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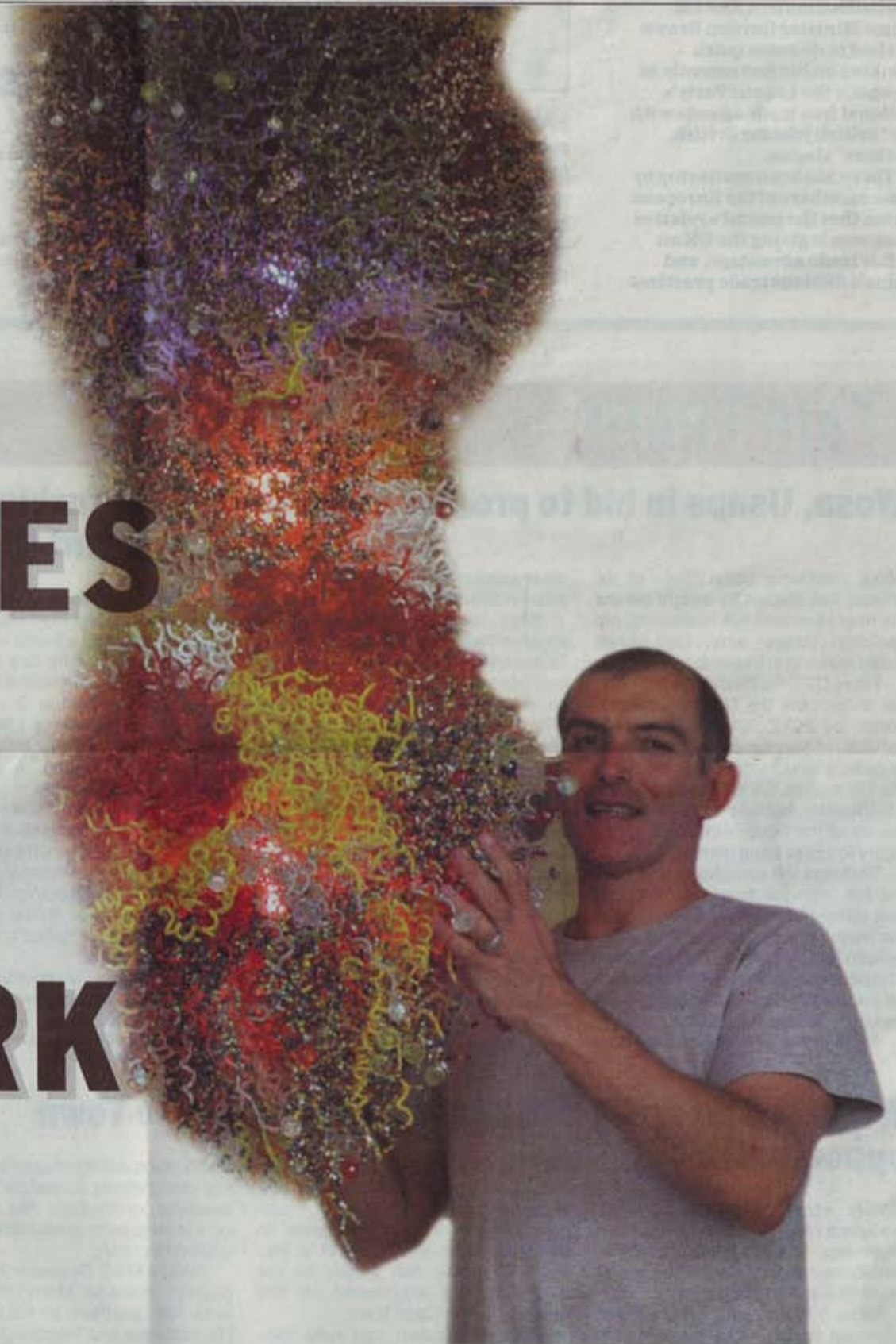
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March 2009

