

## **Artistic Juxtaposition: The Vulnerability and Strength of Black South African Women in Mary Sibande's *Sophie* Series**

**India Benson**

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

### **ABSTRACT**

Mary Sibande is a female South African artist whose work delves into ideas of race, gender, and class from her perspective as a Black South African woman. Through her medium, a mannequin named Sophie made with silicone and fiberglass, she explores these realms by representing Sophie's character in various dream states and attire. This paper examines the ambiguous nature of Sibande's 2009 work, *Caught in the Rapture*, in which Sophie's Victorian-style blue dress acts as the centerpiece, entailing both colonial and post-colonial histories. I propose that there are two conflicting interpretations that can be gathered from examining the installation: one that centers on the vulnerable nature of the piece, while the other highlights its aspects of strength. This creates an unlikely coexistence between two inherently opposing categorizations, which results in a dynamic and complex understanding of the work as a whole.

Keywords: Sibande, Sophie, dress, strength, vulnerability

### **Introduction**

A black spider web stretches out on a stark white background. A woman positioned in the center with outstretched arms pushes against the web with her head turned away in a defiant stance. The web entraps her – the mechanism that holds her hostage casting shadows onto the contrasting colored wall. The woman's eyes are closed as she “wears” a blue ball-gown, a Victorian style dress, its fabric starched and unwrinkled. The dress alone immediately catches the eye with its vibrant color brilliant in a world of all black and white. The dress puffs out at both shoulders, the puffs leaning slightly left toward the background web. A blue collar with tiny white triangles facing out encircles the woman's neck. Three buttons run down the front of her dress until they reach a white apron. The apron wraps around her waist with small square folds lining the bottom and sides of the material.

This is Sophie. As the subject of the sculpture *Caught in the Rapture* (2009), she's an alter ego of South African contemporary artist Mary Sibande, who lives and works in Johannesburg. Sibande, born in 1982, experienced the end of apartheid (1994) as well as the post-apartheid era, growing up a child of three generations of domestic workers – her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother (Dodd 2010, 467). Originally, her dream was to become a fashion designer, but that dream didn't come to fruition; nevertheless, her desire to design can be seen throughout her artwork. *Caught in the Rapture* is one sculpture in a series of many that focus on this particular character, who is named Sophie. Sibande uses fiberglass and silicone to make

casts of her own body as she poses for her artwork for this series. The result is a human-sized mannequin that provides a lifelike aura for the viewers (Dodd 2010, 467-468).

As an artist who experienced her adult life post-apartheid, Sibande's work differs from artists who experienced apartheid and created their works accordingly. Artists like Zwelidumile Geelboi Mgxaji Mslaba "Dumile" Feni, Sydney Kumalo, and Ezrom Legae created art that represented the human/bestial convergence or the animal-like qualities attributed to humans during this time. Black South Africans were seen as the animals in the artwork since they were being violated in inhumane ways. Artists depicted the egregious abuse that Black communities faced by creating distorted animals and humans merging with beasts into unrecognizable and horrifying images (Peffer 2009). After the 1982 Culture and Resistance Festival in Gaborone, Botswana, artists began to use political posters to explicitly state what they were fighting against: apartheid. They wanted their message of change to be clear and unambiguous and saw art as a tool to convey that feeling. One slogan that became very popular was: "Art is a weapon of the struggle" (Peffer 2009, 79). Later in the 1980s, abstract art began to rise in popularity, as workshop movements like the Triangle Artists' Workshop (Triangle 2017) and the Thupelo Workshop (Thupelo 2017) allowed artists to learn techniques they could then apply to their own works in New York and Johannesburg, respectively. Through such workshops, artists were able to learn to express their inner emotions and focus on the medium of their art – the paint itself – rather than on creating a recognizable image. Although the style was not appealing to many artists, since the explicitness of the struggle against apartheid promoted by the Culture and Resistance Festival was still in their minds, abstract art and the movements around it created a community environment among artists (Peffer 2009).

