

# **Marigold Beads: focused innovation in a Zimbabwean co-operative**

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## **About the author**

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## **Case summary**

**Learning outcomes:** Following discussion and analysis of the case, students should be able to explore how an individual's background affects his/her perspective on entrepreneurial opportunities; analyse leadership behaviours that support an innovation process; and understand that constraints can enhance innovation.

**Case overview/Synopsis:** This real-life case explores the main protagonist, Joni Brenner, an arts university professor at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in South Africa, and how over the past 10 years she worked with a group of co-operative beaders in Zimbabwe who developed hand loomed necklaces that were sold locally and internationally, placed in the African section of museum stores. The case provides an opportunity to explore the evolution of the Marigold product, the characteristics of an entrepreneur and how innovation can come from a very focused and constrained approach. Brenner's involvement with the co-operative involved the supply of materials, design innovation and product sales. Innovation had come through focusing on the evolution of the core product, through different designs and colour combinations, learning through mistakes and through other artistic collaborations. The case concludes with Brenner questioning whether the innovation approach should be adapted to meet the needs of a potential new customer.

**Complexity academic level:** This case is appropriate for undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate, MBA and executive education students focusing on entrepreneurship, small business development and/or innovation.

**Supplementary materials:** Teaching notes are available for educators only.

**Subject code:** CSS 7: Management Science.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship; Innovation; Leadership

On March 5, 2021, Joni Brenner sat on her apartment balcony looking at the Johannesburg skyline. Brenner was an honorary member of Marigold Beads, a beadwork co-operative [1] based in Zimbabwe, which designed and made hand-loomed beaded necklaces sold locally and internationally. Her involvement with the project included the supply of materials, design innovation and product sales.

As she enjoyed the evening sunset Brenner thought about an email from a potential buyer interested in stocking necklaces for their museum shop. The communication indicated an interest in a large order of 600 necklaces over a period of six months with a specific request for how the necklaces would be designed. Brenner was concerned about capacity of the co-operative for delivery, and whether the museum reflected the ethos of the Marigold product. The order could provide an opportunity for more innovation, as a new design would need to be made, also creating financial stability over six months. However, Brenner was also conscious that specific orders could limit the current creativity and direction of the studio's work. Should they take on the work, and if so what trade-offs would need to be considered? What else needed to be considered before making a decision within the month?

### **Marigold – a Zimbabwean co-operative specialising in loomed beadwork**

Marigold was established in 1992 by its three founding members, Siphwe Dube, Sifiso Mathe and Teresa Nkomo. It was located in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, in an area called Matabeleland in the south western part of the country. Marigold initially consisted of 20 women who had been trained through workshops conducted by the Bulawayo City Council. The majority of the women had been part of groups called School Leavers' Clubs, which had been an initiative of the City Council's Co-operative Development function. The clubs had taught crafts and entrepreneurship to young Zimbabweans who had opted, for a variety of reasons, to leave the school system. Further training was provided from a partnership between the City Council and the Danish aid organisation Mellefolkeligt Samvirke in assisting the older participants to form self-sustaining co-operatives, a government initiative that was aimed at starting and supporting businesses that provided employment and training intended to improve the livelihood of those employed (Mhembwe & Dube, 2017).

In the first 19 years of its existence, Marigold's clients and commissions were varied and initially the work was shared with another beadwork co-operative called Flame Girls. Both Marigold and Flame Girls developed ranges of beaded items from purses, belts and headbands to chokers for local and overseas markets. Local projects for Marigold included beading for dresses for Miss Bulawayo and Miss Zimbabwe, and products for famous artists and musicians. Beads, especially glass beads, had played a significant role in long distance trade networks from India to Southern Africa, dating back to the 7th century (Wood, 2012). Beads had been used as trade commodity and, in more recent years, as a core material for the development of handcraft and fashion items.

However, the declining Zimbabwean economy [with real gross domestic product plunging 45% from 1999 to 2009 (Hawkins & Pilling, 2017)] and resultant impact on business and tourism also influenced Marigold's sustainability. As a result of the shrinking economy and decreased focus on the arts, Flame Girls closed and the majority of the Marigold members found different employment. By 2011, in a country deeply affected by the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic, political and economic instability and unemployment, most members apart from the founding members had moved on. While the

remaining Marigold work was erratic and unpredictable, the founding members' commitment to the co-operative remained intact.

