

Professor Ruth Simbao
Photo Credit: Harris Steinman



'Remarkable young scholar' honoured for her research in African Art

Professor Ruth Simbao has me intrigued long before I walk up to the impressive wooden doors of the Fine Arts Department and ring the doorbell. The resumé of this worthy recipient of the Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Researcher Award reflects a level of productivity and success that many academics would be happy to have achieved in a lifetime. With three international Masters degrees (one from Harvard, and two from ICS in Toronto) and a doctoral degree from Harvard, Ruth Simbao is more than suitably qualified for her current position as Associate Professor of African Art History and Visual Culture.

I note that 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 both local and international publications. Locally her criticism has been voted Best Art Writing by the online magazine Artthrob for two consecutive years.

I peruse the substantial list of her research outputs. She is a productive researcher who 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. Her work has been translated into Portuguese, Spanish, and Danish and she has presented her work at numerous conferences around the world.

These, along with her many other achievements and accolades, sketch a profile of a serious and committed academic. One does not come to be called 'a remarkable young scholar', 'a superb interpreter of visual texts' with a 'masterful knowledge of their African contexts' or an 'outstanding candidate' for a research award without exceptionally dedicated and rigorous engagement with one's field. In conversation with Professor Simbao this impression is confirmed but I also discover that her creative scholarship is firmly rooted in an irreverence that simply refuses to take all this seriousness too seriously.

There are several facets to Professor Simbao's 'irreverence' as a researcher. The first relates to fieldwork. During the course of her PhD studies, Professor Simbao spent significant periods of time 'in the field', believing that it

was necessary to experience what was happening 'on the ground in Africa'. For several years she travelled the length and breadth of Zambia, witnessing, studying and sometimes participating in annual cultural festivals. During this time Professor Simbao nurtured an attitude of openness to the unexpected and surprising; tuning in to those moments of subversion (potential or actual) that would usually be overlooked and reflecting on the meaning and implications of the exceptions to the rule of tradition.

'Irreverent research is about tuning in to moments of subversion that are often buried in humour, cloaked in metaphor or protected in performance so that those who allow themselves to be surprised will be able to read between the lines'.

Irreverence has also informed Professor Simbao's broader theoretical approach to the role of tradition and place in cultural/artistic expression. It has Simbao regularly grappling with scholarly trends and ideas and asking difficult questions. A colleague describes Professor Simbao as being "mindful of tradition while working at the cutting edge of criticism" while she herself explains: 'It is about sometimes going against the grain due to conviction, not routine'.

It is irreverence too, which informs her fascination with performance. While a cultural artifact on display in a museum can largely be interpreted in the light of its static physical properties, when it is used in the performance of ritual or ceremony it is open to a much more

nuanced reading. During a cultural festival one sees the object and its role in context – perhaps filled with rain, perhaps held aloft in a dance. It is in its relationship to the body and movement, in performance, that Professor Simbao is most often able to discern the moments of slippage that subvert the more taken-for-granted understandings of tradition.

Professor Simbao's research has given rise to two major projects which she has called *The Promiscuity of Tradition* and *The Audacity of Place*.

The Promiscuity of Tradition

'I argue that tradition is promiscuous, for it seldom behaves as we think it ought to behave—we tend to think it is more about the past than the present or certainly the future'.

Professor Simbao's work challenges various understandings of tradition. For example, one notion is that tradition can be passed on seamlessly and entirely intact from one generation to the next. Another is that tradition is about the past, simply a re-enactment of practices which connect people to their cultural heritage. However, if we take up Simbao's invitation to look at tradition through the lens of performance theory, we find that, in the process of being handed down, tradition is always lived and enacted in the present, with reference to our hopes for the future. In other words, ordinary people are 'constantly engaging with and negotiating their traditions as they perform them', and have always done so.

Professor Simbao's work is full of examples; times when she witnessed and allowed herself to be surprised by an unexpected performance

of tradition: seeing girls at play performing a dance that is usually reserved quite reverently for the male chief; hearing a participant in a ritual to appease the ancestors then hurling abuse at the very ancestors his actions were designed to soothe or watching women bring an offering of beer to a chief, all the while singing songs spiked with criticism about his lack of service delivery and reminding him of his need for his peoples' support.

Contemporary African Art and the Audacity of Place

Much of Professor Simbao's current body of work in Contemporary African Art is associated with notions of 'place', geo-politics, diaspora, and site-specific art, and is acknowledged for its considered challenge of European and North American constructions and distortions of the field.

'Simply put, in this contemporary [international discourse of contemporary art], to talk about Africa as a place—an actual, physical place with physical parameters that mark it as a continent with numerous national borders—to talk of Africa and contemporary African art this way, is somewhat audacious, for theoretically, it is seen to be regressive'.

Professor Simbao's work seeks to find new ways of acknowledging the role of place without taking up an essentialist position. This has drawn her to investigate the effects of movement on and within the African continent. She has particularly focused on the work of artists from other African countries who have moved to South Africa in what has been called the Third African Diaspora.

Professor Simbao is interested in the effects of movement, of (dis)placement and (re)placement, on artists' work. Her argument is that these influences are place-based rather than place-bound. Whilst retaining academic rigour, her work in this regard is frequently instilled with an activist edge, linking it to socio-political issues such as racism, xenophobia, and other forms of stereotyping.

Her most recent work considers the Global South in relation to the contemporary art world, specifically China's relationship to South Africa.

Professor Simbao commented, "Performativity, as an underlying methodological approach, enables me to recognize how tradition and place both misbehave, and it allows me to explore the political and interventionist possibilities of research. It is through the promiscuity of tradition and the audacity of place that I have enjoyed being surprised, and

it is the underlying irreverence of these concepts that enables me to work against stereotypes and to affiliate myself with a particular cause".

It has been suggested that Simbao's success as a researcher can be attributed, at least in part, to her ability to link her on-the-ground African field work with some of the world's leading scholarly thinking. I would argue that even more fundamental to her success is her openness to surprise and her courage in challenging others to be surprised. As the heavy Fine Arts Department door closes behind me and I slowly descend the steps towards the road, I have to acknowledge that she has surprised me too.

– Kim Barker