



Curatorial themes

Two decades ago artist and medical doctor Carol Hofmeyr began teaching a group of women in rural Eastern Cape how to stitch artworks as a way to lift themselves out of poverty. This came to be known as the Keiskamma Art Project, after the magnificent Keiskamma River which flows into the Indian Ocean in a pristine estuary below the collective's studios in Hamburg, Eastern Cape.

Umaf' evuka, nje ngenyanga (Dying and Rising, As the Moon Does) showcases and celebrates the Keiskamma Art Project's remarkable works over the past two decades. Iconic pieces such as the multi-panelled *Keiskamma Altarpiece*; the life-size *Keiskamma Guernica*, an interpretation of Picasso's famous 1937 painting; and the 120-metre long *Keiskamma Tapestry* which narrowly escaped destruction in the recent fire in the Houses of Parliament, show more than prodigious artistic talent. They express, beyond this, the resilience, hope and spiritual strength of a community which has endured years of poverty, political upheaval and the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS and Covid-19. Constitution Hill, a declared National Heritage Site, is a fittingly historic space in which to pay tribute to the Keiskamma Artists' Collective, whose dedicated members have confronted and overcome immeasurable odds through their art-making.

● art and the body

The artworks created by the Keiskamma Artists' Collective, expressions of humanity and hope amid desperation, have always been direct responses to the challenging health and social issues faced by the community. The Project straddles two global pandemics: the HIV/AIDS pandemic at the turn of the century, and the Covid-19 pandemic twenty years on, revealing both the devastating losses suffered by the community and its extraordinary resilience through two major humanitarian crises.

■ spirituality in/and nature

These artworks express the ways in which the community of Hamburg, originally called Emthonjeni ('by the well'), embraces and celebrates the sacred meaning of the natural world. Drawing on Xhosa cosmology, myths, folk tales and songs that show a reverential connectedness to nature, and referencing contemporary conservation practices, the artworks explore the artists' interwoven environmental and spiritual journeys.

○ resurrection

'Resurrection' is a tribute to the founder of Keiskamma Art Project, Carol Hofmeyr: a person whose deep humanity, hope and humility underlies the generative nature of the art-making. The artworks themselves are testimony to the power of the creative imagination: not only as a form of healing, but as a way of envisioning a harmonious new Earth.

▲ occupation and resistance

In the year after their first exhibition *Vuselela* in 2001, the Keiskamma artists studied the history of the Eastern Cape region, from early historical accounts of the Xhosa peoples' skirmishes with Khoi and San groups over scarce resources, through the brutally repressive years of colonial occupation and apartheid, to the present time. Over the next few years, the artists made reflective works which address the complex colonial and postcolonial legacies of their unique time and place, while also expressing a deeply shared humanity.

