POWER GAINED—POWER LOST: ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN WOMEN VISUALISED

B BENGU

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Introduction

The record of oppression of women is world wide, but black women have had to bear further oppression from colonisation and racism. As a black woman or woman of colour, I have experienced combined forms of oppression such as racism, classism and sexism. Black women have been dispossessed through the construction of their identity by others and through the breaking up of families by the practice of apartheid. Yet when I examine my history, the strength of women is evident in opposing these oppressions. Women have been at the forefront of political struggles, head households[1] and fulfill various leadership roles. In this body of work, I hope to have portrayed an empowered state of African women that depicts women in wide variety of roles and shows that they are active and equal participants in society. I choose a Pan-Africanist[2] view of African women, because of my interest in cultural diversity .

The boundaries between nations within the African continent are artificial and were created by colonization; however similarities in the various language groups suggest threads of commonality within the whole African continent. Hence I have not limited my research project to only South African communities, but have drawn on material from across the African continent.

[1] 59% of all rural households in South Africa are headed by women (Africa Insight Vol.25 No.2 1995).
[2] I do not limit myself to South Africa but embrace all cultures and ethnic groups of the African continent.

I have also tried to portray African culture as dynamic. Our contemporary South African society is becoming more and more cosmopolitan with the influx of Africans from other African countries. This encourages me to re-define what it means to be 'African' (particularly within a South African context) and to confront the stereotypes that have dispossessed Africans, particularly African women of the power to define themselves. Through my drawings I access multiple realities that belong to African women. Depicting African women from different walks of life, sharing ethnic and class differences, I attempt to find similarities between women's experience. I also attempt to address the many complex issues with which African women must grapple daily. Having returned home after fifteen years of exile, my drawings represent a way to enable me to re-connect to my African roots and to define my own identity within an African context. Examining how women have been and still are oppressed allows me to identify and confront stereotypes and to promote an awareness of the processes of disempowerment.

Women And Power In Africa

a. Disempowerment

African history has been largely written by others, and as a result very little that is positive has been portrayed to emanate from Africa. Yet Africa has a long history of civilization before European conquest. Africa boasts numerous great and powerful women leaders. Contrary to popular belief, Cleopatra was neither white nor Greek but "a distinctively African woman, dark in colour" (Qunta 1987: 47). Other women of prominence, to name a few, include Queen Nzinga[3] of Angola and Ndongo, Queen Hatshepsut[4] of Egypt, Queen Aminatu[5] of Nigeria. The Queen of Sheba features as a powerful African Queen in The Old Testament.

According to Qunta (1987: 36), in African society dating back to the old kingdom in Egypt (3100 BC—10TH Century), there was equal division of labour. Women assumed control of the household and the children while the men procured the food. Property was owned by the community as a whole. With the emergence of class divisions, which resulted from changes associated with the domestication of animals and breeding of herds, equality between men and women disappeared.

[3]Queen Nzinga of Angola ruled c.1581-1663. She waged many successful wars against the Portuguese invaders penetrating the interior of her country. After her death, the Portuguese occupation of the interior of South West Africa began.

[4]She ruled Egypt during the eighteenth Dynasty (c.1490-68BC). Her reign lasted twenty years during which time she established a powerful navy.

[5] She built a strong and united Hausa Empire in the sixteenth Century. Under her reign trade flourished.

Women who had no control over production therefore had less power than the male.

> Since the beginning of the 1st century AD, agriculture had been coming to the forest areas of West Africa. A production surplus became commonplace and this formed the basis for property rights and various forms of exploitation. The development of agriculture and animal husbandry made the emergence of an early form of class structure possible (Loth 1987: 28).

This is further illustrated by Jordan who extends this observation up to the 19th century:

> Pre-industrial societies were characterized by mechanical solidarity wherein each group or tribe was self-sufficient. Division of labour according to the sexes was not rigidly structured as everything was centred around the home. Women were always home-bound. But as societies became organic in nature (as typical modern societies) gradually division of labour was introduced with all its inherent problems of inequality, exploitation, and oppression of the weaker individuals in society which happen to be the blacks and, even more women, i.e. regarding the South African situation (Jordan 1990: 3).

Qunta reiterates this by citing Engels:

> in his historic treatise *The Origin of the Family, Property and the State* Frederick Engels argues that the exploitation and oppression of women has its origins in the emergence and development of a society stratified along class lines. The inequalities inherent in such a society can in the final analysis be traced to the socio-economic formation prevalent at a particular period in history (Qunta 1987: 36).

This division of labour has had the same detrimental effect on women in other parts of the world. Michele Barrett states:

> Family forms have changed in such a way as not only to incorporate, but actively exacerbate, the gender division of pre-capitalist society. The separation of home and workplace has entrenched women more squarely in domestic and familial responsibilities, and detached and disadvantaged them in the sphere of wage labour (Barrett 1988: 78).

Pre-agro-pastoralist society probably allowed women freedom that has never been equaled. With the adoption of agro-pastoralism and the imposition of foreign religions and later colonial laws, women's power gradually eroded. Woman's oppression however cannot be eradicated by simply returning to early customs or traditions. Traditions continually evolve so that gender equality must be asserted within the framework of change. I would wish for equality based on equal opportunity i.e. equal access to production, political and economic power. Traditions which restrict women, particularly those customs perpetuated by men in order to control women must be destroyed as they form the greatest oppressor of all. However, by the same token, some customs such as mural decoration by Ndebele women should be recognised as empowering women by fostering a sense of unity among women.

b. Forces Against Tradition

Although African society has been fragmented and women's traditional roles have altered, what remains seemingly unchanged is the transmission of various human values by women, from one generation to the next. In this section, I wish to examine how African women have, in recent times, adapted to the restrictions imposed upon them by society and tradition. In this section, I have also focused on South Africa as my primary source of inspiration for my practical work as it is my immediate environment.

Many urban women have joined the labour force. Many do not marry but raise one or more children as single parents. Cherryl Walker explains the rise of female headed households in South Africa:

> What we do know is that the twentieth century saw a marked increase in female headed households among the African population and that for significant numbers of women, the

process of proletarianisation and urbanisation provided opportunities to escape domestic relationships that were experienced as onerous and restrictive (Walker 1991: xxi).

As sole breadwinners, these women play the dual role of career women and mothers. Likewise, in the past, rural women performed most of the household functions, but in the age of industrial capitalism they also formed the vast bulk of rural labour. As a result of the Land Act 1913[6] in South Africa, men were forced to migrate to the urban areas for employment and women had to engage in agricultural production for white farmers. Both urban and rural women however, although disempowered by the apartheid regime, have reclaimed different forms of power. Innes & O'Meara explain this as follows:

> women perform additional functions for the capitalist sector. Apart from being involved in agricultural production, Black women in the rural areas function to lower the cost of reproduction of the labour power. Black women indeed fulfill the social security functions necessary for the reproduction of the migrant work-force. Education and health care are virtually undertaken by women, and the state and the capitalist sector are thus relieved from the need to expend resources on these necessary functions...In addition, women not only perform the reproductory labor itself (i.e. cooking, childcare, education etc.) but also have to produce goods that are necessary for the reproduction of the labour power of the household (Jozana 1990: 12).

As the supporter of the household, therefore, women performed an important economic role.

In other parts of Africa women have recently gained independence as a result of their claiming economic influence. In present day, Ibo society of south western Nigeria for example, both men and women take part in the cultivation of the crops. While men cultivate yams, the women cultivate the cassava. Ibo women are free to sell the surplus crop and keep the profit. Similarly, the Yoruba women of south western Nigeria, Togo and the Republic of Benin possess considerable economic power (Klein 1980). Although the men monopolise food production, Yoruba women control distribution. As financial traders, they are financially independent of their husbands.

In South Africa , one of the most destructive roles played by apartheid has been the breaking up of families and the erosion of traditional family values. Women played a vital role in nurturing children in the absence of their fathers. Nzimande when discussing the national liberation struggle describes the role of women:

> The unity of the family became a symbol of success in the fight against apartheid since the system targeted families in many

[6] "[The passing] of the Land Acts reserved only 13 percent of South Africa for blacks to live on. Migrant labour was [also] enforced in South Africa since the turn of the century" (Magubane 1993:11).

ways e.g. migrancy and long jail terms [in Robben Island] in particular (Nzimande 1995: 64).

The role of women has been multi-functional. Women have been the prime nurturers of the children and play an important cultural role in reproducing cultural traditions. By retaining their cultural values through oral history they provide an important sense of cultural continuity. Hendrickson reflects on these issues as follows:

> The claim that women have become responsible for the "work of custom" does not derive only from the absence due to migrancy of males to do this work. In South Africa it has its genesis also in other dislocations of the public socio-political domain wrought by the apartheid regime. In an area northwest of Sekhukhuneland, Hofmeyr (1994) found that the genre of oral historical narrative, previously the domain of men, and performed mainly in the central public space of a village, was unable to survive the destruction of this public space, which occurred with the forced relocations of Betterment planning, while traditions of female storytelling, situated in the household all along, did transplant successfully (Hendrickson 1996: 60).

Women have played crucial roles politically, socially and economically. Not only did women use their roles as mother as a powerful weapon to combat apartheid and fight for survival, but they assumed the responsibilities of absent men who were forced to migrate to urban areas.

c. Primal Power

In accepting the positive role of African women as nurturer and primary reproducer of society, one can view her fertility as a form of power. Broadly speaking, African myths and history are closely intertwined. Despite African cultures being influenced by colonialism and cross-cultural contact, some cultural beliefs and practices appear to have remained relatively intact. This is particularly true with the Yoruba. Maya Angelou, a renowned African-American poet describes Yoruba culture as follows:

> The Yoruba, one of West Africa's most ancient and surviving cultures, has roots extending back to 300 BC They were and are an artistically advanced people whose symbols and mythologies are still in popular use and still influential after centuries (Angelou in Courtney-Clarke 1990: 17).

Drewal, when discussing Yoruba women, notes:

> Females in particular, whether deified, ancestral or living (collectively referred to as the mothers), are believed to possess a special ase which can manifest itself either positively or negatively to affect individuals and communities... The mothers, also referred to as "owners of birds" (*eleye*), can by

> using their spiritual power, transform themselves into birds of the night in order to fly to their victims" (Drewal 1973-74: 26, 58).

The Yoruba believe that *ase* is a destructive power that women possess which is why women are both respected and feared. *Ase* can be translated as "witchcraft" or "witch", however "witches" do not personify evil but are treated with affection and respect (Drewal 1992). This apprehension of women results from their procreative powers. This may reflect male ambivalence towards women. Also noteworthy is the fact that women are deemed more powerful the older they become. They become quasi male, and for example, in northern Ghana it is not uncommon for some old women to be buried dressed as men. Women are viewed to be at the height of their power after menopause. Older women are often given greater status than younger women.

> Older women become "like men"... In such cases, women's status as quasi male seems to derive on the one hand from their proven fertility, on the other from their asexuality and amenorrhea. They no longer threaten transformative activities that depend both on actual separation of genders and a symbolic fusion of them under male control. But they also represent positive accumulations of power, allowing them a public role denied to younger women (Herbert 1993: 231).

Ironically, older women are often victims. In South Africa particularly in the North Western region, older women are the primary victims of witch-killing[7]. The phenomenon of witch-killing is a highly complex one and includes an important political dimension. During the 1980s, it may have been a manifestation directed towards an unpopular erstwhile Venda government, where corruption and nepotism was rife. It was a means for the ANC youth to expel so called informers of the apartheid government. Not to be ignored is the role jealousy and envy play in many of the accusations of witch-killing. Yet another cause may be the tensions caused by social roles shifting in a rapidly changing society. Peter Delius states:

> and the ambiguity of women's positions within the villages had been intensified by the process of change at work which had not altered their formal status and had increased their dependence on cash income, but had also extended their control over households and their centrality within village life" (Delius 1996: 202).

