

HISTORY DOESN'T REPEAT ITSELF, BUT IT DOES RHYME.

DUMILE FENI: AFRICAN GUERNICA



Dumile Feni, *African Guernica*, 1967. National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre, University of Fort Hare. ©Estate Dumile Feni and Dumile Feni Family Trust

Dates: 25 March 2026 – 22 September 2026

Location: Sabatini Building, Floor 2, Room 205.08

Organised by: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

Curated by: Tamar Garb

Coordinated by: Carolina Bustamante

The **Museo Reina Sofía** sets in motion a programme of exhibitions which, entitled ***History Doesn't Repeat Itself, but it Does Rhyme***, seeks to initiate a dialogue with Pablo Picasso's ***Guernica*** (1937) and other major works which reveal parallels in their modes of representation or thematic concerns, despite hailing from different historical and cultural contexts. The series title refers to a phrase which, although traditionally attributed to the writer Mark Twain, is apocryphal and never actually appears in work by the American author.

Dumile Feni: African Guernica

In this opening show, curated by Tamar Garb, a professor of Art History at University College London, Picasso's emblematic work is juxtaposed with ***African Guernica***, a work by artist **Dumile Feni** (Worcester, South Africa, 1942 – New York, 1991), who was a key figure in African modernity. Alongside Feni's monumental drawing are five other works by this artist which arrive from major South African institutions, including the **University of Fort Hare**, the **Norval Foundation** and the **Wits Art Museum**, in addition to private collections. Furthermore, they are displayed with four of Picasso's preparatory drawings from *Guernica*, works which are part of the Museo Reina Sofía Collections.

The Museo Reina Sofía would like to express its appreciation to all lending institutions, particularly the University of Fort Hare, South Africa, for making the loan of *African Guernica* possible. The Museo would also like to thank the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS), South Africa, for its collaboration and support in this project.

Despite *African Guernica* being exhibited on different occasions in South Africa, this is the first time it has travelled overseas. Its first international journey enables it to engage in a dialogue with *Guernica*, in subject matter which over many years has engendered a significant number of written works within South African art, but which has been overlooked in Eurocentric art histories and narratives. Therefore, *Guernica*, an iconic work painted in 1937 as a plea against fascism and war, comes face to face, literally, with a South African drawing made thirty years later within the context of the racist regime under apartheid.

African Guernica is a monumental drawing with dimensions of three metres squared, executed with charcoal and pencil on equal-sized sheets of folded newspaper and glued in a horizontal arrangement. Made between 1966 and 1967, it was first shown at Gallery 101 in Johannesburg in 1967, one of the few gallery spaces in which Black artists were able to exhibit work. Its scale and ambition made the drawing a transgression that defied the widespread expectation at the time for Black artists to stay within the limits of producing crafts or “native art” for the tourism market.



Dumile Feni, *African Guernica*, 1967, detail. National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre, University of Fort Hare © Estate Dumile Feni and Dumile Feni Family Trust

The relationship between Dumile’s work and Picasso’s is a source of debate — there is no evidence of a direct influence, yet the work evokes Picasso in conversing with his visual language (monochrome, distortion, fragmented figures) to **decry State violence and racial oppression**. According to the show’s curator Tamar Garb, both pieces work as “anti-totalitarian totems” which, despite their chronological differences and divergent geopolitical contexts, share a political synergy in the fight against tyranny.

In his large figurative drawing, Dumile uses tactile and immediate lines that draw from historical painting and muralism, setting forth a nightmarish world with distorted figures, hybrid beings and Xhosa¹ cosmology, where the cow symbolises wealth and has a spiritual link yet appears in the work in scenes of horror and disarray.

The origin of the title is unknown, although the work was displayed with this name in Johannesburg with the artist’s blessing. Picasso’s work moved around the studios and galleries of the South African city in the 1960s by way of postcards, magazines and books, as well as reproductions of the work, while information on the circumstances surrounding its creation was also available.

¹ In relation to the second largest ethnic group in South Africa.

As Tamar Garb asserts, Picasso's *Guernica* has, for many years, put forward questions around the relationships between aesthetics and politics, art and propaganda, and the strategic use of the image opposite political tyranny and oppression. Its own history as an object turned weapon, disputed and controversial, is well known — it is probably the most banned, removed, repatriated and reproduced work in European art.

