

ROSE KGOETE

South African, born 1972

16 June 1976 Youth Day, 1999/2007

Embroidery on fabric, 43 1/4 × 45 inches

Gift of Kate Ezra, 2018.8

Rose Kgoete's textile recaptures a pivotal moment in the long campaign to overturn apartheid, a system of racial subjugation that held sway in South Africa for more than four decades, from 1948 to the early 1990s. The artist allows us to imagine a particular intersection in Soweto, where a great tragedy occurred on June 16, 1976.

On that day students left their classrooms in protest of the addition of Afrikaans alongside English as a compulsory language of instruction. The decree proved a flash point for Black students because Afrikaans was the language used by National Party leaders of a white minority regime. Singing struggle anthems, the students were met by police, tear gas, and live ammunition.

More than 500 young people died, including Hector Pieterse, the 12-year-old boy who has been stitched into the heart of this work. At the time, Pieterse's murder was memorialized by photojournalist Sam Nzima in an iconic black-and-white image that rocketed around the world. Journalists, videographers, and photographers regularly risked their lives to chronicle anti-apartheid protests. Their reports about brutal police violence sparked and helped sustain an international solidarity movement that was akin, in scale and scope, to the mass worldwide mobilization against slavery a century earlier.

What is radical, upending, and deeply moving about Kgoete's piece is the way she prods our memories while also inviting us to consider the entire community. Hector Pieterse's murder gets its rightful due, but there's more to the story here. Working from a black-and-white image, she instead renders the neighborhood in resplendent color. The township Kgoete creates is filled with blooms and a flowering tree, more like it looks today than it did forty-four years ago. It is legible here as a beloved space filled with young survivors of the massacre who raise their arms in protest—"Stop shooting!"—but also in exuberant expressions of determination and joy. The artist does far more than reproduce a memorial scene. Instead, she widens the frame and enriches our understanding of a historic insurrection.

—Douglas Foster

Associate Professor of Journalism