An interesting analogy I find between South African society and Yoruba society is found in the following:

> It is a likely hypothesis that witchcraft fears and accusations are the cultural expression of the psychological impact of the individuals in Yoruba society, of the social relations generated

[7] "It has been estimated that at least 75% of the women appearing as victims of witchcraft cases in Thohoyandou [Venda] Magistrate's Court were old" (Minaar 1992: 27).

> by the Yoruba pattern of marriage: of anxiety and guilt in women; and ambivalent sentiments in men—affection and respect for their mothers and for the mothers of their children, but fear of the inadequacy of maternal care, and fear that the jealousy of women in a polygamous household within a compound group giving the security of the corporate membership in a continuous agnatic lineage to their children but denying it to themselves, may be vented as spite against husbands (Morton-Williams 1985: 339).

Whether women are deemed more powerful the older they become or when they are young, it seems clear that the Yoruba myths often express men's attempt to control female power. The Yoruba myths also give expression to society's restrictive gender constructions that define women's societal roles. Women's capacity to play various roles: mother, careerwoman, head of the household is not recognised by society which will not allow for the integration of these multiple roles. Women's role will remain restricted unless alternate forms of gender consciousness are adopted that advocate equality of the sexes rather than a hierarchy which deems one gender superior to another.

d. Power and Gender

The construction of African women is complex, often contradictory or contrasting even to the extent that at times females cannot be attributed gender roles or gender identities. African practices such as the burying of elderly women dressed as males in Ghana and men dressed as women during certain Yoruba rituals express respect for women. It may also be an expression of male and female complimenting one another.

Gender dualism is becoming more accepted in other areas of contemporary society. This crossover is seen in trans-sexualism, transvestitism, in drag and cross-dressing. Gender crossover/blurring assists us to understand the powerful forces of femininity and masculinity. It encourages us to reformulate the way in which we regard the sexes. Male and female can exist as complimentaries of one another and not in competition with one another. Goldberg views transvestites and drag queens as agents that challenge stereotypes. These are all manifestations of individuals coming to terms with both the female and male aspects of their personalities. Goldberg, when discussing Maricevic"s photographs of transvestites and drag queens (Fig.1), states:

> drag queens reveal the temporary metamorphosis of men who choose to transform their image to relieve male pressures or for the fun of it...It's all about sexual stereotypes the making, breaking and reshaping of those roles (Goldberg 1995: 127).

Cross-dressers and transvestites, whether consciously or unconsciously, act to question identities deemed to be fixed. Garber suggests:

> If we refuse to elide the physical existence of these crossdressers, we will notice that these figures perform a

> necessary critique of binary thinking, whether particularized as male and female, black and white, yes and no, Republican and Democrat, self and other (Garber 1992: 10-11).

Restrictive gender constructions deny the existence of complex identities. Male and female are delineated as two separate polarities that cannot exist concurrently.

Among the Yoruba, the duality of the sexes is a recurrent theme. This phenomenon, for example, is strongly evident during the annual Igogo festival when men plait their hair like women and offer sacrifices at the grove of Oronsen. Ulli Beier, in his *Conversations on Yoruba Culture,* explains why Yoruba men plait their hair like women:[8]

> No doubt it's a way of paying homage to women. But at the same time it is also part of a much wider phenomenon in Yoruba culture; namely that though there are male and female roles being played out in society, these roles are frequently blurred or even reversed. I think it has to do with the basic Yoruba concept that nothing is absolute; that all boundaries are flexible, all truths ambivalent (Abiodun R., & Beier, U. 1991: 25).In Yoruba culture, male and female are seen as complimentaries. This is reflected in their art. A large part of African art depicts primordial ancestors, sometimes in the form of male/female pairs. This is the case with Esu staffs (Fig.2) carved by the Yoruba for the trickster deity. This is also the case with male and female brass figures (Fig.3) which are symmetrical, one mirrors the other except for the breasts and genitalia.

> In paired brass objects known as "the-owners-of-the-house" (*onile*) and smaller ones known as edan, both emblems of the Osugbo society[9] males and females are represented as equals. A chain at the top often links the castings together and evokes the importance of the bond between males and females, both within the judiciary and in the larger society (Drewal 1992: 175).

Males in power recognize that to increase their power they need to appropriate female power. Likewise, women who hold power also appropriate male power. For example, among the Shona the princesses in Zimbabwe are not expected to marry but to have many sexual relations so as to enhance the fertility of the land. In Chad, among the women of Moundang, there is a dance known as *imitation des maris*, which during times of drought, or when an old woman dies, women not only wear men's clothing but also imitate male behaviour. According to myth, this practice signifies women's rebellion against a grandmother who taught women that husbands should be treated as gods. This dance celebrates woman as King, whose power is called upon to end the drought. This makes it evident that it is not only men who hold power but that both male and female hold different forms of power.

[8] *Let's check 'em out!* (Plate 14) depicts men applying make-up—the preserve of women.

[9] "The traditional society of elders that historically formed the judiciary in communities throughout southern Yorubaland" (Drewal 1992:33).

> This reflects a desire to maintain a balance between two powerful opposites. Females are not seen as incomplete or defective males, in contrast to the models that have dominated Western thinking. With the emphasis on duality, they may lack qualities attributed to males, but males lack female qualities as well; the fusion of both is seen as indispensable to the proper functioning of the world (Herbert 1993: 125).

Drag queens and cabaret performers transcend gender boundaries yet this is different to the appropriation of female or male power in, for example Yoruba culture. In contemporary society transgender practices are often born out of gender confusion. In other instances they are designed to promote gender confusion or anarchy. But in societies not challenged by gender inversion, transgender practices allow individuals the flexibility to express opposite traits without losing their identity.[10]

> In Nnobi's[11] traditional cultural system, with the Igbo language's flexible gender construction, the conceptualization of daughters as male in ritual matters and politically in relation to wives, did not imply that daughters should be seen as 'manly'; nor were 'female husbands' expected to dress or behave like men. There is therefore no linguistic or mental adjustment or confusion in references to women in a typical male role. Powerful women were not divorced or alienated from "fellow women" (Amadiume 1987: 186).

While gender constructions can be restrictive, flexibility in gender constructions can be empowering and can enable from both individuals to draw strength from their male and female aspects.

[10]Pieter-Dirk Uys under the guise of Evita Bezuidenhout, assumes a separate identity and this allows him to air his views without inhibition.

[11]Nnobi is a town in North-eastern Nigeria. The Nnobi are a subgroup of the Igbo.

Affinities and Influences

Art that has been influential to my work can be divided into two areas. The first area includes artists who are of particular significance to me and the second includes photographers, who have provided my secondary source material.

a. Artists that celebrate the power of women

> The power of the visual is vast and women's image especially potent; for millennia it has been used to affect the course of history for both sexes. If women can control their image, they will possess an important means of increasing their power and achieving social equality in general (Klein 1980: 27).

Feminist artists and artists influenced by feminist ideology have turned increasingly to the subject-matter of women, portraying strong women, workers and lesbians. A growing gender consciousness has created an awareness of women's unequal status in economic, political and social matters. By controlling their self-image, women begin to engage in self-questioning which leads to a greater knowledge of themselves. Being able to speak for oneself instead of being spoken for is a source of power.

In this context, I considered it pertinent to my work to examine the work of four female artists: Paula Rego, Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, Frida Kahlo and Margaret Courtney-Clarke. All these artists with the exception of Margaret Courtney-Clarke, concern themselves with their own realities in relation to being women. Each is primarily concerned with defining women's experience and, in so doing, empower themselves and other women.

Paula Rego

Paula Rego, a Portuguese artist has challenged the depiction of women by men. She uses traditional subject-matter and imbues it with new meaning. One of Rego's central topics is female power:

> Victor Willing, her most astute and lyrical critic, once observed that two of the predominant themes in her work were time past and domination. To these might be added the themes of nurturing and punishment, freedom and repression, power and impotence, as well as the disjunction between what the self desires and what the social order prescribes or what reality has to offer (Rosengarten 1988: 18).

In her paintings, she challenges stereotypes; in the painting it is the woman who possesses power. She appropriates elements from Phillippe de Champaigne, *The Vision of Saint Joseph* c.1638, (Fig.4), in which an angel appears to sleeping Saint Joseph, revealing to him that the Virgin Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. In *Joseph's Dream* (Fig.5), the artist is a young woman who paints her subject, an elderly man, sleeping on a sofa. Rego is challenging stereotypes by

reversing roles. Instead of the woman being the object for depiction, she becomes the artist. In this painting it is the woman artist who possesses the power. Although the female subject has been a common theme for male artists, in recent years, female artists are reclaiming their own images and defining their own identities.

> In Western culture, for the last thousand years or so, women have been the consumers of male prowess: they have provided the applause and the adulation, in return for the idealisation of their own imagery that was at once their glory and their burden (Wiggins 1991: 34).

Rego takes a traditional subject and makes it of our time. In *The Soldier's Daughter* (Fig.6) and *Joseph's Dream* (Fig.5) the heroic scale and weight of both the artist and subject convey a sense that they are real figures, ready to burst into our reality. "In Rego's hands the idealised female form undergoes humanisation. It no longer floats but lurks or squats or shoves"(Wiggings 1991: 36).

Through her paintings, Paula Rego relates personal experiences, some of them dating back to her childhood, some from her daily encounters. She imbues them with a new significance, a different twist where women become the central characters of the narratives.

> In England, Paula Rego (b. 1935) returned to the figurative tradition of history painting but used heroic scale, harsh lighting, and theatrical compositions to present a pantheon of female figures traditionally suppressed in accounts of male exploits. *The Soldier's Daughter* (1987), [Fig.6] *The Cadet and his Sister* (1988), [Fig.7] and other works propose a new iconography for the female heroine (Chadwick 1990: 354).

The way in which Rego reverses gender roles has influenced the way in which I narrate stories in my own work. In *Let's check 'em out!* (Plate 11) roles are reversed to empower woman as the women assess the physical attractiveness of the males. Rego's women are not frail, but strong, active and believable characters. These depictions have influenced the way in which I attempt to portray African women revealing them as active and empowered participants in society.

Using symbols from everyday experience, Rego infuses her work with multiple meanings and multiple identities that define women. Likewise, in my own work I have attempted to suggest the multiple identities of women.

Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi

Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, a Ndebele artist, who first learned about art through her grandmother, depicts women as central to her works. Sebidi depicts women as the principal nurturers and educators of the community. In her painting *The child's mother holds the sharp side of the knife* (1988), (Fig.8), she celebrates the

strength of women as they sustain and unite the family. Her main focus is on African women. Sebidi interprets this painting as follows:

> I see a woman chained, pulling her tradition. In our language they always say—yours is yours. You've got to handle it, you've got to be, don't let go... In African tradition they say it is the woman who holds the sharp side of the knife. Here woman is holding the knife in this way and is saying—this is what I have to do, and it's my way (quoted in Arnold 1996: 140).

She further explains:

> The chain that she is holding, is actually the whole culture. Over there, on her head—this thing, it was supposed to be beads but now it is the thorns which are the nerves inside her head. She is there to protect the child as this animal is now a friend of the father. She has to push the animal away from the child so that the child can survive (quoted in Younge 1990: 35).

Besides depicting the strength of women, Sebidi shows how society has been dehumanised and traditional values distorted. Life in the South African townships encourages the oppression of women. Women who are dispossessed of land are forced to live in cramped conditions. Their lives are impoverished by the fragmentation of the family, when men are forced migrate to the cities and to live in hostels and compounds. Sebidi uses fragmented faces and bodies to convey dislocation and confusion. Women in the townships become viewed as sex objects, and she suggests that rural life was better for the African as relations were characterized by mutual respect.

A common thread that links my work with that of Sebidi is a strong commitment to and support of women. Like Sebidi, my work attempts to portray the daily burdens born by women and the conflict between traditional and contemporary lifestyles.

Frida Kahlo.

