

Highlights and higher powers at Design Indaba 2018: The superheroes of design

By [Terry Levin](#)

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Mick Jagger and David Bowie made the lyric from Marvin Gaye's *Dancing in the Street* "it doesn't matter what you wear just as long as you are there," a 1980's anthem.

Cut to 2018 and the collective Zeitgeist at Cape Town's Design Indaba Festival, may be said to paint a different picture, one in which what you wear and how that communicates identity, culture and self-expression has never mattered more.

This was demonstrated by the Emerging Creatives exhibit showing authentic cultures such as Shweshwe swimwear and new labels such as I Run JHB, Gugu and others street-smart attire.



First speaker honours at Design Indaba is always awarded to a local design practitioner. This year was bookended by Africa, opening with commercials director Sunu Gonera and closing with a tribute to recently fallen warrior Hugh Masekela.



#DesignIndaba2018: 'This is Africa's moment'

Louise Marsland 21 Feb 2018



In the Molotov cocktail shot hurled in the second frame of Gonera's One Source video and every shot thereafter, unashamed African energy and decorative styling offer a glimpse into a vision of a splendid post-apocalyptic Afrofuturism where, in Gonera's words, "aspiration is an attitude."

Coinciding with the recent launch of the spectacular costumery seen in the *Black Panther* blockbuster, Gonera's ovation-worthy presentation, showed his own pantheon of African mythological figures from the Absolut Superheroes short film *Africa is on Fire*, featuring SA DJ's in the guises of The Dragon, The Rain Queen, The Iron Warrior and The Eye, which will be seen at the forthcoming One Source Live event, as evidence of a creative revolution in music, fashion, and art that is happening all around us right now.

Gonera explains, in Africa, we create "on the go, from whatever we have," the process which will continue to breathe fire into the fact that "our stories matter" and that as Africans we can "bring something to the table, without any longer having ask for permission."

This vision is giving rise to the uncovering of our stories – of ancient kings and future heroes – a fusion of fantasy, culture and future-shaping identity.



© Terry Levin.

#Cairopunk

Egyptian-born Amna Elshandaweely examines the issues around what to wear, through the lens of her Egyptian upbringing.

At the age of only 22, Amna has become one of the most successful entrepreneurs in her country, using her fashion ethos to open conversations about the fact that Egyptians consider themselves "non-African," the prejudice that exists against darker skin, gender and the discrimination experienced by Sudanese refugees to Egypt.

Unable to find any clothes she liked that matched her own "culture, experience and struggles," the intrepid Elshandaweely started making her own, embarking on a series of fashion safaris to Kenya, Ghana and Siwa on the Libyan border, to find "the real Africa," fusing the cultural confidence she discovered there into her own fashion identity.

Collections entitled [Road to Nairobi](#) – featuring a fashion shoot using dark-skinned models went viral and other collections such as the most recent #cairopunk herald a fashion empire in the making.

Elshandaweely says the 2011 Arab Spring revolution pushed her forward and made her feel like “proper change was happening around her.”

A fashion show that accompanied her Design Indaba talk saw models wearing t-shirts showing one of the forgotten superheroes of Africa - Nefertiti's iconic image sporting some sort of wearable transforming it into a new version of African identity.

The power of the suit



Not only Africans were getting their superheroes on. Copenhagen-based designer Johannes Torpe was dramatically lowered onto the Design Indaba stage from the theatre's heights by a rope, in dialogue with the AI voice of HAL 9000 from 2001: A Space Odyssey.



Johannes Torpe announced as speaker at Design Indaba 2018

Juanita Pienaar 5 Feb 2018



Johannes (aka your highness) “some people can’t pronounce my name, but I don’t mind,” he says laughing, went on to reveal to the audience that the golden space suits and furniture design, seen in the Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 classic, have been key career inspirations that have seen him transform audio into fashion – as carriables, as wearables and as the ultimate living room accessories during his tenure as creative director for the “mothership Bang & Olufsen.”

Like the heights of hi-fi sound, Torpe’s work demonstrates with crystalline clarity that the business of design is that of creating “universes around things” – whether these are for individuals as costume, products as packaging or as interior design worlds, sharing that every career challenge has been launched by asking himself “Where is my golden space suit?”

The body politics



Bizcommunity I&M editor-in-chief, Leigh Andrews with Lebo Mashile © [Terry Levin](#).

