

Isis Dai—An Inner Battle on a Canvas

She has resisted and accepted, and now Mozambique's Isis Dai is ready to share her art with a smile



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Introduction

It's about 10 pm in a lively apartment filled with undergraduate students chatting and listening to music. In the midst of this, someone wears her jacket, carries her bag, and chugs a Red Bull. One of the attendees asks, "Isis, where are you going?" Beaming Isis, clad in her expressive jewelry-heavy outfit that complements her dark skin, says she has a shift at a distress centre. A chance for her to fulfill her passion for mental health, an industry that she wishes to pursue to the highest degree.

Alongside her passion for mental health, Isis also possesses the ability to create rich, colourful, detailed worlds on a canvas. an artist's mind that has been there for her since her formative years in Mozambique. Her 2025 artwork "Our Way", created for the University of Toronto African Association, is a richly detailed nod to Mozambican identity, with its striking, abstract backdrop behind the realist self-portrait of Isis herself.

Her art style has always featured a pencil-drawn realist portrait of herself or loved ones, contrasted with a "cartoonish" background, naturally drawing attention to the realist subject. In the case of "Our Way", the backdrop serves as a canvas for symbols of Mozambican identity. On it are symbols commonly associated with 2M beer, a widely loved national commodity, as well as the colours of the national flag.

Below the portrait are the words “Eixx Nossa Maniera,” our way in English, which is the tagline attached to the beer, showcasing its national and undisputed Mozambican significance. And at the very bottom is another tagline, “pelo progresso e pela paz,” which translates to “for progress and for peace,” relating to the country’s fight for freedom.



The country’s young history has been fueled by resistance. The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) defeated the Portuguese colonial government in 1974, leading to Mozambique’s independence. Post-independence, the nation was gripped by a 15-year brutal civil war between the Marxist FRELIMO party and the liberal Mozambican National Resistance forces (RENAMO). With its past, most of

Mozambique's history has been tied to its efforts towards stability and freedom. In some ways, it does relate to Isis's life from her childhood up till now, days before she walks the stage in regalia.

Weeks before the end of the semester, I had the chance to talk to Isis about her love for art and what drives her in her passion for mental health aid. Although the conversation was online, it showed her complete honesty and resilience in what she shared, especially in discussing her childhood.

What happened to you?

Growing up in Mozambique as a woman brings certain expectations and aspirations, regardless of an individual's wishes. The nation is a largely patriarchal one, a male-dominated way of life where values and culture are shaped by their perspectives. In Mozambique, patriarchy creates a mindset shaping what role women play in society, which is a largely domestic one, specifically marriage and familial roles. Therefore, Mozambican women have to deal with challenges such as oppression, undermination, or child marriages. Such challenges can harbour a sense of isolation, further deepening into mental health illnesses such as anxiety or depression, especially if they were an outlier in how a Mozambican woman is supposed to act.

Right from a young age, Isis grew increasingly aware of the isolation attached to not fitting the ideal mould of a Mozambican woman. Her young, reserved nature painted a picture of being "grandiose, or big-headed" in a nation where submissiveness for women is expected. It unfortunately morphed into a certain level of social anxiety that brought difficulty in creating relationships with her peers. It was a period when her apparent failure to conform to expectations led her to internalize the belief that she had "no value" in her environment, creating a desperate need for external validation.

And in her words, “that’s where the art thing started.” A passion was born from the desire to be in control of something: the canvas, the colours to use, and the topics to explore. It was something authentically Isis, regardless of any persona or conformity she crafted externally. Her art never lied. It never brought her closer to an ideal Mozambican woman. But it did bring her closer to self-assured Isis, as shown through her high school piece “What Happened to You?”

It was also the piece that “made her teacher cry,” which she joked about, highlighting the bleak nature of it. What stands out immediately once reading it is the bold question separating the self-portrait of toddler Isis and the high school one (present at the time). There’s an innocence and curiosity in the eyes of the younger one, alongside the warm yellow shirt she wears. It’s in complete contrast to the dull green shirt she wears. It’s in complete contrast to the dull green shirt, with a black streak on the older, coupled with an emotionless expression as she looks down on the younger.



It’s a self-critical piece that expresses Isis’s disappointment at her artificial persona. A fabrication that is in complete contrast to the unfiltered personality of her younger self. The backdrop is covered by

questions posed at the older self, such as “Why are you always crying?” and “Why are we taking sleeping medication? “Why are you disrespectful?” Questions that force high school Isis to interrogate herself, and to accept the black streak of mistakes within herself, so she can grow.

Acceptance

There’s a certain level of beauty in a black-stained shirt; although it’s an outlier among the clean shirts, its uniqueness and confidence in its existence are, in themselves, an art piece that grows over time. Today, Isis’s art is a canvas for her joys. The hard-hitting lyrical references in Rico Nasty, or trading paper for black jeans to paint on, are a full awakening of her love for art. Time and steady maturity have brought clarity and self-confidence. She acknowledges that it is still a work in progress; however, it’s at a stage where her canvas isn’t majorly used as an emotional outlet but as a chance to experiment with new colours and forms.





As Isis crosses the stage in her regalia in a few days, she will begin her graduate studies in social work and then pursue employment in the same field. She acknowledges how the future could change her art leanings; in her words, she could “maybe be making something different next year.” Regardless, Isis will always look to help everyone accept the black stain on their shirts, whether in a distress centre or through the canvas.

You can see more of her work on Instagram at [@whatsthatssupposedtobe](#). Also on Substack at [Izinhaaa](#).