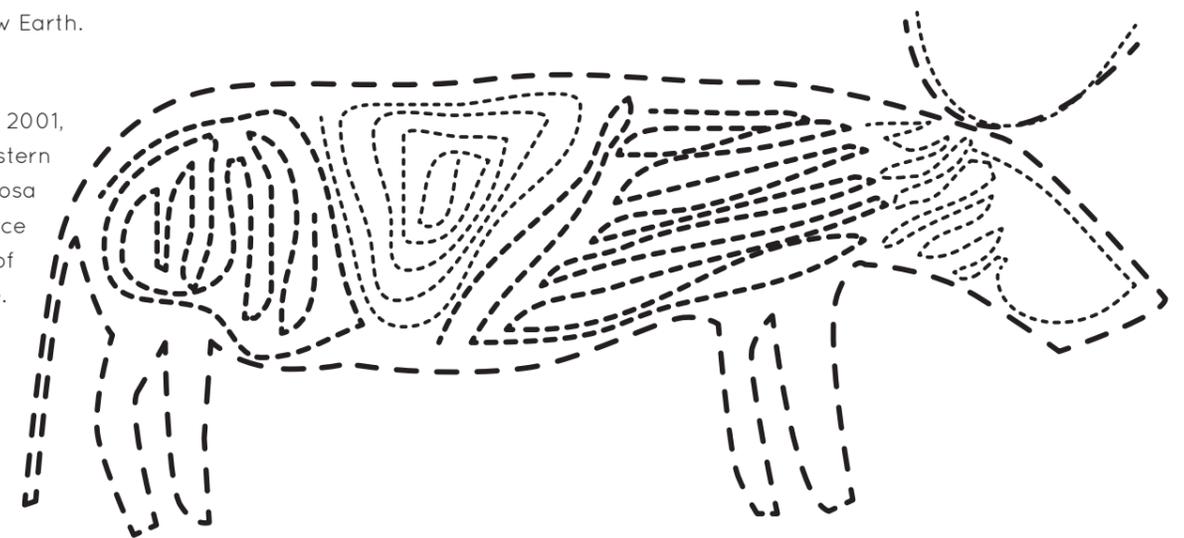
□ covid

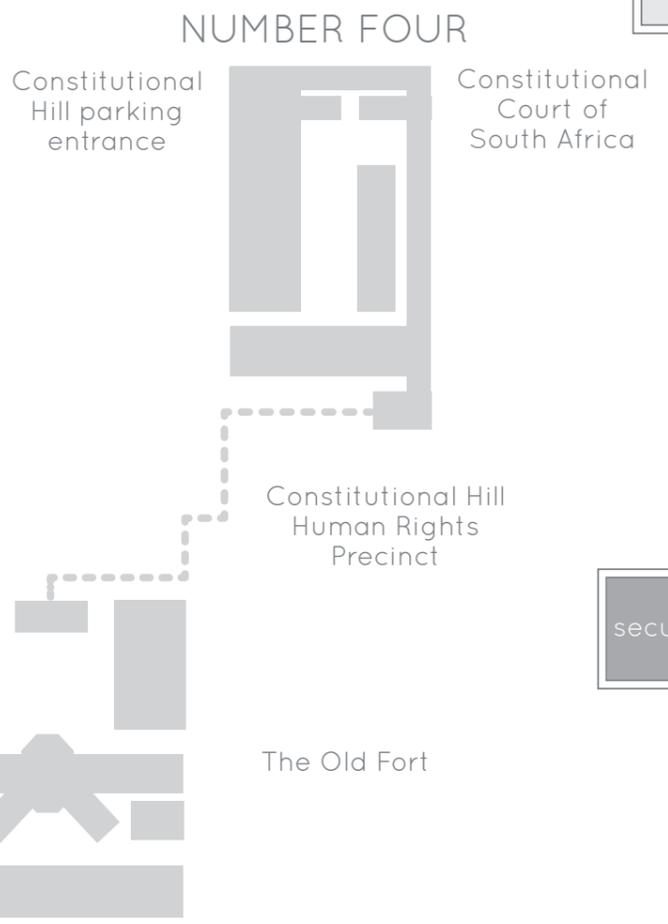
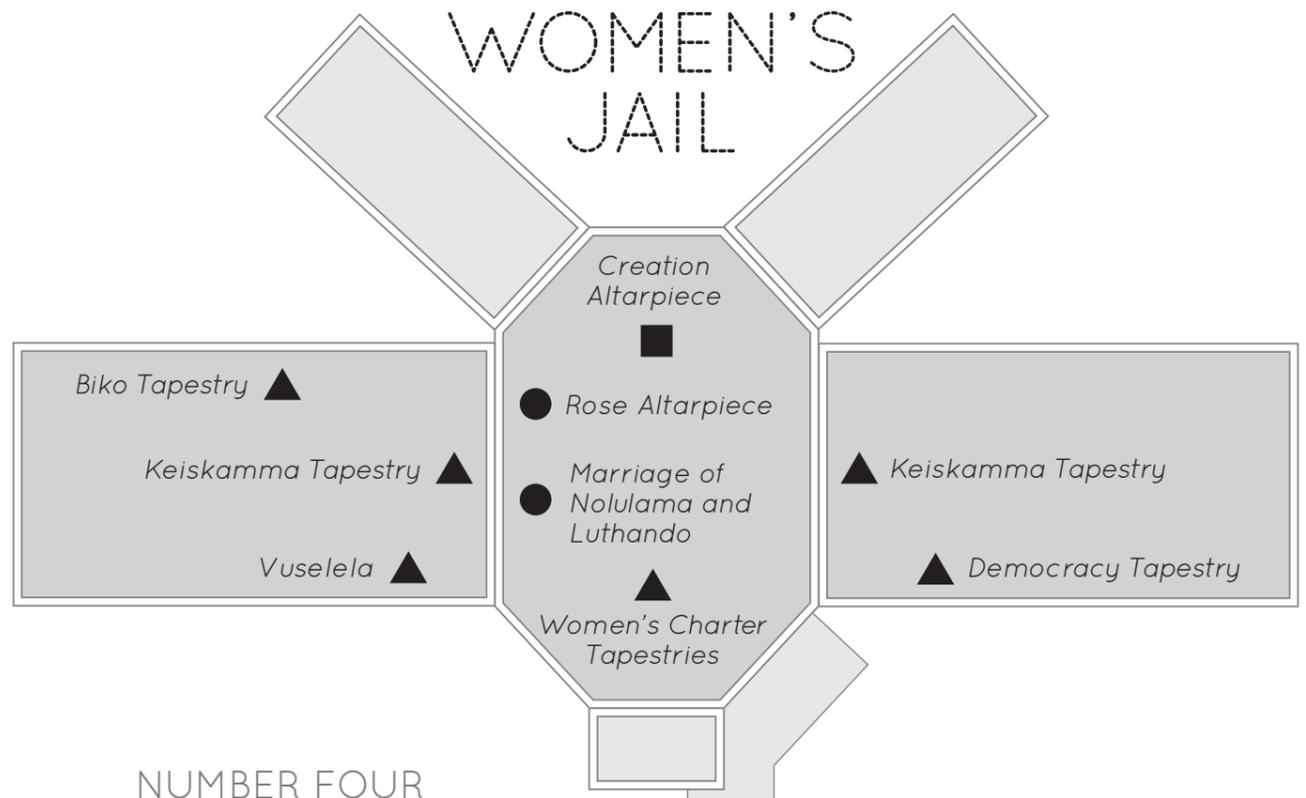
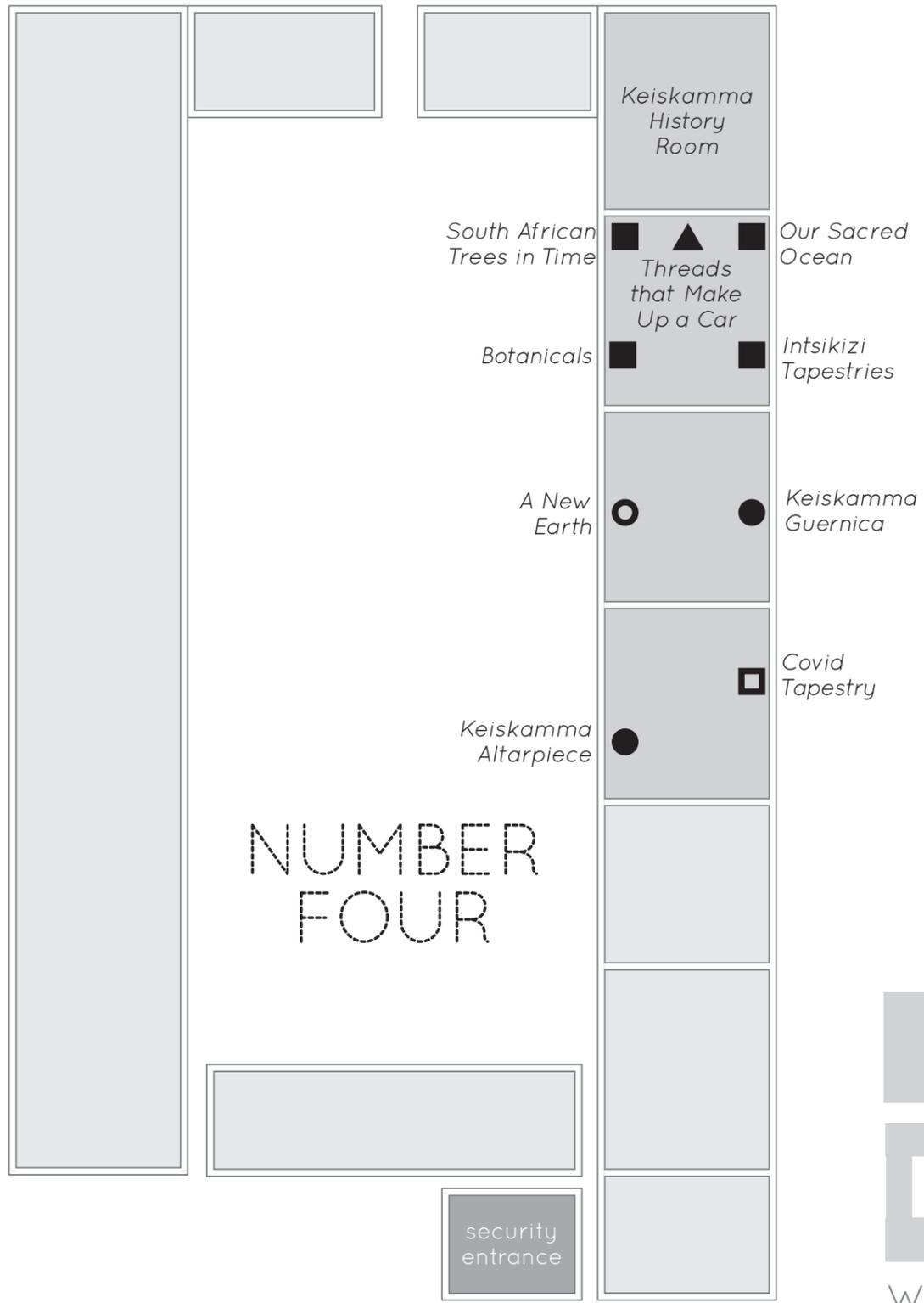
Unable to gather in the studio as a collective during the Covid-19 lockdown, the artists took small pieces of cloth home and worked on individual embroideries that expressed how they coped with isolation, illness and the loss of friends and loved ones. When lockdown ended, these individual works were sewn together into one artwork celebrating the possibility of life returning to normal and showing the profound importance of art as a way of sharing experiences and fostering a sense of hope, community and joy.

umaf' evuka, nje ngenyanga dying and rising, as the moon does

Celebrating two decades of the Keiskamma Art Project.
Retrospective exhibition.

Constitution Hill, Johannesburg 24 September 2022 – 24 March 2023





revolutionary stitching

Once marginalised and relegated to the status of 'mere' craft, embroidery is increasingly recognised as a fine art that has been used subversively - over hundreds of years - to revolutionise channels for female self-expression and creativity. Through embroidery, the women of the Keiskamma Art Project have been able to claim and voice their stories and, through this sense of agency, transform their lives and uplift the rural communities in which they live and work.