The Chancellor of Rhodes University, The Hon Judge Lex Mpati
The Vice Chancellor, Dr Sizwe Mabizela
Chairperson of Council, Mr Vuyo Khahla
Members of the Council of Rhodes University, the Executive Management and Senate of the University
My fellow Graduands, and Family members
Staff, Students and Friends of the University
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you. I am greatly honoured and humbled to receive this award. And delighted too, since Rhodes University is my Alma Mater, and where I first learned to be an artist. I am aware that conferring honorary degrees to artists is not new for Rhodes, and two years ago Hugh Masekela stood here to receive his award. Bra Hugh played his trumpet to everyone's delight. If only I could paint you a picture! But you have seen some of my works projected, and I hope these images resonate with my words.

I need not remind you that we live in uncertain times. But I do want to remind you that it is crucial to assert your creativity and critical consciousness in this fraught moment. My discipline is the domain of the image. But images feature in all fields. We don't have to be scholars of the humanities or social sciences to know that our brain processes the world as images, and that images can come to represent the ideas for which we might even be prepared to die.

To have the chance to study how images resonate as 'imaginative narrative', as we read, write, make sounds, move our bodies and argue, is a gift. Our relationship with images shows us, and our society, what it means to be human, and acts as society's safeguard against authoritarianism, the kind in which creative and analytical work function only insofar as they serve the ideologies of authoritarian power.

There is a view that it is not necessary to go to university to develop this creative and critical consciousness. Artists and thinkers are born, not made,

they say. As a schoolgirl, I was of this view. All I needed was to develop my natural talent by perfecting my technical skill. My mother disagreed: 'You need an education for life', she declared, insisting that university was where I'd find it.

What better place to learn to be a free thinker and enact freedom of expression, the desideratum of my discipline. This was the 70's, the time of the Hippie generation, of flower power and free love. Everything was free. Even those harrowing critiques, when your professor tore your precious creations to shreds. 'You must destroy in order to create' went the mantra. 'Breaking old molds will set you free'. What a good education!

We know, of course, that it was not a good, good education. And it was certainly not free. Someone was paying the terrible price of racial oppression, that crime against humanity that supported the system. This is not to say that Rhodes students did not protest that crime, through their activism. Indeed there were many art school easels in the barricades of the Struggle. But it was not easy to bring politics into the studio. The argument for art's autonomy was too strong. 'Political protest belonged in the streets and with NUSAS', was the message. What I experienced as a good education at Rhodes was an education that, shamefully, excluded 'Africa' on every level.

I don't mean to knock my Alma Mater – this was the situation in all white institutions at the time. Rather I am reflecting on my own complicity - despite my political consciousness - in accepting this bad education for good education

Times have changed, and there is still so much that needs to be changed. But you can safely say today, that you have had a good, good education, the type of education that so many more should have access to; the right to access this education is the right for which we must continue to fight.

Political change calls for a heightened awareness of the power of images. What forms do we give to our public and private selves now? The question; 'What's wrong with this picture'? is not only rhetorical.

I want to go back in time to a personal dilemma I had with 'the image' as a young artist in my studies in the UK after Rhodes. There I encountered a feminist aesthetics that argued that socially engaged artists should refrain from depicting images of women because the visual language in which women's bodies were depicted was so thoroughly a product of the male gaze that any representation of the female form risked perpetuating patriarchal power. The argument made logical sense under patriarchy, but it felt wrong in other ways. By avoiding the image with which I identified, patriarchal pitfalls not withstanding, I would deny my own female desire and my need to connect with others. Could I not work against the grain in this body politics? I took the risk. I learnt a lot, an experience that helped me when I returned to South Africa and chose to engage with the more complicated questions of racialized images of women. This presented its own ethical dilemma with which I am still grappling today.

The digital revolution has had its way with images. Politics has a new face; Hashtags win the day. This is not to say that the importance of physical form fades away. The statue of Cecil Rhodes could fall a trillion times in the internet, but for things to really change his bronze body had to come down from his platform, and be removed from the land he had so long surveyed.

In the media recently a cartoon by Zapiro has sparked another debate around our public symbols. It depicts a rape scene where President Zuma and one of the Gupta brothers are the perpetrators. The rape victim is draped in the South African flag. Zapiro defends his use of rape as a metaphor for the violation of our country through state capture. But rape is an all too pervasive and painful reality in South Africa. That besides, what is demonstrated by presenting rape as the so-called universal sign for violation, and woman as the sign of nation is that our visual language is still imprinted with patriarchal

and colonial inscriptions. It also shows that images can hurt. Is the image worth the hurt?, one might ask.

South Africans are passionate about debating images because the consensus of what we look like is still to come. The digital revolution makes it easier but also more difficult. It demands that we grasp the complexity of how technologies, bodies, image and the narratives about them operate in digital culture. How does the phenomenon of the 'selfie' work for instance? It does not conform with the self-representation of identity we have studied in the past. Our tried and tested methods of analysis might not be so appropriate now. The selfie merges the imagined and live(d) self through blurring image and imagining processes. If there is an identity it speaks of, it is the performance of digital, read global, connectivity. The new field of Digital Humanities is set to take this on being a field that both employs digital technology in the pursuit of humanistic research and subjects the same technology to humanistic questioning.

Digital visualization knows no bounds, what with 'augmented reality', fake news, Photoshop, high-speed data, codes, algorithms and more besides. As Achille Mbembe observes: 'The economic consequences of this revolution are hard to predict. But its cultural, political and aesthetic effects are already manifest. In Africa, as in the rest of the world, life behind screens has become a fact of daily existence, including for many urban poor.'

What would my mother say now about 'an education for life'? She would want me to be WOKE or whatever the equivalent of WOKE then was - a state of enlightened understanding, particularly related to social justice, and a way to be awake to one's own privilege.

The grounds for this 'awake' state lie in embodied engagement with others.

I benefitted from embodied learning at Rhodes in ways that changed my life. I remember one moment in particular. It was the 1st year drawing class, in the art school in Somerset Street. Us students were perched on our donkeys – a

donkey is an easel on which you sit rather than at which you stand. I was making my best drawing ever. The medium was liquid - pen and ink - the subject, an imagined composition. There was a great sense of freedom with the medium that came as a relief after days of trying to bend the dry black lines of a 3 B pencil into a white plaster bust of Pericles. Then an accident happened, moments before my lecturer was to review my work; I spilled a blob of ink and blotted my picture. Pointing to the blot, my lecturer exclaimed, ‘’The cat works wonderfully!’ “Its a mistake’, I retorted. ‘Lucky you, to have a mistake that turns into a cat’.

Lucky indeed. I learned a vital lesson that day, one that guides my art practice today – to see the potential of the mistake, and the benefit of another’s eyes to help to see that potential. The blot turned into my longstanding interest in the materiality of the medium, and the medium as idea beyond its function of depiction. The lesson has also helped me in my teaching, and in my personal life. At a time of immense grief, when words failed, the blot appeared, presenting itself as the body into which I could release my blocked emotions. Images can heal as much as they can hurt.

My advice to you today?
Embrace your mistakes. They can be creative and teach you a lot about yourself.
Engage the image-world around you, love it and critique it. And in so doing, ask not *only* what the image can do for you, but what you can do for the image.

Your studies have given you the capacity to form and transform the world. Appreciate this. Act on it. And know, as in Samuel Beckett’s words, ‘Creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place every day.’ Seize the day! And the best of luck!