

Fig. 1. $Umanyano\ Ngamandla$ (Unity Is Power), 2000. Acrylic on cotton, 56 x 72 inches. © The Philani Printing Project. Photograph by Kurt Gohde.

The Philani Printing Project: Women's Art and Activism in Crossroads, South Africa

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"There is a good change while working here."

— Nolwando Fani, Philani artist

"Yes, Lady. Philani has helped women to be strong." — Tonono Nomqo, Philani artist

In the township of Crossroads, South Africa, a group of Xhosa women artists have created an extraordinary space of female agency and empowerment. This women's group, called the Philani Printing Project, has formed a place where art and feminist politics intersect with political action. Primarily concerned with economic survival and with self-representation, Philani artists use artmaking as a vehicle to address and confront social and gender inequalities. They produce work with powerful visual narratives that call attention to their own personal experiences with varied public and private forms of injustice and violence, as they simultaneously call for these conditions of injustice to change.

Initiated in 1997 by the Philani Nutrition Project and the Western Cape Department of Social Services, the Philani Printing Project was initially funded primarily by South Africa's Department of Welfare as part of an ambitious, nation-wide, anti-poverty program. Its ultimate aim is to fight and eradicate child malnutrition and poverty by employing, educating, and empowering mothers. The project's philosophy is based on the belief that when women become economically active their newfound economic security, greater independence, and improved self-esteem will transfer into better nutritional care and support for their children, thus breaking cycles of suffering, poverty, and violence that are endemic to South Africa's township areas. As the project's literature explains, "poverty, unemployment, instability and violence are central to the life experiences of township and squatter communities in South Africa today. As a result, there are large numbers of malnourished chil-

dren and destitute mothers who form the most vulnerable groupings within these communities."

The Philani Printing Project came about as a solution to this situation. In this sense, the mission of Philani is about human survival at its most fundamental level. The project provides skills training and printing facilities to unemployed mothers with children under the age of five. For women who meet these qualifications, Philani offers an initial threemonth training course in design, textile printing, and painting. Once they are trained, Philani artists are granted unlimited access to a generous workshop space, printmaking equipment, and artmaking materials. The project also offers various "leadership and empowerment" classes on a regular basis. These include nutrition and cooking instruction, literacy and computer training, and informational meetings on health-related subjects such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and pre- and post-natal health care. Some artists may also attend business management and marketing classes where they work collaboratively on developing leadership skills and learning strategies for conflict resolution. The artists produce innovative designs, the subjects of which are typically autobiographical narratives, which they then silkscreen and hand-paint onto large-scale cotton wall hangings, t-shirts, pillowcases, and aprons. The work is sold on-site at the project and in national and international markets. It is also exhibited in galleries and museums. In recent years, Philani work has become widely recognized throughout South Africa and is now an important part of the country's new visual environment.

For example, local, national, and international galleries, including the South African National Gallery (SANG), have recognized the importance of the project by organizing exhibitions featuring Philani artwork. "Staking Claims: Confronting Cape Town," an exhibition arranged by SANG curator Emma Bedford in the year 2000, included a selection of Philani work both in the exhibition display and published catalogue. As part of Cape Town's first "One City Many Cultures" festival, Bedford's exhibition showcased the work of contemporary artists such as Berni Searle and Dorthee Krutzfeldt, who explicitly address political and social concerns of South Africa's past and present. "Staking Claims" celebrated the fact that most of the artwork it included could not have been legally made or openly displayed just a few years earlier. Another notable exhibition organized by Clementina Van Der Walt and Albie Baily took place, also in the year 2000, at the A.R.T. Gallery, a quaint space located in an old farmhouse in the town of Paarl, about twenty kilometers outside of Cape Town. Consisting entirely of Philani work, the exhibition organized the material around the theme of "women's issues," acknowledging the achievements of the women working at Philani and validating the increasing focus on issues of gender in their work. As a popular gallery that regularly showcases the work of upcoming and established South

African artists, the A.R.T. Gallery's display of Philani work was a crucial moment in the recognition of the project's artistic merit. In addition to showcasing Philani artwork, these exhibitions call attention to the economic and humanitarian mission of the project, raising public awareness of issues that are of central importance to Crossroads women.