### **An artist with a passion for focused innovation**

Brenner was born in Bulawayo and moved to South Africa for her senior school and university studies, graduating with a Masters in Fine Arts from the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. She forged a career in art and art history, becoming a working artist who exhibited in South Africa and England, as well as teaching as an art historian at Wits. As an artist, she believed in the power of daily practice and having an intense artistic process. Part of her regular studio practice included a focus on the artistic expression of skulls which Brenner believed showed a “meditation on life and living, its transience and fragility, on presence and absence, rather than [...] as a symbol of danger” [2]. Brenner thought that an almost obsessive repetition of a specific subject helped an artist to keep on going, moving forward, becoming attuned to subtle shifts that gave rise to growth and therein continuity. In particular, her focus on skulls was expressed through works in watercolor, clay, bronze and oils.

### **A fortunate introduction**

Brenner's parents divided their time between the USA and Zimbabwe, and as there was extensive time required to travel between the States and Johannesburg, Brenner tried to connect with them frequently while they were in Zimbabwe. During one of these visits in 2011, in a phone call her mother spoke to Brenner about the beautiful work of Marigold and how she had visited the co-operative with a family friend who had been a patron of the arts in Zimbabwe. But Brenner found it difficult to visualise the hand-loomed beadwork, as loomed beading was not an artistic process present in South Africa. So she asked for a sample, and Brenner was sent a long beaded strand, which her mother thought would make a nice edge to a tablecloth. Brenner put it instead around her neck and thought, this would make a nice necklace.

### **A core focus on making loomed necklaces**

Brenner then commissioned three necklaces to be made, each slightly different lengths, with a stitch join at the end of the necklaces so that they did not have a clasp or fastener. She received many compliments from friends and colleagues at Wits when she wore the necklaces, which made her think that there might be a market for selling them. A few months later she was able to visit Marigold and met with the founders. After long conversations, an arrangement was made for how they would work together. Brenner would source materials (beads, thread and needles) and be closely involved with the development and direction of the design innovations. As things turned out, and perhaps not ideally, Brenner would also become their sole client, buying all the necklaces that the co-operative made.

With this arrangement the founders maintained complete autonomy for how the co-operative was run, including the hiring, payment and training of members as they grew and the overall process and production of the necklaces. Nkomo played more of a mentorship role, with Dube and Mathe running the daily operations, along with other long-term members of the co-operative who had rejoined once work increased. The co-operative could work with other businesses or individuals if opportunities were presented to do so; however, these particular necklaces would only be made for Brenner.

Sourcing of materials initially seemed straightforward: the looms were constructed of four pieces of wood made to the length of an arm (with longitudinal pieces longer than the horizontal sides) by a local carpenter who nailed them together. But the beads and the thread needed to be sourced from abroad. Specific three-ply nylon-coated twisted thread was bought from the USA. Quality control was conducted on two sides: the founders inspected the finished products, as did Brenner when they arrived in Johannesburg. In 2012, when Brenner asked the women why a necklace was not straight, Dube and Mathe said that they needed higher quality beads, not beads mass produced from China where the beaders experienced wastage of almost 50% in every bag of beads. So Brenner found a supplier of Czech Republic beads in Durban, and a different supplier based in Cape Town [3] that sourced beads made in Japan. All of these supplies, including the needles, were then transported by road couriers to Bulawayo, 850 km away.

## **Evolution and documentation of design**

Initially, the necklaces were made as narrow strands, eight beads wide, in a single colour. When Brenner received the finished products back from the couriers on a monthly basis, she carefully checked and photographed each one. This documentation had three main purposes: to examine each piece for quality control; to keep a record of ongoing production; and to note design innovations. She started selling the necklaces from her apartment, using interaction with clients to observe and to listen carefully to what was said as they tried them on. She could see that they enjoyed the tactile nature of the beads, handling them and commenting on their feel. Excitement about the quality of the finished products was a consistent theme. But often there were comments around matching different colours of different necklaces – a green necklace with a red necklace, for example. So Brenner shared that information with the beaders, and suggested trying a single necklace with two colours. Marigold then started experimenting with the colour combinations. First, two colours were tried in one necklace, then four colours in a necklace divided into quarters, then a line that designated the quarters and then more abstract shapes and combinations; one design innovation seemed to lead to the next.