The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo also concerns herself with her own personal reality. Her work speaks of the many contradictions of women's identities, relating to power and powerlessness. Although Kahlo depicts herself as possessing heroic strength, she also sometimes portrays herself as vulnerable and needy.

> The duality of the Mexican Frida Kahlo's life (1907-54)—an exterior persona constantly reinvented with costume and ornament, and an interior image nourished on the pain of a body crippled in a trolley-bus accident when she was an adolescent—invests her painting with a haunting complexity and a narrative quality which disturbs in its ambiguity (Chadwick 1990: 294).

Kahlo's autobiographical paintings document her heroic battle against illness and an oppressive relationship yet her many self-portraits celebrate women's beauty as a form of power. Frida Kahlo was obsessed by fertility as it defined her mythic heritage and connection to the earth. As a young child, a terrible accident made her unable to bear children. She suffered three miscarriages. In her painting *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) (Fig.9), Kahlo depicts herself on a hospital bed, haemorrhaging. Weeping, she sprawls uncomfortably, the lost foetus looming over her body.

> Less than positive views of maternity carry over into [Kahlo's work]. Now it is violence directed against the self, not projected onto another, violence inseparable from the physiological reality of woman's sexuality and the social construction of her feminine role (Chadwick 1990: 296).

Whether or not women artists define themselves as 'feminist', their work often relates to surviving their immediate reality in which they are primarily defined as women. From their art, women have derived consolation and most important of all, have derived power. Creating images has given women the authority to re-write their histories and an opportunity to assert power for themselves and other women.

Kahlo's work, because of the direct way it addresses the many contradictions of womanhood, is influential to my work. Kahlo's work reveals the multiple identities of women. Through my work I attempt to show that these many varying identities apply equally to African women.

Margaret Courtney-Clarke

Margaret Courtney-Clarke is a significant photographer to me because of the way in which she celebrates women; their beauty, their creativity and their central role within their communities. Her photography is important to my work because of its strong sense of design and pattern. Her book *Ndebele* (1986), pays tribute to Ndebele women. It gave long-overdue exposure to their art which is of remarkable richness. Being a woman, Margaret Courtney-Clarke is not only able to portray the exteriors but gained entry to the interiors of homes, establishing a relationship to those who lived therein. *African Canvas* (1990), documents the mural decoration of West Africa but more importantly, it foregrounds the power and beauty of a dying art. As Nadine Gordimer states:

> The art of Africa is known as a casualty of colonial exploitation, surviving principally in the museums of other continents, never seen by the people who created it. What reappears among African artists today is regarded as a renaissance of a destroyed tradition (Courtney-Clarke 1986: cover).

Courtney-Clarke describes *African Canvas* as follows:

> My objective in this book is to document an extraordinary art form—vernacular art and architecture in West Africa, that is

> not transportable and therefore not seen in museums around the world. It is an attempt to capture the unseen Africa, a glimpse into the homes and into the spirit of very proud and dignified peoples. In much the same way as I photographed the art of the Ndebele women, I have drawn on my personal affinity for art itself, for methods, design and form, rather than the socio-anthropological or political realities of a people or continent in dilemma. These images portray a unique tradition of Africa, a celebration of an indigenous rural culture in which the women are the artists and the home her canvas (Courtney-Clarke 1990; 19).

Unlike Courtney-Clarke, I believe that one cannot divorce art from the political and social realities of the people. Nevertheless, I am drawn to her depiction of design and form. Celebrating the Ndebele mural decoration, Courtney-Clarke presents an environment where human life, nature and pattern is interwoven into every aspect of life. More than just celebrating beauty, her work shows culture as dynamic, expressed by the fusion of African and Western influences. The photograph of thirty-eight-year-old Maria Mahlangu (Fig.10) makes this evident. Maria is seated on a stool in the interior of a room she painted using geometric patterns that include hearts, clocks and *inDau* (lions)—symbols of her own personal history. She is clad in the Ndebele colours; yellow, blue, red and purple. In contrast, on the wall rests a photograph of Maria on her wedding day, clad in a white wedding dress.

b. Photographers

Peter Magubane

Using the camera, both Peter Magubane and Jürgen Schadeberg have recorded South African experience, particularly the struggle against the harsh, racist apartheid regime.

Working as photojournalists for *Drum*, the major magazine for the African community in the 1950s and 1960s, their photography documented the great human struggle for survival in the face of severe forms of oppression.

In South Africa's patriarchal society where women are believed to play a supportive or subservient role to men, Magubane in his book *Women of South Africa: Their Fight For Freedom* shows this to be a fallacy. This revolutionary book shows the prominent role women played not only socially but politically. Magubane documents women's struggle for survival; women who sustained their families, nursed children who had been attacked by police and finally women who, such as Winnie Mandela and Albertina Sisulu led political marches and protests. One of Magubane's most striking images (Fig.11) shows Winnie Mandela looking out from behind the bars of her prison cell, literally thrusting

out into the viewer's space. This is a powerful portrayal of an undeniably strong African woman. It is significant that Magubane was arrested for photographing the pass protest march of 1958, when 3,500 women took to the streets of Johannesburg.

While revealing the harsh realities of women's experiences in South Africa, Magubane never ceases to inspire me because of the way he highlights women's enduring strength and resourcefulness in the face of difficult circumstances. Magubane's photographs enable me to access an important record of the past and although one cannot eradicate the wounds of forty years of apartheid, helps me understand South Africa's present reality.

Jürgen Schadeberg

Jürgen Schadeberg's photographs celebrate the surging rich culture of the 1950s which defied the racist apartheid regime which deemed African culture inferior or even non-existent. More importantly, Schadeberg's photographs, by paying tribute to creative women and documenting beauty contests, celebrate African beauty.

Drum magazine of the 1950s mirrored the lives of black South Africans. But this magazine was to play a much more significant role than that; it exposed nationally and internationally the evil system of apartheid. It helped restore dignity to the oppressed by celebrating the rich, vibrant culture in the townships. In this sense, Schadeberg is a revolutionary artist; his works make a political statement and that statement is celebratory. By depicting the people as beautiful and creative, Schadeberg is saying 'Black is Beautiful'. Using the African-Americans as role models, blacks adopted western practices in order to claim equality with whites. For the first time there were so- called "beauty queens" and beauty contests. The beauty of the era cannot be more aptly described than with the photograph of singer Miriam Makeba (Fig.12), rehearsing in her studio, her full skirt swirling, her face jubilant. In South African society where women have constantly been debased, Schadeberg's photography makes a political statement that says beauty is to be found everywhere and that beauty is power.

Dancing at the Ritz (1952), (Fig.13), shows a couple dancing, their bodies suspended in the air, reflecting freedom and energy. Another striking image is *Johannesburg 1952* (Fig.14), that of a young woman lighting a cigarette sitting brazenly with her legs crossed, defiantly engaged in an activity reserved for men. This image shows how women defied imposed tradition.

Introduction to my practical work and my formal approach

a. Source material

Having established that there are multiple identities for African woman, my aim in my practical work has been to depict a multifaceted view of African women. bell hooks, an African-American cultural critic, states:

> In the accepted version of black female reality that predominates in mainstream images there is no subtlety to our experience. We are always portrayed as lacking in complexity, as transparent. We are all surface, lacking in depth. Within mainstream art photography the vast majority of images representing females are full frontal views of face or body. These images reaffirm the insistence on transparency, on the kind of surface understanding that says to the viewer, "What you see is what you get" (hooks 1995: 97).

My aim in my work is to move as far as possible from the stereotypical view of black women and to reveal some of the complexities and contradictions that constitute women's reality in contemporary African society. My works attempt to give identity to a seemingly faceless mass by, in some cases, reversing or reinforcing stereotypes, challenging domesticity (by depicting women as bread winners) and examining gender role inversion. This section discusses aspects of my formal approach.

One of the important developments in my work has been to create portrayals of women that do not generalise or idealise, but speak of specific individuals. To this end I have been aided by my secondary source material; photographs that include newspapers, magazines and family photographs. These photographs represent women from divergent backgrounds: agricultural workers, schoolteachers, students, mothers and so on. In some cases I have also made use of live models in order to relate my research topic more closely to my own reality.

The first stage in the process of creating my artworks was preparing a rough sketch, which was then transferred to cotton paper. In the more recent works (Plates 2, 15 and 17), I employed collage; different images were drawn on cotton paper, and I then selected the relevant images to suit a particular work. These cut-out images were glued down.

b. Space

An important aspect of my work was the manipulation of space to reflect the dualities and contradictions of power and powerlessness. In some cases women are enclosed in space, and yet at other times they dominate the space. In *Mother and two children* (Plate 18), the woman is clearly confined in space, however in *Amadlozi* (Plate 7), both women become part of the pattern of their environment, signifying a society where human life, nature and pattern are integrated into everyday life.

The use of space also denotes shifts in time. In some of the works this idea is conveyed by the use of two different sheets of paper set side by side. In others a window is used to create dual realities. Sometimes the realities belong to the same frame of time but refer to two different environments; rural and urban. In our shifting South African reality, all aspects of society have become urbanised to some extent so that often one cannot make a distinction between rural and urban spatiality.

c. Pattern

I use pattern throughout most of my works to refer to ideas of continuity from one generation to the next. This pattern not only exists in the form of repetition, reflected in uniform houses that lie in one plane, but pattern is also evident in the linear arrangement of figures and in clothing and hairstyles. When pattern is disrupted, contradictions between past and present reality are manifested.

Pattern is also an important reference in denoting power in my work. For example, one of the most striking pieces of beading produced by the Ndebele called the *linga koba* (long tears) carries with it a reflection of status as it is worn by mothers after the return of their sons from initiation. I refer to this item in my drawing *African woman* (Plate 10).

Embedded within the patterns is also the potential for multiple meanings that relate to traditions and oral history. Patterns also reflect sophisticated aesthetic considerations. Forming complex geometric fields, these configurations make a strong design statement. As the poet Maya Angelou stated:

> West African women's dress designs and patterns are said to set European standards for modern modes, and are often found transformed in Western magazines of high fashion. Most of the ancient designs, whether on cloth, walls of houses, or on earthenware, were inspired by proverbs and sayings. Today in some cases the meanings have been lost, but the illustrations have remained (quoted in Courtney-Clarke 190: 18).

Even the most impoverished interiors reveal decorative considerations which reflect a search for beauty and harmony despite the surroundings.

The mistress (Plate 15), describes an environment which is devoid of pattern and where individuals are isolated from one another. Past society fostered a sense of community, yet our current urbanised society encourages individualism often at the cost of community. The lack of pattern refers to a society where cultural traditions have been destroyed and to the confusion created by the fusion of traditional African and western lifestyles in urban South Africa.

d. Colour

I have attempted to limit, as far as possible, my use of colour in order to focus on the essentials of my topic which are the daily realities of contemporary African woman's existence. The use of earth-tones bears a direct link to art of the Northern Sotho, Ndebele and West African women, and speaks of their connection to the earth.

Art has a religious significance and is linked to various rituals; "As in most African cultures, art for the Ndebele is a magico-religious activity, and is therefore intimately connected with ceremonies" (Courtney-Clarke 1986: 22). For Northern-Sotho women, the ochres have a ritual significance. They are used in rites of passage. The meaning of colours varies from region to region and in my own work, from drawing to drawing.

> The meaning of colors varies from region to region, or compound to compound. Chalk to some women signifies happiness and success in the family, while to others the whiteness means purity. The Kusasi women in Ghana use black for "dark days of suffering" when food is scarce, and red when someone dies (said to originate from periods of tribal war and slavery), whereas other women use red simply to brighten the decoration. In Nigeria, red is revered and called *aja-nwamuo*, "sand son of spirit"(Courtney-Clarke 1990: 152).