Moreover, in 1960s Johannesburg it began to be mentioned in the debates of the time around aesthetics and resistance, and on art's capacity to influence political change or the artist's responsibility opposite oppression and discrimination, as well as art's vulnerability to censorship. The debate also arose, in an era dominated by documentary aesthetics and photojournalism, around the relative value of a more "realistic" art for the social critique against "abstract" or "expressionistic" art. Amid these discussions, the issue of "Africa" and "Africanness" as a counterpoint to European modernity began to gain traction.

Picasso's debt to African art is well documented. He believed his formal abstraction was both a facilitator and bearer of magical or spiritual properties. Dumile, paradoxically, acknowledged Picasso's debt to Africa as he set up a dialogue with his language and imagery.

Other exhibited works

Displayed with *African Guernica* (1967) in the show are, in room 205.08, other salient works by Dumile Feni which enable a closer look at the South African artist's work.



Dumile Feni, *Hector Pieterse*, 1987
©Estate Dumile Feni and Dumile Feni Family Trust

You Wouldn't Know God If He Spat in Your Eye (1975), an impressive **53-metre-long scroll** made during the artist's exile in London in the 1970s, works as a visual diary that mixes fantastical creatures and personages, arranged in a sequential procession. The scroll, unlikely to have been conceived for public display, includes texts which at times contain word repetitions and political slogans such as "Exile, Exile, Exile", enigmatic phrases like "universal awareness of the child" and names of artists such as "Nina Simone" and "Stevie Wonder". The work is at once a reflection of his personal experience and an interpretation of the world.

Hector Pieterse (1987) is a large-scale charcoal drawing based on an iconic photograph Sam Nzima took of Hector Pieterse, a twelve-year-old boy who was shot and killed by police at the Soweto uprising in 1976. In the work, Dumile employs stylised figures to turn the boy into a symbol of "universal awareness" and innocence in the face of State violence.

The Classroom (1965) and *Woman and Boy* (n.d.) are both large-scale drawings which show Dumile's mastery of tactile, expressive lines. *The Classroom* depicts agitated figures challenging the era's formal instruction and educational segregation.

Saying No (1967) is an ink work on paper which serves as an example of his rejection of the labels “native art” and “art of the Townships”, and his search for an aesthetic of ethical and social commitment.



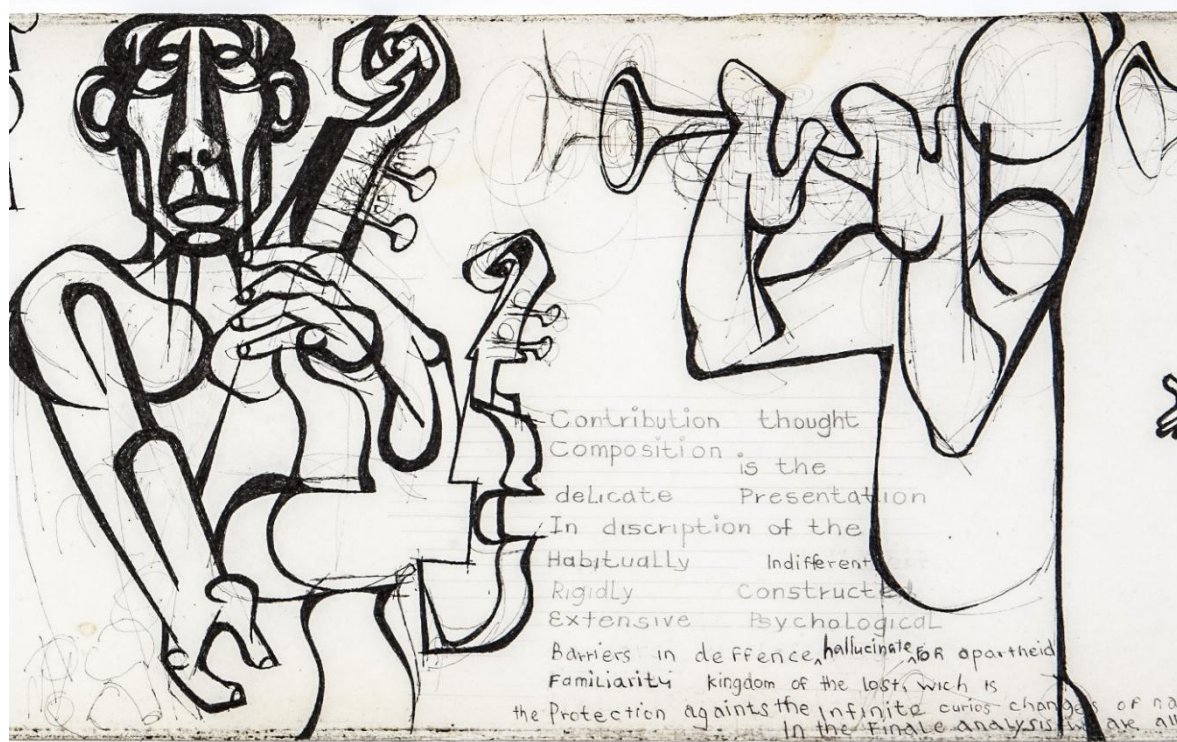
Pablo Picasso, *Composition Study (V). Sketch for Guernica*. Museo Reina Sofía.
© Sucesión Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2026