As a South African artist, Sibande was no doubt familiar with these artists and the styles they created. Her work raises questions on gender, race, and class, taking on these issues with a character who tries to distance herself from the world in which these problems dominate. Like *Caught in the Rapture*, her other works in the series echo these ideas as they show Sophie in various costumes and dream states. Mary Corrigan (2015), research associate at the University of Johannesburg, views *Caught in the Rapture* as a piece that focuses fully on the artist, Sibande, and her created character, Sophie. Corrigan sees this artwork as being more than a piece that can be broadly applied to the experiences of Black South African women. She views both Sibande and Sophie as trying to escape from their current realities. For Sophie, it's her job as a domestic servant; for Sibande, it's her current reality. The web, for instance, is one that Sibande makes, both physically and symbolically. Corrigan argues that Sibande is therefore the architect of her own trap, and that this is enhanced by the fact that the casts of Sophie are made from Sibande's own body, writing: "She has become enslaved by her aspirations, causing her to be embedded in another reality" (159). I agree with Corrigan's escapist view of Sophie. Aside from that connection, our interpretations diverge, however, as I view this artwork as going beyond just Sophie and Sibande toward a larger societal context.

In this paper, I will argue that *Caught in the Rapture* displays both the vulnerability of Black South African women as well as the inner strength they need to break free from stereotypes and oppression due to their gender. I will begin by examining another interpretation of the art piece, as well as detailing the development of the Sophie series and its influence in South Africa. Next, I will compare the presentation methods of and ideas expressed by artists Jane Alexander, Mmakgabo Mmapula Helen Sebidi, and Yinka Shonibare that can also be observed in Sibande's works. I will then move to a deeper analysis of Sibande's *Caught in the Rapture*, and conclude with thoughts on the future of the Sophie series.

## Background

Sibande's Sophie series was originally created for a 2009 solo exhibition titled *Long Live the Dead Queen*, put on in honor of her grandmother, who bore the same name and served as her inspiration. Sophie's transformations didn't end there, though. Instead, more mannequins followed, clothed in an array of garments and placed in striking poses, each one possessing a universal quality – closed eyes – with the purpose being to illustrate that Sophie is journeying into a dream state where she escapes from her everyday domestic chores. She enters a world where she takes control and holds the power. Sibande chooses to represent Sophie as a mixed media installation rather than a painting, due to the significance of what a mannequin represents. Mary Corrigan (2015) states that, "Mannequins are associated with the subconscious, becoming conduits for the yearnings that plague the psyche." Sibande's work, then, takes on various layers, as Sophie's longing to break free expresses not only her desires as an alter ego, but also Sibande's own desires (147).

Sophie, however, is not restricted to art exhibits in which Sibande participates; she reaches people outside the gallery walls also. In 2009 and 2010, the Sophie series left the confined walls of an art exhibit and journeyed throughout the inner city of Johannesburg for the Joburg Art Fair. Individuals unable to attend Sibande's exhibits were able to see images of Sophie posted on billboards around the area. Enlarged prints of Sophie were placed on various buildings and billboards. The fair was held in order to turn the city into an art gallery, allowing people to view the artwork outside of the traditional enclosed location. The organizers of the "democratic exhibition" saw Sibande as a perfect choice for the event, as she was one of the few young black women working in mixed media. During the 2010 fair, nineteen prints of Sophie were displayed on nineteen buildings. Director of the Johannesburg arts, culture, and heritage department, Steven Sack, said that Sibande's work "humanizes our tough and rough society," and that he "hope[s] the citizens of Joburg notice and are engaged and moved by them [the prints]" (Davie 2010, np).

## Stylistic Analysis

### *Immersion*

Sculptor Jane Alexander creates installations with striking images that evoke both emotional and thoughtful responses in a way similar to Sibande. She uses life-sized sculptures to capture the onlooker's attention in a way that questions the humanity of the figures represented in her work. While the appearance of the grotesque figures instantly accentuates their inhuman nature, it brings to light their human aspects too; the figures' nudity results in a feeling of vulnerability – a human characteristic. Alexander creates an "aesthetics of abjection" in which inhumanity and humanity combine so that the viewers cannot cast off that which they do not want to accept. They are forced to confront what makes the figures unlike them as much as like them (Bick 2010, 33-34). This is an active journey for onlookers, as they must confront the figures presented to them, comprehend the human-inhuman connections represented in the figures, and then evaluate the artist's overall statement. One such piece is Alexander's famous *Butcher Boys* (1986), a sculpture of three mutilated figures sitting on a bench. Horns extend from their heads; what appear to be cut marks go down their chests, as if something inside has been taken out; their ears are removed, mouths covered, and sexes fused; and their black eyes stare up and off to

the side. This piece is far from one that can be understood with a single glance; it requires further discussion to gain understanding of its meaning (Peffer 2009, 64).

