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Sarah Baartman sculpture reignites art dialogue at UCT

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is running an exhibition as part of an ongoing process and dialogue about the display of artworks at the university, with the intention of creating a more open and inclusive space. The Sarah Baartman sculpture by Willie Bester is being exhibited alongside a sound installation featuring a poem by Diana Ferrus, images and other artwork in an exhibition entitled *Sarah 'Saartjie' Baartman, A Call to Respond* which is being held at the Ritchie Gallery on the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Hiddingh campus.

The exhibition, which runs until October 4, is part of an ongoing process. It has also been designed as an expressive space and a place for thinking and reflecting. People are also free to write their own messages on a wall which forms part of the display.

Dr Nomusa Makhubu, senior lecturer in art history at UCT's Michaelis School of Fine Art, says: "Art is not just the beautiful things we put on walls and in various spaces, but they themselves are the intellectual discourse we are looking for. This sculpture has become a very significant catalyst for that intellectual discourse, about a number of things, but also focusing on the narrative of Sarah Baartman."

UCT acquired the sculpture in 2000. It was initially located in the engineering section of the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library on the upper campus. "It was not only an inappropriate location, but a difficult sculpture to engage with and deal with," says Dr Makhubu.

Both the location of the sculpture and the emotional responses to it became very important, particularly during the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall protests of 2015 and 2016. During that time, black women students clothed the sculpture in a kanga and a headwrap to give Baartman her dignity. This provoked debates and evoked strong emotions.

"We have had to deal with an intricate and complex set of debates about whether it should be left robed, or the robes taken off," says Dr Makhubu. Discussions were held with the university community. The outcome is the exhibition that has been put together by the Works of Art Committee (WOAC).

Apart from the sculpture, images of the robed Baartman and texts that were pinned to the cloth wrapped around her body are on display. A piece authored by a collective of black women academics at UCT, under the banner of the Black Academic Caucus Womxn's Collective, also forms part of the collection. Ferrus's poem, *I've come to take you home*,

about the return of Baartman's remains from the Musee de l'Homme to South Africa, plays alongside the artworks.

Says Dr Makhubu: "With this sculpture and exhibition, the WOAC wants to point out that we recognise what happened to Sarah. We recognise the need to dignify her and commemorate her in more ways than one. This exhibition is part of that process. Sarah is an important figure. She represents not just the stories and experiences of women, particularly black women in South Africa, but also the point at which racism was legitimised through science. She lies at the core of the establishment of scientific racism."

Associate Professor Jay Pather, chair of the WOAC and director of the Institute for Creative Arts at UCT, says: "For many years there was a tradition of art at UCT where you took the works as a given. We want to go back to the moment when art was important, during the glorious 60s and 70s when protest arts and art was an expression of what people were feeling. It wasn't just decorative and not simply about commercial viability and assets, which is what art is increasingly becoming in a neo-liberal economy."

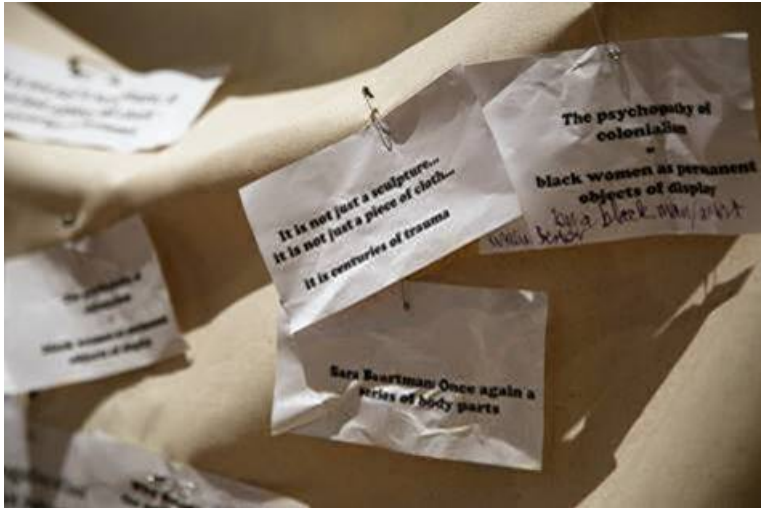
Associate Professor Pather says while 80% of the work in UCT's art collection is by white artists, the university is already starting to work on spaces such as the Molly Blackburn building and several public areas at the university.

"We are in the process of opening up spaces to allow discourse to bleed in and challenge the notion that the university is a place of simplistic object-driven spaces. It's a fluid space. We have to allow these discourses to give us glimpses of what it may look like in the future," says Associate Professor Pather.

Watch the *Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman, A Call to Respond* exhibition's [video](#)



Willie Bester's renowned Sarah Baartman sculpture at the Ritchie Gallery.



Some of the texts that were pinned to the cloth wrapped around Baartman's body on display at the exhibition.

Photos: Je'nine May

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