In the later works, I employed colour on the faces in order to disrupt expectations and to challenge the stereotype. The colour which was absent in other works, draws attention to the subject, it forces the viewer to question the image.

e. Scale

I used life-size scale to aid in conveying a sense of realism, which is then both idealised and problematised depending upon the issue raised. I also used scale to denote power; the greater the scale of the figure, the greater its significance. However, in some instances, a smaller figure may gain greater significance when placed on an empty field or isolated in space. In *Woman Expecting* (Plate 6), the smaller figures belong to a separate, idealised reality yet they indicate more directly to the viewer the theme of the drawing.

f. Format

Throughout my work, there is uniform use of format; 1400mm x 1000mm. The paper is tilted vertically or horizontally to suit the composition.

g. Photography

Photography represents an important influence in my work. It enabled me to access different realities belonging to different time frames. Photography has also assisted the way in which I manipulated space in my drawings. Photography has

encouraged me explore different angles of perspective, each providing a different light on the subject.

There is a complimentary relationship that exists between art and photography. During its early stages, photography attempted to imitate painting. This was referred to as pictorialism. In a similar way, I am influenced by the vivid photographs of Peter Magubane and Jürgen Schadeberg, which are a crucial record of aspects of South African history.

These photographers provided the public with an insight into African culture which showed it to be dynamic and evolving—a critical contrast to the image created by apartheid.

Explication of the practical work.

The works are described in chronological order, from the earliest to the most recent drawing. For each of the works I have identified the most salient themes relating to my topic.

1. *Motherhood* (Plate 1)

This first drawing depicts an idealised image of a woman carrying four babies. The woman is represented as almost super-human or super-woman. I use the spiral pattern to allude to fertility which also indicates the mother's elevated status. Motherhood is complex and demanding, as many women including my own mother have experienced, having had five children. In times of poverty or stress, women's nurturing role becomes a burden rather than fulfillment. For impoverished women struggling for survival, having children can represent more stress than joy.

> The stress of being isolated in a confined space in winter, alone with one or more energetic and demanding small children, with inadequate money for heating or outings, while trying to cope with endless domestic chores, has to be experienced to be believed. When money is also inadequate for food and clothing, and housing is sub-standard or lacking, women's ability to lavish multifaceted care on children as their personal dependents within the private sphere is mythical (Romazanoglu 1990: 72).

The woman on the right holds a pot, symbolising love and a nurturing spirit. The line of huts in the background signify women as the guardians of the home. The circular embryonic shapes on the mother's dress echo fertility. Paul Changuion in the *African Mural* states:

> Fertility is the gift of the woman, and among agricultural peoples its symbol is the plant. As we have seen, mural painting is essentially a woman's art, and its study necessitates an understanding of the traditional place of the woman in society, and perhaps even more importantly, the nature of womanhood in its concern with fertility and growth (Changuion 1990: 42).

2. *The bearers of fruits* (Plate 2)

On the surface, this drawing appears to reflect an idealised image of women. The woman positioned diagonally however evokes a sense of instability, fruits are falling from her basket. This instability is further reinforced by pattern in the background and on the basket. This drawing is directly linked to *Grandmother, mother, daughter* (Plate 13). The woman carrying the basket stands in front of the wall on which the grandmother, mother and daughter stand. The women observe each other's instability. Reflecting back on their history, they assess their progress.

My aim is to make a political statement by celebrating women's potential, not depicting women as broken but rather as triumphant. The woman carrying the basket is strong yet the weight she is carrying is too heavy for her and hence the fruits falling. This symbolises the everyday reality of being a woman—one which fraught with possibility of abuse, rape and sexual harassment.

3. *Before and after the wedding* (Plate 3)

In all cultures the bride is idealised. She represents the quintessence of beauty—her beauty must be shielded from the sun. The pattern on the bride's clothing indicates her elevated status. In Ndebele culture, the more elaborate the pattern, the greater the status accorded the wearer. But ironically, immediately following the wedding, social constructions dictate that she must shoulder the enormous responsibilities of motherhood; she is weighed down by a baby behind her back and one on her breasts.

4. *Eleye: "owners of birds"* (Plate 4)

Dominating the drawing is a woman who grips two birds firmly hence the title of the drawing *Eleye:"owners of birds*" which, as discussed earlier is a Yoruba word that alludes to women's power to transform themselves. I depict the difficulty of rural life: an older woman carries a baby on her back while hoeing and a young woman is weighed down by a heavy load of pineapples that she must sell as source of livelihood. However, a flower on her right hand is an indicator of hope after a long journey and years of toil. Because, as this drawing suggests, women have the power to transform themselves, there is hope for a better future. A row of huts forms a consistent pattern in the background. This suggests life's continuum. Two women face the viewer suggesting the present, the other has her back to the viewer suggesting the past.

5. *Women of the soil, women of toil* (Plate 5)

This drawing raises questions to which there are no simple answers (or no answers at all). It confronts women's constrained choices. What power do women have of unseating past practices? What is the power of concealing the body? What is the power of revealing the body? The women are surrounded by a pervasive pattern of crops, also a pattern of life from which they cannot easily remove themselves. The repetitive pattern indicates a continuous cycle: the daughter inherits the burdens of the mother. A labourer usually has little chance of improving the situation of their children by upgrading their education, thus children find themselves forced into the same occupation. The crops link women with their nurturing role as mothers, something passed on from one generation to the next. Menacing and overpowering, the crops represent a continuous pattern of life over which women must battle. The clothing of the women is devoid of pattern as the women's role depicted here is not assigned much prestige in society and they are viewed merely as workers.

6. *Woman expecting* (Plate 6)

My concern here is with women's multiple roles; a woman rests while another works in the fields. The symbolism of the wall pattern refers to fertility. The river fern in Yoruba culture represents the protectress of pregnancy.

The format indicates past and present, the past being the woman ploughing the fields and the present represented by the pregnant woman. The image of the woman outside the window represents a different reality to the woman seated inside the house.

7. *Amadlozi* (Plate 7)

In this drawing, I draw on two practices from two different cultures that are both dominated by women and are passed on from one generation to the next: the mural decoration of Northern Sotho and Zulu potmaking. *Amadlozi* (a Zulu word for ancestors), depicts a young woman cooking while her husband looks on impatiently. A child clutches at her apron. I am questioning the domestic role of women by depicting a woman as pivotal in the running of the household. Northern Sotho culture reinforces domesticity by designating the home as the womb. Van Wyk[12] describes Northern Sotho architecture as:

> Rather than an imposed architectural presence, the house may be viewed as a womb opened up in the earth, with which it is identical... The house may thus be viewed as a conceptual work that foregrounds women's labor—both the agricultural labor in the fields represented in *litema* and the reproductive, human labor that occurs within the womb of the house (Nooter 1993:85).

The *litema*[13] motifs decorating the exteriors of homes show a predominance of plant motifs. These motifs are associated with women because of their procreative role. But the murals do not only equate women with nature, they highlight the woman's role as breadwinner. The pattern on the woman's clothing indicates that she is important. As the nurturer of the family, the woman ensures the livelihood of the family.

As a shelter, the hut has a natural link with the human dimensions of life and death and therefore has ritualistic implications. The mural also denotes ritual and religious significance. In my drawing, I attempt to elevate the status accorded to domesticity by ascribing it religious significance. I attempt to depict the kitchen as a religious sanctuary, within which the community is able to communicate with their ancestors. The ancestors are represented as the faces on the plates and as the old woman who appears behind the cook. These faces form a pattern framing the drawing. This work reflects upon the dynamic nature of

[12]Van Wyk's research on the South African mural is significant because of the way it reveals multiple layers of meaning and depicts the artists as multifaceted, complex individuals.

[13]Patterns made by drawing a fork across the wall surface in Northern Sotho houses.

African cultures. African religious practices have assimilated and adapted other cultural practices into their custom. For example Van Wyk notes:

> while religious practice among the Sotho-Tswana is now overtly Christian, writers such as Setiloane demonstrate that Christian rituals and observances conflate "traditional" practice in a complex and dynamic layering. Elaborate mantelpieces for the display of food plates have replaced the mud platforms on which clay ancestral figures were once arranged, but because the ancestors are remembered at mealtimes, these displays of crockery may be viewed as a continuation of a customary practice in a form that would not offend even the most iconoclastic missionary (Nooter 1993:85).

8. *Umsebenzi.* (Plate 8)

Umsebenzi (Beer ceremony) depicts two Zulu women carrying beerpots made for the ceremony which is associated with ancestor worship. I attempt to depict women as central figures in a ceremony that allows the community to have dialogue with their ancestors. The art of potmaking is passed on from generation to generation, particularly from mother to daughter and allows women to codify their pattern of life in a secret and personal language.

The pots also represent women's procreative powers and in many parts of Africa such as Nigeria, are linked to transformative processes where pregnancy and menstrual taboos apply.

Forming a strong backdrop is the wall decoration derived from Northern Sotho murals signifying a society where human life, nature and pattern is interwoven into every aspect of living. Ironically, this area has in the past decade, been troubled by political strife and witch-killing.

More than just an affirmation of themselves, the murals represent women's resistance to oppression. During the repressive apartheid years of the mid-1980s, when to fly the black, green and yellow colours of the African National Congress was forbidden, mural decoration flaunted the ANC colours. The mural decoration signifies women's reclaiming of land. Van Wyk states:

> Rather, as some contemporary feminists argue, and as the murals appear to demonstrate, the realms of nature and the female body are positive sites of resistance, springboards for the reappropriation of territory lost in (white male) history. And indeed, possession of the land is a vital issue at this point in South African history (Nooter 1993:95).

9. *Rite of passage* (Plate 9)

Rite of Passage is a portrayal of a young girl (my niece) looking with ambivalence to the future. The division of space addresses three time frames, that of the past, present and future. This drawing poses a question: in a society where young girls are geared from an early age for child-bearing governed by preconceptions about a woman's role in society, how much choice does she have in determining her own role in society? The stones represent the rocky road ahead.

The intricate patterns of the murals in this drawing hold encoded arcane information. The murals not only radiate a sense of life and self, but conceal a deep-rooted knowledge of life. In the drawing, I use pattern to indicate that the young girl must undergo rites of passage before she reaches adulthood. The mural decoration, as a cultural activity reserved exclusively for women, not only denotes women's connection to nature but women's connection to one another and their culture.

> Another common *litema* motif is the triangle, which Sotho-Tswana women frequently embrace under the term *blomme* (Afrikaans for "flowers"), and which is further associated with heaven and with women, both with sky and with earth (see Changuion 1989). Color associations reinforce the reading of triangles as bridging the earthly and heavenly realms: black is associated with the ancestors and the dark rain clouds they bring: red and pale ochres—the earth pigments—are used in rites of passage. Where triangles of any of these colors adjoin, then, heaven and earth come together...Like the flowers of the field, they simultaneously place woman at the center of the cosmos (Nooter 1993:89).

10. *African woman* (Plate 10)

African woman challenges media images which portray women as sex objects. I investigate how constructions of women by current media representations perpetuate certain images of beauty. These constructions create contradictions for women, which are disclosed in forms of power and powerlessness. Women are encouraged to aspire to stereotyped images of beauty promoted by the media, yet these stereotyped images are not compatible with the way in which I value womanhood. When women are exalted for fulfilling their traditional role only to promote certain commercial products, they end up being nothing but commodities. It is common to see the half-naked female body in advertisement, selling an image of ideal female beauty. Conversely, in Ndebele and Zulu culture the more layers of clothing a woman puts on, the greater her social status and the more she is deemed beautiful. In the drawing, the dog which is a metaphor for males, seems caught in between the image of women in the media and the traditional ideals of African beauty. The indecisiveness of the dog indicates that

different ideals about beauty and power exist and deciding which shall predominate is difficult.

11. *Let's check 'em out!* (Plate 11)

The drawing *Let's check 'em out!* shows how men can also use clothing to acquire status. More importantly, this drawing is also about reversing gender stereotypes; my aim is to reverse gender roles by showing women pursuing men. Among the Wodaabe living in Niger, during the annual festival called *Geerewol* men compete with one another for female attention. According to the Wodaabe, male beauty is as significant as female beauty. Men beautify themselves with make-up and attempt to outdo one another in dances. In the drawing, the women, half-amused, assess the physical attractiveness of the men. The question is: who holds power; the performers or the audience?