In 1999 South Africa's Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology (ACST) selected Philani as one of several women's cooperatives to represent the country at the Smithsonian Institution's annual Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. The group selected four senior artists to travel to the United States for the occasion. This provided the Philani Project with international exposure and proved to be a life-altering experience for the women who were traveling outside of the Western Cape for the first time. While in Washington, they showcased their artwork and spoke with individuals from around the world about their art, the issues their work addresses, and their daily lives. In this context, the Folklife Festival provided Philani artists with the space to act and speak as agents on their own behalf. Overall, reception of Philani work has been overwhelmingly affirming and has stimulated the growth of the project.

The majority of Philani works boldly address issues that are important for most South African women, such as labor exploitation, physical violence, sexual objectification, unsatisfactory education, scarce natural resources, HIV/AIDS, and the political possibilities of motherhood. In their approach to these topics, Philani artists express a gendered political consciousness in that they depict and discuss their life experiences with an awareness that being female is a factor in their oppression as well as a basis from which they can resist. Although they identify issues that are important to all South African peoples, their emphasis is clearly on how certain problems specifically affect women.

This essay will consider four Philani works that collectively call for increased attention to the rights of women by addressing issues that are of great concern to Philani artists. In the first three images, *Umanyano Ngamandla* (Unity Is Power), *Stop AIDS*, and *Stop Crime*, the artists show themselves as a group of women actively engaged in community-based political action. The fourth work, *Say No to Domestic Abuse*, depicts a more private act of injustice. In presenting these works, this brief essay aims to frame Philani artists as political actors who strive to make visible the conditions of their lives by focusing their artistic efforts on the exploitation and survival of Black South African women despite apartheid policies that discriminated against them and a current environment that in many ways continues to be hostile to the emancipation of women.

Umanyano Ngamandla (Unity Is Power)

The work *Umanyano Ngamandla*, Xhosa for "Unity Is Power," addresses the state of women's rights in South Africa by presenting a group of Xhosa women taking action around the issues that concern them (fig. 1). A visual text that speaks on many levels, *Umanyano Ngamandla* recognizes the women's rights activists of the past, celebrates the gains that these women have made, and calls for further action on behalf of women and their families.

The work depicts a group of Xhosa women who are joined together with female and male children in front of a large gathering of people. Arms raised and mouths open, the women are shown moving and speaking as they face and address their two separate audiences: the South African crowd behind them and the multinational crowd viewing this work. The many rows of spectators in the background indicate the widespread support of the South African women's movement and demonstrate the potential political power of South African women. The bright blue background serves to unite the various components of this work and helps indicate that this is an important and celebratory occasion.

The women in this work present themselves wearing a variety of fashions that also speak to the significance of this occasion (fig. 2). Several of them proudly proclaim their Xhosa identity, wearing brightly colored traditional Xhosa dresses decorated with rows of black embroidery, fancy beaded necklaces, and intricate head wraps. Other women appear in more casual dresses which are sometimes paired with Xhosa head wraps or scarves, while still others wear plain straight skirts topped with t-shirts. Just as the women who wear the traditional Xhosa dress have chosen their costumes strategically to establish and express group identity, the plain skirts and t-shirts have also been selected purposefully to communicate political consciousness and intent. Worn in the tradition of the protest t-shirts that were donned by anti-apartheid activists in the 1980s, these shirts bear slogans that call upon other people to join alongside the women and speak out on issues such as gender equity, violence against women, and other forms of women's rights. Also like the antiapartheid activists, Philani women recognize the ability of the t-shirt to transmit political messages quickly and effectively among a diverse group of people. For example, one woman wears a white t-shirt that insists "amandla ngawethu" (the power is ours). Although the Xhosa phrase might not be understood by some people in her audience, the common visual slogan that accompanies it—that of a raised, clenched fist-allows her to communicate her message instantaneously, even to her diverse multilingual audience. The raised fist, a symbol of empowerment that has been used in South Africa and in other freedom movements throughout the world is being used in this instance to call for the libera-

tion of South African women.

