

**VICE-CHANCELLOR’S DISTINGUISHED
RESEARCH MEDAL**

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour of presenting to you
Ruth Helen Simbao,
Associate Professor of African Art History and Visual Culture
in the Department of Fine Art,

for the award of the Vice-Chancellor’s Distinguished Research Medal.

Professor Simbao is acknowledged as a leading South African researcher on traditional and contemporary African art, and the distortions arising from Eurocentric framing of the field. She has worked and conducted research in various African countries¹, and in the USA and Canada. Professor Simbao holds a Doctoral degree from Harvard University, and three international Masters degrees (one from Harvard, and two from ICS² in Toronto). Her undergraduate education is a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Stellenbosch. She has studied, taught, and held curatorial positions in the USA, Canada, and Southern Africa, including a curatorial internship at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and a Research Fellowship at the National Gallery of Canada. She has also worked as a freelance art critic, writing for international publications such as Parachute, Mix, Fuse, NKA and ThirdText. Locally her criticism has been voted Best Art Writing by the online magazine Artthrob for two consecutive years.

One of her referees, who describes her as an “outstanding candidate” for the Vice-Chancellor’s Distinguished Research Medal, attributes her success in part to the academic and experiential path she has walked, linking on-the-ground African field work with some of the world’s leading scholarly thinking. To quote from this referee: “The advisors and assessors of her doctoral dissertation read like a Who’s Who of African Studies; the experience Ruth had of teaching alongside such luminaries while completing her studies at Harvard, represents an extraordinary privilege.” The luminaries referred to in this quote include Henry Louis Gates Jr., Kwame Anthony Appiah, Suzanne Preston Blier, Emmanuel Akyeampong, James Pritchett and Peggy Phelan.

Her disciplinary experience, which includes philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, performance studies, and African studies, reaches beyond Art History, and most of her work is conducted at the intersection of Art History, Anthropology, and critical theory. She has conducted extensive field work in Africa, notably in Zambia, which has included training in a number of African languages. She is described by a colleague as being “mindful of tradition while working at the cutting edge of criticism”, and in her PhD dissertation she developed a theory of performance to playfully subvert old-fashioned notions of tradition.

Much of Professor Simbao’s research is associated with notions of ‘place’, geo-politics, diaspora, and site-specific art, and is marked by its challenge of European and North

¹ South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

² ICS – Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada.

American dominance of the field. Her recent work considers the Global South in relation to the contemporary art world, specifically China's relationship to South Africa. Whilst retaining academic rigour, her work is frequently instilled with an activist edge, linking it to socio-political issues such as racism, xenophobia, and forms of stereotyping. Displaying a subversive African stance in her work, she contributes regularly to *African Arts*, the leading US African Art Journal published by MIT press, and she has published several chapters in international books and exhibition catalogues. Such is the acknowledgment of her contributions to scholarly knowledge, that Professor Simbao's work has been translated into Portuguese, Spanish, and Danish. She has presented her work at numerous conferences in the USA, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong and Jamaica, and will be a keynote speaker later this year at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, Portugal.

She is described by one referee as having "an encyclopedic knowledge of traditional and contemporary art, and of African and Diaspora art".

Other referees have the following to say about her:

"Her research results enrich discussions throughout the entire realm of cultural studies; particularly art history. Ruth is a remarkable young scholar."

Another:

"Truly impressive ... (she is) a superb interpreter of visual texts, and displays a masterful knowledge of their African contexts."

Yet another:

"She remains linked to the larger academic world in a way that is unusual amongst South African scholars (in this field)."

And finally, one that writes:

"Her scholarship is on a par with the best work being produced about African art and Diaspora art. I compare the ease with which she navigates different traditions and disciplines to the work of Cheryl Finley and Kellie Jones."

Mr Chancellor, I request you to award the **2009 Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Research Medal** to **Professor Ruth Helen Simbao**.