

CONSCIENTIOUS CONSUMPTION: MONKEYBIZ ANIMALS

Out of Africa, gifts that give back

These fanciful critters have Oprah's stamp of approval, Moira Farr writes

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A herd of tiny, colourful animals marches across the floor of Jeanne Grierson's warehouse headquarters in Toronto as though crossing the savannah. The fanciful beaded creatures - miniature versions of gazelles, elephants, hippos, giraffes - are from Africa, but not the safari-crisscrossed wilderness. Each began its trek in a Cape Town shanty, stitched and fashioned into life by one of more than 450 artists, mainly women who have HIV/AIDS or care for others with the disease.

Where they travel next depends on the generosity of corporate or individual gift-givers who purchase an animal for \$50 to \$500, knowing that the money provides a living for the artists as well as community services such as a health clinic. Each maker's name - Eunice Tema, Noloyiso Maphakathi - appears on a card attached to her creation.

"It's groundbreaking - these women are making art that is utterly unique, drawing on colour and pattern that is deeply ancestral," says South African-born Grierson, who has partnered with Cape Town-based Monkeybiz, the non-profit art collective that promotes the work.

It's right on trend, too. According to British-based Marketing Magazine, this year's favourite themes when it comes to corporate gift-giving are thoughtfulness, restraint and social responsibility.

Print Edition - Section Front

Section L Front [Enlarge Image](#)

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Established by ceramic artists Barbara Jackson and Shirley Finch and cultural expert Mathapelo Ngaka, Monkeybiz has garnered an international reputation, enjoying sold-out exhibitions in Britain and support from celebrities such as Donna Karan. She appears, along with Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, in a Monkeybiz video called *Bigger Than Barbie*.

However, Grierson says, "you don't have to be a Rockefeller to help. People find it hard to grasp when you say that, in sub-Saharan Africa, 15 million people have AIDS. But

when you know you have contributed to the well-being of a real individual by purchasing their art, it has more meaning."

As sole Canadian distributor of the work, which includes dolls and wall hangings, Grierson hopes that more of the corporate world will engage in do-good gifting this season. Having recently been joined in the (non-profit) biz by her daughter, Sacha, and colleague Heidi Pyper, she is an old hand at tying beautiful gifts to a charitable cause. For the past eight years, she has run Eat My Words, which makes gorgeously decorated cupcakes, cookies, cakes and truffles and donates the profits to the Stephen Lewis Foundation.

"We give Eat My Words treat trays to our ad agencies at Christmas and they always love them, especially when they know the proceeds go to a good cause," says Mary Kreuk, vice-president of marketing at CTV.

Amanda Ashford, marketing co-ordinator at Virgin Mobile, is enthusiastic about the possibilities for Monkeybiz. "It's such a good tie-in with Virgin Unite, our charitable arm in Africa," she says. She is also smitten with Grierson's organic truffles iced with African motifs. With a tiny beaded doll attached, "everyone on my list is getting them," Ashford says.

Perhaps the ultimate sign that "gifts with a conscience" have arrived is the nod from Oprah: Monkeybiz was written up in her magazine O.

"It's a long way from Cape Town to Moose Jaw," Pyper says as she pulls together a Monkeybiz shipment destined for the Prairies. Given their growing appeal, these artful animals are destined to trek far for a long time to come.

Custom and corporate orders are available through Eat My Words 416-489-7700.