In this image, the artists at the Philani Project position themselves within a long history of women's activism in Crossroads and throughout South Africa, recognizing the accomplishments of the women who came before them. Other political slogans and sayings attest to this, appearing in both English and Xhosa on aprons and banners throughout the work. One woman holds a large, white banner bearing two important phrases. For her English-speaking audience, the banner calls for "Equality in the Eyes of the Law." The accompanying Xhosa message, "When You Strike the Woman, You Strike the Rock," is the phrase made famous by the multiracial women's anti-pass campaign in the 1950s. More than 20,000 women from all over South Africa sang this phrase when they bravely marched upon the apartheid government Union office buildings in Pretoria protesting pass laws for women that were subsequently repealed. Since that time, this saying has been used to indicate the political strength of South African women, past and present. The woman who carries this banner stands with raised arms, prominently holding it up over her head to ensure that all will read this important message and be reminded of women's resistance in the past. Another woman wears a green apron that is reminiscent of the hand-painted aprons that artists at the Philani Project also produce. The apron's message insists that "we are the future of our children," explicitly linking the emancipation of South African women to the survival of the country's children. The presence of children as active participants in this celebration of women's gains in this work suggests that women and children play a central role in building and sustaining a community. Together the women and children command our attention and respect through the combination of brightly colored dress, political slogans, and powerful body language.

Philani artists support this reading of their work. When discussing Umanyano Ngamandla, they emphasize the important contributions of their female predecessors and draw connections between the current needs of women and children and the struggles and experiences of women in older generations. Nontsikelelo Stuurman passionately describes what this design means to her personally: "I show that in the olden days our mothers were not allowed to come to Crossroads. Only [their] husbands. They had to fight for their right to be here and also fight to have a job and show they have the ability to do something." As one of the younger women working at Philani, twenty-eight-year-old Stuurman makes a conscious effort to represent the struggles and experiences of the women who lived in Crossroads before her. She continues, "They [women] also struggle to fight abuse and children abuse, because when you hurt the child you hurt the mother. This work shows the mothers' struggle."2 Stuurman's words reveal an acute consciousness of the status of South African women, both past and present, and an apprecia-

tion for the importance of telling their stories and linking them to her own. When Stuurman refers to "the mothers" she refers not just to an older generation of mothers but to the mothers at the Philani Project, and thus to herself. This important connection between and appreciation for women in different generations is also revealed in the words of Philani artist Noluvuyo Guza: "Even our grandmothers who are here come to visit us and think it [the Philani Project] is amazing. They don't have skills, but we can survive with what we are doing with our hands. Now we can draw." For Guza, the affirmation received from her female elders in response to her employment and artistic success is one of the key factors adding to her own sense of empowerment. Umanyano Ngamandla demonstrates the acute level of political sensibilities among Philani women and their sense of their own power by presenting the importance of political action through the unity of women with their children. This gathering of Xhosa women should be read as both a celebration of women's newly legislated rights and a demand for increased action on behalf of women.

Stop AIDS

Whereas Umanyano Ngamandla celebrates women's agency and achievement, other Philani works identify specific women's issues that require immediate attention in South Africa's transformation. Speaking to the AIDS epidemic in Africa in general, and its effects on South African women in particular, Stop AIDS (fig. 3) expresses the artists' concerns about their own vulnerability to HIV infection and the devastating effect that the AIDS epidemic is having on their families and throughout their community. Designed to educate and instruct, this work presents women, men, and children who are mobilized in different activities around the issue of AIDS: activists, doctors, mothers, photographers, artists, journalists, nurses, patients, couples, and entire families. Each small scene is paired with a text label, so that image and text work closely together to educate the viewer. There is no mistaking the didactic intent of this design. As in other Philani works, each scene is repeated several times throughout the large cloth, allowing the narrative to be read either horizontally or vertically. Familiar symbols such as the AIDS awareness ribbon and the sign of a cross or crossroads are also interspersed throughout the piece. A shockingly bright chartreuse background appropriately indicates that this is a crisis situation, conveying the sense of distress and alarm that rightly accompanies this issue.

