

Aids education through art

The A.R.T. Show aims to highlight the pandemic's effects on ordinary people

ESTELLE SINKINS

ONE of the most striking and moving works in The A.R.T. Show at the Tatham Art Gallery is the tower of tiny beaded dolls, made by the crafters of the Siyazama Project.

The work aims to make a statement about the huge numbers of Aids orphans in South Africa, and the impact those numbers have on the communities where the children live. At last count, South Africa is believed to have 3.7 million Aids orphans — a number the project founder, professor Kate Wells, describes as “terrifying”.

Wells, the Masters course in graphic design leader at the Durban University of Technology, said they were approached by Durban's Carol Brown and David Gere of the Make Art/Stop Aids Foundation, and a professor at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), to make the piece for The A.R.T. Show, which aims to highlight the current HIV/Aids pandemic in southern Africa and how it affects the lives of ordinary people, especially when it comes to access to treatment.

“The Siyazama Project was invited to submit an artwork, and it was decided together with Carol Brown and Linda Rethman to create a tower,” Wells said.

“Siyazama craftswomen have produced hundreds of small, beautifully beaded child-figure dolls, that collectively make a strong statement about the statistics with regard to the Aids orphans in South Africa. Our aim is to make sense of these statistics visually through an installation, from which it is hoped should build awareness of the growing inhumane calamity in our part of the world. We see it as a call to action.”

Lobolile Ximba, Sbhongile Ximba, Celani Nojjeza, Tholiwe Sitole and Beauty Ndlovu took between four and five weeks to make the 600 dolls, for the Child Tower. “They made about 100 baby dolls each,” Wells said, “and then Rethman got a commission from the craft shop at O. R. Tambo Airport to make another tower.”

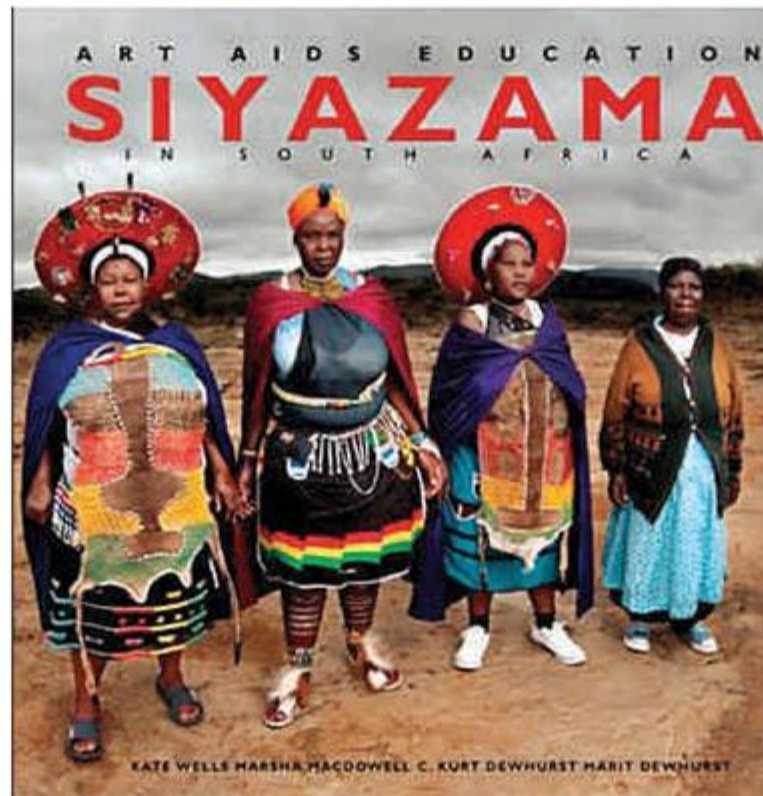
To help keep costs down, Siyazama has used donations of fabric,



LEFT: Siyazama's tiny beaded dolls. PHOTOS: SUPPLIED



ABOVE: The Siyazama doll tower.



wool and beads from supporters Duane van Tonder at Saprotex International in the Eastern Cape and Mo Peer from G+M The Peers Company in Durban, among others.

“Glass beads, and most especially the Czech variety from Jablonex, are becoming increasingly expensive. Nonetheless, we all love them and treasure them, so we were mindful that we needed to come up with a solution to this problem. The Siyazama Project dolls are prized because of their rich beadwork ... and the donations meant we not only hit our target of 600 with ease, but were able to continue with our aim to produce the child-figure dolls endlessly.”

They were also assisted by Richard Barrows and his design team, who helped come up with a flat-pack, collapsible tower, which will be easy to transport and reassemble, wherever the exhibition is staged.

The A.R.T. Show — which also includes works by South Africans William Kentridge, Andrew Verster,

Sara Anjargolian from Armenia, American Daniel Goldstein and Gideon Mendel from the United Kingdom — will remain at the Tatham Art Gallery until the end of January, after which the exhibition will move to KZNSA Gallery in Bulwer Road, Durban, where it will be staged until March. There are then plans for it to go to Cape Town and Johannesburg and to the World Aids Conference in Washington D. C.

“We are really excited about this inclusion, as it not only means a boost for the Siyazama project bead workers, and the sales of their baby dolls, but also it will grow our cause in a big way!” Wells said.

For more information on the project, e-mail katew@dut.ac.za • The Siyazama Project — named by the women involved and meaning “we are trying” in Zulu — was launched in 1998, with the aim of improving the marketability of the crafts made by those involved, and recognising that rural women are often the sole providers for their families.

The women use their beaded dolls to speak out about the insecurities, rumours, threats and fears, which continue to swirl around the Aids pandemic in SA. In an environment where discussion on intimate matters, sex and love is considered largely taboo, this method provides them with a way to use their voices.

• The project has produced a new book, *Siyazama: Art, Aids, Education in South Africa*, which is a joint collaborative effort between Michigan State University in the United States and the Durban University of Technology.

The book, which has been published by UKZN Press, chronicles the origins and the broad range of activities in the Siyazama Project. The photography in the book was provided by Kevin Goss-Ross, Xavier Vahed, Tom Wells and Annie Behalla, and the contributors included Professor Ian Sutherland, Professor Kurt Dewhurst, Dr Ken Netshimombo, Professor Jackie Guille, Dr Marit Dewhurst, Mike White and Tony Reilly. — Supplied.

• arts@witness.co.za