

Pulane Kingston on collecting black African female artists

The South African businesswoman and lawyer discusses seeking out works by women from across the continent

Georgina Adam 8 HOURS AGO

The list of Pulane Kingston's achievements is long: a lawyer who has lived in numerous countries and speaks six languages, a specialist in oil and gas regulations, a fellow of the African Leadership Institute, and a founder of her own company in the rail industry. All this as well as being a collector, with a particular mission to collect work by black African female artists because, as she says, "Their voice has not been heard as much as it should."

When we meet over Zoom — she in Johannesburg, I in snowy London — we begin by talking, as always these days, about the Covid crisis. "We're all stuck at home because of the pandemic," she says. "But the fact you can't go out makes you work in a far more efficient and clever manner. I happen to be a homebody, so I am quite enjoying working from home."

Kingston's early life was not spent in South Africa. She was born in Tanzania and grew up there and in Zambia. "My parents were political exiles, as members of the ANC [African National Congress]," she explains: "I ended up studying law at Aberystwyth University in Wales, and did my masters at Nottingham University." She was also active in the ANC Youth League, and spent time in Norway with the League. As a result, she speaks English, French, Swahili and Norwegian as well as Zulu and Xhosa.



'Salute' by Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi

“I came to South Africa as soon as Mandela was released. Moving here was the biggest shock I had ever had to deal with,” she says, laughing. “But I was lucky that, through my mother and sister, I spoke Zulu and Xhosa. So much of African culture is embedded in the language, and it made it much easier to assimilate. It hasn’t been an easy ride,” she admits, “but by the same token *this* is where I come from, and I have to make it work.”

Kingston is wearing a brightly coloured dress with a chunky string of beads; her nails are similarly bright. She is extremely engaging and approachable for someone with such a powerful profile: a year ago, she founded Mirai Rail Corporation, a sub-Saharan rail company. “It’s a very male-dominated sector,” she says. “And sometimes I smile my way through being mistaken for the tea lady.” She laughs wholeheartedly at this, without the slightest trace of rancour.

She founded the company because, as she explains: “I am quite an ardent pan-Africanist, and one of the key levers to see economic development catalysing was to have a workable transportation system and key to that had to be transport infrastructure.” She chooses her words carefully and precisely, befitting her legal training.

Kingston started collecting art after moving to South Africa, and her first purchase was “Portrait of a Woman” (1960) by the artist and musician Gerard Sekoto. “I thought it was so beautiful. He painted it in Senegal, and it is very regal, portraying the beauty of Senegalese women with their long necks and angular features,” she says.



'Portrait of a Woman' (1960) by Gerard Sekoto

At the beginning, Kingston was very much guided by the late Linda Givon, founder of Goodman Gallery, one of the few that represented black artists right through the apartheid era, and she continues to work closely with the gallery and others in South Africa. “Because of its complicated history, there is very little documentation about black artists in the South Africa,” says Kingston: “I would pop into the gallery two or three times a week; Linda took me through the history of black African artists and white ones, then took me to fairs around the world.”

“As I went along,” she continues: “It struck me that to build an interesting collection I had to identify where there was a gap. And I am quite the feminist — every time I went to an art gallery, I had to ask to see art created by women artists. So I decided to focus mainly on black African women artists.”

Among the artists she has bought are Nolan Dennis, Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, Bronwyn Katz, Donna Kukama, Cinga Samson, Igshaan Adams, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Malawi-born Billie Zangewa, the Nigerian, British-based artist Jadé Fadojutimi, [Zanele Muholi](#) and Kudzanai Chiurai from Zimbabwe.



‘Julile I, Parktown, Johannesburg’ (2016) by Zanele Muholi, from the series Somnyama Ngonyama

This demonstrates Kingston’s emphasis on collecting widely across the continent: “It’s so easy for collections to just focus on their home artists but we must look beyond our borders,” she says: “My collection would be incomplete if it didn’t incorporate artists from countries where I spent so many of my formative years. Zimbabwean and Angolan artists are phenomenal; in Mozambique you can’t build a collection without Malangatana Ngwenya.”

While women artists are her focus and mission, it is not exclusive. For instance, she has a large portrait by [William Kentridge](#), “Untitled (Frantz Fanon)”, (2016). “You can’t have a meaningful collection in South Africa without Kentridge — he is one of our great masters,” she says. “And I have my eye on [Yinka Shonibare](#)’s “The African Library”, I don’t have enough space for it, but it’s a magnificent work of art.” The huge installation comprises thousands of books covered with bright cotton textile.

