



Mbongeni Buthelezi

'I'm an artist, an observer.'

He has developed a new form of art and perfected it.



Mbongeni Buthelezi
[1965 -]



Mbongeni Buthelezi was born in 1965 in rural Kwazulu Natal. He has made a name for himself in contemporary art, through his use of waste plastic. Buthelezi's "paintings" are made of waste plastic, which he cut's it into little pieces and melts, with a heat gun, onto a plastic canvas.

Buthelezi attended courses at the African Institute of Art in Johannesburg from 1986 - 1992 and later also at the University of Witwatersrand from 1997 - 1998.

Buthelezi, a pioneer in the recyclable art world, began working with plastics in 1991 – a time when it was even more difficult than it is today for a black artist to establish themselves.

The material that Mbongeni Buthelezi uses for his "paintings" is always waste made of plastic: he cuts it into little pieces and glues them onto the canvas, creating surfaces and structures with subtle and changing tones and colours. The use of waste material shows Buthelezi's awareness of environmental problems and the physical decay of the townships in South Africa. Through his work, Buthelezi wants to mediate and communicate hope. He is convinced that seeing his works and his history, people are able to realise that in South Africa there are many opportunities, too, and that it is possible to create a better life and a career out of nothing.

Using discarded plastics, Buthelezi paints in impastos, solid, forms burnt with a heat gun onto a thick, roofing –plastic surface. He has created a new form of paint, so called 'plastic painting'. His unique paintings are larger than life. He is able to work realistically and abstractly, with the technique being extremely detailed.

<http://mbongenibuthelezi.com/about/>

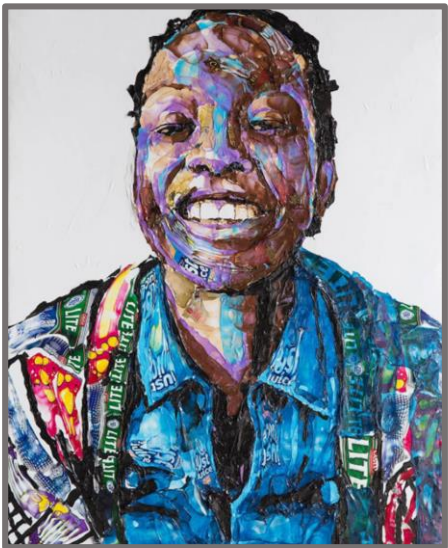
Buthelezi's paintings consist in their entirety of plastic sheets. No other material is used. He replaces the canvas with layers of thicker sheets, the oil paint he replaces through colourful sheets, wrappings and bags.

<http://www.alanlarsen.org/biography/>

‘My history – my background – is in watercolour, so when I moved into plastics, I started the experiment with recycled materials. As I worked, these discarded logos and brands came up over and over again, and I eventually realised that, in most cases, I found them beautiful – the vibrant colours on these fizzy drinks. As things changed, I realised that I needed to come up with some sort of dialogue in terms of the whole sugar tax argument. Aside from that, it’s fascinating for me as an artist to look at this beautiful material that is being used as packaging.’



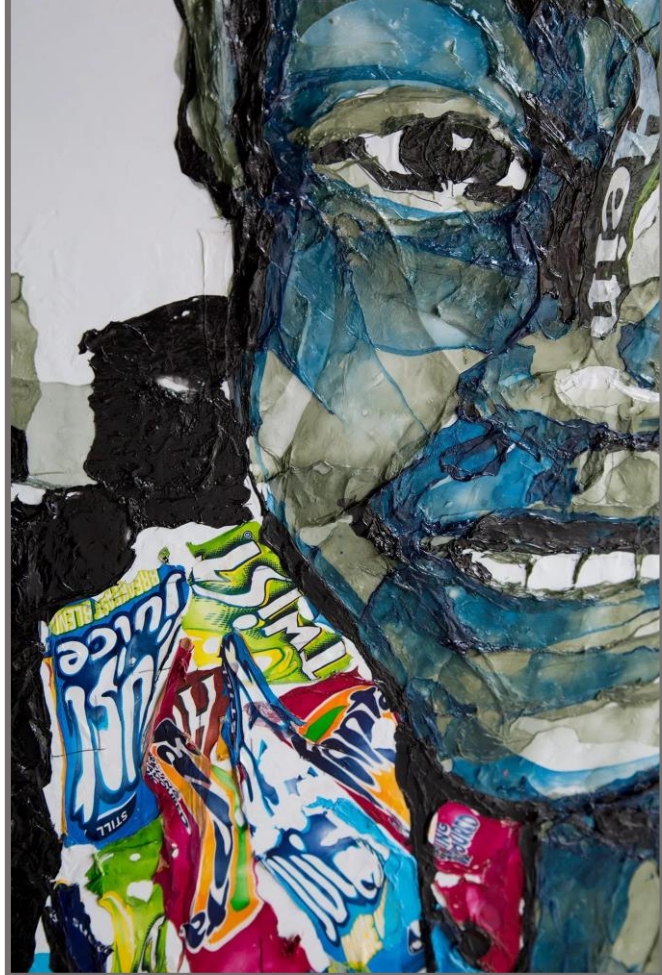
In his latest exhibition **‘Sugar Tax’**, the logo’s and branding of well-known and popular soft drink brands are a unifying theme throughout. Members of the artists’ community are portrayed, going about everyday life, shadowed by these brands that the modern world has become so accustomed to. It is difficult to imagine our lives without these brands – without sugar, and with no plastic.



‘I find it interesting that something of no value, with the right care and attention can be used to create artworks of such beauty that they have considerable value to art collectors.’

Waste plastic on plastic - the medium for which he is globally acclaimed.





'To start a career as an artist is not cheap in terms of the resources that one has to put together. To get enough of a support structure to succeed in this was extremely difficult for me. It was almost impossible to make ends meet. So that, on its own, pushed me to see things differently. And the best I could do was to look at a cheaper way of making art,' he says.

'Today, everything I make is with recycled materials. The mentality of recycling and how I see it as an artist, 26 years later, came from years of being fortunate enough to travel the world, get exhibitions, residencies and partner with clever people who I have always looked up to. Now I need to pass that message on.'

Buthelezi does not use randomly collected rubbish, but specifically found materials. The first step of this process was arguably the most important one, because at the beginning of the 90s, when looking at the mountains of plastic, bags and wrappings, he didn't see rubbish, which had to be thrown away, but saw colours and shapes, which one had to keep or even re-create. He saw something positive, colourful, which one could use in a new and different way.

Mbongeni Buthelezi developed his technique by layering plastics on a canvas and using a heat gun to melt the plastics together to create a picture.

In order to portray the desired feelings or images through his 'paintings', which could be anything up to 250cm x 185cm canvases, he first cuts the plastics into long strips and then layers black and white plastics on the canvas and melts them together with a heat gun to create a 'base' before the colourful and sometimes sepia-toned plastic is layered on to create a picture.





In June 2017 we had the opportunity of visiting Mbongeni Buthulezi's **'Sugar Tax'** exhibition at the Melrose Gallery in Melrose Arch, Johannesburg.

We were mesmerized by the colours, textures, emotions, detail and proportions of his artworks.

He starts with a watercolour of the subject and then translates that into his 'plastic paintings.'