Pattern is evident on both the appearance of both the men and the women.

12. *Mirror, mirror, on the wall* (Plate 12)

Mirror, mirror on the wall shows a woman looking at her reflection in the mirror and seeing the daunting prospect of ageing. This image attempts to reveal how the media promotes standards of beauty that focus principally upon the physical and encourages women to see themselves as sex objects. The questionable and unrealistic beauty standards set by the media lead women into a futile struggle for beauty which creates insecurity about their bodies. My intention in this drawing is to raise awareness of the status quo and encourage a re-appraisal of the image of women.

13. *Grandmother, mother and daughter* (Plate 13)

This is a portrayal of continuity between different generations. I attempt to find the commonalities among women. Grandmother, mother and daughter are seen standing behind a wall, looking ahead. I use the wall image as a symbol of unity among different generations of women. In front of the women, is a woman carrying a basket of fruits (Plate 2). As the women assess their progress, they can move forward with a clear sense of direction.

Dominating the drawing is the calabash rope-net pattern which is used throughout West Africa from the Igbo of Nigeria to the Nankani of Ghana and is named differently from region to region. It is associated with peace and unites generations.

> The motif of the rope-net used for hanging calabashes is called *zaalenga* (meaning net) by some women, and *wanzanna* (translated literally means to hold a calabash) by other women of the same clan. Likewise, the "handshake" pattern can be seen literally as a clasping of hands or interpreted symbolically as "a greeting". In either case, it signifies peace and unity (Courtney-Clarke 1990: 156).

14. *The great father* (Plate 14)

In some African societies, as discussed earlier, women are deemed more powerful the older they become. In this drawing of reversed roles, a man is buried dressed as a woman. Is it not possible for a man to attain the status of a woman upon death? Why does society have to be such that a woman must seek the status of a man upon death and not vice versa?

In this drawing roles are reversed as men acquire the status and physique of women. Men wear elaborate hairstyles that carry with them an indication of high status. The fabric covering the body of the deceased reveals a floral pattern that extends into the background.

15. *The mistress* (Plate 15)

"It is a fact that there are generally more female than male teachers in elementary school grades" (Mjoli 1990: 19). This drawing pays tribute to those women whose role as educators of our society is crucial. The classroom is stripped to its bare essentials and is devoid of pattern. There appears to be no link between pupils and the information on the blackboard which remains nothing but a shadow. The values of the older generation have less impact upon the younger generations as cultures become increasingly transformed by cross-cultural contact. Despite all this, the mistress retains her dignity. Because of inadequate facilities, teaching becomes a challenge. In such cases the endurance and dedication of the teachers is commendable.

16. *Ndebele woman* (Plate 16)

Through this drawing, we are able to penetrate a Ndebele woman's mind, she imparts knowledge to us relating to the truths of life. The symbols include clocks, hearts, flowers which speak of humankind's link to nature. The young contemporary woman on the right regards her roots with ambivalence. Traditional culture and contemporary culture often contradict one another. The Ndebele woman is surrounded by pattern that indicates life in harmony with nature whereas the contemporary woman is streetwise, living in an urban environment and she questions the knowledge that Ndebele women has to offer.

17. *Wife 1 or wife 2?* (Plate 17)

Here I address the issue of polygamy; the contempt it can foster between women and the unequal power relationships it creates between men and women. It fosters the exploitation of women who become a symbol of wealth as they represent labour power. The husband on the other hand, depicted as a Zulu *Induna* (chief) becomes supreme head of the household. His high status is evident in his clothing. The trumpet around his neck indicates that he's the decision-maker.

18. *Mother and two children* (Plate 18)

This drawing foregrounds women's perpetual struggle for survival. Constricted by space, woman's power is limited. Yet, despite cramped and impoverished living conditions, many women establish comfortable living conditions for their families and seek beauty in their surroundings. The repetitive pattern that encloses the woman's space signifies a continuous life of struggle. The mother and children are part of a continuous pattern. The expression on the mother and the sons' faces shows a resolution to fight for survival against all odds.

Conclusion.

In the past, under matriarchal rule, African women possessed great power and freedom. Although African women in South Africa have been disempowered by history, as supporters of the household and the family unit, they have played leadership roles politically, economically and socially. African cultural practices and today's manifestations of gender crossover attest to the fact that women also hold power. An effort must be made to uncover and extend that power.

Following in the footsteps of four female artists: Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, Paula Rego, Frida Kahlo and Courtney-Clarke, through my drawings, I have hoped to act as a catalyst in uncovering the power that resides in women. Through my interpretations of the roles of women, I hope to encourage women, in particular, African women to assert power by defining themselves. It will be only after we begin to raise questions concerning our past and current situation that we can take active part in our empowerment.

> To identify woman as a subject of representation and not as an object of representation is a long and difficult process; to renegotiate cultural paradigms is often perceived as threatening by the dominant cultural group. Appropriating codes which have great social power, deconstructing them to expose their inconsistencies and ideology, using fragments and refusing wholeness, artists reveal the ways that codes of meaning are entrenched in the dominant culture (Chadwick 1990: 365).

In my drawings, the African woman expresses her multiple facets; she is strong, beautiful and she confronts the viewer.

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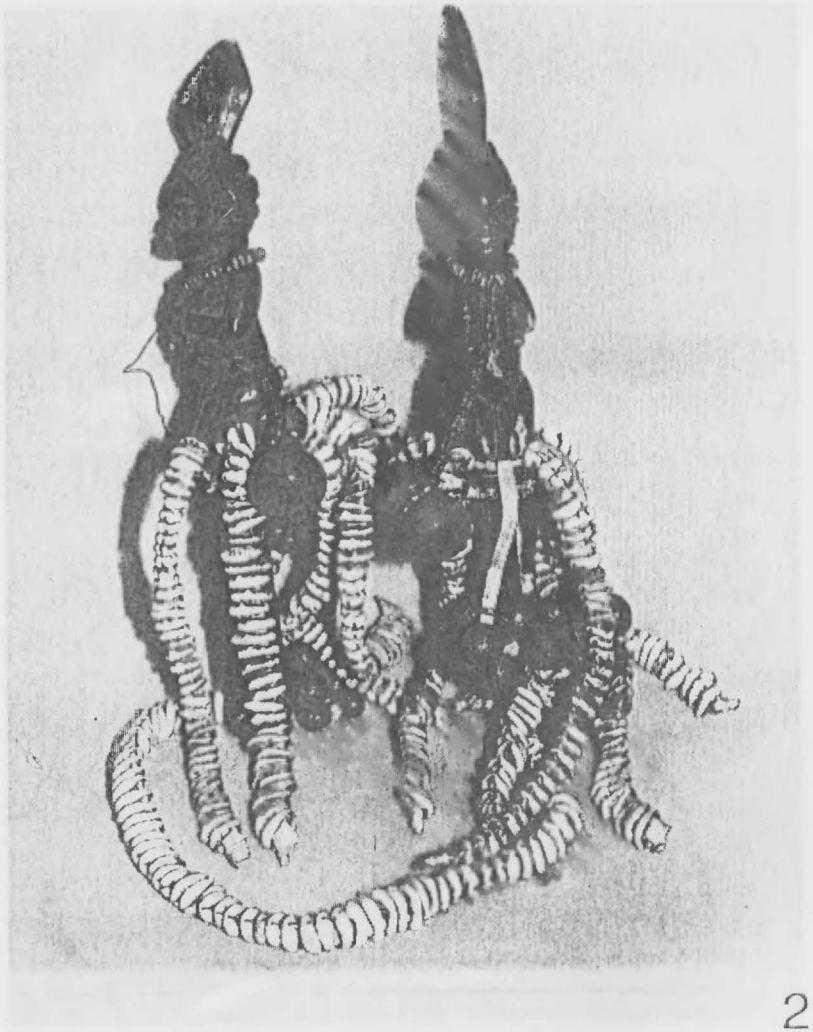

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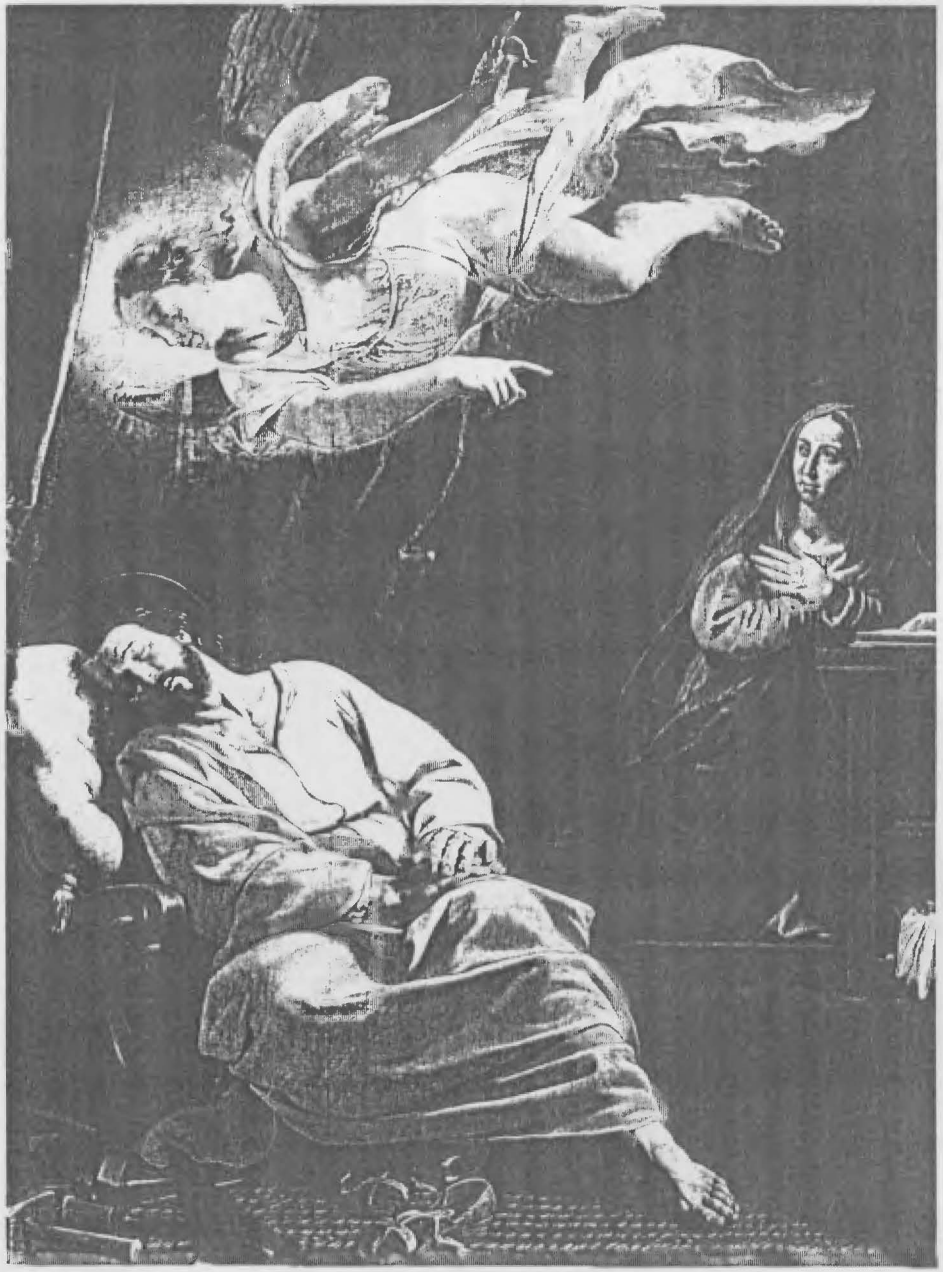