Both Alexander and Sibande force their audiences to engage with their artwork. While Sibande does not use emotions such as horror to provide the impact of her message, like Alexander, she finds an effective method to capture viewers, specifically through her use of excessive dress material, her lifelike mannequins, and her mixed media. Excessive clothing serves as a trademark of her style. The blue dress Sophie wears seems excessive, yet that is one of the reasons Sibande's artwork catches the eye. It is the first place to which the eye is drawn, essentially pulling one into the dream with its central focus in the piece. Her human-scaled mannequins, made from the casts of her own body, lend realism to her work. In *Caught in the Rapture*, characteristics such as Sophie's neck veins, hand veins, and middle of the arm indentions all add to Sibande's realistic approach, which is eye catching to the observer. Dress material, Silicon, fiberglass, thread, and other materials are all used to enhance Sophie's dreams, bringing color, realism, and everyday objects into a world of fantasy.

### ***The Body***

Mmakgabo Mmapula Helen Sebidi focuses on gender and racial aspects similar to those in Sibande's work by highlighting women's roles in Africa. Sebidi focuses on gender from the female perspective, bringing to light women's roles in the home and community. In her work, Black women serve as the central focal point. Through pastel and paper collages, she produces art that emphasizes the roles that women play in South Africa. As a female who grew up and lived during the apartheid era, she sees women as the "bearers of tradition" and of "the next generation of children" (Peffer 2009, 70). They have faced misogyny, been the primary breadwinners, and been abused as domestic servants for white employers, providing them with valuable insight into the problems that face South African society. In *Where is My Home? The Mischief of the Township* (1988), arms, legs, and faces are distorted and are located on various places on the canvas. Bright colors blend into one another, making it harder to distinguish between the faces and the body parts. Yet, there is a woman in the center of it all. Although Sebidi's collages appear dysfunctional and chaotic, especially during the period when artists were portraying bestial qualities in humans, in Sebidi's work overall, a woman serves as the "symbol of stasis within chaos" (Peffer 2009, 70).

Gender and race issues are tackled on a subconscious level in Sibande's work, which focuses on the maid – a common profession of Black women during apartheid. Sibande and Sebidi focus on the female perspective, with race being equally important to both artists, specifically for Black women, although gender is broadly explored in their work. In contrast to Sebidi's method, Sibande chooses to bring forth her message with Sophie's character only. Almost all of Sibande's early works showcase Sophie interacting with the Victorian upper class world without others present. Even so, Sophie does not represent one female; she represents South African Black women as a whole. Sibande, although using her own body, therefore serves as a spokeswoman as she broaches the gender issues she sees women facing through an artistic perspective. Thus, by using her own body to create Sophie and not just a sculpture made from her imagination, she is connecting herself with the women she strives to represent. She is a Black, South African woman, and she is part of the group for which she means to speak – not from a detached standpoint, but from an intimate one that she can relate to firsthand.

*Excess*

British-Nigerian artist, Yinka Shonibare, makes political statements with his installation pieces. His work aligns with Sibande's on issues of class, delving into discussions of context and extravagance through the medium of clothing. His signature headless mannequins, a reminder of the French Revolution beheadings (1789-1799), work to Africanize Victorian leisure activities by displaying skin tones of indeterminate ethnicities and through the use of fabrics of mixed authenticities (Stilling 2013, 301). The fabrics that Shonibare uses appear to be African, yet their origins prove otherwise, thereby questioning what it means for an item to be labeled authentic in one area over another (Stilling 2013, 301). He is best known for his use of batik clothing and his use of it in formal Victorian designs, for the purpose of critiquing colonialism through the installations' clothing. For Shonibare, it is the batik cloth that has a complex background. The Dutch wax technique used in producing the fabric, associated with an African origin, is in fact from Indonesia, although it travelled to both Holland and Manchester prior. Only after those exports did it arrive in Africa, where it is now considered traditional African wear (Tolia-Kelly and Morris 2004, 154). One such work by Shonibare that uses the cloth is titled *Yinka Shonibare Dresses Britannia* (2001). The statue, located in front of the Tate Britain, is significant for two reasons: one, its connection to the Victorian ideas of empire and nationhood; and two, its link to Henry Tate's acquisition of wealth through the sugar trade. This statue, or symbol, serves to re-contextualize the colonizer "through the embodiment of 'the colonized,'" providing a nuance in the meaning of the artwork ((Tolia-Kelly and Morris 2004, 155).

