

CRAFTS

THE MAGAZINE FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

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OUT OF AFRICA

'Gone Rural' is a social enterprise based in Swaziland, employing women to weave baskets that are sold across the globe. As managing director Philippa Thorne prepares to launch a new collection in London, Crafts catches up with her. Photography by Mel Bles and Steve Harries

From Manchester to Africa, via Ibiza, much of the work at *Interwoven*, a new exhibition featuring five graduates from Central Saint Martins, takes its inspiration from some intriguing source material. The show, which runs from 8 March – 28 April at Platform, Habitat's new(ish) gallery space at its King's Road store, includes former Talent Spot maker Nadia-Anne Ricketts (*Crafts* No.236, May/June 2012), whose pieces explore the relationship between dance music, digital technology and textiles to beautiful effect.

Then there's Jane Harper, with her three-dimensional woven metalwork that draws on her upbringing in the North West. However, the star of the exhibition promises to be a series of new baskets, each one metre in diameter, made by a group of women based in Swaziland and led by

fashion design and marketing graduate Philippa Thorne, which tells the story of three women from different generations of the same family.

Gone Rural was the brainchild of Jenny Thorne, Philippa's mother-in-law. 'She was a farmer's wife in Swaziland,' says Philippa, over a (slightly shaky) Skype connection. 'She was trained as a nurse and she did some teaching. Obviously she was very compassionate and had a very magnetic personality. She became involved with her community and saw the opportunity for rural women to get the chance to earn an income, making products they could sell with the natural raw materials of Swaziland and their hand-skills.'

Initially selling a range of items including jam and knitted objects in a shop on the Thorne family's farm, in 1992 Jenny took the decision to



This page: images from Siphwe's homestead
Opposite page: work in progress from *The Song of the Water* collection

Bonakele Ngwenya

Bonakele Ngwenya is the first-born daughter of Siphwe Mngometulu (see overleaf). Like her mother, she left school at 16, as she was pregnant. Having to give up her education was difficult and led to depression - represented by the indent at the base of her basket. However, her daughter gives her a huge amount of joy and inspired her to start weaving - a skill passed on by her mother.

Bonakele represents her daughter with pink - a key influence on the design of her basket. She used a host of materials, including dyed and

undyed grasses, sisal fibre and waste fabrics - while the metal loops symbolise her husband. The couple have a good relationship, one able to withstand the fact he's currently struggling to find permanent employment. However, there remain many ups and downs in their lives.

Bonakele would like to work more herself. Asked if she wanted to do something else, she answered no: she was praying for more weaving work. Her vase-weaving is represented at the top of her basket and acts as her prayer for the future.



Left: Bonakele's basket, 80 x 70 cm, £3,800
Right: Gogo's basket, 1.83 m, £1,400



Christina Mngometulu ('Gogo')

Christina Mngometulu is Siphwe's mother, known within the family as Gogo (which is siSwati for grandmother). Her basket represents the start of Gogo Rural's collaboration with its weavers 20 years ago, and is created from a huge variety of materials, including wattle, grasses, waste metal, old water containers and aloe plant, with the same technique used to build traditional Swazi houses.

She has had 12 children in total. Sharing her life story, she explained how she'd lost many of her family to AIDS. Her daughters, she said, made her proud but

her sons had disappointed. She felt she did a good job teaching them about home and community life, but regrets not spending more time discussing such topics as HIV.

Gogo's basket depicts aspects of her daily life, as represented by the water containers and traditional cooking pot. The metal element symbolises the weight that she carries - especially her concerns about the men in her family. She feels that society's problems have arisen because of a breakdown in family values, and dreams of peace and serenity for her children and grandchildren.





Siphiwe Mngometulu

Siphiwe left school after becoming pregnant with her first child. Taught to weave by her mother, she joined the *Gone Rural* group in her region, married the father of her child, and began to build a life at her husband's homestead, in the far south of Swaziland.

However, after Siphiwe bore her seventh child, her husband left, selling all their cattle. He didn't return for four years, so Siphiwe was forced to leave her husband's community.

She started all over again, building a new home and buying goats and chickens with the

money she earned weaving. Her husband has since returned, but only visits a few times a year and never brings the family any money - he is represented in the basket by a metal disc, because he always arrives by bike.

Siphiwe is the backbone of her homestead - represented by the stacked bone. Her strength creates a foundation for her family and the layers in this basket - which is also made from wood, grasses, reeds, waste metal, waste leather and waste fabric - represent the years of her life. Some years are dry, some grow and some sink back.



Above left: Siphiwe's basket, 1.5 x 1.25 m, £4,200
Left: family and friends
Opposite: some of the elements from Siphiwe's home that inspired the baskets, including a white plastic water container, rice plants, a banana leaf, and old pieces of basketry and weaving found around her home

focus on weaving, and *Gone Rural* was created. Philippa arrived in Swaziland in 2001, initially six months as a volunteer on the suggestion of a family friend. 'The whole time I was at St Martins I was always interested in social issues around design and social messages behind it,' she explains. Once at the farm, she quickly made a life for herself. 'I actually met Jenny at the port - she was there to pick me up and we had an instant connection. It was one of those strange things I guess. We worked really well together.' She married her husband, Jenny's son Sholto, became the organisation's creative director, before taking over when her mother-in-law passed in 2003, becoming managing director in 2007.

And she obviously has a shrewd business sense to go alongside the design skill. During her time at *Gone Rural*, which currently partners 75 employed women in 13 different communities across the country, has doubled its turnover, quadrupled its artisans' incomes with its products being sold in over 200 shops worldwide. The secret of its success, says Thorne, is down to a subtle shift in its positioning. 'It's about creating an awareness around hand-made products,' she says. 'It's a very rare art, the materials we use are indigenous. They really are collectors' pieces about telling the story in a different way.' An effect it has on the communities involved is profound. 'Income is obviously a big part of it but it also empowers and uplifts.' She explains how some families the men had drifted off to work - but that they started coming back when the women joined *Gone Rural*. It's this sense of empowerment that Philippa is keen to build for the future, so the women 'really are leading directing the organisation in collaboration with our international partners.'

Currently, the social enterprise has three product lines, primarily designed by Philippa herself with input from the women. The *African Edition*, aimed largely at the tourist market, is based on more traditional design and African prints and colours that take inspiration from the environment around us. 'The *Gone Rural* Collection is more consciously contemporary. And for the Habitat 67 *Gone Rural* is launching *The Song of the Weavers* inspired by these three baskets. 'We really thought about how the women did things within their lives - going to collect water, working in the homestead, cooking, farming,' Philippa explains. 'It's such a different experience to what a lot of people would be familiar with, so we really wanted to be able to express that in the weaving.'

To do that she alighted upon Gogo, Sipi and Bonakele - three women from different generations of the same family - and asked them to make a one-off 'biography basket'. 'In that basket is the story of their life from their children, their husband, key moments and influences,' Philippa explains. Elements of each of these baskets were then used in the collection. 'Each of the pieces tells part of the story of these inspirational women's lives,' she concludes. Across these pages are the women's tales, elegantly illustrated with photographs by Mel Bles and Steve Harries. *Interwoven* is at Platform at Habitat, 208 King's Road, London SW3 5XP, from 8-28 April. www.habitat.co.uk; www.goneruralswazi.com