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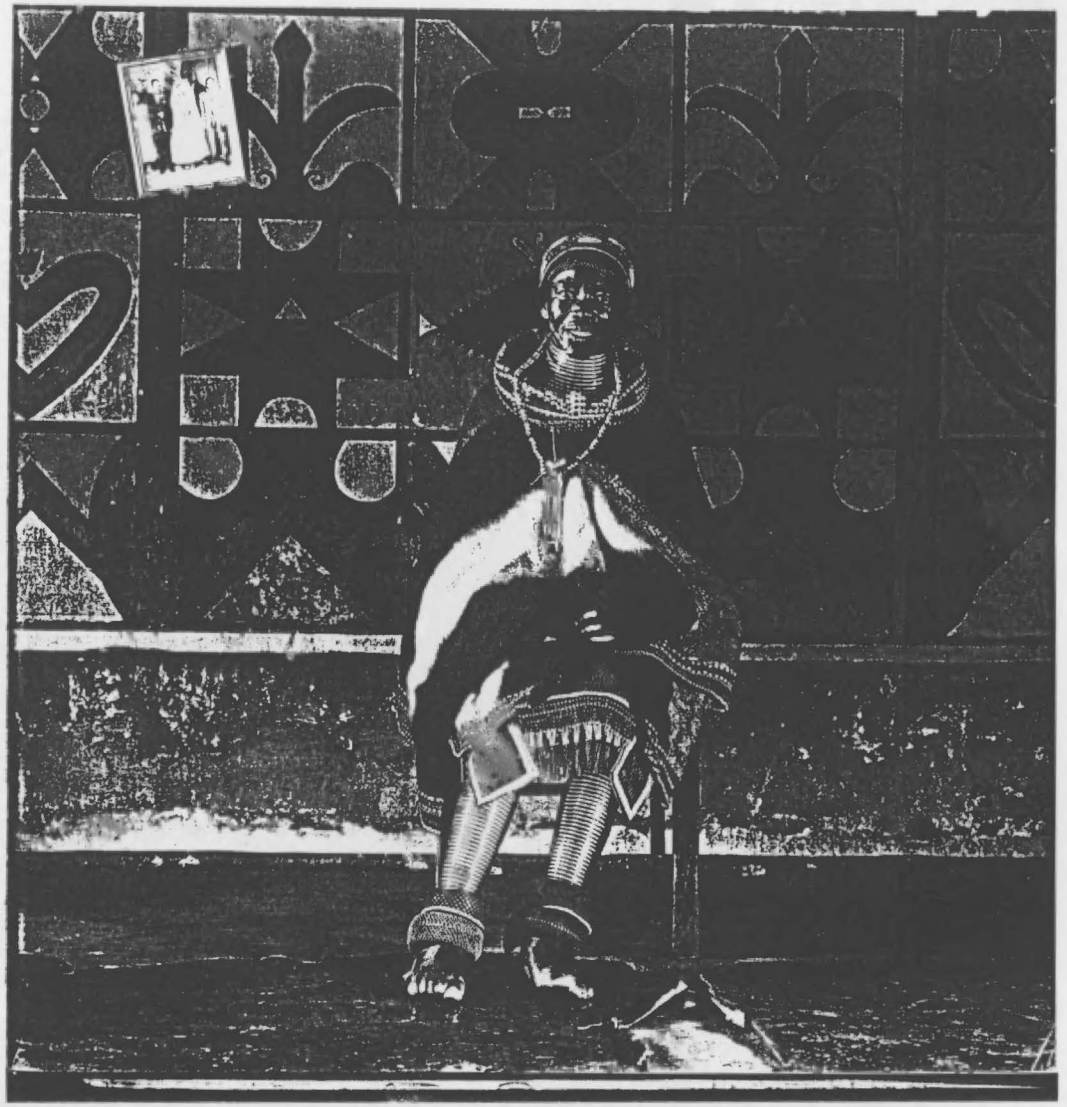

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2. THE BEARERS OF FRUITS
Pastel on cotton paper
1,400mm * 1,000mm

3. BEFORE AND AFTER THE WEDDING
Pastel on cotton paper
1,400mm * 1,000mm

4. ELEYE: OWNERS OF BIRDS
Pastel on cotton paper
2,100mm * 1,000mm

5. WOMEN OF THE SOIL, WOMEN OF TOIL
Pastel on cotton paper
1,400mm * 1,000mm

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Pastel on paper
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Pastel on cotton paper
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11. LET'S CHECK 'EM OUT!
Pastel on cotton paper
1,400mm * 1,000mm

12. MIRROR,MIRROR, ON THE WALL
Pastel on cotton paper
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13. GRANDMOTHER, MOTHER, DAUGHTER
Pastel on cotton paper
1,400mm * 1,000mm

14. THE GREAT FATHER
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15. THE MISTRESS
Pastel on cotton paper
1,400mm * 1,000mm

16. NDEBELE WOMAN
Pastel on cotton paper
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17. WIFE 1 OR WIFE 2?
Pastel on cotton paper
2,000mm * 700mm

18. MOTHER AND TWO CHILDREN
Pastel on cotton paper
1,400mm * 1,000mm

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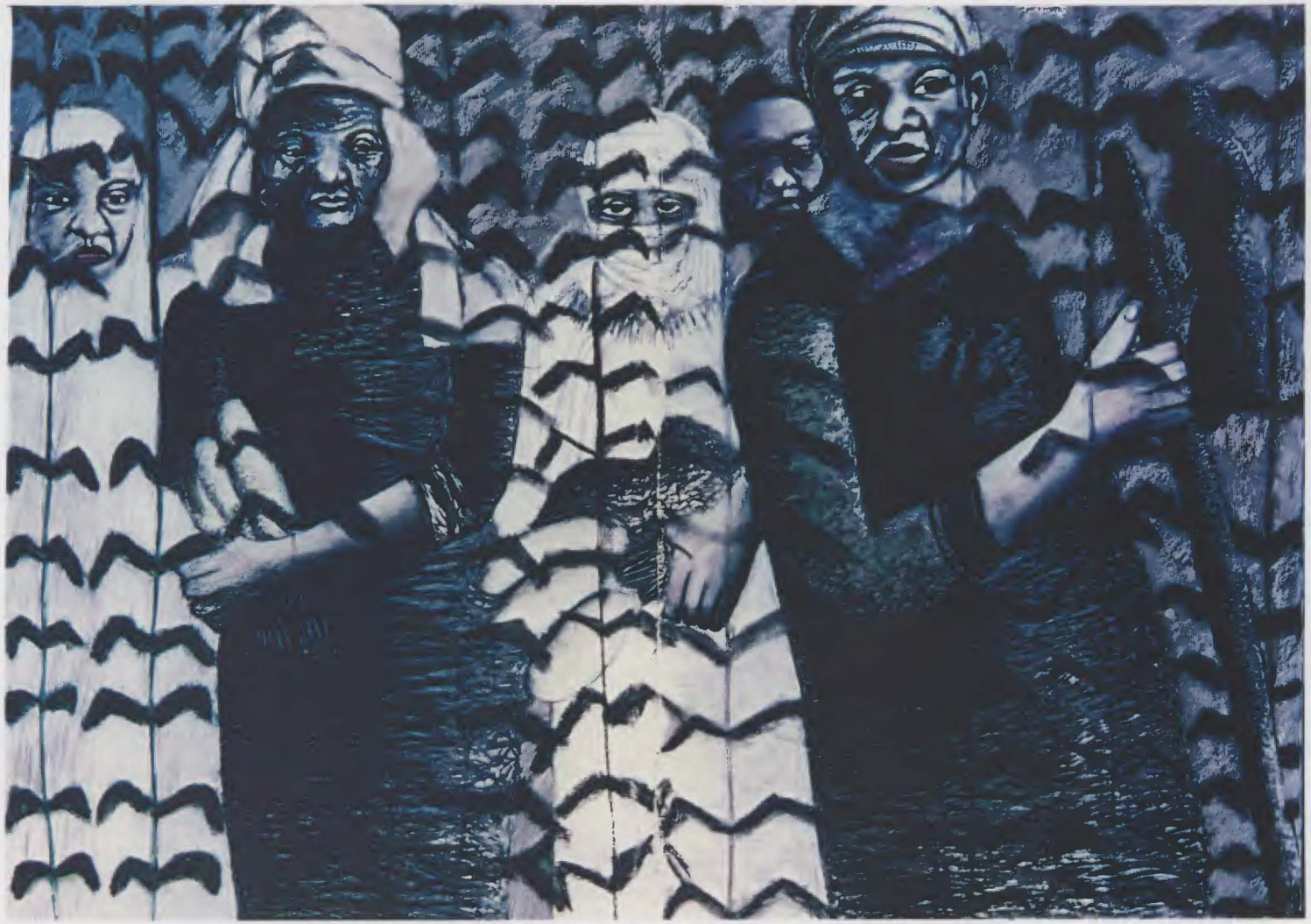

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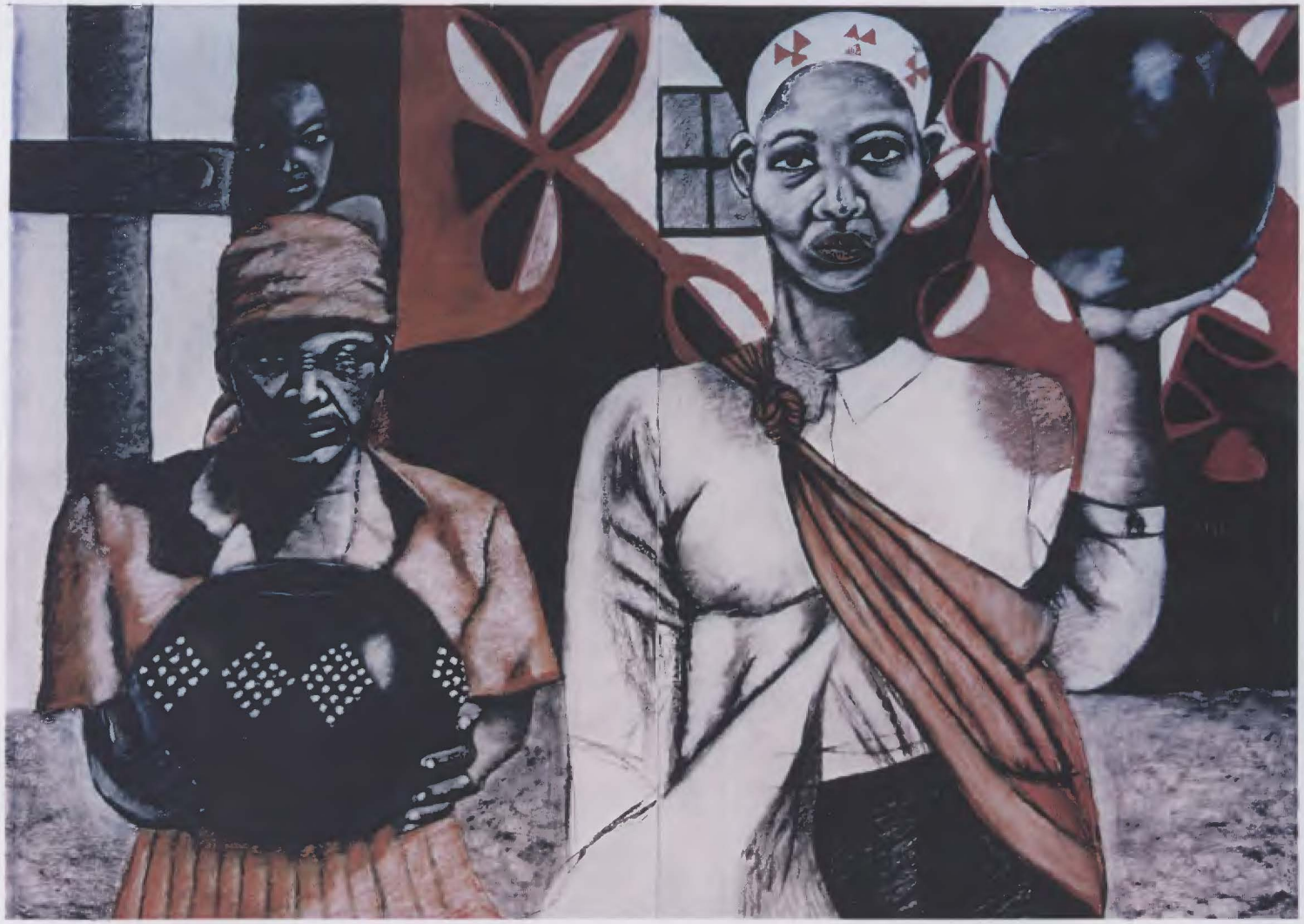