And that is where Brenner thought the project took off. Looking and maneuvering small yet specific changes within the tightly constrained design space of this simple necklace helped, she believed, to encourage continuity and also facilitated creative freedom. Gradually, changes were made (Exhibit 1). Different lengths of the necklaces were created, as were options around necklace width, ranging from 5, 8, 12, 16 to 24 beads. Longer and wider length necklaces could take over a week to make, standard length designs took a few days and included between 4,800 and 5,000 beads, with 600 lines of improvisation. Ideas and photographs were exchanged via WhatsApp between Brenner and the women when she was not able to visit in person. It was a dynamic interaction, Brenner thought, focusing on communication and understanding. It was not always straightforward or easy given the frequent power supply disruptions through load shedding in both Zimbabwe and South Africa. But one adapted to the circumstances, and they created a way to communicate ideas and to brainstorm about possibilities.

New designs were given their own names. For example, the first variation was called “half half”, representing a necklace with half of one and half of another colour. The next version was “quarters in 2 colours”; a necklace which looked like it was divided in quarters featuring two different colours. Later, more abstract designs were called “Random geometric pattern in 2/3/multiple colours” and “Kente”, so named for the vibrant colours in a necklace that echoed a loomed Ghanaian coloured-textile. All necklaces and designs were documented by Brenner, creating a substantial photographic archive (Exhibit 2). Initially, she printed copies of the

photographs (later sent through WhatsApp) and forwarded them to Marigold so records could be seen of what the beaders made; these were then pinned on some of the studio walls. Brenner believed this was an important part of the beaders' creative health – they did not always have time to reflect on and admire the ranges produced. She also sent particular images of designs and combinations that she thought were spectacular or special, where she noticed new shifts that she wanted to encourage. Sometimes, she added notes to the images to suggest extensions and shifts. And on other occasions photographs highlighted beads that had flaws or were not well made. Documentation was explicitly linked to record keeping, development, learning and pleasure.

As interest in the Marigold necklaces grew, so did the size of the co-operative. The founders were mindful of trying to employ young women into the co-operative, as jobs became scarcer in the country and they wanted to support individuals who might otherwise not find full time employment. By 2016 there were 16 women working in the studio, able to produce up to 200 necklaces per month. Bringing in new colleagues took time to train and was a deliberate, thoughtful process as there was internal concern as to how large the co-operative could and should develop. When Brenner visited, she was always struck by the energy and conversations happening between the women. As the women beaded, grouped around three different tables, they discussed life as well as work, providing support personally and professionally to each other.

They had put in their 10,000 hours, Brenner thought, and it was amazing to see how that base of knowledge helped them to take confident creative risks through different colour combinations and evolution of design. “The beads are alive”, Dube often said, “They tell you which ones can be combined” (Staff Writer, 2018). There was nothing mainstream or “touristy” about the colours; in beadwork outside of Marigold, Brenner could see that artists were using traditional colour combinations, such as replicating colours of national flags, trying to attract a tourist purchase.

## **Learning through mistakes and constant shifts**

The Marigold team also did not look at trends. While it might be a risk not to care about what others thought, they also believed it gave them creative freedom to explore and express themselves through their work. The design principle was that small changes were made which affected constant shifts. But not all of the new designs worked, and the whole team believed that was part of the process and the learning. When a new design was discarded, learnings were discussed and they moved on.

Additional shifts included using new nylon thread colours. Initially, black or white were the colours used for the warp (the nylon running from top to bottom/vertically holding the beads on the frame) and for the weft (thinner thread) that was used to secure the beads horizontally with a long, thin needle. But as designs evolved, new vibrant colours were used. Translucent or transparent beads were used with bright weft thread colours such as red which created an additional colour-cast.

