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Kemang Wa Lehulere makes waves as Visual Art SBYA

National Arts Festival
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Cape Town-based visual artist Kemang Wa Lehulere has been named by the National Arts Festival as the 2015 Standard Bank Young Artist for Visual Art.

Growing up in Gugulethu, 30-year-old Wa Lehulere was surrounded by a very creative family as a child. His mother was a singer and his cousins were script writers, directors and actors in film and theatre.

Despite having won five awards including the first International Tiberius Art Award Dresden, launched in 2013 as a tribute to outstanding contemporary artists outside of Europe; having had four solo exhibitions; 50 group exhibitions, and six residencies he remains humble in his achievements and emphasises the importance of hard work, exposure to the arts and collaboration: "The most important thing for me has been to read as much as possible, interacting with other artists, going to see shows, going to the theatre and watching a lot of independent films. It is also important to keep working and that doesn't mean producing physical things but researching and writing as well."

Performer, photographer and filmmaker, initially a theatre aspirant working with the Cape Town Theatre Laboratory, Wa Lehulere enrolled in a performing arts course at CAP (Community Arts Project) and decided to change to a Visual Arts course because he wanted a challenge. Here, he garnered experience in drawing, painting and sculpture. From there his interest moved to new media and film and recalls: "Initially I became drawn to works which dealt with identity politics, because I could relate. I looked a lot at Berni Searle, Tracey Rose, and Thando Mama. That kind of work became my interest, instead of painting. Even though I have continued painting and drawing throughout, that was what drew me in, quite strongly."



Co-founding the arts collective the Gugulective, and collaborating with the Centre for Historical Re-enactments and the NON-NON Collective, Wa Lehulere's focuses on initiating conversations in the arts, particularly bringing the arts into the townships AND making it accessible to the masses.

Wa Lehulere's visual artworks range across media where he is particular about not conforming to one medium and draws on a range of subjects by being open to the unknown. His ethos The Foot Has No Nose - a Xhosa idiom, meaning one doesn't know where one's journey is going, or where one is headed is closely linked to this. Theatre also influences his works by using props to change the traditional meaning of spatial relations on stage or in a gallery. He explores themes of boundaries: portals between the living and the dead, the past and the present; segregation, discrimination and identity. Wa Lehulere uses iconic objects as reference points to represent these themes. The longevity of his works are influenced by the medium in which he presents them: from using charcoal and chalk to create works, playing on the idea of preservation.

His long-standing exposure to theatre has crafted his most memorable moment at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. "I first went to the festival with my cousin Ithumeleng Wa Lehulere with a play he directed called Echoes of Our Footsteps, one in which Keith, my other cousin, was acting in too. Traveling with a large cast, having spent a lot of time in rehearsals and watching the play come to life at the Festival was very special to me."

Recently Wa Lehulere was part of a group exhibition Do it at the Michaelis Galleries in Cape Town.

"I am excited that my work will be traveling to different venues and cities around the country." Says Wa Lehulere on receiving the award.

The other recipients of the 2015 Standard Bank Young Artist Award are Christiaan Olwagen (Theatre), Luyanda Sidiya (Dance), Musa Ngqungwana (Music), Athi-Patra Ruga (Performance Art), and Nduduzo Makhathini (Jazz).