

# Dr. Esther Mahlangu

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At Almine Rech, Dr. Esther Mahlangu presents a series of paintings created between 2019 and 2021. She was first introduced in France and Europe during the exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, which then-director Jean-Hubert Martin organized at the Centre Pompidou in 1989. One can immediately recognize the South African painter's geometric style and dynamic color intricacies, and this new solo show in Paris seemed like a great opportunity for a conversation with the art historian as he shares his first impressions when he discovered her work. She was born in Middelburg in 1935.

by Marie Maertens, writer and critic.

**Marie Maertens** : Let's place ourselves in the context of the time. At the end of the 1980s, you inaugurated *Magiciens de la Terre*, a project that may have seemed a bit crazy to a truly international scene at the Centre Pompidou, outside the circuits of Western Europe and North America. To do this, you and a group of curators travel to five continents, in the end bringing together one hundred artists. André Magnin travels to South Africa to discover artists about whom he has very little information, and meets Esther Mahlangu for the first time...

**Jean-Hubert Martin**: Indeed, we ventured in blindly, because there was no bibliography, even if we had made contacts with ethnologists, specifically those at the Musée de l'Homme. I had also consulted many books and magazines, like *National Geographic*, where we sometimes found a lead. However, for the *Ndébélés*, a very beautiful eponymously-titled book by Margaret Courtney-Clarke had already been published on the house paintings of this group of African people, which were done during a ritual of passage into adulthood. But our goal was to find the artist who was the most talented or who produced the most personalized works in communities where they repeated the formula. We wanted to discover someone who put more investment or energy into it than others, and that turned out to be Esther Mahlangu.

**How did the public at the time react to the work exhibited at La Villette, which was an exact replica of her Middelburg house which she had painted before the opening?**

It is always difficult to know how the public feels about a work... but the criticism was, shall we say, "measured"... Some loved the exhibition - or so they say today! - but at the time, the reviews were mixed. Many people in the art world thought that this phenomenon would be over in a few months. For example, I had suggested to a critic that you could draw a formal parallel between Esther Mahlangu and Sol LeWitt. But he told me that it had nothing to do with the latter's background, which goes back five centuries. So in 2000, when I was the curator of the Lyon Biennial called *Partage d'exotismes* (Sharing Exoticism), I made sure that they worked together, but again critics pointed out a superiority on the part of the American artist.

**Is Esther Mahlangu's work more formal and decorative, or more symbolic and linked to the rite of passage to adulthood? Do the colors have a significant role?**

In her work we find more or less identifiable shapes, particularly ones that resemble Gillette razor blades. The artist has always confirmed that this was a direct reference, and I think it could also be a reference to magical practices or rituals that require blood to be spilled. Another motif is modifying elements of home objects. On the symbolic side, she does not necessarily emphasize or omit it. Insofar as these paintings accompany rites of passage, the spirituality is implicit, however one must not exaggerate with an overly ethnological reading. Traditionally, her grandmother and mother worked with cow dung, but Esther Mahlangu was able to gradually acquire colors, to which she does not attribute any specific meaning, to my knowledge. Nevertheless for Magiciens de la Terre she added a small part made with cow dung, where she drew tracings and lines with her fingers.

**The discovery of acrylics allowed her to move to the canvas and create a perennality, like with the paintings on houses that faded away after each rainy season. Do you think her trip to Paris had an impact on her work?**

No, not really, although when she returned, she put up a sign next to her house that read "Esther is here. The 1st woman who visited overseas. Art woman". Esther Mahlangu knows how to adapt to different occasions and demands, while remaining rigorous in her style.

**As a curator, you said that at that time you had to work a lot on feeling, flair, instinct... because when you arrived there were few written sources and validations, especially in Africa. The relationship to time was also totally different, as evidenced by an article in the Quotidien de Paris from 1989. It reported that André Magnin took three weeks to reach a village in Mozambique in search of John Fundi, before learning that the latter had left for Tanzania ten years earlier, without a precise address...**

Indeed, we only had our eyes and our head. However a population and a tradition existed around Esther Mahlangu. Moreover, this notion of "tradition", which immediately imposes itself in our system of thought, is questioned a lot – just like the terms "archaism" or "primitive art". We find it difficult to imagine that a person can emerge from his or her society and produce an extraordinary work without filiation or passage through a Western mold. My initial prism was to look at this work on the same level as any other contemporary work and to draw more attention to artists from "indigenous cultures". That is to say, cultures that are not looking for any connection with our art market and working only for their community.