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15 September 2020

Redressing past injustices through art

Reshaping the University of Cape Town's (UCT) art collection and transforming it into a resource for researchers, curators and students is what UCT's Works of Art Committee (WOC) aims to achieve. The committee plays a critical role in redressing some of the past's injustices through its commitment to purchase artwork by both prominent and emerging artists in South Africa.

The WOAC oversees the display and integration of art into campus life. The university boasts a vast visual art collection, which comprises approximately 1 700 artworks across 70 UCT buildings — many of which represent the work of South Africa's most noted artists, as well as the art of emerging talents.

In recent years, there's been ongoing debate about the need to transform UCT's art collection. Chairperson of the committee Associate Professor Nomusa Makhubu said transformation is a priority. "An institutional art collection maintains historical and cultural value only when it is socially responsive and when there is a measure of self-reflexivity in terms of the institutional practices it engenders. We have established a working group, and we are in the process of identifying the key areas that will need to be addressed. We recognise that we need to refine our acquisition strategy, while conserving certain artwork and diversifying the curation and site-specific installations."

She added: "We still have a long way to go to shape our current artwork collection into one that reflects the socio-cultural dynamics in South Africa and beyond our borders. There are significant gaps when it comes to race and gender in our collection, which we have been in the process of filling in these past few years. We also need to develop an in-depth collection reflecting key historical categories by, for example, acquiring artworks of key African modern artists and African contemporary artists based outside of Cape Town."

To help UCT transform its art collection, the committee has managed to achieve this through new acquisitions and re-curation. "We are thrilled that works by both established and emerging artists have been purchased and are being displayed at various sites on campus. This is an incredible achievement," she said.

Makhubu pointed out that the question of accessibility has been an important one for the committee. "While there are a few artworks installed in access-controlled areas, the majority of UCT's art collection is installed across campus in public spaces.

However, she said there's been no platform that enables all members of the UCT community to view the work in the collection and learn more about each piece. "To help us address this, we have recently created the [WOAC website](#) to serve as an archive of past organised

interventions, a platform to showcase upcoming events and an entry point to get to know the collection.”

UCT’s art collection is relatively easily accessible to the public. “But the website is one other way of ensuring the collection is accessible to those outside the campus community. We really want it to be an educational resource that attracts researchers from other institutions and organisations both in and outside South Africa,” she concluded.



UCT’s WOAC chairperson, Associate Professor Nomusa Makhubu.

Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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