



Painter and impresario Jonathan Freemantle in the gallery space at MK & Artist.

Johannesburg Reframed The South African city's central arts district, Maboneng, is shining a light on the creativity of the country as a whole.

by Ben Ryder Howe. Photographs by David De Vleeschauwer



From left: Ponte City tower in downtown Johannesburg is now a popular movie backdrop; a Maboneng habitué.



URBAN BLIGHT DOESN'T have any beneficiaries—except skateboarders and graffiti artists. Bheki Dube grew up a skateboarding kid in Johannesburg in the 2000s, as the sprawling city, one of the largest and richest in Africa, underwent a staggering free fall into anarchy, violence, and population flight.

“The city was a blank canvas,” said Dube, who at the time lived in downtown Johannesburg, where hijacked skyscrapers, abandoned hotels, and artist-run squatter colonies proliferated while South Africa chaotically transitioned from apartheid rule. “You could go anywhere you wanted, if you were brave enough.”

Today, while still facing significant social challenges, Johannesburg has given birth to one of the most robust arts scenes in Africa, owing greatly to the near apocalypse of its inner core. The center of the decade-long revival is Maboneng, a now-thriving district of galleries, restaurants, and shops that is drawing an

international crowd looking to experience the country’s contemporary culture. “Maboneng is where Brooklyn hip meets authentic Africa,” Mark Lakin, cofounder of Epic Road, a bespoke travel company specializing in Africa, told me. “It’s an example of a rising black middle class amid grassroots arts and innovation.”

Roughly ten square blocks, Maboneng comprises an old industrial area next to a pothole-filled road leading directly to Johannesburg’s legendary gold mines. Its name, a Sesotho word meaning “place of light,” says more about the aspirations of its inhabitants than the actual setting: Highway overpasses and hulking warehouses loom over the cafés and bars along Fox Street, the principal thoroughfare.

“It was a ghost street when I arrived in 2009,” said Marcus Neustetter, codirector of the Trinity Session, which produces public art. “Over a quick period we saw a change.” It started with the opening of Arts on Main, a complex of brick industrial

buildings converted into art spaces and shops. William Kentridge, one of South Africa’s most famous artists, held a show there in 2009 and soon opened a nearby studio. The studios of Magnum photographer Mikhael Subotzky and conceptual artist Kim Lieberman are now there too.

Franchises and other mass-market encroachments have been kept out of Maboneng, and the tolls of delinquency and age have been sedulously maintained, conjuring the grit of 1980s Tribeca. Painter Jonathan Freemantle, co-developer of the Cosmopolitan, a gallery and shopping venue in a Victorian landmark that once housed a brothel for miners, describes the Maboneng vibe as “just enough chaos.” Freemantle has turned the Cosmopolitan into “an active creative space” centered around music, culture, and nightlife, with a sculpture garden by Patrick Watson, one of South Africa’s most celebrated landscape designers, amid the peeling paint and crumbling walls of derelict apartment buildings.

Across the street from the garden, I met Mlungisi Kongisa, a soft-spoken 39-year-old printmaker. I hadn’t come to Johannesburg to buy art, and Kongisa, whose



From top: A sculpture by Amalie von Maltitz in the garden of the Cosmopolitan; street art in Maboneng.



inviting gallery, MK & Artist, is filled with original prints by the likes of Kentridge and David Koloane, the elder statesman of South African painters, wasn't going to hard-sell me. I had my eye on an etching by Cameroonian surrealist Joël Mpah Dooh, but the day was ending and I needed to think it over.

Maboneng after dark is not for everyone. Visitors are advised to seek the guidance of a local like Dube, who founded and operates Curiosity, a provider of accommodations and private tours of public art and other landmarks. Dube likes to say that two decades ago, a visit by an international celebrity such as Ava DuVernay or Oprah Winfrey—both of whom recently made well-publicized stops at the studio of painter Nelson Makamo—would have been inconceivable. But you still have to know where to go.

The next day I returned to MK & Artist. Since Maboneng is only ten years old and built on something as mercurial as art, there is an anxiety about its existence, as if it could vanish at any moment or be turned into a kind of cultural zoo. After deciding to buy the etching, I had lunch at Canteen, a café in Arts on Main that serves elevated versions of South African dishes, such as biltong and springbok carpaccio, in a courtyard shaded by olive trees. It was barely afternoon, but a party was underway on the roof, where legs dangled off a fire escape and a DJ played the Mankunku Quartet. Below, families with strollers dined on *peri-peri* chicken livers, and outside, a Tesla tried to wend its way through a street fair with merchants selling a variety of goods, from medicinal plants to seemingly ubiquitous T-shirts saying IWASSHOTINJOBURG. Someone was adding a new mural to the layers of graffiti on the walls of Fox Street. It was just enough chaos.

Johannesburg Essentials

HOTELS

Fine Hotels and Resorts properties include the **Houghton Hotel** (rooms from \$255; thehoughton.com) and the **Four Seasons Hotel The Westcliff, Johannesburg** (rooms from \$340; fourseasons.com).

GUIDES

Dlala Nje (dlalanje.org) leads tours of less-visited areas, like Ponte City tower, which was hijacked by gangs in the 1990s and today is used as a performance space. **Curiosity** (curiosity.africa) provides private tours of landmarks and public art exhibits.

RESTAURANTS

Few restaurants pay attention to the aromatics of fine dining as closely as **Grei**, a new addition to the ultra-exclusive, 53-suite Saxon Hotel (saxon.co.za). Along with hearty fare and a welcoming courtyard, **Canteen** (fb.com/canteenmaboneng) offers a good selection of South African craft beer.

GALLERIES

MK & Artist (264 Fox St.; 27-71/411-7788), a collaborative studio, sells etchings, linocuts, woodcuts, monotypes, and other prints. The **David Krut Workshop** (davidkrutprojects.com), one of the original tenants of Arts on Main, has a bookstore as well as a gallery space.