While there were requests at times to expand focus to other forms of jewelry, Brenner and the team kept their design to the necklaces. They thought the magic was in playing with the possibilities within the constraints of the form. Brenner believed other artistic co-operatives lost focus when constantly trying to launch new season designs and new products. Repetition, she believed, was a creative practice, as long as there was evolution and change within the

existing parameters. It was almost like the advice she gave her students at Wits when learning to write for an academic audience – understand the parameters, practice the writing and put in the time to develop a base threshold. Only then play and evolve one’s writing style within the boundaries of academic standards.

Brenner’s arrangement with the co-operative evolved too – initially, she had agreed to buy the necklaces for specific prices, given their length, width and complexity. But production varied and she did not want the co-operative to hold back on the time and energy it took to make new designs, worrying about production versus evolution. The women needed to know what they could count on financially, and Brenner needed to know what her financial responsibilities were at the end of the month. So, an agreement was made for Brenner to pay a specific monthly amount to the co-operative, enabling the beaders to adapt production to accommodate moments of development. It was a mutual relationship based on pride in work and trust between all of them; they did not know what was going to happen month by month, but communicated with and responded to each other regularly.

## **Networking and positioning**

Brenner used her core networks to generate interest in the necklaces and to position how and where they would be sold. It was important for her that the necklaces would be sold in environments where they were positioned in a particular way; any sellers needed to know the history of the co-operative, and the necklaces needed to be sold in an environment that embraced the value of context. A book chapter that Brenner co-authored called “Marigold Beads: Who Needs Diamonds!?” (Brenner & Gupta, 2019) described how beading could have been viewed by others as a low-end artistic form or fashion accessory, and not as a highly skilled creative practice. Brenner’s positioning of the Marigold beadwork aimed to highlight and expose the creativity, technique and mastery of the craft.

As the work grew and evolved, necklaces were placed in museum shops locally and abroad: the Norval Foundation in Cape Town, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, the Museum Rietberg in Zurich and the Tate Modern in London. Brenner continued to attract local customers, hosting buyers at her apartment where a section of her living room was renovated to include a series of 16 shallow drawers (in light grey colour so that the colours from the necklaces would stand out, see Exhibit 3) and custom-made glass and perspex display units to highlight individual pieces. The necklaces were also sold in a small selection of additional South African shops and galleries.

Brenner was constantly being asked to sell through other channels such as game lodges or to display the necklaces at fairs. She declined many requests partly because of the limited supply, and partly because of her focus on representing the work in the specific ways outlined above. She had been criticised by this tight control over the selling and positioning of the beads, but remained clear that it was important how the necklaces were presented, appreciated and sold in ways that reflected their value.

## **Learning through collaborations and experience**

In 2016, Brenner represented Marigold at the First National Bank Joburg ArtFair [4], situated at the Sandton Convention Centre [5]. In preparation for the stand, Brenner thought that a new design could be made to echo the work of an artist who would be featured at the art fair; Serge-Alain Nitegeka, a Burundian artist now based in South Africa. Nitegeka had been a student of

Brenner's at Wits many years ago and she admired his work and his rocketing international career. When hearing that he was a selected artist at the ArtFair Brenner broached the idea with him, having in mind that his geometric abstracted work would translate well onto the loomed gridwork that underpinned all Marigolds. She also flew to Bulawayo to discuss the ideas with the beaders, putting together a set of colour printed images of his work, of him, and some sketches of initial ideas she had for the design. She spoke with the beaders also about some of the meanings and interpretations behind his work, also looking together at the formal qualities expressed in his art, such as the particular colours he used. The final range of necklaces, known among the group as the "Serge", used colours resonant with his work: black and white with accents of very specific red, blue and yellow in a sleek, graphic design.

Dube and Mathe travelled from Bulawayo to be present during the three days of the fair as they believed that some things could not be communicated in words or pictures. They thought it was wonderful to see the collectors who admired the necklaces and to hear what was said about them. When returning back to the co-operative, Dube and Mathe shared their overall experiences and learnings. The "Serge" design then evolved further: the beaders heard how collectors enjoyed the graphic look of the necklace and further evolved, or mutated, the design as well as extending the colour combinations. These innovations were referred to among the beaders as "Serge-like".

## **Different partnerships in design**

From Brenner's experience as an artist and a teacher, artistic expression and innovation deepened when one was exposed to new ideas, techniques and other types of art forms. So she was receptive to positioning well-scoped projects (especially in terms of overall time and deliverables) to the Marigold beaders where she thought there could be learning, with the intention that the beadwork would further evolve through the experience.

