

DIGITAL AGNES

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Ukutula: Our Timeless Journeys: Curatorial Walkthrough

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SPEAKERS

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KEYWORDS

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TRANSCRIPT

Dr Qanita Lilla: African dance and music inspired *Ukutula: Our Timeless Journeys*. Ukutula is a new word created from two Nguni words: in both isiXhosa and isiZulu, “ukucula” means “to sing”; “ukuthula” can mean either “to be quiet” or “be calm.”

By combining these meanings to form a new word, we can highlight a tension inherent in any exhibition featuring African art — historically silenced voices speaking themselves into existence.

Ukutula allows us to dance through the extraordinary diversity of West African masks, hoods, and crests of the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art, singing together with contemporary art made in Canada today.

Today, the masks and a new troupe of contemporary art are in London, Ontario, resting together on river pebbles from the banks of Deshkan Ziibi - the Antler River in Ojibwe and Anishnaabemowin.

Their proximity to the river reflects not only where they have come from, but also how their continuing journeys signify who they are, how they are collectively experienced, and what they might become.

So the three main components of *Ukutula's* masks is the masks themselves, the Atlantic Ocean in the background, and the rocks from Deshkan Ziibi.

The masks come from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection at Agnes Etherington Art Centre, and they have been at Agnes since 1986, although they were collected much earlier, about 40 or 50 years before that. So the collection itself is about 100 years old, and this is the first time they've come out from Kingston.

In Jill Glatt's work, *Seed* movement is very important because it talks about her intergenerational movement that she's, you know, gone through herself, through her family's life. And because of that, she also harnesses color and light in her installation.

Anthony Gebrehiwot's *Mahaba* has people and portraits as a central component.

These are people that he knows, his community, and “Mahaba” means “love.” So having portraits of the people that he loves encapsulate what a new future, what a black future looks like.

Jessica Karuhanga's piece, *Body and Soul* focuses on the breathing body of the artist - of Jessica. It's important to her because it shows how when people meet us, the first thing that they notice is our body and they respond to that, whereas we are more than that. We are the soul that we carry within our bodies.

Jessica Karuhanga's *Through a Brass Channel* has three main components. It's got masonry blocks that she found in London, brass bangles that used to be part of her father's jewelry collection that he used to try and sell at trade fairs to earn a living, and then it's got these brass pipes. So the masonry block speaks to her own connection to this place and to the country, to Canada. The brass bangle speaks to her father's- a connection to her father and her ancestors, and the brass channel speaks about a connection from different generations.

Camille Turner's *Nave* speaks about the archival gaps, the absences that exist in the archive, and the way that artists like Camille have to use creative means to reconstitute it. So *Nave* speaks about the transatlantic slave trade with a focus on Atlantic Canada, and she thinks about the ballasts of ships and the holds of ships that used to hold enslaved people, and the rocks that used to be in the same space.

For Winsom Winsom, red is a central colour. It connects her to her ancestors, and in this work, she uses it abundantly to show that in order to escape the kind of masks we have to wear, and we see a whole wall of masks behind Winsom's portrait, we have to connect to our ancestors, and we have to connect to ancestral knowledges.

The works of *Ukutula* show how traditional African art can be in chorus and can share inspirations with contemporary art from the Asian and African diasporas. As part of a collective, the African masks of *Ukutula* do not stand alone as they journey across Canada from Kingston to London, Ontario. They make their journey enveloped by African ways of being, alongside contemporary art that welcomes them, art that seeks counsel from them, art that seeks belonging, resonance, and visions of the future.