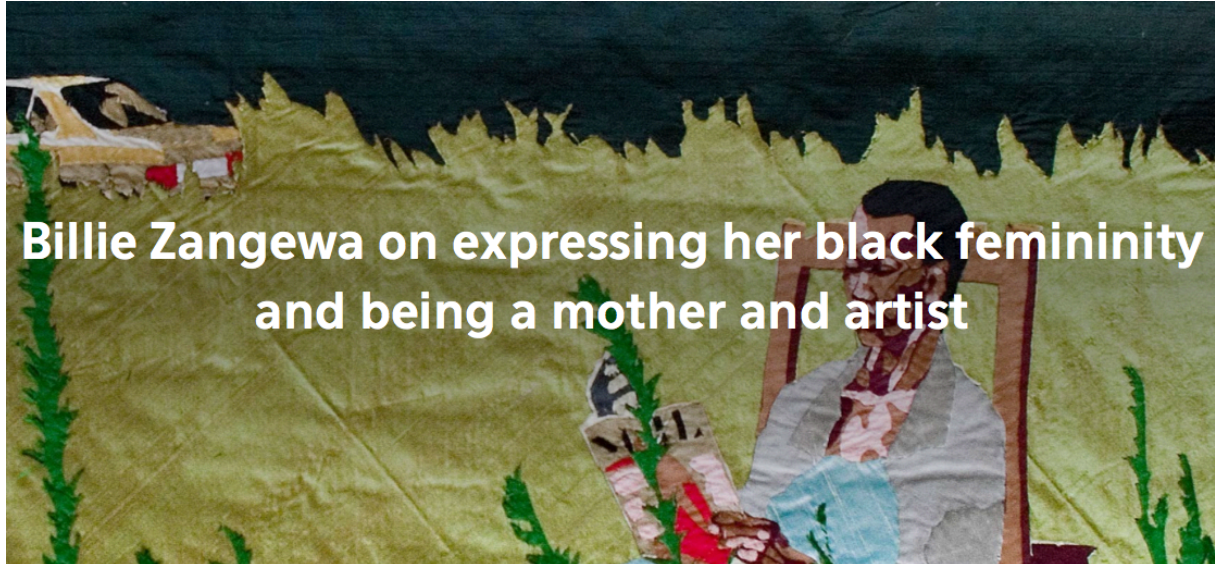


# TEMPLON

## ii

BILLIE ZANGEWA

*TRUE AFRICA*, 19 novembre 2015



## Billie Zangewa on expressing her black femininity and being a mother and artist

By [Awut Atak](#) | [awutatak](#)  
November 19, 2015

**Billie Zangewa is a Malawian artist who works with fabrics, mostly silk, to create intricate tapestries.**

Billie has a bachelor's degree in fine art from Rhodes University, Grahamstown. After completing her degree, she worked in Gaborone, Botswana focusing on oil paintings and stitching characterful bags.

Billie then made a move to Johannesburg to work in the fashion industry and developed a skill for elaborate silk 'paintings' which she makes by hand. Billie's work is honest, humorous and stunning with her pieces often depicting and centred on herself. Her work has been exhibited across Europe, Africa and America. Billie currently lives and works in Johannesburg with her young son and is represented by Afro Nova Gallery, Johannesburg. She shares some thoughts behind her work.

**What themes and ideas does your work touch on?**

My work explores the theme of identity and what that means for me. It is concerned with the female experience both personal and universal.

**You do all your own stitching for your intricate silk tapestries. Can you tell us about the process?**

I start off with an experience that elicits an emotion. The emotion then inspires an image that examines and narrates the experience. From here I do my visual research and then the template drawing. This is followed by cutting and pinning and then finally, the sewing.

“ So my work is autobiographical but the themes are evolving as my life story unfolds.

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It's a very lengthy process and it all has to come together in the drawing phase otherwise I experience problems later on in the process. I have also learnt to allow my intuition to tell me what order things must be cut and pinned in. Previously, I would go from left to right or visa versa but the intuitive approach is more exciting and rewarding.





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**Can you tell us about your most recent series of work you've made?**

I am a mother to a three-year-old boy and raising him is my focus so I am incorporating the pleasures and pressures of this experience in my work. *Exquisite Fantasy* is looking at how precious time becomes when you are a hands-on mother whilst *Ma Vie en Rose* celebrates this life expansion.

“ I am using my own image and body to tell my story.

*Mother and Child* is more about blending the roles of mother and artist. So my work is still autobiographical but the themes are evolving as my life story unfolds.



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**There's been a lot of discussion on representation of black women in arts and culture. Do you find it empowering to portray yourself in your work as an African and black woman?**

Absolutely. I am using my own image and body to tell my story. What could be more empowering than that?

**Is there a significance in stitching instead of using other types of media like paint or pencil?**

Sewing is traditionally a female past-time so it is about identity for me. I'm expressing myself and embracing my femininity through my choice of material. Sewing is also very therapeutic and as a person who internalises things, I find relief in it.

“ I pay particular attention to what my protagonist is wearing in my silk narratives.

Finally, I have a thing for rich textured surfaces. That, combined with my love for fashion, meant working with textile was really a natural progression.

**What influence does fashion have on your artwork? There seems to be a lot of overlap!**

Fashion photography has been a huge inspiration for me, the work of Ellen von Unwerth in particular being an influence. I really enjoy her narrative approach – the way she tells a story in her shoots and it's not just posed models in beautiful clothes.

“ I want to make the clothing come alive.

On the other hand, there are the garments themselves. That is why I pay particular attention to what my protagonist is wearing in my silk narratives. I want to make the clothing come alive.

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**How have you found being an artist based in Johannesburg?**

I have lived here a long time so I feel comfortable enough to relax and create. There is an active art scene and a connection to the rest of the world so one never feels isolated. I love the energy of the city. It makes me feel like anything is possible.

**What do you think the African art scene has to offer in the near future?**

Surely exciting things. The scene is already energetic and there is growing interest in the African perspective.

**Are you up to anything exciting we should look out for?**

I have a group show *A Constellation* at the Harlem Studio Museum, *Making Africa* at Guggenheim Bilbao and *Body Talk* at Frac Lorraine.

Follow Billie on Twitter [@billiezangewa1](https://twitter.com/billiezangewa1)

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