One such project happened in 2019 in which Marigold necklaces were produced in response to the work of internationally acclaimed South African artist William Kentridge [6], who had a large retrospective exhibition planned for later in the year at the Norval Foundation in Cape Town [7]. As Kentridge's wife Anne Stanwix was a long-time supporter and admirer of Marigold, Brenner thought it fitting that Stanwix should have a "Kentridge-style" Marigold to wear for the exhibition. When both Stanwix and Kentridge both approved the idea, design preparations began.

It was an exciting project for Brenner and the co-operative. Brenner traveled to Bulawayo where she spent three days conducting intensive "masterclasses" about Kentridge's work (showing books and photographs of his work ranging from dramatic productions to drawing, prints and sculpture). They also watched a selection of the videos of his films and operas and discussed what his work meant. After analysing his extensive portfolio, they concentrated on Kentridge artwork that had more geometric shapes, as curved figures or words did not translate well on the Marigold bead grid. An agreement was reached to concentrate on a few pieces of Kentridge's work including the design on the cover of his recent book, *The Refusal of Time* (Meyburgh, Miller, & Kentridge, 2013). A section of the book's front cover was fractured into a more abstract design and re-created in beadwork, which they felt honored Kentridge's style. Through this specific project, five new Marigold designs were created. Once the curators at Norval saw the beadwork, they requested them as part of the Kentridge merchandising for the event at their museum.

## **An opportunity for reflection and innovation during COVID lockdown**

When lockdown occurred in 2020, Brenner was worried that it could be hard to be productive and creative with the world in such a hostile place, where fear governed many decisions and actions. She knew that a focused attention to the creative process was important. So she encouraged the now 18 beaders to focus for a month on one specific design. They started on a check pattern. Ideas and images flowed through WhatsApp. Another lockdown project focused on bell curves: depicting the data graphs and charts showed daily on Covid infection rates in the news. The last project was “voice messages”; sound wave representations of voice recordings which could also be interpreted as heart rates, images that seemed appropriate to represent increased online behaviour during Covid-19 and monitoring of patient vital statistics. The resultant designs were well received when Brenner was able to begin hosting clients again, after almost 10 months of limited contact.

## **Looking back to look forward**

Brenner reflected on Marigold’s history while sitting on her balcony. In the past 10 years there had been the development of this pure looped hand-loomed necklace and within that, around 80 broad design changes, each with variable elements. These changes reflected what she believed was Marigold’s strength: focused innovation, which for her meant focusing on the core product with limited material used, making specific and intentional modifications over time. The overall process felt organic and collective, and she had tremendous pride in how the project had grown and how the work had evolved. The learning curve, however, had been huge: from running a business, reconciling accounts, setting up a pay point machine, to networking with a variety of different stakeholders. Not all the steps had been easy, but she and the beaders took each challenge one step at a time and took a great sense of satisfaction in what had been achieved.

As Brenner considered the potential museum opportunity, she wondered how the guaranteed income from the sales to the museum would create some financial stability for six months, and how that might have a positive impact on herself and the collective. She also contemplated on the beaders’ capacity: 600 specific necklaces would be half of their current capacity and meant that their output would be limited for other work. She was also concerned about whether the museum would display the necklaces in the way that Brenner liked the products to be viewed. Additionally, would making a specific requested design from the Museum be more of a production line approach or would lead to other innovation in the long run? The co-operative often referred to an Ndebele [8] proverb, which reflected their ethos: phambili siyaya, asibuyeli emuva, meaning forward ever, backward never. What did this potential museum buyer represent – a forward move? Or a backward one? What else should be considered before responding?

## **Notes**

1. A co-operative is a business owned and run by the people who work for it.
2. Brenner, J, viewed 10 March 2021, <https://www.jonibrenner.com/>
3. Durban and Cape Town are cities in South Africa.
4. The Johannesburg ArtFair, sponsored by the bank First National Bank, was an annual contemporary art fair that supported and promoted art for the entire African continent.