Shonibare's work further explores the idea of excess, specifically focusing on its destructive road, as well as power relations. As Downey states, Shonibare "comments on power, or the deconstruction of power... and use(s) notions of excess as a way to represent that power – deconstructing things within that" (2005, 25). *The Last Supper* (2013) is a perfect example of excess: the headless figures sit and stand around a table filled with food, and there is a plethora of colors to represent the food and clothing. While a modern recreation of Leonardo Da Vinci's 1498 version, it is also reminiscent of the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the European powers' colonial quest for more power in Africa. The underlying political meaning of the piece presents itself through symbolism, with the food, representing Africa, being distributed among the figures, which represent those in attendance at the conference. It also adds to his *Scramble For Africa* (2003) installation piece that explicitly relates to the historical event. Yet, there is a reason for his focus on excess. In 2004, he screened *Un Ballo in Maschera*, his first film, which investigates what excess eventually becomes – in his words: "the primitive side of humanity" (Downey 2005, 28).

In *Caught in the Rapture*, Sibande uses Sophie's wearing of the dress to call into question a deeper analysis of the work's meaning through a re-contextualization process similar to Shonibare's. Through dress alone, Sophie ascends to the position of madame, with the dress's size and length varying between exhibits. Although, the message associated with the outfit she wears is not as evident as it might initially appear. After 1994, the official end of apartheid, a new fashion of dress began to be marketed as "South African fashion" by local designers, who wanted their clothing to be associated with a new South African identity. Fashion and shifts in dress are not merely changes in fads, though. The creation of clothing that is not prescribed by class allows anyone to wear the clothing if they have similar work opportunities, creating a link between the clothing and democracy. For Sophie, the Victorian style dress represents a power that was once held by whites during apartheid, and even earlier, during colonial times. Her clothing is therefore a symbol. However, she hones those symbols that represent immobility in

class and democratizes them, by wearing the dress even though she's a servant (Corrigall 2015, 151-152).

Sibande's purposeful use of excess extends beyond the aforementioned method of grasping onlookers' attention. Sophie's clothing calls to mind the wealth during the Victorian era among those who had the means to display it. The raw emotion of greed resulted in such a time period, leading to the acquisition of the means to satisfy that desire. As artists, both Shonibare and Sibande realize that, by intentionally using excess as a concept, whether through clothing or other signs of lavishness, they can expose the path that excess leads to among those who choose to engage in and focus on it.

### **Artistic Juxtaposition**

The captivating style of Sibande's work along with her views on race, gender, class, and excess serve as a foundation to the investigation of *Caught in the Rapture*. Even though it appears as an installation piece focusing solely on Sophie's stuck position in a spider's web, there is more beneath the surface. There is an ambiguity to the overall symbolism of the piece. Is Sophie a representation of the victimization of Black South African women because of their race and also because of their gender? Or, is her position an exemplification of the strength needed to overcome gender issues that are still a problem concerning Black South African women? The answer is both. While those questions pose two exclusive interpretations, the artwork requires an inclusive one that creates a juxtaposition of two opposing characterizations – that of vulnerability and strength. None of Sophie's gestures are superfluous, because each one conveys a purpose and message, allowing an analysis of struggle and perseverance. This dynamic back-and-forth interpretation can be drawn from the piece by viewing it holistically, and also by analyzing other aspects that make it similar to Sibande's other works and those that make it unique. These include: the title and its different meanings, the spider web and its negative and positive connotations, the Victorian wear of Sophie and its significance, and the idea of freedom and its liberations.

In Sibande's *Long Live the Dead Queen* collection, there is an expression of strength that resonates among her various art pieces as the figures all hold positions of power. Why, then, is Sophie in a vulnerable stance in *Caught in the Rapture? The Reign* (2010), in particular, shows Sophie wearing a blue dress as she sits on a reared up horse. The artwork is a reminder of the Jacques Louis David painting *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801) – an art piece exuding power. Sophie holds a similar power as she sits on top of the horse; yet, that position is in opposition to the seemingly vulnerable one in *Caught in the Rapture*. Even in other collections, Sophie shows power and strength in some fashion or another, whether it is subtle or overt. *Don't Make Them Like They Used To* (2008) evinces Sophie's inner strength as she knits cloth with the Superman symbol on it, while the *Everything Not Lost* (2011) collection, where Sophie is not only dressed in army attire, but also multiplied in number, is a blatant example of strength at its fullest.