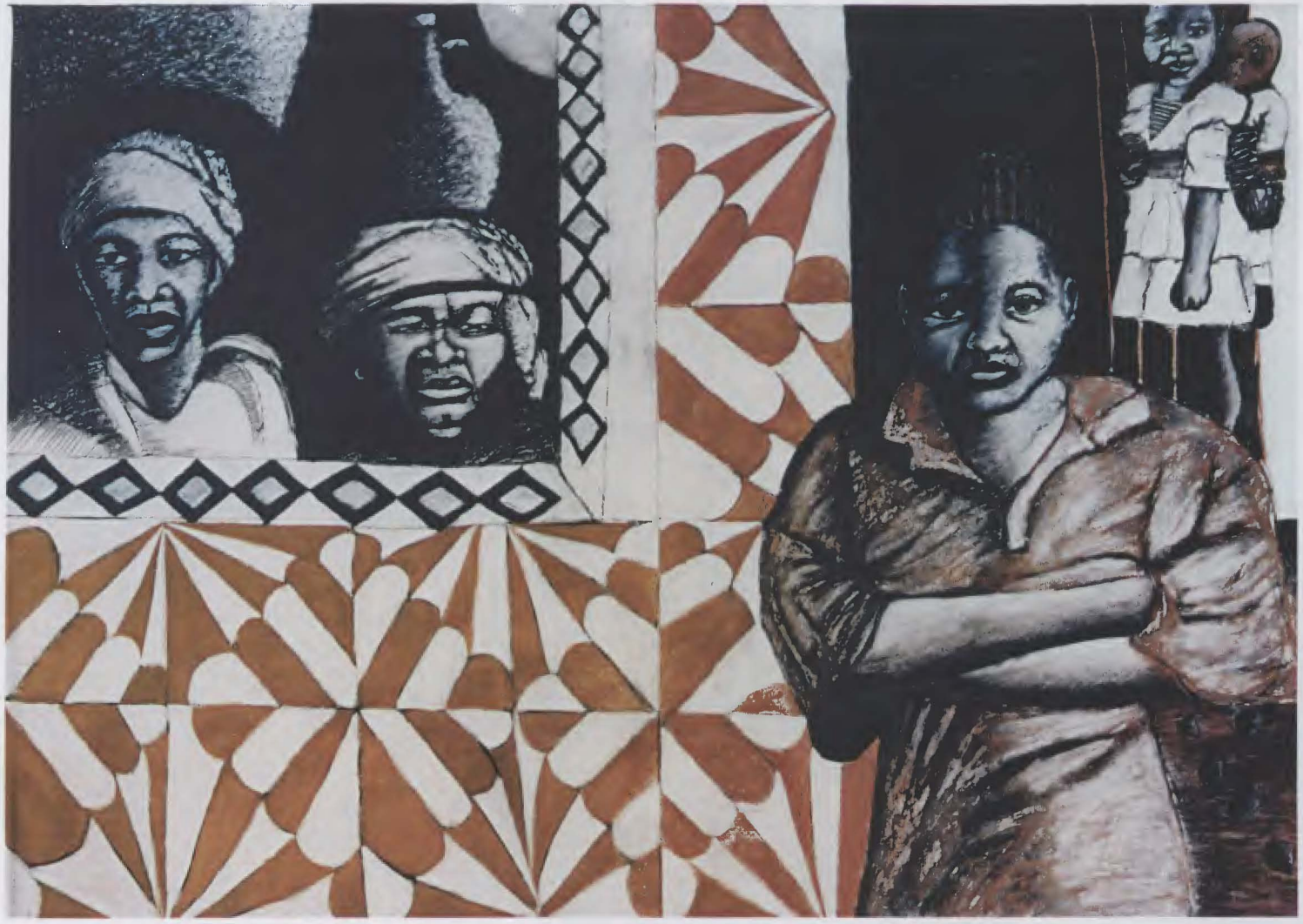

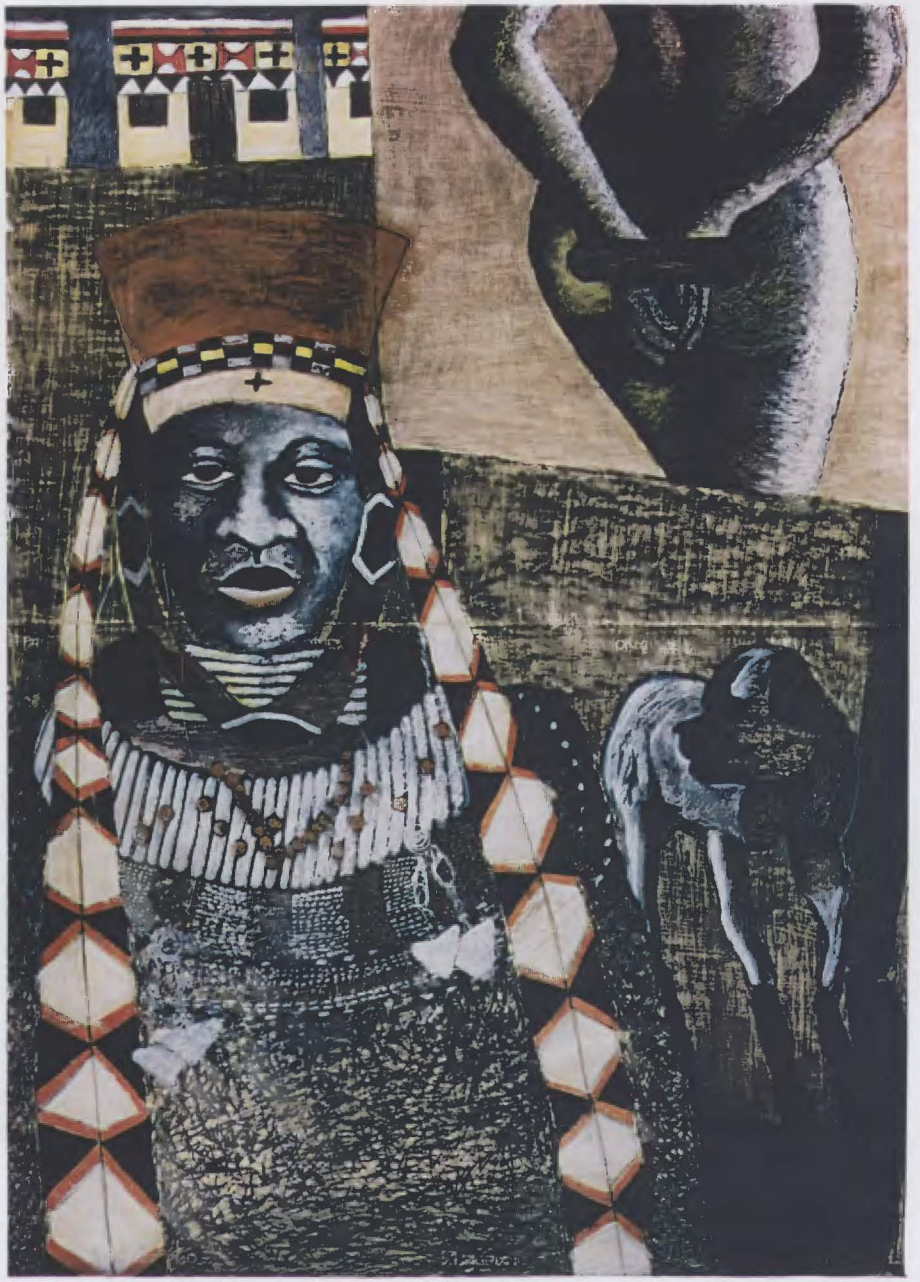

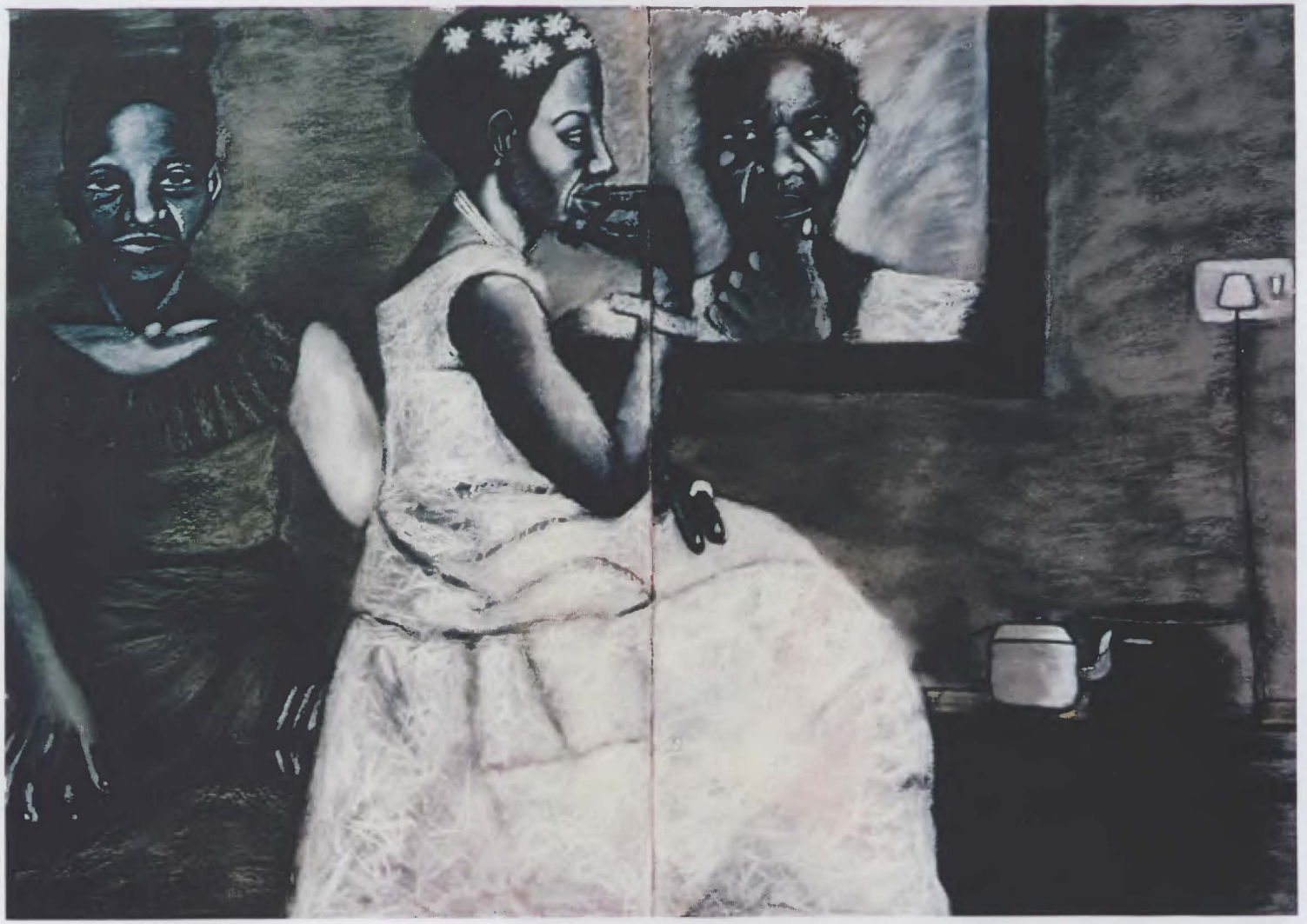

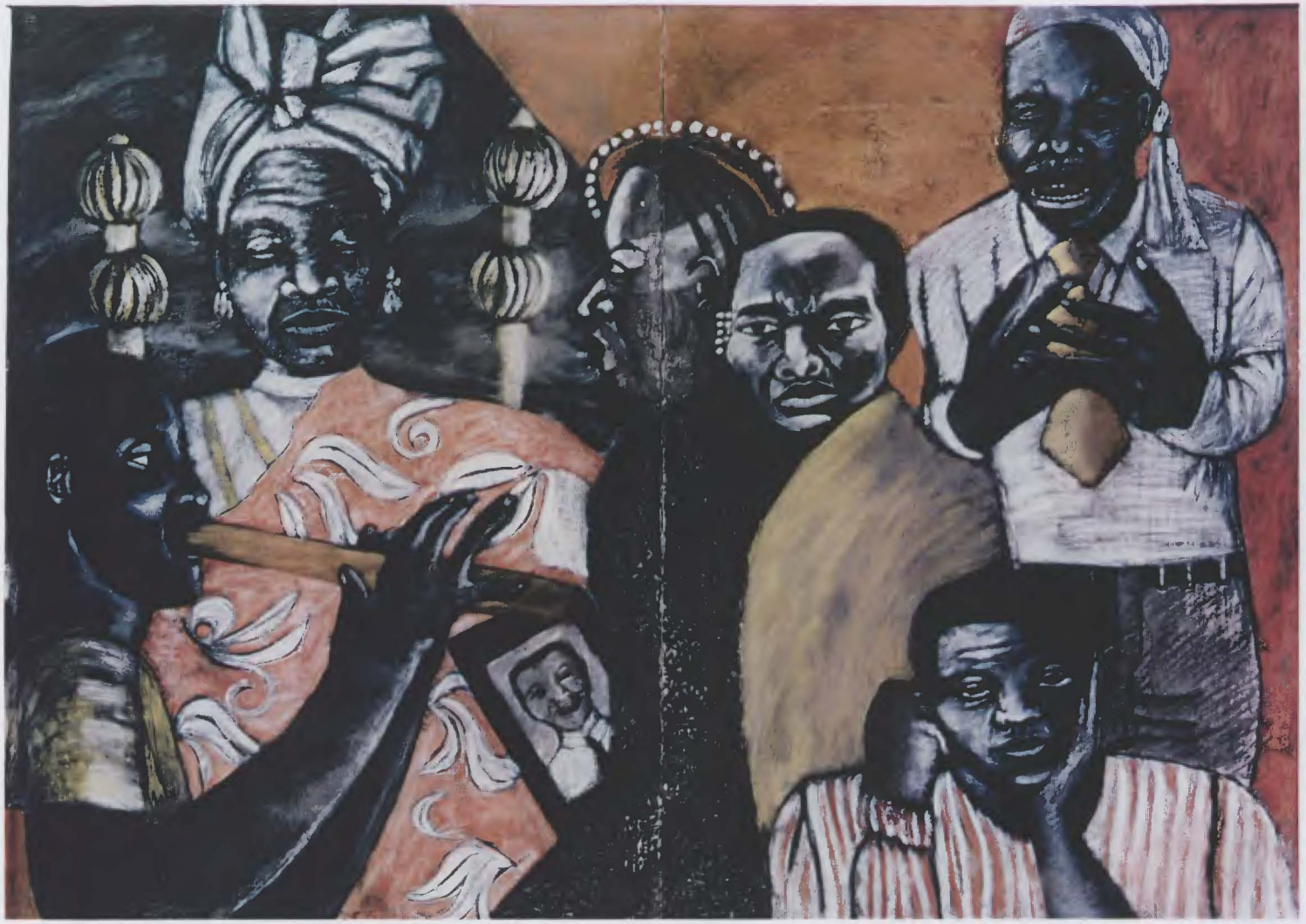

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