You could have heard a pin drop in the Artscape auditorium as Design Indaba speaker and MC Lebo Mashile delivered an account of her life and work and it is unlikely that there was ever a more rapt or attentive audience for a poetry reading anywhere.



#DesignIndaba2018: Lebo Mashile on why she keeps coming back to gender and race in her poetry

Leigh Andrews 22 Feb 2018



Mashile claims that poetry is the crown jewel of literature and it is plain to see that she is the one to wear it, with the uncanny ability to give voice to issues of patriarchy, gender, colonialism, identity or race and allow them to somehow be exorcised like squeezing a volcanic pimple.

With 120,000 Twitter followers and mass media reach via her former TV personality status, Mashile offers just the right note – non-judgmental, masterful and profound – a riveting Rumi for Africa.

The performance of *Saartjie vs Venus* about the life of Saartjie Baartman, whom she calls “the grand ancestor of body politics right now,” which was performed this week as part of the Design Indaba Festival with Ann Masina, reiterates the themes of identity, self-expression and self-ownership in a world reimagined.

Believe in yourself as heroes

Of US, Nigerian parentage, Swiss-based product and furniture designer Ini Archibong uses fantasy, spirituality and mythology such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the *Bible* and Greek and Roman demigods to add meaning to his highly refined marble and glass furniture and lighting designs, adding that “myths are clues to our hidden potential.”

In his work, the physical takes on the spiritual as seen in the Om table designed to convey the serenity and peace that comes from still water, the gradated glass of his sunset lamp series and Totem, a 1,4 metre sculpture that allows you to take out a stone and carry it around with you each day, as a reminder of what you meditated on, in the morning, all of the above acting as “physical mantras” inspired perhaps by powers greater than ourselves.

An icon for an icon



Hugh Masekela's sister, Barbara takes to the stage at Design Indaba. © [Terry Levin](#).

With ovations, laughter, networking, tears of catharsis and joy, of the overwhelming emotions of struggles faced and overcome, it was time for the finale, which in recent years has become a format for ending with some sort of collective highpoint. This year the opportunity was met by the need to honour the passing of icon and jazz legend, Hugh Masekela.

“ Who is this man with the name of an Aztec god and the mouth of a preacher that comes from the Mother City?

Professor Neri Oxman, MIT Labs. ”

It was none other than publicity-shy Design Indaba founder Ravi Naidoo, who took to the stage for the first time in 23 years, not only to pay tribute to his personal friend and Design Indaba alumnus Bra Hugh Masekela, but also to reveal that in honour of the South African music legend the main hall within Thomas Heatherwick's multi-award winning Zeitz Mocaa architectural masterpiece has been unveiled as the Hugh Masekela Gallery, complete with metallic lettering in the signature font designed for the complex by M&C Saatchi Abel.

Members of Masekela's family, including his sister Barbara, were present on stage with poems and tributes and with the final surprise for an already emotionally drained audience being an appearance by Hugh Masekela's own band, who performed the song *Thuma Mina*, send me, I want to be there, I want to lend a hand”, which recently came to broader public attention as it was quoted by SA's new president, Cyril Ramaphosa in his inaugural address last week.

The butterfly nation

There are shots in Sunu Gonera's One Source video of Khuli Chana's music, in which people dance in front of a graffiti butterfly.

Trend forecaster, Li Edelkoort's presentation this year was about the guise of goddesses, which set me to pondering whether the title Rainbow Nation, the term attributed to us by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe South Africa's diverse peoples in harmony with one another, is still valid.



The *Goddesses* of the past and present (Part 1)

Jessica Tennant 20 Feb 2018



Rainbows are elusive, subject to evaporation. Inspired by the Zeitgeist of this year's Design Indaba could we take on a new identity of a butterfly nation – dynamic and evolving, like Eros and Psyche of love and the soul respectively. Perhaps we will wear regenerating wings grown from organic compounds as shown by Aleksandra Gosiewski or Neri Oxman. Perhaps it won't matter, just as long as we are there, next year at Design Indaba 2019.



#DesignIndaba2018: The next generation of fashion is biology

Jessica Tennant 23 Feb 2018



#DesignIndaba2018: Neri Oxman is naturing our future

Sue Disler 26 Feb 2018



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