### **Vulnerability**

Vulnerability appears in the essence of the piece, as the artwork itself is a personal dream state of one female, namely Sophie, being exposed to the viewers that observe her. If mannequins are the channels through which the psyche can express its yearnings, as Corrigall suggests, then the artist's message and medium become one. Sophie yearns to be free from the work she must do; therefore, her dreams pull her out of the pressing job she is to perform as well as take her away

from the realities of the world in which she lives. Unfortunately, her dream is just that – a dream. Even if she imagines being part of a higher class, in reality this is not the case. The spider web signals that fact by both catching and keeping her in that one position. Her dreams are only in her mind; they do not stretch into the real world. Sophie may not want that to be true, as shown by her pushing away from the web, but it is. She is left vulnerable to the onlookers who receive an intimate glimpse of her dream.

Sibande's desires are left open for others to see as well. Her collection, which focuses on race, gender, and class, marks stances that she has taken and expressed through art. Sophie's presence emphasizes that point; through her, Sibande's desire for a more freeing future for Black South African women is there for others to see. The viewers can critique Sibande's art piece and judge for themselves if they agree with the artist or not. Either way, Sibande has revealed her thoughts. As Sophie stands there wearing her unmissable blue dress with the spider web behind her, both she and Sibande are opening themselves up to their dreams. Interestingly, Sophie's dream lies in separation from her work as a domestic servant, while Sibande's dream is expressed through her work as an artist.

According to Random House Dictionary, one meaning of the word "rapture," from the piece's title, is "the carrying of a person to another place or sphere of existence." Sophie is caught in another place, namely her dreams. This takes on an additional layer since the viewer is involved in this process as well. Sophie is not the only one experiencing this journey from reality to the imaginary; every viewer who engages with the artwork is also carried away to another place. While observing it, the viewer is essentially taken from the present world of being inside the art gallery into a world of dreams. The difference, though, is that Sophie's dream is the one being exposed. There is also a significance in the fact that Sibande creates the casts from her own body. She becomes vulnerable by the mere act of using the casts in her creation of Sophie, who Sibande claims is her alter ego. By making that assertion, Sibande is showing that there may be more behind the adoption than what is readily apparent. The artist may have desires that she dreams about, but that she feels are confined to her imagination.

Sophie's trapped position in the spider web as she pushes against it, trying to get away but unable to do so, displays helplessness as she stands in this powerless position. The spider web could be representative of the immobility that Black women face in South Africa. During the apartheid years, while artwork focused on the struggle, there were only a few artists who called attention to the struggle that women faced. One female South African artist, namely Sebidi, was in that small number. Since Sibande experienced apartheid as a child, her work draws attention to current issues surrounding women, making Sophie's position a symbol of stasis in regard to the restraints women face. As stated by Sibande, Sophie's body serves "as a tool to express concerns in the stereotypical depiction of women, particularly black women" (Stielau, n.d.). There is a vulnerability in being victimized because of one's gender, and by making Sophie the center of the piece, like the females in Sebidi's work, Sibande is choosing to highlight women and their struggles.

The bright blue Victorian-style dress itself represents an era of confinement. Although the blue dress is domestic wear, as shown by the clean white apron around Sophie's waist, the dress has an excess of material which would not have been used for a domestic servant's attire; big, ball gown structured dresses would have been restricted to the wealthy class. Sophie is stuck to the spider's web where she is caught, showcasing this symbol of the immobility that has been felt by women through the Victorian era, during apartheid, and post-apartheid. Sophie's pose

displays the oppression of women that still exists and it positions her as a victim of societal views of her based on her gender.

The use of the dress goes beyond that of the Victorian reference, however. An issue that Black African women have to face is one of a sexual nature. Africa as a whole has been viewed in a sexual light (Osha 2004, 92), art being an avenue through which to enhance this outlook. Artists engaged in settler primitivism in the twentieth century. One such artist was Alexis Preller, who, while painting images of Ndebele culture, did not occlude a sexual appeal, as seen in *Mapogga I* (1951): a faceless woman is seated with her breasts above her clothing, with the holistic view of the woman alluding to the female genitalia (Peffer 2009, 17–18). Constance Larrabee, a photographer, numbered her pictures instead of titling them, giving no further information about her subjects except one moment captured through a camera lens (Peffer 2009, 16). Both artists took away the individualism of their subjects; and, in Preller's case, he saturated his images with sexual innuendos. As the central focal point in *Caught in the Rapture*, Sophie is open to being exposed within this focalized view. Sibande reacts to the stereotypical view of Black African women by desexualizing Sophie through the excess of her gown. Instead of the viewer seeing Sophie as a sexualized female, the ball gown dress takes away the outline of her body that a tight-fitting dress would show. The sexual and vulnerable exposure is further critiqued by Sibande through the turning of Sophie's head, reinforcing the fact that she rejects being viewed in such a way and stressing that women should be regarded apart from their sexuality.

