

FAMOUS FORMS: Artist Lungelo Gumede exhibits his sculptures at the BAT Centre in Durban



WAX JOB

Durban artist Lungelo Gumede has been asked to paint Michelle Obama but would much rather model her in wax for his museum, he tells *Ziphezinhle Msimango*

WHEN 16-year-old Marie Tussaud created her first wax sculpture in 1777, and even when she opened Madame Tussauds in 1836, she couldn't have imagined that almost two centuries later the museum would still be one of London's major tourist attractions. Nor could she have known that one day it would inspire Lungelo Gumede to start his own wax museum in South Africa.

As a child, the Durban-born artist knew he was good at drawing, but never thought art would become his life's work. "While I was at Mabayana High School in Ndwedwe, KwaZulu-Natal, I would draw my peers and teachers. I would also draw the maps and diagrams that we used in class. But I didn't see it as art. I just saw it as drawing."

After matric, his mother wanted him to study medicine but couldn't afford to pay for it, so in 2002 he stayed at home and continued drawing. When Mandla Gasa, an artist and facilitator at Durban's BAT Centre who lived in his neighbourhood, saw Gumede's drawings, he introduced the talented youngster to the centre, where in 2003 he did an arts course. He received a bursary to attend the Durban University of Technology and completed his Diploma in Fine Arts in 2006.

Gumede, 27, began his commercial life as a painter. He has produced portraits of singer John Legend, actor Forest Whitaker, former presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, and President Jacob Zuma. In 2005 his painting of Mandela was auctioned at a New York art gallery.

His idea to make wax sculptures has been taking shape since 2005, when he walked into the New York branch of Madame Tussauds.

"As an artist, I was inspired by being in the museum. I'd learnt about statues while studying, so it wasn't hard for me to go from doing [other kinds of] sculpture to wax. At Madame Tussauds they showed me how they do wax sculptures," he said.

Last year he registered Lungelo Gumede Wax Museum (Pty) Ltd, which will operate from a space in the BAT Centre, where Gumede works. Some of his paintings of international stars and his bronze and wax statues are displayed there.

The paintings, he said, were part of an exhibition he will be taking to Los Angeles on April 5. US First Lady Michelle Obama is one of the invited guests. "I'm taking all the paintings, and two statues of [US actor] Miguel Nunez. They've asked me to do a painting of Michelle Obama and Martin Luther King, whose family will be attending."

Nunez organised the exhibition for Gumede. "He saw my paintings of John Legend and Forest Whitaker, and said I should also do Denzel Washington, Sean 'Puffy' Combs and Morgan Freeman. He showed them my pictures and gave me a list of all the other people I should do."

Gumede has travelled the world

through his art and has exhibited in many places, but says opening the wax museum will be his greatest achievement. He has also visited the wax museums in Las Vegas and Washington DC and is excited about recreating the concept in Durban. "Doing a wax sculpture is not easy. It's difficult to make the likeness of a person perfect. It's even harder when you are working from photographs. It's better when the person is still alive, because you can take pictures of them from different angles."

It takes Gumede at least four weeks to complete a wax likeness. A mannequin is used to create the base. If the subject is a live person, he'll take pictures of them from all directions. If not, he works from

the images available. He starts with the head, using silicone, plaster of paris and waterflex, among other materials. There is a great deal of skill involved in getting the little things right — the proportions and the bend of the hands.

Once all the parts are moulded, he casts them in wax and joins them together. He requests clothing from the person, and if they can't provide it he'll buy items from the person's usual outfitter. In the case of historical figures, he will select clothing appropriate to the time.

So far he's made wax sculptures of King Goodwill Zwelithini, King Dinizulu kaCetshwayo (from photographs), and former Durban mayor Obed Mlaba.

He is funding the museum from the money he makes from commissions (mostly from local government), but would love to have a sponsor. "I'm always writing proposals, but haven't managed to get anyone on board yet."

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HISTORY IN THE MAKING: Some of Gumede's celebrity portraits will be on show in the US next month