

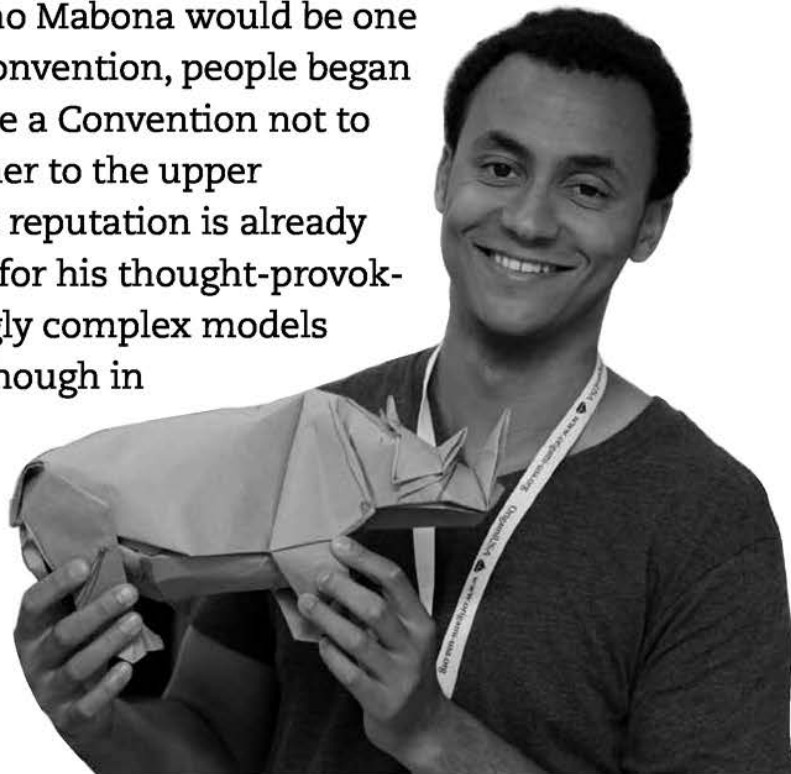
SIPHO MABONA

A Master of Origami

Interview with Laura Rozenberg (NY)

Photos by Andrew Cribb

Ever since it was announced that Siphon Mabona would be one of our Special Guests at the Annual Convention, people began to check their calendars. This would be a Convention not to be missed! Siphon is a relative newcomer to the upper echelons of the origami world, but his reputation is already unquestionable. He's been acclaimed for his thought-provoking conceptual works. His painstakingly complex models appear quite simple at first glance although in order to reach that level of perfection and sheer sensuality one has to master techniques as only few can do today. Plus, he is young and handsome! So no wonder I was thrilled when I finally had a chance to interview him for *The Paper* and *The Fold*.



Siphon, just before meeting you today I was thinking that there is no other art form that “behaves” like paperfolding. You don’t see a Picasso or a Rembrandt handing sheets of instructions to people in order to allow them to make exactly the same thing. So what really attracts you to origami?

Well, as you explained, Picasso wouldn't have given anybody a sheet with the diagrams on it. I think that's one of the reasons why certain people look at origami not as an art form but rather more as a craft and I think that, to a certain extent, origami has quite a few aspects of a craft. I think it depends on how you actually go

about making origami to kind of differentiate it between a craft and a fine art. So that's one of the things I have been focusing on in my work. From my perspective what I brought to this Convention is probably more towards works of craftsmanship. They are single pieces because the focus was on sculpture and not so much on what I was trying to say with it.

So installations shift focus from a single piece to a wider landscape, and the viewer begins to investigate other meanings?

The pieces in an installation are more about concept. Again, I like craftsman-

ship as well. I care about how things are crafted and I try to make a piece as nice as I can. I try to fold it in a very nice way but at the same time the main focus of an installation is more on what I am trying to say with the piece.

Earlier this year at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles I saw your installation of locusts coming out of sheets of bank notes, and it was really very thought-provoking.

The locust swarm is (so far) my strongest piece, where the concept behind it is pretty obvious at first sight. But then if you think a little deeper, you discover

aspects and more things, and everybody kind of interprets something different from your piece. I think that's one of the important parts—people can make all kind of connections to it.

What is the most unusual thing you have heard about that installation?

I like when people discover things in art that I hadn't even intended (to show). For instance, when I worked on the locusts, I was thinking more of a plague, but people were thinking I was using locusts because they are elusive, they jump away. Like money is elusive. In German, the word locust translates as *Heuschrecke*, which is also a metaphor for someone who eats everything, packs up and moves on. The term is being used to criticize private investors and investment banks. But not all is bad. At the same time, locusts, in its metamorphic cycle, have a transformative aspect which shows that money per se is not the problem. The problem is what you do with it. It's a transformative process; you can always fold it differently. It might not fold into a locust, it might fold into something else.

