

Dr. Esther Mahlangu

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu

Oct 4, 2024 — Sep 28, 2025 | Serpentine Galleries, London, UK

Celebrated for her brightly coloured geometric paintings rooted in South African native Ndebele culture, Dr Esther Mahlangu (b. 1935, South Africa) has been creating large-scale and site-specific works for over eight decades. She began painting at the age of ten, learning the traditional Ndebele techniques and visual language of covering houses in bold patterns from her mother and grandmother.

Mahlangu uses natural pigments mixed with clay, soil and cow dung to paint directly on the exteriors of structures in her village. Rather than using stencils and tape to achieve lines and shapes, she paints by hand with chicken feathers and an array of different brushes. The artist also works with acrylic paints on canvas, which allows her to explore different scales and a broader colour palette.

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, presented in the garden at Serpentine North, is the artist's first public mural in the UK. Painted over sixteen wooden panels, the work depicts Ndebele shapes and patterns outlined with a black borders. The title of the work translates directly from Ndebele as 'I am because you are', emphasising the importance of communities and unity among humans and other living species.

"I am proud to present this monumental outdoor work at Serpentine in London. It is my wish that this painting brings much joy to those who see it in celebration and recognition of the interconnectedness that exists between our two nations and indeed all living beings", comments the artist.

Bettina Korek, CEO, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director, Serpentine say: "Esther Mahlangu is one of the most important artists of our time who continues to inspire emerging talents. Mahlangu is a polymath who brings art into society. This is a wonderful moment to celebrate Serpentine's friendship with the artist and honour her work in the UK. We're grateful to all our partners who have made this fantastic project possible and particularly BMW for their support, and we hope audiences will engage with the piece and the unique surroundings of The Royal Parks".

The work will be officially inaugurated at the traditional Serpentine breakfast on October 9 during Frieze London.

Mahlangu's work was first shown internationally in Paris at the seminal exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the World) in Grande Halle de la Villette in 1989. Since then, she has exhibited widely and created a large number of site-specific murals, in addition to ceramic pots, skateboards, trainers and other everyday objects. In 1991, she was the first woman invited to paint the BMW Art Car – a prestigious commission started in 1975 to create a one-of-a-kind car design using a variety of artistic techniques.

This mural is part of Serpentine's Public Art programme, which this year features outdoor sculptures installed throughout Kensington Gardens: Gerhard Richter's *STRIP-TOWER*, 2023 (until 20 October 2024) and Yayoi Kusama's *Pumpkin*, 2024 (until 3 November 2024).