

Now South African Artists Are Being Ravaged by the Impact of the Coronavirus

Already Plagued by Record Unemployment and the Shut Down due to COVID- 19

YONKERS, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES, August 28, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Artists in South Africa have always had a challenging time being creative and eking out a living in an oppressive environment and in a country known for abject racism and overt subjugation. Now the coronavirus has descended on the creative community in the region and has wreaked havoc in myriad ways. One South African expat here is determined to send a lifeline to struggling artists in the region, and is committed to keeping the arts — and artists — alive in an area hit hard by Covid-19.

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Artists can't afford to buy materials to create, Soraya Sheppard laments. They are unable to get into galleries because they are shut down — all over the continent.”

Soraya Sheppard

Soraya Sheppard was born in South Africa and immigrated to the U.S. in 1987, but her heart has always remained in

her native country. A champion of the arts and the creative process in both countries and, in fact, every country, Ms. Sheppard is the progenitor of Color Me Africa Fine Arts www.colormeafricefinearts.com a not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting artists and their craft in South Africa and throughout the African continent. A 2011 year return visit to her homeland left Ms. Sheppard deeply disturbed by what she saw: rampant despair, disenfranchisement, rife poverty among artists, and a sense of resignation that the government would not live up to its commitment to help. More recent developments in South Africa have left her crestfallen; namely, the onslaught of the coronavirus and its palpable impact on artists in the country. While the pandemic has gripped the entire world, it has been particularly brutal in South Africa, where the elite receive exceptional care, and the masses are left to fend for themselves. Both health care and information on the virus are scant for the working class.

“I was a political exile,” Ms. Sheppard shares. “I made a pact with myself to create this organization; it was a way for me to reconnect with South African again.” South African artists are still busy creating, she explains, but amid enormous hardship. The country is ostensibly in 100 percent lockdown because of the coronavirus.

To Interview Soraya Sheppard

Via

*SKYPE*Zoom*Facetime*

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“Artists can’t afford to buy materials to create,” she laments. “They are unable to get into galleries because they are shut down — all over the continent.” Artists resort to Facebook and Instagram to disseminate their art, “but because data is expensive, they can’t even use that; they can’t even pay for the Internet.” Because of the pandemic, many are losing their studios and are forced to share living and workspace. Exhibitions are all but nonexistent now. “They are living cramped conditions so they’re not creating as much as they need in order to support their families.” The pandemic has also given rise to “enormous exploitation of artists,” who are forced to sell work for a fraction of what they’re worth simply to make ends meet. “They need to bring value and honor to their work,” Ms. Sheppard says. “This undercut all of that. They need to afford to eat and pay their rent.”

Artists need a lifeline, and they need it now. So Ms. Sheppard and her colleagues on the board of Color Me Africa Fine Arts are launching a fundraising effort to allow South African artists to exhibit their work virtually, to have a travelling exhibition when conditions permit, and to involve the entire African continent in the endeavor. “Everyone seems excited about it,” Ms. Sheppard says, “so it will be done.” Because of COVID-19 the effort will have to forgo on-site viewing and can only be virtual now. Some funding will come from South Africans and some from the government there, but more is needed to bring the concept to fruition. “We just need a compelling proposal to participate in something like this,” she says.

Part of the effort includes Slave Lodge, one of the oldest buildings in Cape Town. The museum is dedicated to exploring the long history of slavery in South Africa. The building houses both permanent temporary exhibitions. Ms. Sheppard has family in Cape Town and has visited the museum several times. “We don’t really know our history or from whence we come,” she explains. “I went with such mixed emotion. I was angry, saddened, confused.” She wandered in and out of several rooms depicting the legacy of slavery in her home country. One room featured the experiences of enslaved women, but with no faces — just names and stories. “I wanted to do something about them,” she says. “How about an art exhibition — to find out more about each woman?” She intends to find artists to assume the identity of each woman and exhibit their story through art. The exhibition will, she hopes, ultimately travel the entire African continent, and beyond.

“I truly believe, where we are as a people, with white supremacy on the planet as long as I’ve been around, this will not survive on our watch,” Ms. Sheppard explains. “We stand on the shoulders of our forefathers to see that future generations are not subjected to brutality and subjugation of and the psychological damage to people of color, as has been the case for centuries. Today we are their voices. We are them.”

The artists themselves speak poignantly and expressively about their plight today:

Art in the time of COVID .

"It's a solitary passion being an artist. Sitting for hours with reds and blues and the perfection of the strokes created in the hopes that it strikes a chord so finely ensconced in another soul, that acquisition follows," explains South African artist Lioda Conrad. "A critical component of artistic creation is inspiration, reflection, immersive experiences that influence and shape the subject matter.

"So as an artist, I need to see, hear, feel things that excite me and push the direction of what I paint. With the unexpected removal of all the usual stimulation, in such a jarringly fast fashion as the appearance of a global pandemic,

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