Umcebo Trust's  
ROBIN OPPERMAN

## TREASURES OF THE ZULU BEADWORK



# Disability no obstacle for talented crafters

Foreign sales of traditional Zulu beadwork have transformed the lives of disabled artists, writes **Nicola Jenvey**

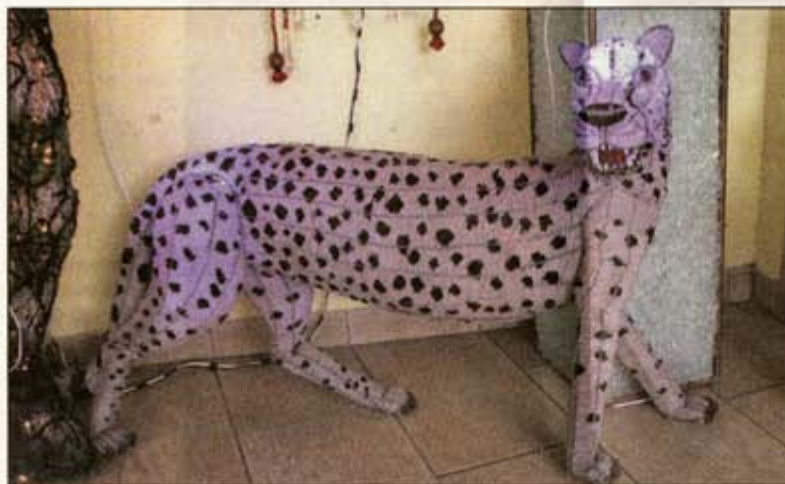
**T**HE Umcebo Trust had humble beginnings as a traditional beadwork project at a school for mentally-challenged children. Umcebo is Zulu for treasure and the artwork now being created from the small workshop and retail outlet within the uShaka Marine World shopping village is treasured by talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey, entrepreneur Richard Branson and Bob Marley's widow Rita.

Less well-known are the pieces assuming pride of place in homes across the US, Canada, UK, France, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and Japan as well as in the foyer of the Azura Hotel in Mozambique. Closer to home, Umcebo won the commission to create beaded aloe trees for the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg.

Fifteen years ago Umcebo Trust director Robin Opperman was an art-loving maths teacher who volunteered his time to the Ningizimu School in Lamontville, and began transforming the lives of mentally handicapped teenagers by teaching them to create art from recyclable waste.

The project swiftly outgrew the school's premises and Opperman established the trust with premises operating from the ArtSpace Gallery in Durban. That facility enables founding artists to hire space for their work and gain a foothold into the commercial art world.

The relationship created a place where children who would more than likely have been shunted into the state's care or run the risk of being abused within their communities, evolved into bread-



A leopard-styled lamp.

winners by selling the products of their newly-acquired skills.

After outgrowing that space the workshop relocated to sponsored premises in uShaka that is today jam-packed with exotic beaded lampshades, free-standing lamps in a variety of shapes and designs, wall hangings and chandeliers.

The overriding theme is African, with aloe trees (the design sent to Branson in Virgin colours), zebra, antelope and flowers. Abstract wall hangings beautifully crafted in the rich colours and textures of Africa are also apparent.