Tell us something about your family. What is your background?

My dad is from South Africa, and my mom is Swiss. He was a political refugee,



Sipho Mabona created and folded the models on this page out of one sheet of square paper each. The bear, rhino and elephant were exhibited at the 2012 OrigamiUSA Annual Convention in New York.

they met in Rome, then moved to Switzerland. I was born 32 years ago and grew up in Switzerland. We never got a chance to go to South Africa until the end of the apartheid regime. I have an older brother, Themba, who is an anthropologist, and a sister, Nomsa, who studied English literature in Zürich and is working as an English teacher now. My dad is also an anthropologist but he is retired. He was a professor, but when he went to Switzerland, his degrees weren't accepted, and he had to work in completely different venues like taking care of people in hospitals and things like that. Basically we are a family of teachers now except my mom, she used to work as a nurse but now has retired. I don't have an artistic background. I am kind of the only artist in my family.

When did you realize that art was what you wanted to pursue in life?

I always loved art and craftsmanship, but when I was about to choose what I would do with my education, I was kind of scared of going into art because my parents had an influence and said it is an insecure field—you never know if you are going to make a living with it. They had an influence in the beginning but then they changed when I became a professional artist.

Do you work with other mediums besides paper?

I try to incorporate other media more and more but mostly it's paper. I think incorporating other media shows somewhat of an openness to art in general. It takes away of the craft stigma of origami.

Do you paint or sculpt?

I don't paint at all but I think I had a bit of talent for it as kid. I lost interest though and painting is a lot about practice so I never excelled at it. But I've always had more talent in the three-dimensional field rather than in the two-dimensional one.

What prompted you to choose paperfolding as your medium for expression?

It was more by doing. I folded since I was very young, but at one point I started getting commissions, because some people saw my stuff. For instance, I liked doing that commercial for ASICS (Pursuit of Perfection) it's a movie that tells a story



of sport shoes... I created 15-20 original origami models and helped animate them. It was a lot of fun.

It seems you managed to overcome the consequences of the financial crisis in Europe.

If you are an artist and you have some success, it is easier. For me, I never had to advertise myself. But still there is always a certain kind of insecurity. It is not scary though, because I have a background as a teacher (of English). And I've also been studying psychology.

How did you begin creating and exhibiting paperfolding?

I first started with paper airplanes, and I think my first creation was a goblin mask from a frog base. It was a sort of modification from a traditional model. The first time I actually displayed origami in public was at the origami convention in Verbania. I think I showed some of my beetles, a Christmas Scene and puffer fish.

When you do an installation, do you think of other materials that go well with paper?

I did an installation with paper and helium balloons. They go together well, it's lightweight, they float. Wood and paper is also good. And there is an installation I created with swallows crashing into Plexiglas. I could also use wire.

How are you perceived by non-origami artists? Are you in a different corner?

I think I am in a different corner, and it doesn't only have to do with the medium I am working with. I think it also has to do with the fact that I wasn't trained originally as an artist and where I live is nowhere like New York, where it seems easier to get mingled. I am kind of progressing slowly but still I am kind of an outsider. I think a lot of people think of paperfolding as a craft and not so much as a conceptual art form.

What art galleries have been calling you to exhibit?

Not many galleries. I'm in some museums, but it's still hard. However, interest has been growing since the installation in Los Angeles. Right now I am in a museum in Switzerland, near Luzerne where I live, and at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. There is also gallery in Palm Springs, California, which showed some interest in my work.

Thank you Sipho, it's been a great pleasure talking to you and we all wish you a good and long career as an artist and a representative of paperfolding of the highest quality around the world. 🍴



A complex bear in the hands of Siphon seems possible to achieve!

Siphon Mabona's site:
www.mabonaorigami.com

In Pursuit of Perfection: is the name of the award winning video that tells the story of the Japanese sport brand ACSIS. For this video, Siphon Mabona designed the origami models and consulted throughout the animation process. The video won a Gran Prix at the Eurobest, gold at the New York Festival, gold at the London International Awards, silver at the Clio in Miami and two times bronze at ADC Germany. It can be viewed at: <http://vimeo.com/2188162>



Siphon Mabona teaching his models at the 2012 OrigamiUSA Annual Convention.



Here Siphon explains how to generate volume in the swallow's body.