These works are displayed in close proximity to *Guernica* (1937) by Pablo Picasso, enabling visitors to compare formal synergies, such as the dislocation of space and the use of black and white, as well as the political differences in each historical context.

Included alongside these pieces are four of Picasso's preparatory drawings for *Guernica*, made in his Paris studio in May 1937, which show his compositional studies and the sketches he made to execute the work, commissioned by the Second Government of the Spanish Republic during the Civil War to be displayed in the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition that same year.

Public activities

On 24 March, coinciding with the opening of the exhibition, an **Inaugural Conversation** will take place in the Nouvel Building's Auditorium 400, conducted by lecturer and curator Tamar Garb and introduced by Museo Reina Sofía director Manuel Segade. In the conversation, Garb will address the possibilities of analysis and reflection set forth by the exhibition held in the Museo around Dumile Feni's piece *African Guernica* (1967), displayed in juxtaposition with Picasso's emblematic work.



Detail of Dumile Feni, *You Wouldn't Know God if He Spat in Your Eye*, 1975. Paper, wood, ink, pencil, wax, laminated plastic, 23 x 530 cm. Wits Art Museum Collection, Johannesburg. Photograph: Mark Lewis. ©Estate Dumile Feni and Dumile Feni Family Trust

The encounter will conclude with the first ever performance of the music piece ***Inkomo iwile***, which translates into English from Zulu as *The Cow Has Fallen*, comprising nine songs the South African artist Philip Miller has composed for the concert, in collaboration with Tshegofatso Moeng, and which seeks to create a parallel dialogue between traditional South African sounds and the classical repertoire of string, voice and wind instruments. Therefore, a broad ensemble of performers from both South Africa and Spain will congregate to perform the piece live, with the generous support of the South African organisation Spier Arts Trust.

In addition, held on 25 March in Auditorium 200, the encounter **Thinking with Dumile Feni's *African Guernica*** will see curator Tamar Garb join a panel of experts from different

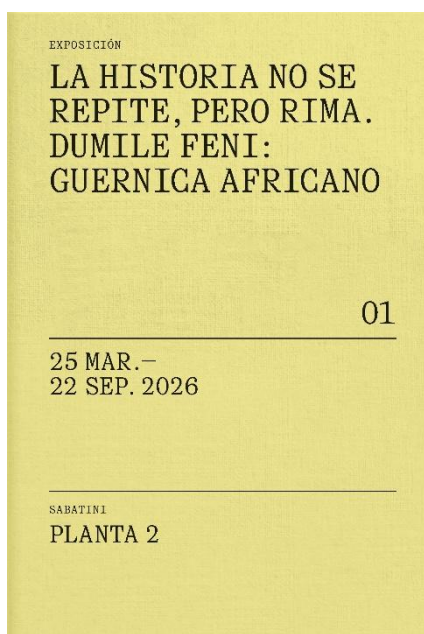
disciplines, from art to social anthropology, African studies to the history of violence, to reflect collectively on the points of convergence in Picasso's work and the South African artist's drawing.

Participants on the panel include **Siyabonga Njica**, a professor at the University of Cambridge, **Thozama April**, senior curator at the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS) from the University of Fort Hare, and **Elvira Dyangani**, director of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

These activities are part of the main working strands of the **Museo's Public Programmes area** and seek to explore in greater depth the content of exhibitions organised by the Museo from the perspective of artists, curators and specialists.

