



PRESS RELEASE

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Helen Sebidi – “You must be doing something in your life. You can’t just be a person.”

21 Icons South Africa, the remarkable series of short films and portraits that celebrates iconic men and women whose lives and work have inspired both South Africans and people the world over, continues on Sunday **October 13** on SABC3 at 6.57pm with Mmakgabo Mmapula Sebidi, or Helen Sebidi, one of South Africa’s most collectable artists.

Sebidi started out as a domestic worker who went on to become an internationally celebrated fine artist. Her works reside in many collections across the world. Sebidi followed the call of creativity and overcame what would seem to be insurmountable obstacles for a black woman artist. Sebidi was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to travel to the USA and exhibit at the Worldwide Economic Contemporary Artists’ Fund Exhibition. Through it all, she remained a champion of especially rural women, shining the torch on their hardships and triumphs through her art.

The suffering and disruption inflicted by apartheid, especially on women, are common themes in Sebidi’s work, which also evokes spiritual ancestors, rural African objects and the conflict between African belief systems and Western values. She uncannily combines the rural and the city, the male and the female, reality and myth. But she could not care less whether people like her art or not: “Whoever likes it will love it, whoever don’t has not been given to love my work. I don’t have to be conscious of whom I’m working for. I have to be happy about what I’m doing,” she tells the 21 Icons team.

For his portrait of Sebidi, Steirn chose to position her in front of her famous 1988 painting, “Tears of Africa”, a large charcoal collage on paper. “I wanted a portrait that represented Helen Sebidi’s passion and her charisma, and I wanted to show her emerging from

her art. I wanted to shoot her wrapped in her own creativity, and if you look at the photograph, you’ll notice it’s hard to work out where Helen Sebidi starts and where her artwork finishes,” he says.

The portrait, signed by Sebidi, will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to the charity of her choice. A copy of it will also be published in the Sunday Times newspaper on October 13.

A consummate fine artist, Sebidi tells filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn that making art in her home studio in Parktown, Johannesburg, makes her feel happy to be alive: “I know then that I’ve been born for something in life. I don’t think there’s anything better than my studio. It’s my spiritual home.”

Although the early life of Sebidi — born in 1943 in Marapyane (Skilpadfontein) — was one of poverty and daily manual labour to survive, she grew up in the protective embrace of an artistic grandmother who would serve as her life-long inspiration. “I got very close to my grandmother because all her children ran to the city and she would always say to me: ‘You are my gift,’” Sebidi says. “In the rural areas where I grew up we had strong grandparents who loved us, teaching us, with us helping them and they helped us.”

Sebidi’s grandmother, a traditional wall and floor painter, would be a major formative influence on both her personal life and career. “I was very unhappy after her death because I felt very much naked,” she tells the 21 Icons team.

In her mid-teens, having completed only standard 6 (grade 8), Sebidi moved to Johannesburg. Like many of her peers, her limited means meant she could not complete her schooling and instead she sought to become a domestic worker. But she always knew she was not cut out for it and changed jobs frequently while quietly continuing to hone and broaden her skills. This was backed by a rich informal education from her grandmother, who emphasised



independence, creativity and a commitment to her community.

Eventually, Sebidi received a more formal art education under Koenakeefe Mohl, a figurative and landscape painter who had studied in West Germany. From him she learnt Western styles of illusionism, which she employed in her idealistic paintings of rural life. He would later encourage her to create the work that became her first solo art exhibit — the first black woman in South Africa to do so — and Sebidi began to be noticed in the art world. The exhibition became a commercial breakthrough for her and enabled her to make a decent living from her art for the first time.

For the 70-year-old Sebidi, her life's work is far from over. Her philosophy reflects the message of hard work and spiritual fulfilment that her grandmother instilled in her. "We need to meet the world, and the only thing that is in my life is energy to work. And I'm still hoping to have more energy," she tells the 21 Icons team.

Public participation is invited on **Twitter: @21icons**; www.21icons.com and www.facebook.com/21icons.

21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Nikon and Deloitte and supported by The Department of Arts & Culture as a nation-building initiative.

PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

Photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn provides an intimate look at the incredibly philosophy of fine artist Helen Sebidi, who, under difficult circumstances, has dedicated her life to creating art and through her works has given us a better understanding of who we are and where we fit in the world.

PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS

Photograph details: Photographer Adrian Steirn's portrait shows Helen Sebidi enveloped by her painting "Tears of Africa", demonstrating the inextricable link

between her and her work and the deeply spiritual relationship she has with her vocation.

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On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

Jo-Leen Jan

Publicity

joleen@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 83 287 0165

+27 74 525 9014

Heidi Pretorius

Project Management

heidi@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 82 940 3464