The idea of strived-for freedom, both physical and mental, takes form in the work, as Sophie's attempt to push away from the web represents an effort to achieve true freedom. There is still a susceptibility that women face because of their gender, not only in the roles they may try to attain, whether socially or economically, but also in their minds. They must believe they can overcome the pressures they are facing and attain what may have been denied them due to their gender. The act of doing so, though, is not an easy task. The spider web's sticky component holds Sophie in place, just as reinforced ideas about women have worked to hold them within a stereotyped scope both in the past and in the present. Sibande has talked about how South Africa as a whole is working to obtain the mental freedom that the country has attained physically. She states that, "Although one can argue the freedom of our country under the new democratic dispensation many members of the South African society are not free in their minds haunted as they are by lingering self-doubts" (Stielau n.d.). Those doubts are the spider web that holds the people in place. They hold women in place.

### ***Strength***

Nevertheless, perseverance is not void in the artwork in the least. There is an inner strength evinced through the work in a similar manner as vulnerability. One example is the title of the artwork, explored earlier. Random House Dictionary provides another possible meaning to the word "rapture": "caught in the state of delight" or "ecstatic joy." While this additional meaning may not at first be clearly evident, just as the former definition, it reveals itself in the piece upon observation. When looking at Sophie's head posture – turned away – and facial expression – eyes closed – the sight of joy is not clearly evident. There are no physical signs of joy on her face (e.g., a smile), and her facial expression looks calm, arguably blank. So where is this joy visible? The answer is in Sophie's mind, or her subconscious. The dream world that the installation presents is a place she has escaped to and found refuge in. There are no racial, gender, or class issues there; it is just her and her elevated status. Therefore, she is overjoyed, not in her awake



state, but in her dream state. Instead of constantly thinking about herself as a maid, she chooses to take her mind off of that fact. Her strength comes from reaching beyond what's currently available to her. She's pushing toward a dream in a way that contemporary South African women are pushing toward their dream of removing gender-based stereotypes.

The pushing away from the web may serve as an attempt to reject the view that Black women are part of a lower class – the turning of Sophie's head adding to the fact, by showing a separation from that very assessment. From an apartheid standpoint, Sibande's central focus of Sophie in the installation piece honors the women during this time, by showing that they were a central part of South African society and served as a symbol of strength. This viewpoint further aligns Sibande's work with Sebidi's because both women realize the importance of speaking on behalf of women. Part of this honoring process is sculpting not a story of tragedy and oppression, but one of survival and determination. There may have been little mobility for women due to their race, gender, and class, but even so, they still found a way to help provide for their families (Salo 2007, 189–90). The women may have been stuck due to the confines of their society; nonetheless, they made it through.

The Victorian dress may have a history of confinement and represent signs of stasis, but that doesn't mean that its symbolism is restricted to that historical meaning. By placing such a dress on a maid, Sibande could be attempting to re-contextualize it. The Herero women in Namibia have done just that with the Victorian style dresses they have been wearing for over a century, transforming the style into one that symbolizes perseverance. They even wear petticoats, to add to the fullness of their dresses. Lutz Marten, a linguist at London's School of Oriental and African studies specializing in the Herero tribe, states that the dress, which was introduced to the Namibians in the early 1900s, "reflects a strong sense of history and the memory of national rebuilding after the [Herero-German] 1904 war. It also provides a sense of cultural identity in general, in the historical context and in the context of modern-day Namibia" (as cited in Wither 2011). The attire represents the strength of a country rebuilding after a war, and is a sign of history and remembrance and a nation rebuilt (Wither 2011). Like Shonibare's re-contextualization of the statue of Britannia and Corrigan's statement concerning the democratic re-contextualization of clothing, Sophie's attire could be indicative of more than a structured and immobile society. The attire may serve as a reminder of the past, but one to learn from and not one to repeat.

