

Take your chances and work hard

Textile artist Mielja Magobelilo makes her dreams come true

by Kay Cowley

If there was still apartheid, I couldn't have done art. In those years you couldn't see a future," says successful textile artist* Melija Magobelilo. Her message to the 'born frees', all those Namibians born after independence, is to realize that they have a whole new life open to them.

Originally from Botswana, Mielja grew up on a Gobabis farm with a **pious*** Afrikaans family her mother worked for. This religious environment laid the foundations for her strong belief "that the Lord has opened doors" for her.

The first door opened when Mielja moved to Windhoek in the 1980's to work at the 'Kunskabinet', a small private art gallery. When she was a child, there was no art education at schools, but in Windhoek Hilda Wasserfall introduced her to watercolour, and she did her first painting.

Later, Hester van Schouwenburg showed her how to do textile painting. "Why are you sitting here? Do something! Take a cloth and paint," she said and encouraged Mielja to take art classes at the Franco Namibian Culture Centre. There she learnt drawing and cardboard printmaking from Joseph Madisia and Ndasuunje Shikongeni. She was also introduced to **etching*** by Alfredo Garcia,

who sponsored her art classes at the Academy (now the University of Namibia).

In 1990, Annaleen Eins, then director of the National Art Gallery of Namibia, raised money from Germany for Mielja to attend a textile workshop in Nigeria. Mielja sees this as a turning point in her life. It was the first time she boarded an airplane and her first visit to a foreign country. "If you are given such a chance, it's time to start working."

In Nigeria she witnessed a strong **work ethic*** and hence a very productive textile industry which supplied the markets regularly. She learned new techniques such as starch resist and how to use a maize meal paste in cloth design. For this technique, you apply the paste in patterns onto the cloth and then cover it with dye or fabric paint; the areas where the paste was applied will block out or 'resist' the paint. Many layers of colours and patterns can be created in this manner. Mielja finds this an economical and creative technique, which can empower people.

"Why are you sitting here? Do something! Take a rag and paint!"



Sheena Magenya

After her inspirational journey to Nigeria, Mielja was recommended by Sharon Cagnetto of the College of the Arts for teaching textiles at Victory Women's Movement an upliftment program in Katutura. During that time, Mielja also worked with school children and later at the John Muafangejo Art Center (JMAC) as a textiles lecturer. This opened another door, as it provided her with a chance to transfer her skills to the larger community. Now JMAC classes fall under the College for the Arts program, and Mielja visualizes a big rainbow over both institutions, promising a future for many. Here the youth have the opportunity to learn skills in textile and fashion design, printmaking, painting, drawing, ceramics, sculpture and mixed media.

Mielja has many hopes for the future: One aim is to offer workshops to mature women who want to acquire new skills and a way to earn an income. After a recent successful sell-out exhibition of her textiles at Europe House, she hopes to exhibit in Europe or Mexico. Another dream is to see Namibia developing its own textile industry, promoting its local culture and identity and giving people the opportunity to practice **entrepreneurship***. Because, as Mielja says, "independent Namibia is a place where you can still make your dreams come true." ♀

"Independent Namibia is a place where you can still make your dreams come true."

Glossary

- ***textile artist** an artist working with cloth
- ***pious** having a deep love for religion
- ***etching** using a sharp point to engrave an image on a metal plate from which copies may be printed
- ***work ethic** strict principles or rules of conduct with respect to doing work
- ***entrepreneurship** the skill and knowledge to start your own business