Although AIDS is a concern for all South African peoples, this work addresses the issue through a gendered lens by focusing on the ways in which the disease affects women differently than it does men. This is a valid approach for the artists at Philani because, as Catherine Albertyn shows elsewhere in this volume, AIDS hits economically impoverished

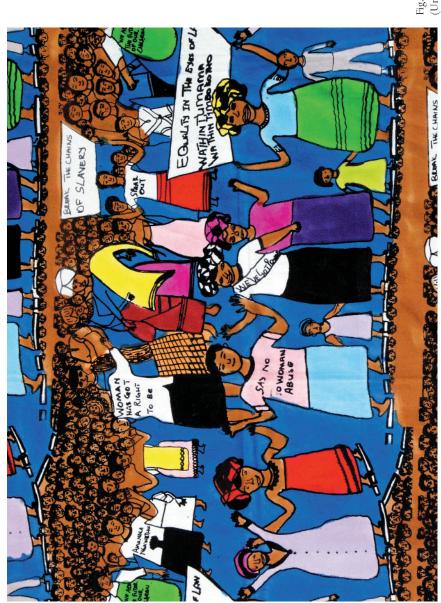
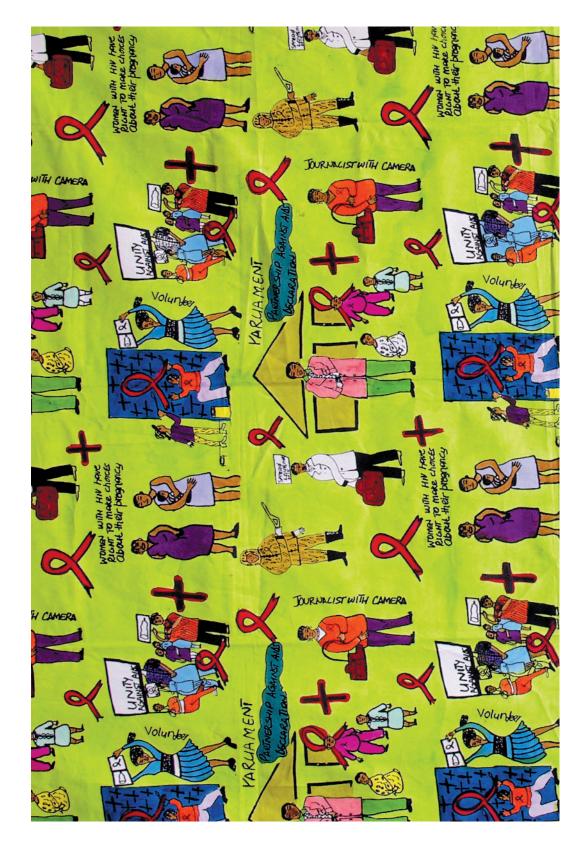
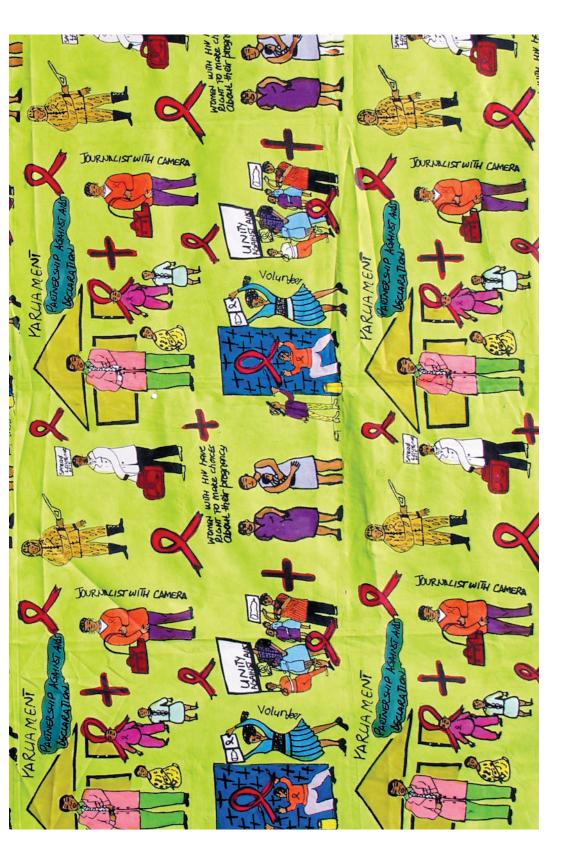
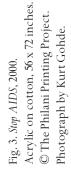


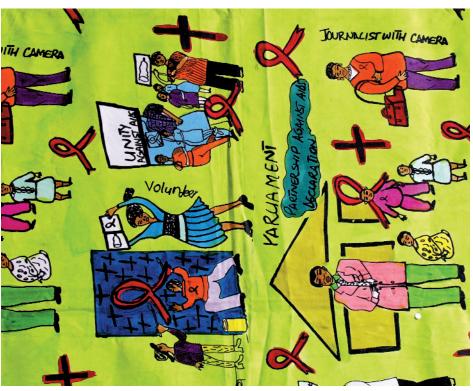
Fig. 2. Umanyano Ngamandla (Unity Is Power) detail.