5. The Sandton Convention Centre was a large event venue that hosted large exhibitions, events and conferences, based in Johannesburg.
6. Willim Kentridge was an internationally acclaimed South African artist whose work was exhibited and sold around the world. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/william-kentridge>
7. The Norval Foundation was a contemporary art museum and sculpture garden situated outside of Cape Town.
8. Ndbele refers to individuals who come from are Bantu-speaking people from southwestern Zimbabwe. They now live primarily around the city of Bulawayo. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ndebele-Zimbabwean-people>>.
9. Marks, Shula, *Southern Africa*, viewed 7 May 2021, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Southern-Africa>>.

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# Exhibit 1. Evolution of necklaces

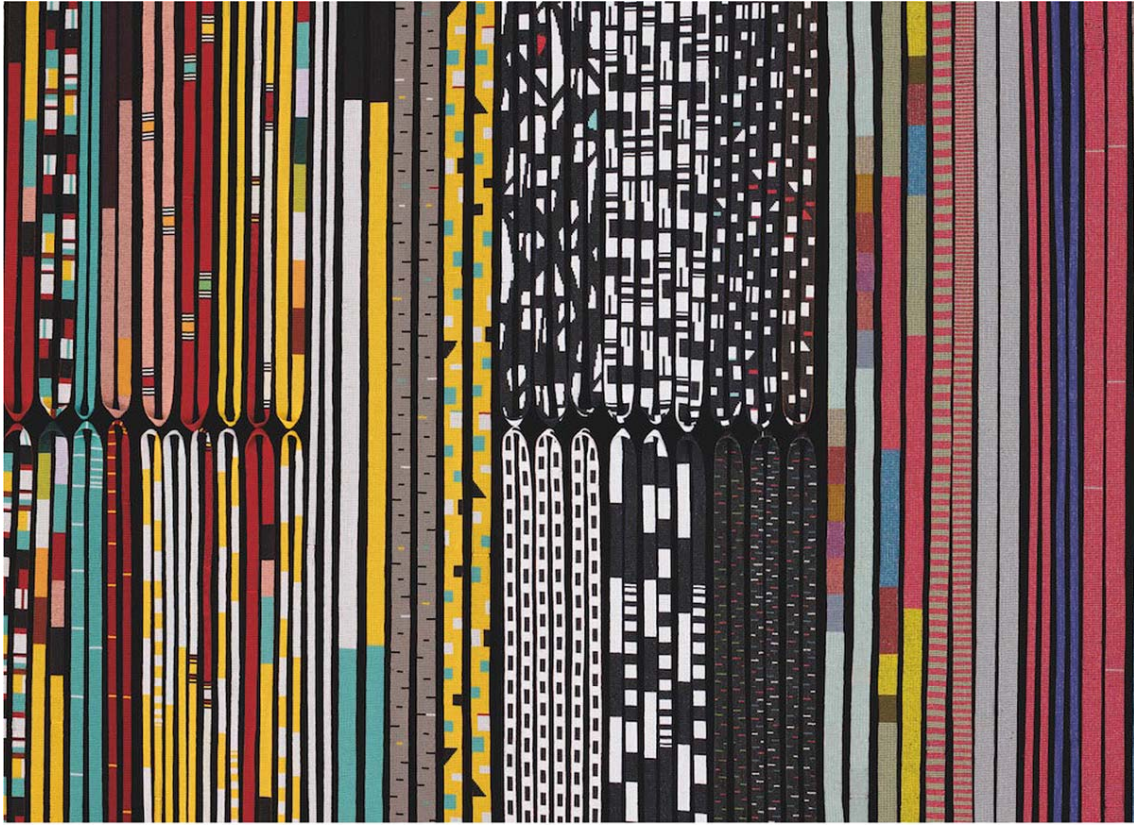
## DESIGN EVOLUTION OF MARIGOLD NECKLACES



(Continued)

Figure E1

## Exhibit 2. Photographic documentation of necklaces



**Source:** Photographs above provided by Joni Brenner. photography by Liz Whitter, poster design by Danel van Jaarsveld

**Figure E2**

**Exhibit 3. Custom-made drawers showcasing necklaces**



**Source:** Photographs above provided by Joni Brenner. photography by Liz Whitter, poster design by Danel van Jaarsveld

Figure E3