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BILLIE ZANGEWA

BETWEEN 10AND5, 1 août 2014

Creative Women: Billie Zangewa

Written by [Jessica Hunkin](#) × on Aug 1, 2014 × in [Art](#), [Featured](#), [Interviews](#)

At first glance, or from a distance, the intricate tapestries that artist [Billie Zangewa](#) creates using silk could be mistaken for oil paintings. Upon closer inspection their unique beauty comes to light as the skilful cuttings and thread work are revealed. Often set in the urban landscapes of Johannesburg, the city which she has called home for the past 17 years, her tapestries seek to explore the female gaze – that is, how a woman sees herself as beautiful through her own eyes.

To launch our annual [Creative Women](#) series celebrating Women's Month, we visited Billie's home studio to see first-hand her process and we spoke to her about her artistic background, how she began working with textiles and the dominant themes in her work.

What type of environment did you grow up in?

I grew up in Gaborone, Botswana in a suburban setting. It was very free and I could be a child. It was also multi-cultural, so I was exposed to many different shades of humanity and cultures. My parents were present and supportive. My siblings were also present and sometimes very annoying.

When did you realise that you wanted to be an artist, and how did you go about pursuing this?

I was about 9 or 10 years old and a drawing by a friend moved me so much that I knew instantly that I wanted to do this thing. I did not know the word artist at the time. From that day on I drew every single day, engaged with other young people interested in drawing and continued to expand my knowledge. I studied art in high school and got a degree in Fine Art. Then it was all about wanting to get into and working in the art world. I've had a lot of luck.

In what ways has the style of your work or your approach to making art developed over the years?

I started with drawing and then I was introduced to printmaking, sculpture etc. Later, I had no access to a print press or studio space so it had to be something that I could do anywhere. The limitations led the way. Initially, I was doing small-scale embroideries and then arrived at the narrative based silk tapestry. When I started the tapestries they were graphic and simple. Then they became more detailed and now I am working with a combination. Today, I have a deeper understanding of my medium and am able to be more expressive with it.

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Having worked in fashion, advertising as well as a musician under the name Billie Starr, you've had quite a multi-faceted creative career. Has your experience in each of these fields had a lasting impact on your artistic practise?

It makes me appreciate that I am now able to make a living solely from my art. Although, I think it's beneficial for a young creative person to experience different spheres. It was like getting a Master's degree in life. I learnt hard work and perseverance and also that I really wanted to be an artist...Billie Starr may make a come-back.

In your artist's statement you expressed a desire to communicate "a truth so profound that it resonates beauty." Is it difficult to translate personal experiences which are painful into work that is visually beautiful, or do you find this process cathartic?

It is difficult because you experience the pain again, but it's cathartic because you can then free yourself from it. The most rewarding part is to see the transformation of negative experience into something tangible and beautiful. Chrysalis to butterfly.

Other than your experimentation with textiles – predominantly in the form of silk tapestries – how does fashion influence your work?

I am inspired by the creativity in fashion. Designers are artists to me. A garment is a sculpture, the fashion-show a "happening" or performance art and the coherence of concepting is on the cutting edge. Not only that, it makes me feel happy.

What else are you influenced and inspired by?

Firstly there is the stuff in the personal memory that drives all of us. Apart from that there is fashion photography, art cinema, vintage posters and now, my son is my biggest influence and inspiration.

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Tell us about the themes that seem to reoccur in your work...

The days and nights of a woman in today's urban landscape is an important one. It's a relevant discussion and more importantly, it's about the female gaze. How a woman sees herself as beautiful through her own eyes. My protagonist (moi!) has evolved from needing the male gaze for affirmation to this perfect powerful being that does not look for approval outside of herself.

Would you say that your process is more spontaneous, planned, or perhaps a combination of the two?

It's a combination of the two. I don't do any preliminary sketches but everything needs to be resolved in the template drawing. During the cutting, I can be spontaneous and intuitive again with colour choices.

What has been the most rewarding part of your journey so far?

The travel. I was in Tokyo for an art fair during the sakura. It was exhilarating and so very beautiful.

Who are the creative women who inspire you?

Beyoncé. She sings with such strong focus. When I'm feeling overwhelmed, I just put on some B and I know that I can do it. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – 'Half of a Yellow Sun' is the most powerful book I have ever read. The late Busi Mhlongo. Yayoi Kusama.

What's next?

More. My friend Tamara reminds me of when we were at university and when asked what I wanted I said "more! I want the more!"