Clockwise

Fig. 4, Fig. 5, Fig 6. Stop AIDS, detail

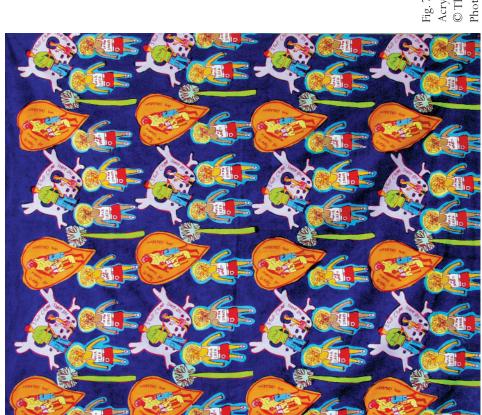


Fig. 7. Stop Crime, 2000.
Acrylic on cotton, 56 x 72 inches.
© The Philani Printing Project.
Photograph by Kurt Gohde.





Fig. 9. Say No to Domestic Abuse, 2000.

Acrylic on cotton.
© The Philani Printing Project.
Photograph by Kurt Gohde.



Fig. 10. Working for Water. Acrylic on cotton, 56 x 72 inches. © The Philani Printing Project. Photograph by Kurt Gohde.

South African women especially hard. Not only do South African women constitute one of the highest risk groups in the world, they are also experiencing the fastest rate of HIV infection in the world today, in large part due to other forms of gender inequality, such as unemployment, poverty, high rates of sexual violence, and poor health care, all of which affect women in disproportionate levels.

Stop AIDS explicitly makes connections between women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and these varied forms of gender injustice. For example, one scene explores the relationship between a woman's reproductive rights and AIDS by presenting two women who are mothers, standing side by side and facing the viewer (fig. 4). The woman on the right holds a small baby whom she is nursing, while the woman on the left is visibly pregnant; her left arm encircles and rests on her growing belly. The text above the pair proclaims, "women with HIV have the right to make choices about their pregnancy." This particular scene is a direct critique of President Thabo Mbeki's refusal to provide antiretroviral drugs as part of a preventative strategy for pregnant or nursing women. The transmission of HIV/AIDS from a mother to her child can be prevented if a single dose of the drug nevirapine is administered to both mother and baby. Women's groups, including the Philani Project, have also criticized South Africa's national and local governments for not providing antiretrovrial drugs to rape victims. Strategically using the language of "rights," this scene evokes South Africa's new constitution that specifically legislates access to affordable healthcare services as a woman's constitutional right and urges Mbeki to fulfill this constitutional guarantee and reconsider his controversial public health policy.

Stop AIDS also emphasizes the importance of women's sexual freedom and safety as another preventative strategy against AIDS. Although the work does not address this in visual terms, the Philani artists frequently make connections between rape and AIDS when discussing this work. Visually, Stop AIDS draws attention to the importance of using condoms. Several of the protesters pictured in the work carry signs with drawings of condoms on them, and text messages instruct "condoms help aids" and encourage people to "spread love not HIV." In addition, the work calls for free access to condoms in clinics and in schools, something that is lacking in South Africa's poorer areas. By informing the audience about condom use, this work emphasizes a woman's right to protect herself and her future children from AIDS.

And yet this work does more than simply raise these issues; it also instructs its viewers on how and where to wage an effective protest. Scenes of activists engaged in different activities demonstrate and suggest various tactics (fig. 5). One group of activists is shown marching and carrying signs with images of condoms, the AIDS awareness ribbon, and a slogan calling for "Unity against AIDS." To the left of this group a

second gathering paints a mural to raise community awareness. Like many AIDS activists in South Africa today, these figures use art as a cultural weapon of protest, demonstrating the political power of visual culture. The text message that joins these two activist groups simply says "volunteer." It is also significant that these groups of protestors stand in front of South Africa's Parliament buildings, and they have called in a photojournalist to document their actions. The female journalist with her large camera holds much power in this work, demonstrating the important role that the documentary photographer and the media can play in furthering advocacy efforts (fig. 6).

