

ARTS

Restaurant chain serves up a side-dish of art

South African-owned Nando's has shown a long-running and deep-seated support for art and artists. *Melanie Gerlis reports*

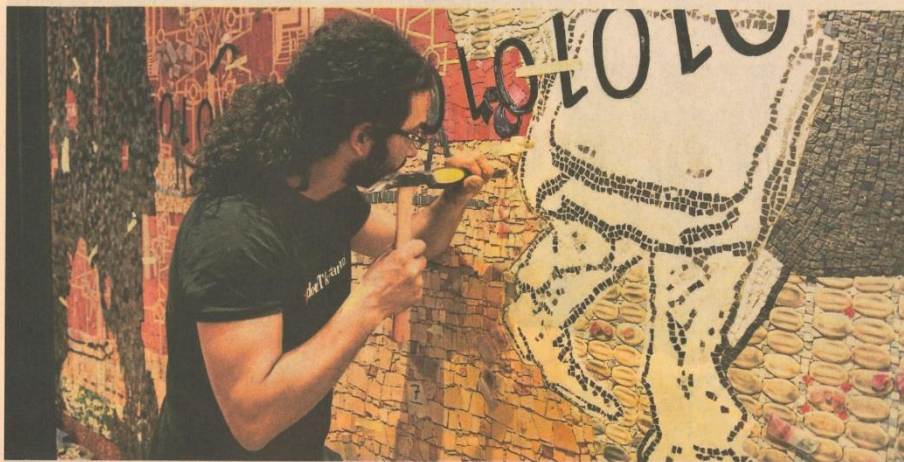
It is famed for its flame-grilled peri-peri chicken and cheeky takeaways. But Nando's restaurant chain also has a lesser-known distinction: it owns the world's largest visible collection of contemporary art from southern Africa.

Nando's support of artists, mostly emerging artists, runs deep. Majorly-owned by South Africa's enterprising billionaire Richard Enthoven and his family, who also buy art privately, Nando's has a growing collection of about 22,000 works. Through the Spier Arts Trust consultancy, which has been managing the corporate collection since 2002, many of the works hang through the group's 1,300 restaurants across the world. The trust manages a further 7,000 works for the insurance group Holland and the Spier Wine Farm, both also Enthoven-owned businesses.

Mirna Wessels, chief executive of Spier Arts Trust, is reluctant to put a value on the collection but says that, over the past four years, the trust has bought around \$600,000 of art per annum. Most of this is now in Nando's global collection.

"For us, it is more than a budgeted figure," Wessels says, and the artists they support agree. Diana Hyslop, a painter who now has more than 250 works in the collection, says, "What Nando's does is amazingly generous; they come here and buy something every two months." We meet in her studio in Johannesburg's Bag Factory, a chaotic, non-profit space that houses up to 17 artists. "We've needed them," Hyslop says of Nando's, explaining that, as the country has been in and out of recession these past few years, "South Africa's art market disappeared with the economy."

Many of the artists in Nando's collection have been trained through its own development programmes. At their core



Above: a student from the Spier Arts Trust helps to install a mural by Clive van den Berg at Nando's, King's Cross, London. Left: artists' 'blocks' on display at Nando's, Birmingham New Street *Jonathan Banks*

is the engaging "Creative Block" starter initiative. Artists apply for this and, if approved by the Spiers chief curator Tamlin Blake (also an artist), earn the right to work on a set of small blank blocks, which are regularly provided. The resulting works – mostly paintings – get critiqued by Blake and, in many cases, are bought for the collection. Five

sizes are available, with commensurate prices, ranging from R1,500 (\$100) for an 18cm square block to R4,200 (\$275) for a 38cm square.

More than 250 artists have participated in this income-generating programme so far, with around 85 at any given time. Nando's currently owns about 12,000 such blocks, some of

which can be seen on the walls of its Birmingham New Street and East Croydon restaurants, for example.

Some artists continue use the blocks even once their careers are more established. These include the Iran-born artist Sepideh Mehraban, who now works in Cape Town. "The blocks are my bread and butter," she says. "Plus I can use them to experiment and be a bit more playful, they don't need to be masterworks."

Nando's is behind other forms of patronage that often stem from an artist's Creative Block commitment. At Victoria Yards, a 30,000 sq m redeveloped industrial zone in Johannesburg's inner-city Bez Valley neighbourhood, two of the city's artists, Ludumo Maqabuka and Nkosinathi Quwe, are sharing a spanking new studio space for a year, thanks mostly to the restaurant chain. "We have a bigger platform, more audience and more opportunity here," says Maqabuka, whose work reflects the hip-hop community of the township in Bramley where he grew up.

Increasingly successful artists who have come through Nando's programmes include the Kinshasa-born Patrick Bongoy, whose rubber-based works now attract an international market, and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, whose work was a sellout at Frieze New York in May through Mariane Ibrahim (the artist also shows with South Africa's Stevenson gallery).

A different Nando's-backed project, the Spier Arts Academy, trains unskilled workers – many from disadvantaged backgrounds – to become professional mosaicists or ceramicists. The three-year apprenticeship programme in Cape Town is "tough", Wessels says, but its graduates (25 a year, chosen from 600 applications) leave with an accredited business qualification and the skills to operate their own studios, should they wish. The development programmes also intertwine: Creative Block artists can get

their work turned into a larger-scale, site-specific mosaics by the Academy students, which are often commissioned for a Nando's restaurant. Examples can be seen in London's King's Cross branch of Nando's, where Clive van den

More than 250 artists have participated in the 'Creative Block' income-generating programme

Berg's intricate and huge (3m x 18m) "Coming to the City" was made and installed by 10 Spier students in 2011, while a 600kg mosaic mural by John Murray surrounds the façade of Nando's in Notting Hill, London, with images including animals and sandals ("Donkey", installed 2018).

Sales of the art mostly take place privately. On behalf of the Enthoven businesses, Spier Arts Trust generally buys work straight from the artists (though they may also go through galleries when relevant). There are few public selling opportunities, though the Trust has



'Birds of a Feather' by Diana Hyslop, from the Nando's art collection

organised occasional pop-up offerings of Creative Blocks during Nando's restaurant refits, such as in its Frith Street branch in London's Soho in 2017. When these works don't sell, Nando's commits to buy them, with proceeds going in full to the artists.

This is also the case for the works that Nando's brings to London's 1:54 Contemporary African art fair, which it has sponsored since 2016. Mehraban is among the artists coming to its booth this year, with works that draw parallels between post-revolutionary Iran and post-apartheid South Africa. Other artists on show will be the Maputo-based Nelsa Guambe, whose paintings delicately reflect women's everyday emotions and circumstances, and the cross-disciplinary Port Elizabeth artist Mxolisi Dolla Sapeta. Works made by the Qaqambile Bead Studio, which sits alongside the Spier Arts Academy in Cape Town, also come to 1:54 this year. Art on the Nando's booth is generally priced under \$10,000.

"The Nando's space at the fair allows more people to know and meet some of these talented artists and buy their original work. It also lets visitors learn more about Nando's art story and later appreciate the art in the restaurants," says Touria El-Glaoui, founder and director of 1:54.

1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair is at Somerset House, London, October 3-6, 1-54.com/london



'X (After Betty Shabazz)' (2013) by Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, from the Nando's collection