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Removal of UCT artworks is about curation, not censorship, says Price

The removal of works of art at the University of Cape Town is intended to help create a process of inclusive engagement and discussion to help advance transformation in the area of art curation; it is not intended to censor any artworks, Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price says in a letter distributed to the campus community today.

The key points in Dr Price's letter, which is co-signed by Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Sandra Klopper, are:

- "It is important to understand that we are not censoring any artworks. Much of the negative public comment fails to recognise that current removals are provisional. It is our belief that the artworks will all ultimately be on display once curatorial policies have been developed."
- "The University remains committed to enabling scholars and the public to engage with the most difficult and challenging works, including those presently under discussion, and many others that may arrive in the future. What is currently at issue is not *whether* this should be done, but *how*."
- "The decision to cover and take down some works is motivated by two concerns: the first is to signal that we have started a process of debate and discussion about how works of art should be displayed on campus, and that we will respond to this debate with seriousness and urgency. The second is in recognition of our custodial obligation to protect our art collection, especially those works of art that have become controversial (whether for good reason or not), noting that in the absence of an art gallery, almost all of UCT's art is displayed in public spaces. This is necessary while we conduct the discussions about how and where these works should be displayed."

The full text of Dr Price's letter is below:



From the VC's d



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
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11 April 2016

Dear colleagues, students and alumni

There have been various articles and letters in the media commenting on the process that is being followed to create engagement and discussion around the display of art on campus. Much of the public comment about this process focuses on the removal of specific works of art from public display, and offers highly critical views about this. Such criticism that UCT is practicing self-censorship or giving in to the demands of a small radical student group indicates a lack of understanding about the University of Cape Town's transformation process and how our engagement with works of art contributes to this process. We are writing to set the record straight.

It is important to understand that we are not censoring any artworks. Much of the negative public comment fails to recognise that current removals are provisional. It is our belief that the artworks will all ultimately be on display once curatorial policies have been developed. The University remains committed to enabling scholars and the public to engage with the most difficult and challenging works, including those presently under discussion, and many others that may arrive in the future. What is currently at issue is not whether this should be done, but how.

UCT Council's Artworks Task Team was established by the Council in September 2015. The members include a number of experts in fine art (see list of members at end). The Task Team released an interim statement describing the Team's mandate, the urgency related to its work and progress made. Read the [full statement from the Artworks Task Team](#). It indicates that the University needs an active and considered curation policy. The ATT's statement focusses attention on how the works are being curated, notably on cumulative effects, some of which are discussed below.

The problem is not the individual artworks themselves but how the University has handled them.

Examples of the problematic curatorial issues include:

- Accumulated effects or weightings such as the number of works depicting black poverty and naked black bodies, in sharp contrast to the lack of anything similar in the depiction of white people, an effect exacerbated by an absence of artworks that would encourage black people to feel proud of who they are
- A passage full of portraits of white people creating an unconscious stereotype that academic excellence and leadership has a colour (and gender)
- Juxtapositions that create effects that might not have been anticipated, noticed or thought about, and may not be desirable
- Forms of framing by, for example, the architecture, situation, lighting, height, associations with historic university insignia, some of it saturated in colonial symbolism, and so on, that have not been actively considered
- Lack of contextual information
- Lack of stimulating, intellectually enabling and exciting curatorial engagement

We acknowledge that in addition to these cumulative effects, some members of the campus community have identified certain works of art as offensive to them – for cultural, religious or political reasons. This raises the

policy question whether artworks that offend a significant number should be on display in public places where they cannot be avoided and, if so, what curatorial responsibilities this imposes on the University. Alternatively, should they be displayed in a gallery where they can be better contextualised and viewed by choice? This again is about curation, and not the censorship of individual artworks. All of these questions are now open for discussion.

The Task Team proposes that the curation policy, which will also affect the policies on acquisitions, should be developed through an open consultative process that includes the different voices on our campus. Through the provisional removal of some artworks the University is dismantling elements of its curation, not suppressing the individual works, before such a consultative process.

The decision to cover and take down some works is motivated by two concerns: the first is to signal that we have started a process of debate and discussion about how works of art should be displayed on campus, and that we will respond to this debate with seriousness and urgency. The second is in recognition of our custodial obligation to protect our art collection, especially those works of art that have become controversial (whether for good reason or not), noting that in the absence of an art gallery, almost all of UCT's art is displayed in public spaces. This is necessary while we conduct the discussions about how and where these works should be displayed.

We view the discussion around works of art as part of UCT's accelerated transformation process. We are seeking to discuss with all members of the University community how we can reflect different aspects of our university community, our diverse body of staff and students, and help to create an inclusive community where everyone can readily identify with the institution. We invite you to share with us your idea of how the UCT environment can be used to show our pride in the growing diversity of our campus community: what works of art speak to you, how and where you feel those works should be displayed. Please write to artworks@uct.ac.za

To read more about UCT's accelerated transformation process and the work done thus far, please [click here](#).

Members of Council Arts Task Team:

Associate Professor Shadreck Chirikure (Chair), Department of Archaeology
Professor Carolyn Hamilton, SARCHI Chair: Archive and Public Culture, Social Anthropology
Dr Nomusa Makhubu, Lecturer in Art History and Visual Culture, Michaelis School of Fine Art
Associate Professor Berni Searle, Videography, Michaelis School of Fine Art
Mr Rorisang Moseli, President, Student Representative Council
Ms Noxolo Ntaka, Secretary General, Student Representative Council

Sincerely,

Dr Max Price, Vice Chancellor
Professor Sandra Klopper, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Professor of History of Art

ENDS

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