As a cultural response to the AIDS crisis in South Africa, *Stop AIDS* views this crisis from a Black woman's point of view by placing emphasis on the effects of AIDS on women's bodies, families, and communities. In addition to identifying the problem, it offers solutions and strategies, calling for freedom from AIDS as central to the empowerment of South African women.

Women and Violence

Two final works, *Stop Crime* and *Say No to Domestic Abuse*, draw attention to another source of great concern for Philani women, the unacceptable level of violence against women and children in South Africa. It is crucial to note that contemporary violence in South Africa is rooted in the political violence of the apartheid past and must be understood within this context. Apartheid created a particularly hostile and violent environment for Black women, who were the most oppressed sector of that country's population. In post-apartheid South Africa, women continue to be subject to varied forms of violence. Rape statistics are particularly distressing. South Africa currently has one of the highest incidences of reported rape in the world, and it is estimated that if current trends continue, one in three South African women will be raped in her lifetime.⁴

Stop Crime is a large-scale wall hanging that depicts a generic scene of violence (fig. 7). Set in the darkness of night, as indicated by the deep blue background, it demands the freedom for women and children of all ethnic backgrounds to walk safely in the streets and to be free from all forms of violence. The narrative consists of three primary scenes that are repeated throughout the large work. Central to the narrative is the horizontal row of multiracial women wearing white tank tops and red miniskirts (fig. 8). The message printed on their shirts is a main focus of the work: "We want to" "walk safe" "in the streets." Like the figures themselves, this message is repeated again and again. The women's ample, natural hairstyles stand out and glow like protective halos that light up the darkness of the night that surrounds them, suggesting a kind of ethereal energy or supernatural empowerment. These women are

shown taking back the night, demanding the freedom to walk safely in their own streets regardless of the time of day or the kind of clothing they choose to wear. On either side of them is a row of alternating images symbolizing danger and safety. Danger is represented by a red, ominous-looking skull and crossbones, inside of which a gangster approaches and tempts a young child. Juxtaposed against this warning is an image of safety and security, represented by the image of a mother whose arms reach out to encircle her three young children. The four figures are shielded within the shape of a heart, representing mother love and indicating the responsibility mothers have for the well-being of their children. Competing forces of good and evil co-exist side by side. Without alluding to any particular event or form of violence, *Stop Crime* calls for an end to all forms of violence against women and children.

Ntsiki Stuurman: Domestic Violence

In 1998, a group of five Philani artists responded to the high rates of violence against women by embarking on a unique project outside of the usual parameters of the Philani collective; they worked independently to create a series of t-shirts carrying designs that testify to their individual experiences with violence. Each t-shirt addressed a different form of gender violence, including domestic violence, rape, and physical harassment and abuse in the workplace. The shirts were made to be worn on the artists' bodies. Because they often depicted scenes that identified the perpetrators of violence and were then worn within the very communities where those acts of violence took place, the images exposed the identities of those individuals who committed violent acts.

In one t-shirt addressing domestic violence, Philani artist Ntsiki Stuurman called for women, men, and the government to all "SAY NO TO DOMESTIC ABUSE" by presenting a horrific scene that she herself witnessed (fig. 9). Stuurman depicted a view into the interior of her neighbor and friend's home as an act of "domestic" violence was in progress. In looking at this t-shirt, we, like Stuurman, become witnesses to murder.

Stuurman's friend (whom the artist does not name) was a frequent victim of spousal battery and sexual abuse. The moment that Stuurman depicted was the instant when the husband murdered his wife by beating her on the head with a large rock. We can see the family of three—husband, wife, and child—standing together in what appears to be the kitchen area of the home; a long table with dining objects and a plant is visible in the background. Behind the male figure and to the left of the work, a low, purple divider separates the sleeping quarters from the main area of the home. Small colorful flowers and green plants outside show a garden that has been tended carefully. A tall tree, full of lush green leaves, frames the right side of the house; it has been placed there

strategically in order to draw our eyes inward to the living area. The artist also used color to catch our attention; the interior of the home is flooded with bright orange that, juxtaposed against the cool purple background, alerts us to the trauma that is unfolding. In a dramatic gesture, the man, who is significantly larger and physically more powerful than his wife, sweeps his arm over the head of his child as he strikes his wife's head with a large object. Turning away from her assailant and toward the viewer, the woman raises both arms to her head in an unsuccessful attempt to protect herself from his blow. The child, a young witness to this scene, tugs urgently and helplessly at her mother's colorful skirt.

