

THE HIGHEST COURT IN THE LAND

THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT OF SOUTH AFRICA AT CONSTITUTION HILL, WITH ITS MAGNIFICENT ART COLLECTION, IS A PLACE THAT SHOULD BE VISITED BY EVERYONE, SAYS KHEHLA CHEPAPE MAKGATO.

Constitution Hill, a former prison complex in Johannesburg, is today a museum and the seat of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, the highest court in the land. It is one of my favourite buildings in Johannesburg, for a variety of reasons.

My initial encounter with the building was more than a decade ago when I was a student at Artist Proof Studio, where I studied Printmaking Fine Art for three years. As part of the programme, lecturers took us on field trips to art museums and galleries around Johannesburg.

My first visit to Constitution Hill has remained with me all this time. We were taken on a tour of the entire precinct: Number Four, The Old Fort, Flame of Democracy, the Women's Jail, Civic Centre and the Constitutional Court. I was mesmerised by the art collection.

The collection comprises more than 200 original artworks by artists, whom I later learnt are big names on the local visual arts landscape: Dumile Feni, Gerard Sekoto, Judith Mason, William Kentridge, Sue Williamson, Noria Mabasa and so many more are there.

As you approach the court building, you are hailed by Dumile Feni's sculpture *History* to the right of the entrance. The wooden doors are engraved in visual languages that

include sign language. The facade of the court building is inscribed "Constitutional Court of the Republic of South Africa" in all 11 official languages. The visual aesthetics arrest your attention before you enter the building and get hooked by the interior decor.

When we visited this building as students, it was not long after I had relocated to Johannesburg and you can understand how the cityscape fascinated me so much after being deprived of this modern architectural structure because of the nature of rural cities.

While looking at the artworks in the collection – one of the most significant local public art collections in South Africa – I came to understand that I was the only ambitious student in the group, as I told myself that my work belonged in this collection alongside the great artists whose works graced the walls. It may have been seen as a fanciful dream for a then first-year student to envisage his work as part of The Constitutional Court Art Collection. But from that day onwards I was determined to work tirelessly so that one day my work will indeed grace those walls.

During the memorial service for Judith Mason, one of the great South African visual artists – she is the artist who created a powerful a triptych known as *The Blue Dress* in honour of Phila Portia Ndwandwe, an

anti-apartheid activist who had been brutally murdered by Security Branch officers – I had a chance encounter and conversation with Justice Edwin Cameron. I made a suggestion to gift him with my original signed and dated artwork, because he is a great inspiration to many of us, the youth of this country. He kindly appreciated my gesture and submitted that instead he would propose that I gift my artwork to the Constitutional Court, as that will mean a larger public consumption of my work. He facilitated the eight-month process of acquisition that I can now be proud that my longest dream has come true with my work *Marikana Memoriais* officially in the collection of this wonderful institution.

The Constitutional Court is one of my favourite buildings in Johannesburg culturally, artistically and historically. It is one of the heritage sites around the city and the history behind the Hill is profoundly inspirational and equally emotional. The precinct housed profound history of injustice and oppression orchestrated along racial lines.

A few months after my work was added to The Constitutional Court Art Collection, a major achievement for a young artist, I fortuitously found a space for my studio in the vicinity of the Constitution Hill in the Transwerke Building.

Background: Island Frond Aruba wallpaper designed by Patricia Braune, at Robin Sprong

DID YOU KNOW?

Visual artist, arts writer and philanthropist Khehla Chapape Makgato has lived in Johannesburg for a decade. "It's a culturally vibrant city that inspires me daily," he says.

Some of the words his best friend would use to describe him are, "a humanist, a disruptionist, loving, ambitious and unstoppable".

His philanthropic side, he says, keeps him grounded and pays his rent on earth.

Chapape says he is a summer person: "Having your skin kissed by the African sun is the best feeling."

This summer, he plans to spend his weekends in the platteland, doing arts and literacy workshops with young people in rural villages.

The trait he most admires in others is selflessness.

An avid reader, Chapape has just finished *The Blessed Girl* by Angela Makholwa and *Under the Apricot Tree* by Niq Mhlongo. Next on is list is *The Cleanser* by Martin Koboekae.

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