

Art that empowers - Q&A with FNB JoburgArtFair producer Nicole Siegenthaler

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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The annual FNB JoburgArtFair returns to Johannesburg's Sandton Convention for its tenth edition from 8 to 10 September 2017. With the theme *Looking Back and Looking Forward*, this year's fair predominately showcases female artists, with an emphasis on reflection, progression and diversity.

The fair will feature over 60 exhibitions within five categories, including contemporary and modern art, solo presentations, limited editions and art platforms, with selected galleries and organisations hailing from eleven countries across Africa, Europe, and the United States.



The FNB Joburg Art Fair celebrates tenth edition

21 Aug 2017



We got in touch with the fair producer Nicole Siegenthaler to find out what to look out for at the 10th anniversary of the FNB JoburgArtFair, how art can empower and more for the tail end of #WomensMonth.

Nicole Siegenthaler joins the FNB JoburgArtFair after six years of involvement in New York galleries and various international fairs, most notably the international [Independent fairs](#).



Nicole Siegenthaler - Image by Andile Buka

■ ***The tenth Joburg Art Fair promises to be bigger and better than ever. Can you tell us more about the additions to this year's event? Which would be your must see exhibition or artists?***

It's an exciting edition – we are bringing back Robin Rhode as our 2017 featured artist after he participated as our

inaugural featured artist in 2008, welcoming Dr. Zoe Whitley of the Tate Modern to curate a South African Modern exhibition within the fair entitled *Truth, or some other abstraction* that will look at our artists as storytellers and historians, and partnering with the Centre for the Less Good Idea to present a film programme on Nelson Mandela Square on the evening of Friday 8 September. Then, of course, we have a strong line up of solo presentations – six of the eight booths are led by female artists but the section also includes Antonio Olé, who is celebrating his 50th anniversary as an artist this year and exhibited in the two editions of the Johannesburg Biennale back in the 90s, and HOICK, the Cape Town based design collective.



Robin Rhode - Paradise

■ ***Great to see the solo shows are dominated by women this year. Was this a specific aim or did the artists put forward just happen to be predominantly female?***

It happened naturally. While I am absolutely all for all female exhibitions, female run spaces and the like, it is incredibly promising to see this develop naturally. To capitalise on this moment we included a panel in our Talks Programme entitled *The Significance and Power of Womanhood* with South African collector Pulane Kingston in conversation with artists Lady Skollie, Zohra Opoku, Peju Alatise and Sethembile Msezane. It will take place Saturday, 9 September at the Theatre on Nelson Mandela - definitely not to be missed.



Peju Alatise

■ ***Could you tell us more about the meaning behind the theme *Looking Back and Looking Forward*?***

We really wanted to use the moment of our tenth anniversary to reflect, like you would for any milestone anniversary or birthday. In our preliminary conversations about our goals for this edition, we kept coming back to the act of reflection and talking about how we reflect. This idea of looking back at your past, learning from those mistakes, celebrating the successes while looking forward to your future, making plans, working towards your goals – we kept talking about both at once. It didn't matter if we were having conversations about the past or future, they always both emerged together in conversation.

■ ***Can you explain how galleries and artists are selected for the fair?***

Other than our featured artist, we do not exhibit any unaffiliated artists – meaning, we work directly with the galleries who in turn select the artist they will exhibit at the fair. The galleries are selected based on set criteria by our selection committee. The whole process begins about nine months before the fair each year.



■ ***In these disruptive times, art that addresses topics such racial injustice, discrimination, and identity are vitally important. How do you see art changing the world for the better?***

One of the starting points for Dr. Zoe Whitley's exhibition (and the title itself) was a line in Doris Lessing's 1950 novel *The Grass is Singing*. "It is terrible to destroy a person's picture of himself in the interests of truth or some other abstraction." I'm very excited to see her exhibition, as well as hear her conversation with Penny Siopis, Sue Williamson, and Mmakgabo Mapula Helen Sebidi during our talks programme – this idea of artists as truth tellers, and what constitutes as "truth" has been a central theme in her research for her exhibition.

Personally, I always believe it is the duty of the artist to tell their truth, their story. That is what sparks conversation and ignites change in society. An honest artist is always interesting.

■ ***What upcoming artists would you say are the ones to watch?***

I am personally very excited to see Bronwyn Katz's solo presentation with Blank Projects. I first saw her work in February and was completely drawn in. She has also just opened a new body of work in Blank Project's new Cape Town space that I look forward to seeing later this month as well. First-time FNB JoburgArtFair exhibitor Mov'Art Gallery will be bringing Keyezua, a young Angolan artist to the fair – from the images and texts I've seen online, I am really looking forward to seeing the work in person and seeing her career develop.

■ ***What are the challenges when working on an event of this scale?***

I feel a lot of pressure to deliver for our galleries. Whether they are a small two-person team or one of the larger galleries in the country that participates in multiple international art fairs a year – for all of them, this is their moment. A lot of people don't realize, but galleries prepare for months in advance for an art fair. They have a very focused space (their booth)

wherein to put their best foot forward and take advantage of the spotlight on the fair that brings in a huge cross section of collectors, patrons and journalists. Our job is to help connect them to their clients and audience during each fair. We want to bring the best audience we can and help our gallerists realise their presentations 100%. It's certainly a challenge, but an exciting one.



■ ***How does local art still need to be supported?***

From the ground up. I was very lucky to be able to participate in art classes from elementary school which exposed me to a completely different world from my upbringing. My dad was the first in his family to go to university (he became an accountant); otherwise, we have all been farmers with the women sometimes taking part time secretarial positions if they can be spared from the farm/children. A career in the arts would never have been on my radar had my public school not had such a strong arts curriculum. I would love to see every child have such opportunity.

■ ***What's your message for Women's Month?***

Be true to yourself and don't let your voice be drowned out. Even if you're not a loud person, there are other ways to be heard. If you're true to yourself, your place in the world will be genuine.

fnbjoburgartfair.co.za | Tickets available from tickets.tixsa.co.za

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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