Mediation

The Museo's **Education Area** has organised a tailored programme centred on the exhibition: *In Situ*, a new gallery-based mediation format which, rather than proposing a standard visit or exhibition route, invites visitors to engage in a friendly, unhurried conversation with Education staff to share details and activate reflections.



Publications

In conjunction with the show, the **Museo's Editorial Activities Department** has published an exhibition information sheet designed by Hermanos Berenguer which includes the essay *African Guernica. Seeing Picasso from the South*, written by curator Tamar Garb and containing images of the works on display. The publication will be available to visitors in the exhibition rooms in its printed version.

About Dumile Feni

Zwelidumile Geelboi Mgxaji Mslaba Feni (Worcester, South Africa, 1942 – New York, USA, 1991), known artistically as **Dumile Feni** or **Dumile**, the names with which he signed his works, was a pivotal figure in South African modernism and a visual chronicler of systemic oppression under the apartheid regime. The artist's expressive interpretation of social life, poverty and daily life interweaves fantastical figures and mythical constructions which refer to cosmologies and oneiric worlds rooted in Africa. His work, characterised by roughly drawn lines and a deeply existential intensity in hard-to-classify pictorial creations, earned him early recognition as the **“Goya of the Townships”**.



Dumile Feni, *Woman and Boy*, n.d. ©Estate Dumile Feni and Dumile

A self-taught artist, his flair for drawing was apparent from early childhood, and he honed his skills through his contact with other artists in Johannesburg. Evident in his works are the influence of canonical artists ranging from Hieronymus Bosch to Käthe Kolwitz, via Pablo Picasso, artists that would feed into his work, whether consciously or subconsciously. Equally, he drew from the writings of poets such as Ingrid Jonker and Wally Sorote, as well as jazz musicians like Gideon Nxumalo and John Coltrane.

In his childhood, Dumile moved from his birthplace to Johannesburg to live with an uncle, and there started working at the age of seventeen as an apprentice at a sculpture and ceramics foundry, where he developed his skills in the fields of drawing and sculpture by way of carving wood and soapstone and clay modelling. He started to paint murals and work with sculptor Ephraim Ngatane, and, after recovering from tuberculosis, visited exhibitions on a regular basis, encountering gallerist Madame Haenggi at Gallery 101, as well as other artists and writers living in the city, for instance Sydnet Kumlao and Ezrom Legae, painter Louis Maqhubela and photographers Peter Magubane and Ernest Cole, who worked for the magazine *Drum*.

During this period he was a regular at Dorkay House, home to the Union of South African Artists and a meeting point for Black artists, as well as the place where jazz musicians like Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba would perform. Dumile, who rejected labels such as “art from the Townships” and “Bantu art” related to Black artists, consigning them to ethnic art-making, started to exhibit his work in the early 1960s, resulting in a contract with Gallery 101, through which he achieved notable success while he lived and worked in the house of artist Bill Ainslie.

With his artistic practice now consolidated in Johannesburg, his work arrived at a historically relevant milestone with *African Guernica (1967)*, a piece with which he recontextualised Picasso’s iconography to denounce the atrocities of segregation, fusing political condemnation with an expressionistic aesthetic that was universal in scope.

Due to political restrictions and the censorship of his work, Dumile was exiled, in 1968, moving first to London and later to the USA. This second period saw his work diversify into sculpture and poster designs for the African National Congress (ANC), establishing him as a reference point of cultural resistance in exile. Dumile died suddenly in New York in 1991, shortly before his scheduled return to South Africa following the release of Nelson Mandela. His legacy is currently the subject of a profound critical revision which seeks to situate his work at the heart of narratives of global modernism.

Sobre Tamar Garb

Tamar Garb is a professor of Art History at University College London and a distinguished specialist in themes around gender, sexuality, identity and representation in modern and contemporary art. Across her career, Garb has published important works such as *Sisters of the Brush*, *Bodies of Modernity* and *The Painted Face*, as well as curating major exhibitions at institutions such as Tate, the Walther Collection and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Furthermore, she is a renowned expert in South African photography and African contemporary art, and currently curates the project *History Does Not Repeat Itself, but it Does Rhyme. Dumile Feni: African Guernica* in the Museo Reina Sofía, where she puts forward a re-reading of global modernism by virtue of a dialogue between Picasso and Dumile.

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Press Material



For further information

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