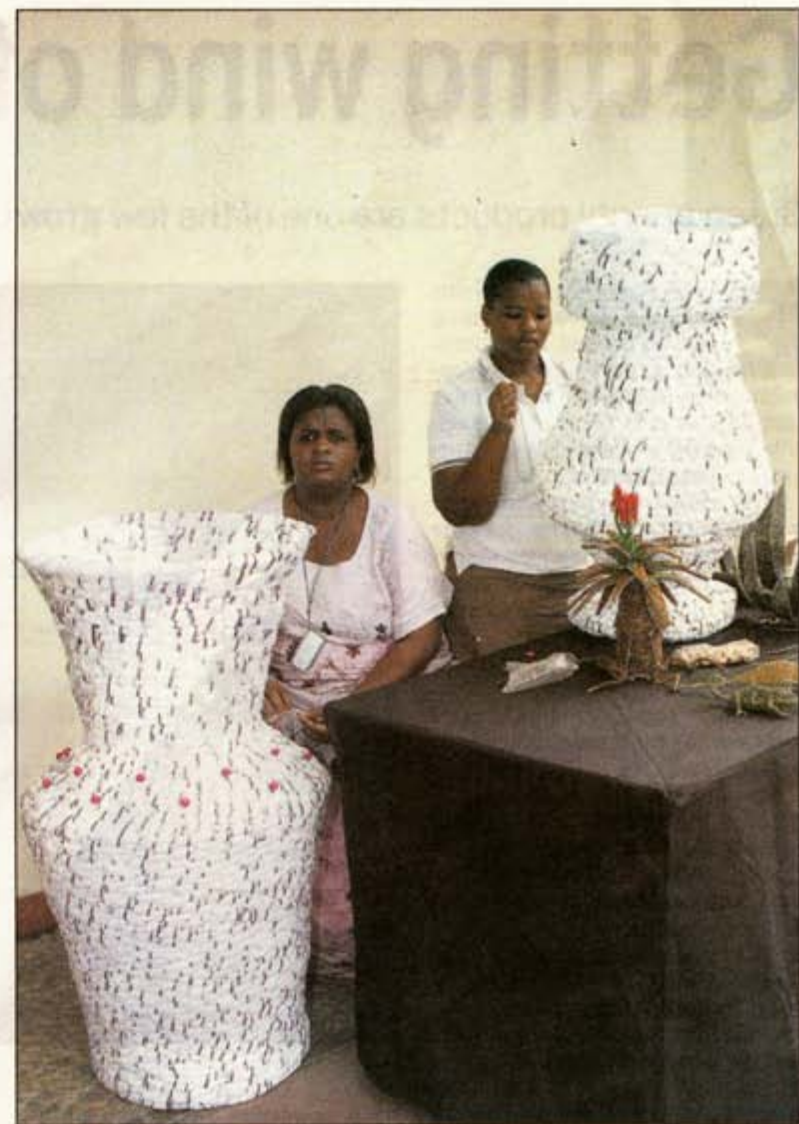
US chain store Anthropology has placed "a pilot order" for 100 pots woven from scrap plastic that Opperman says are "being stored in the most creative places" as each piece is completed, while the initial project has expanded to accept bead working and weaving

pieces commissioned from artists across KwaZulu-Natal.

He says as a non-government organisation the trust aims to establish an inclusive studio workspace for people with special needs and other community members to develop their artistic talents for creative development as well as to generate income.

"Umcebo is committed to the broader education and development of skills for people with special needs, but also aims to include those who have various abilities, encouraging contact between all people no matter what their abilities. The trust believes personal empowerment and improved self-awareness is brought about through art, craft, creativity, learning and teaching," Opperman says.

However, he stresses that educating foreign buyers (particularly



Sithabile Madlala and Nxolo Nomvete work on pots created from plastic that will be shipped to the US.

those working for large-scale chain stores and seeking the "do-good" element such as assisting HIV/AIDS sufferers or impoverished people) plays a major part in developing the business.

"Just because the people working in the public eye do not appear ill or impoverished does not mean they are not so. Everyone is either infected or affected by HIV/AIDS and a fair percentage of these crafts are completed without electricity or the luxury of tarred roads near their homes," he says.

Despite their challenges, Opperman says many of the crafters

have no sense of limitation within their art — a 4m-high beaded wire tree incorporating 10 000 beaded leaves is planned. He hopes this "magic tree" — a symbol of the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic with an inherent message of life and representing the African traditional for sitting under trees to solve problems — will enter the Guinness Book of Records.

Thereafter, the Chelsea Flower Show in the UK has expressed interest in acquiring this unusual piece of art — a final indication African beadwork has a proud role to play in the world's art spectrum