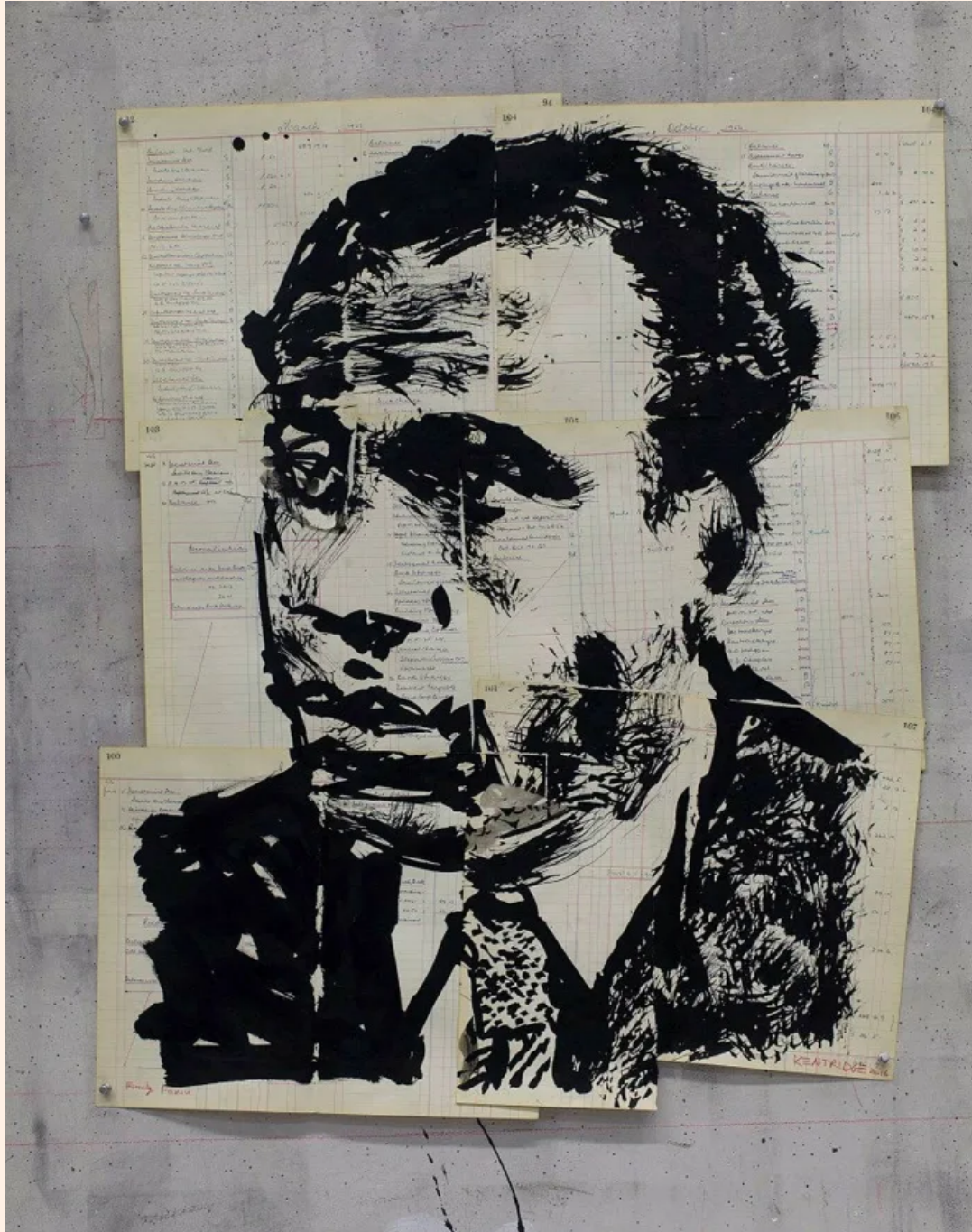


Pulane Kingston with *Afternoon Delight* by Billie Zangewa on wall behind her © Katlego Mokubanye

She now has too many works to keep at home, so a lot are in storage — “I just don’t have enough space, but I keep photographs of everything on my phone!”

Kingston was an adviser to the [Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art](#) in Cape Town at its start and is now a trustee — and she is on the African acquisitions committee of Tate. “Showing artists from the continent is absolutely critical for Africa and for the world,” she says: “It validates the artists when they are in a museum — visitors get an introduction to artists from different parts of the world and back here it shows that we have an international platform for our art.”

She is also an ambassador for [South South](#), a platform focusing on art galleries, artists, curators and collectors in the Global South. “I am very excited about this, over and above the [platform’s] charity auction,” she says: “Especially in the time of Covid and no travel, I can go to this repository of information and understand what is happening in Brazil or south-east Asia. And what has struck me are the similarities in different countries, despite their geographical distance, for example how exhibitions put together, the race issues, how art is seen and experienced.”



‘Untitled (Frantz Fanon)’ (2016) by William Kentridge

I ask what the future of her collection is. Her six children (“two of mine, four ‘inherited’ when I got married”) are, in her own words, “totally disinterested” in art. She says this with laughter, recounting how her children were *sulking* — she emphasizes the word — when she took them to the Broad in Los Angeles to see the exhibition [Soul of a Nation](#). She had to negotiate a 45-minute visit — “and then they literally dragged me out!”

So a donation seems most likely. “We come from an environment where race dictated *who* would see what art, so I would be happier if my collection went to some sort of academic institution,” Kingston says. “For example, the [Wits](#) gallery, or Pretoria University. I want it to be used not only for pleasure but also for learning.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2021. All rights reserved.