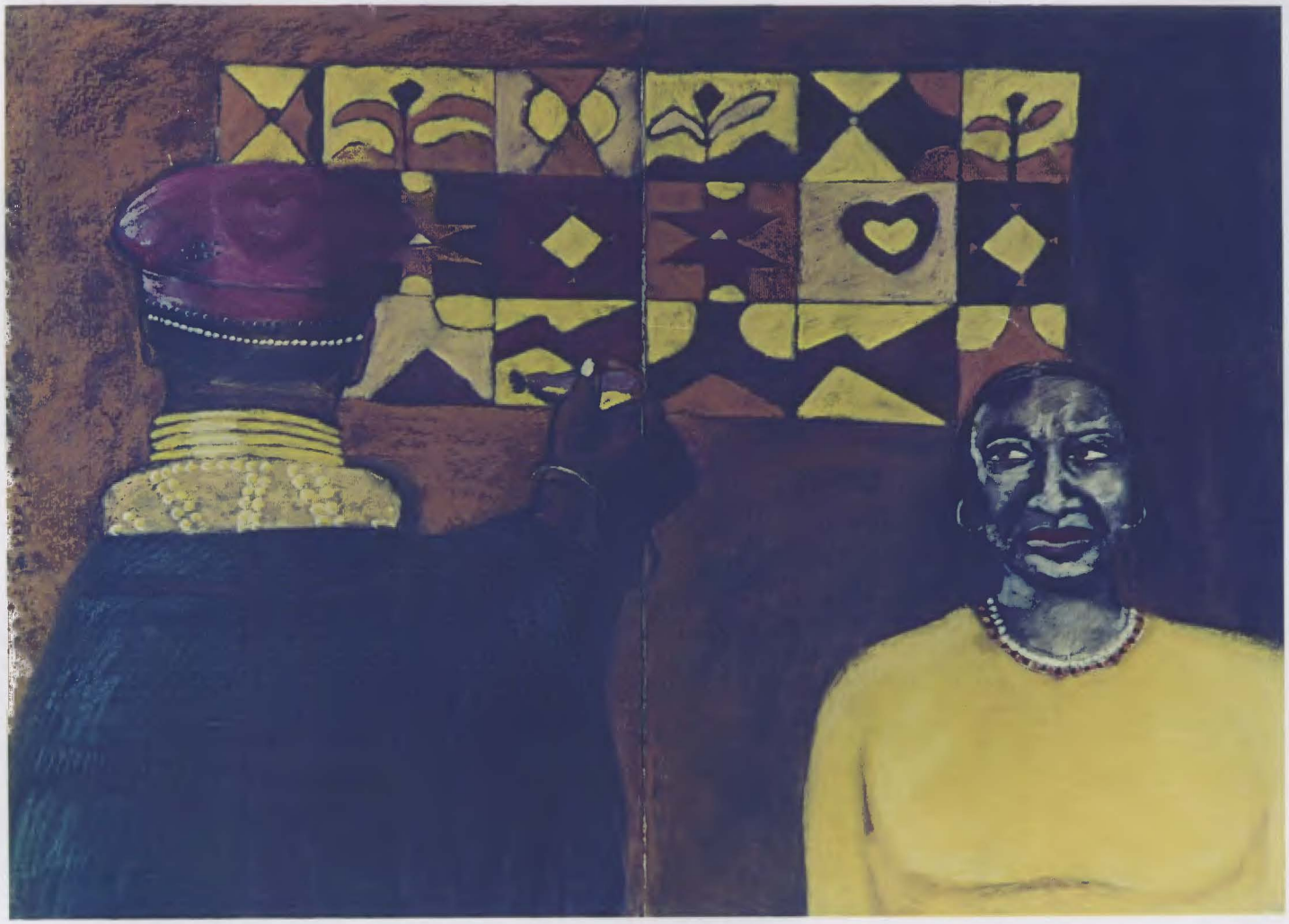

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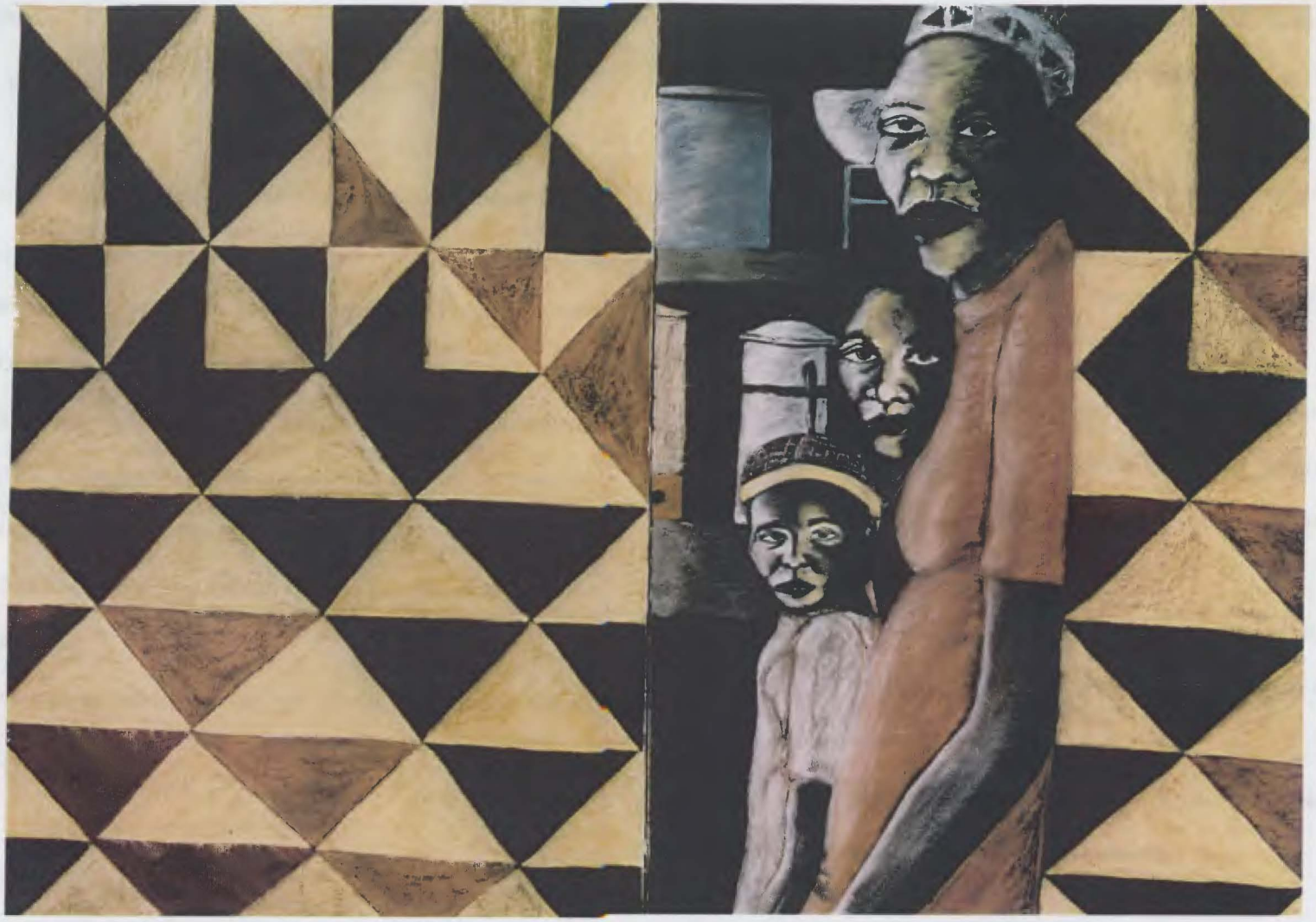

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