Because of the close proximity of homes in Crossroads, events that happen in the interior of one's home are frequently exposed to neighbors and the surrounding community. Stuurman emphasizes this by focusing on the interior space of the home. In doing so, she also effectively engages several of the important issues that have motivated women's rights activists to break the silence about domestic violence.⁵ Because it occurs inside the home, domestic violence is frequently seen as a personal or private, rather than a political and public, issue. It has been a primary goal of feminists around the world to reverse this perception. Presenting the crime in the manner that she does, in literally opening up the home and exposing this event for public view, Stuurman's t-shirt insists that this kind of violence-"domestic" violence-is not a private issue. These violations that women regularly experience, not just in Crossroads and not just in South Africa, are in fact public violations that affect and damage entire communities worldwide.

Stuurman continues to publicize this event by wearing her t-shirt even in plain view of the perpetrator that her work depicts. In doing so, not only does she "advertise" the existence and prevalence of domestic violence, she also comments on the failure of the judicial system to prosecute and punish offenders. Reminding abusers that they are subject to the gaze and actions of others, her image serves as a warning to perpetrators of "private" offenses that they may be exposed through the vehicle of culture. She also engages her audience through the use of text, which is an essential part of this work. Set in bright yellow boxes against a purple and red background, the words "SAY NO TO DOMESTIC ABUSE" command the viewer to take action, rather than iust observe this violent scene. Stuurman has made the text in bold bright colors for this purpose. Like those artists and activists who came before her, Stuurman and other Philani artists, in wearing their testimony on their bodies in the form of t-shirts, engage in political action in order to resist oppression. In this sense they continue the tradition of using the power of visual culture to fight a political struggle, although here they fight not against an oppressive state, but rather against an

entire culture of violence and injustice where women are the most frequent victims.

The above works are but a few of many Philani designs that call for gender justice by examining the unique needs of women in South Africa's new democracy. As arts activists, Philani artists attend to the issues that affect their lives through the realm of visual culture. The final image (fig. 10), for instance, is a celebration of accessible water in Crossroads Township and a commentary on how critical this is for women's lives. In creating these painted textiles, not only do they identify the problems that women continue to face despite the end of apartheid, they also call upon local, national, and international viewers, instructing them on ways to create change. The Philani Printing Project is ultimately about women's political power and about the abilities of culture to celebrate, resist, instruct, and empower.

NOTES

- 1. Because Philani is organized as a collective, the majority of the works are created through a collaborative process and are therefore unsigned by individual artists. So that the artists do not go unnamed in this essay, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge each of them, concurrently offering my sincere thanks for the time that they all graciously gave to me, allowing me to interview them and observe their work during my two separate trips to South Africa in 1998-1999 and again in 2001 for the purpose of researching women artists. As of June 2001, the women working at the Philani Printing Project were: Jane Solomon, Lungiswa Pikoko, Nontsikelelo (Ntsiki) Stuurman, Priscilla Mantlana, Ncediswa Mantlana, Nomaledi Nkinga, Nomfundo Dyantyi, Neliswa Fanteni, Lilian Bambiso, Fundiswa Gam, Xoliswa Nyakiso, Nolwando Fani, Nosipho Mququ, Wendy Mdleleni, Nowthando Mtosele, Tonono Nomqolo, Zandile Mayekiso, Nombongo Noboza, Noluvuyo Guza, Nonceba Gobizembe, Nomfanelo Ntumase, Consance Ndzishe, Nomakhaa Katsi, Nothembentoni Nqfiyi, Nomfundo Bawuti, Nothozamile Mfundisi, Mavis Makinana, and Nothembentoni Ngayi. In addition, I would also like to express my gratitute to the institutions that generously funded my research and writing. This includes the American Association of University Women, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the U.S. Department of Education, and Transylvania University.
- 2. Nontsikelelo Stuurman, interview, Crossroads, South Africa, 1991.
- 3. Noluvuuyo Guza, interview, Crossroads, South Africa, 1991.
- 4. December Green, Gender Violence in Africa: African Women's Responses (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 70.
- 5. Stuurman, interview.
- 6. Ibid.