesburg’s economic might and ambition. In ensuing decades, however, the building fell into disrepair, wealthier residents moved out, and the poor crowded in. Subotzky and Waterhouse spent six years photographing its architecture and residents, chronicling dreams and nightmares in encyclopaedic detail. More recently, Subotzky has turned his attention to painting, starting with a show at Cape Town’s Maitland Institute in 2017. His new work involves printing images on canvases, scrubbing, ironing and layering them until they take on new meanings. This has included reversing the skin tones of attackers and victims in a historical racist cartoon about early European settlers being terrorised by the Xhosa. “Part of the foundations of racism has been the normalisation of whiteness, so most of the work I do now is engaging with white masculinity and trying to make whiteness look strange. It doesn’t look like my earlier work, but there’s a real conceptual thread that holds it all together.”

Mikhael Subotzky

Subotzky at his studio in Arts on Main, an artists’ hub in Maboneng that also counts William Kentridge among its residents. The artwork behind him, Don’t Expect to See Any Explosion Today, relates to the Fees Must Fall protests and the political implications of neoclassical architecture.
Left, Skollie’s oeuvre addresses sex and sexual violence, as evidenced by the recurrence of bananas and papayas to suggest male and female genitalia. Opposite, MacGarry with a work-in-progress of *Porte-parole*, a steel sculpture for a show at Cape Town’s Everard Read gallery.

### Lady Skollie

Skollie cuts a distinctive figure with striking features that have certainly played a part in her sponsorship deal with Nike and campaign for local fashion label Marianne Fassler. But she wasn’t always the belle of the ball – as a minority in an Afrikaans school in Cape Town, she always felt she didn’t fit in because of her race. Skollie is descended from the Khoisan people who, for centuries, suffered rape and repression at the hands of colonisers. A recent show at Birmingham’s Eastside Projects explored papakas, the wine-filled bags that were once used as lieu of money to pay Khoisan workers and brought about a plague of alcoholism, while *Hottentot Skollie* related the story of Sara Baartman – a callipygian Khoisan woman displayed like a freak in 19th-century Europe – to female objectification in our time. The project included a series of black imprints of female derrières, surrounded by cameraphone-wielding hands. While there is much about South African society that continues to aggravate Skollie, she has a love for Johannesburg, her home for the past three years. ‘It’s a city based on the discovery of gold, so it moves at an energetic pace.’

### Michael MacGarry

MacGarry’s short video work, *LHR-JNB*, showed four young men, including himself, clinging to a life raft after a fictional plane crash. The sense of being adrift between continents and cultures was a reflection of the artist’s variegated background – born in Durban, he lived all over South Africa and Europe before settling in Johannesburg four years ago. This sense continues to crop up in his recent films including *Sea of Ash*, which reimagined Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. The piece centres on Senegalese refugee Pape Babacar Kebe, who meditates on the current migrant crisis as he makes his way through a modernist cemetery, along a Venetian lagoon and into the sea, in an ill-fated effort to return home. South Africa, believes MacGarry, is still scarred by the experience of apartheid, with a ‘bizarre’ relationship to the rest of Africa. This has fuelled projects that uncover the underside of progress on the continent and its diaspora. His *Kilamba Kiaxi* series explored a Chinese-funded new city 25km outside Luanda, Angola, which remains a ghost town due to unaffordable rents, while an upcoming project will focus on the lives of African migrant farmers.
Art

This page, Mntambo in her backyard, the future site of a studio designed with local architect Kate Otten.

Opposite, Zangewa creating works in fabric at her kitchen table. In front of her is Sweetest Devotion, a work shown at 2018’s FNB Joburg Art Fair.

Nandipha Mntambo

Visceral and spectacular, Mntambo’s work fuses African tradition with European lore and Hindu mythology. She rose to prominence in 2008 with a photographic self-portrait showing her head morphing into that of a minotaur, at once embodying the victim and aggressor from the Greek myth of the rape of Europa. In the years since, the Swaziland native has created many sculptures from cowhide, often moulding it on her own body, most notably in Inubalani, a spectral battalion of 24 headless figures that came to anchor her mid-career retrospective at Cape Town’s Zeitz MOCAA last year. She has been working with architect Kate Otten to build a new studio in her backyard in the suburb of Kensington, with dedicated spaces for sculpture and painting. The architecture is ‘thought of as frames with skins over them, which has a relationship to how Nandipha works’, says Otten. Meanwhile, a recent collaboration with composer Clare Loveday compared the cities of Birmingham and Johannesburg and the way iconic architecture, such as schools, theatres and mosques, have changed in function as people and money move in and out.

Billie Zangewa

Zangewa grew up in Gaborone, Botswana, but moved to Johannesburg in 1997, lured by creative opportunity and urban grit. Her early works showed the local cityscape, cobbled together from silk swatches in the same way post-apartheid Johannesburg has been a patchwork of cultures. The Rebirth of the Black Venus, a spin on Botticelli showing a black African woman towering above modern skyscrapers, was Zangewa’s way of rebelling against a patriarchal society that diminishes women – ‘I wanted a young girl to see it and say “I can be independent, powerful and protect myself from transgression”.’ More recent work focuses on scenes of domesticity; one shows her asleep in bed, swathed in a floral duvet, another sees her in her kitchen holding her infant son. ‘I realised that sharing everyday stories is the only way we can humanise one another.’ In the era of the selfie, Zangewa’s confidently confessional artwork has struck a chord, not only finding its way into the collections of the Tate, Smithsonian and Stedelijk, but also leveraging her place as the featured artist at 2018’s FNB Joburg Art Fair, where she had a solo exhibition styled as a garden.

358 | Wallpaper