There is a sense of freedom in strength, a concept presented in this particular piece. In Sibande's other works, Sophie's head is covered in some way, whether with her white head scarf or with purple tendrils, as found in Sibande's later works. However, for *Caught in the Rapture*, Sibande chooses not to include any article on Sophie's head. Her braids hang down without any restraint for others to see. The lack of a head scarf could represent a freedom that Sophie is experiencing – one that can only be obtained through breaking free from the confines that those in society have placed on her because she's a woman. Moving past those restraints is not easy, but she attempts to do so anyway, knowing that pushing for a better future is better than accepting the realities that she currently faces.

Additionally, the artwork embodies a religious strength that is not readily apparent, but that is nonetheless present. In Christian doctrine, the Rapture refers to the return of Jesus, when Christians will leave this earth, or be caught up, to meet with Jesus in the sky on the way to heaven. However, with that image in mind, in viewing Sibande's installation piece, one may wonder why Sibande chose this particular title. Her work, though, does have Christian influences. In one interview, she stated that her fabrics were inspired by the South African

Zionist churches: "I like them: they call themselves the 'Soldiers of God' and you should see them when they go to church – they put on their starched clothes...That's fashion!...That's how I constructed Sophie" (Balboa-Pöysti 2011). From this statement, it is clear that the starched clothing Sophie wears has a religious origin.

Building on that insight, the title could signify the wait of the Zionist members for the Rapture. Sophie, in her blue attire, may represent one of those members. If this interpretation is taken to its maximum, this means that the spider web loses its negative connotation of immobility and stasis and takes on a positive one. The believer (i.e., Sophie) is firmly rooted in her faith. The sticky spider web – her faith – keeps her grounded and immovable, with her position in the spider web adding to that viewpoint. She is in the very center of the web, like a Christian's faith in God should be at the center of one's life. If a person maintains such a faith, then they will be caught up in the Rapture.

*Caught in the Rapture* challenges viewers to think beyond categorizations of race, gender, and class. For example, a person should be defined by more than their gender, although societies tend to judge and place individuals into isolated categories. Such categories do not encompass the complete nature of a person and are unable to provide insight into one's personality and character. The spider web traps Sophie, exposing her race, gender, and class – she is a Black South African woman who is part of a lower class, in accordance with her Victorian class status. However, Sophie is more than these descriptions. She may be a mother, a sister, or a wife; she may be the person others go to in her community. Her aspirations and talents are there if only one searches for them. Observing her race, her gender, or her class will not reveal those aspects about her. So, while society may try to confine her based on only one aspect of her life, such confinement can be changed by critiquing that view – by pushing away from that web.

### **Conclusion: Sophie's Metamorphosis**

Nonetheless, before an artwork can be interpreted in such a manner, an artist must find a way to engage those who will be viewing it. In order to have onlookers engage with the piece, they must first be drawn to it. Before they can be carried away into the world of dreams, they must choose to give more than a cursory glance.

In 2013, Sibande decided to engage viewers in a new way, or at least with a new alter ego. Sibande stated that it was time for her to move on from Sophie, and began transforming the maid into a new image. The artist needed to challenge herself with something new. In an interview pertaining to her new collection, *The Purple Shall Reign*, she stated: "I'm searching for the next identity, I am in search of my identity." She views the color as a representation of herself, drawing from a 2009 installation piece in which Sophie was adorned in purple (Martin 2013). This collection was thus titled to emphasize Sibande's change from Sophie to a new alter ego who would better represent her. The new character wears all purple, a color of royalty, and in one of the works, she is surrounded by root-like figurines – the roots symbolizing the artist's need for growth. According to Sibande, color, as a whole, is important in South Africa: "Colour places you, colour tells where you are within the geography of South Africa" (Krouse 2013). The title of her new collection actually references an historical event – a 1989 anti-apartheid protest, where the police sprayed the protestors with purple dye so that they could spot them as they ran away (Krouse 2013).

That fact alone is evidence that her political and non-political messages will not stop with Sophie, but will continue on into Sibande's future work. Even though she's moving away from Sophie, she is still drawing inspiration from the apartheid era, while coming from a post-

apartheid standpoint. *Caught in the Rapture*, like many of Sibande's other works, is not an artwork that is lovely to behold, but has no depth; instead, it stimulates questions about its meaning. It is one of many works that allows a deeper look into the struggles Black South African women face as they continue to fight for women's rights.

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