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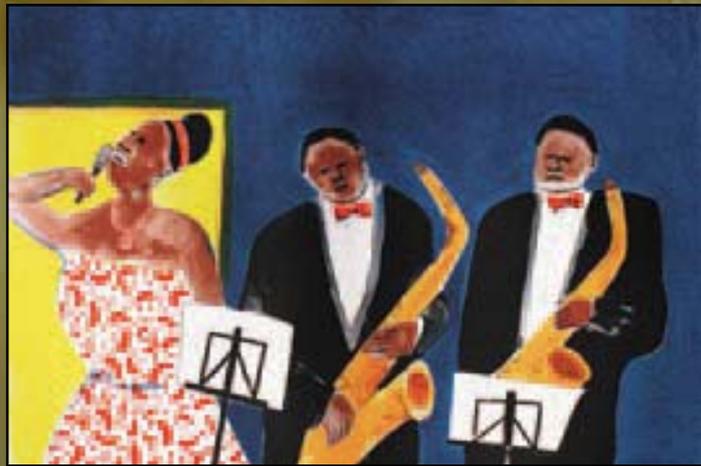
**Exhibit  
highlights  
shared  
human  
experience**

*By  
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South African artist Jo Smail's *Cries and Whispers*, an oil-on-canvas work, hangs on the consulate's second floor, overlooking the atrium. **Right:** From top: Constance Stuart Larrabee's *Ndebele Design, Pretoria, South Africa*; Sam Nglenthwa's *Tacet*; and Sean Wilson's *Waterline #3*.





A beaded-front apron from the 20th century hangs in a consulate hallway. **Below:** The works of South African artist Sam Nhlengethwa—from left, *Tacet* and *Tribute to Lemmy Special Mabaso*—hang on an atrium wall.

A recently installed collection of American and South African art greets staff and visitors at the newly constructed the U.S. Consulate General in Johannesburg, providing a visual exploration of the human bond shared by the United States and South Africa.

Curated and installed by the ART in Embassies Program of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, the exhibit features 82 paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed media, crafts and ethnographic works. They convey such common human experiences as the pursuit of joy, sense of identity and importance of family, and provide visual meditations on our shared humanity.

Installed in May, the collection is the 27th permanent collection project developed by ART since the program expanded its curatorial mission in 2005 to include permanent collections for all new embassies and consulates. As with all of ART's projects, the Johannesburg collection was conceived as an effort in visual diplomacy designed to recognize and celebrate the cultural connections between the United States and the host nation.

## Research First

ART's curators began the Johannesburg project by comprehensively researching South Africa's artistic traditions and the ways our cultures have influenced each other. The curators consulted numerous resources and identified artists who represent the best of contemporary American and South African art and have forged cultural connections between the two countries. In addition, ART conferred with the consulate's staff to ensure that each of South Africa's ethnic groups would be represented in the art collection.

ART curators also worked with OBO's project team to ensure that the art would interact well with the facility's architecture and complement the surrounding environment. After the research and planning phase, the curators selected, negotiated for and acquired the work, ultimately establishing a cohesive collection.

Although the artistic styles vary, the artwork is connected through the universal concerns and experiences of shared humanity. For example, Sean Wilson's black-and-white *Waterline* photographs portray children playing on the beach on a sun-drenched day, elucidating the extraordinary beauty of an ordinary moment. The visual references are vague, leaving the viewer with the universal joy of the playful children.

Constance Stuart Larrabee's black-and-white photographs from the 1930s and 40s have a kindred, timeless and poetic quality. After spending her youth in Pretoria, Larrabee served as South Africa's first female war correspondent during World War II. Known for her portraits of leading cultural and political figures, Larrabee took the striking photographs of South African tribes during her travels through the communities of the Ndebele, San, Northern Sotho, Zulu, Swazi, Basotho and Xhosa. Rather than focusing on social, economic or political conditions, she emphasized the power of humanity in those photographed.

Another piece in the exhibit, Sue Williamson's monumental filmed portrait from her *Better Lives* series, portrays a South African couple, identified by their traditional dress. However, the emotions



evoked are universal. Williamson filmed the couple as they listened to a recorded interview that tells their life story. The emotions of hearing a person's life story elicit the empathy of viewers.

### Common Needs

The ethnographic works in the collection, which represent each of South Africa's ethnic groups, may initially seem completely dissimilar from American culture. While the Swazi meat platters, Zulu clay pots, Nguni beaded cows, San leather bags and other pieces visually reflect their diverse cultural origins, the functions of these items are universal. They celebrate fertility, honor one's ancestors, form and communicate identity and provide protection. Each fulfills a need that all humans, regardless of origin, can understand and have likely felt.

Inspired by jazz, works by South African Sam Nhlengethwa and American John T. Scott convey a shared passion for music. While Nhlengethwa's lithographs are vibrantly colored schematic images of American and South African jazz legends, Scott's large-scaled, hand-pressed woodblock print illustrates a lively group of musicians through sharp contrasts of black and white.

Like jazz musicians improvising and collaborating, well-known South African artists Jo Smail and William Kentridge created their work by one starting it and the other altering it, each riffing on the original image. Through visual conversation, the artists shared and built upon each other's ideas.

As with all of the State Department's new permanent art collections, the Johannesburg art enlivens the consulate with creativity and culture. An extensive catalog and labels accompany the collection, cultivating an appreciation of the artistic achievements of the United States and South Africa, and recognizing the transcending bond of common humanity. ■

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*The author is an assistant curator for the exhibit and for the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations' ART in Embassies Program.*



Hanging in the lobby, from left, are South African-born Gary Schneider's Botanical Series photographs *Kiwi*, *Leaf*, and *Poppy Flower*. On the tables are the *Nguni Beaded Cows* of South Africa's Streetwire Collective.

## New Building Brings U.S. Agencies Together

Following 18 months of construction, the new U.S. Consulate General in Johannesburg opened for business in April. At the dedication attended by guests from the host government, diplomatic corps, local businesses and media, Chargé d'Affaires Helen La Lime called the new building "a testament to the vibrant and growing relationship the United States has with South Africa."

Some 100 employees from five agencies who previously worked in three separate areas of Johannesburg are now together in a safe and modern work environment.

Environmentally friendly materials were used wherever possible, including recycled building products, low-energy lights, sensors, water wells and indigenous plants.

The consulate general has quickly attracted regional training programs and business outreach events. The information resource center provides weekly English-language instruction for local youths. In its first four months of operation, the consular office has issued 10,000 visas, and American citizens now have a secure setting in which to receive services.