

# Flying Colours for MFA

Simone Heymans, a Master of Fine Art student who was part of the Fine Art Focus Area, Visual and Performing Arts of Africa, graduated with a distinction at the Graduation ceremony this year. Her research explored the way in which individuals negotiate both the movement of self as well as interactions with others in 'non-places'.

"Non-places are 'habitually transient' spaces for passage, communication and consumption, often viewed from highways, vehicles, hotels, petrol stations, airports and supermarkets," Heymans explained. These places, according to Heymans, are spaces in which material excess and psychological lack come together to create a feeling of disorientation and disconnection.

"The non-place is a contested space as it does not hold enough significance to be regarded as a place, and yet, despite its banality, is necessary - and in many ways a privilege - in everyday living," Heymans elaborated.

Heyman's research was directly related to the Visual and Performing Arts of Africa research group theme "The Audacity of Place" which is funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Her thesis was titled *Habitual Transience: Orientation and Disorientation within Non-Places* and accompanied her exhibition titled *via*, which she described as "a phenomenological site-specific series of inter-media interventions and installations at the 1820 Settlers National Monument in Grahamstown."

Much preparation went in to producing her final Master's work. Heymans conducted research by installing a series of interventions around Grahamstown during the National Arts Festival. She then observed and documented how people reacted to these, a project which she described as particularly exciting. In addition to this and at the level of theory, Heymans explored questions of globalization, time-space compression, site-specific art, and absentmindedness.

To have all this effort recognized in her final results made Heymans feel a combination of

relief and achievement. Though she had moments of uncertainty when challenges arose due to the logistical challenges of the exhibition and concerns about the impact it would have on the viewer, Heymans tried to deal with these by throwing herself in to the work with dedication.

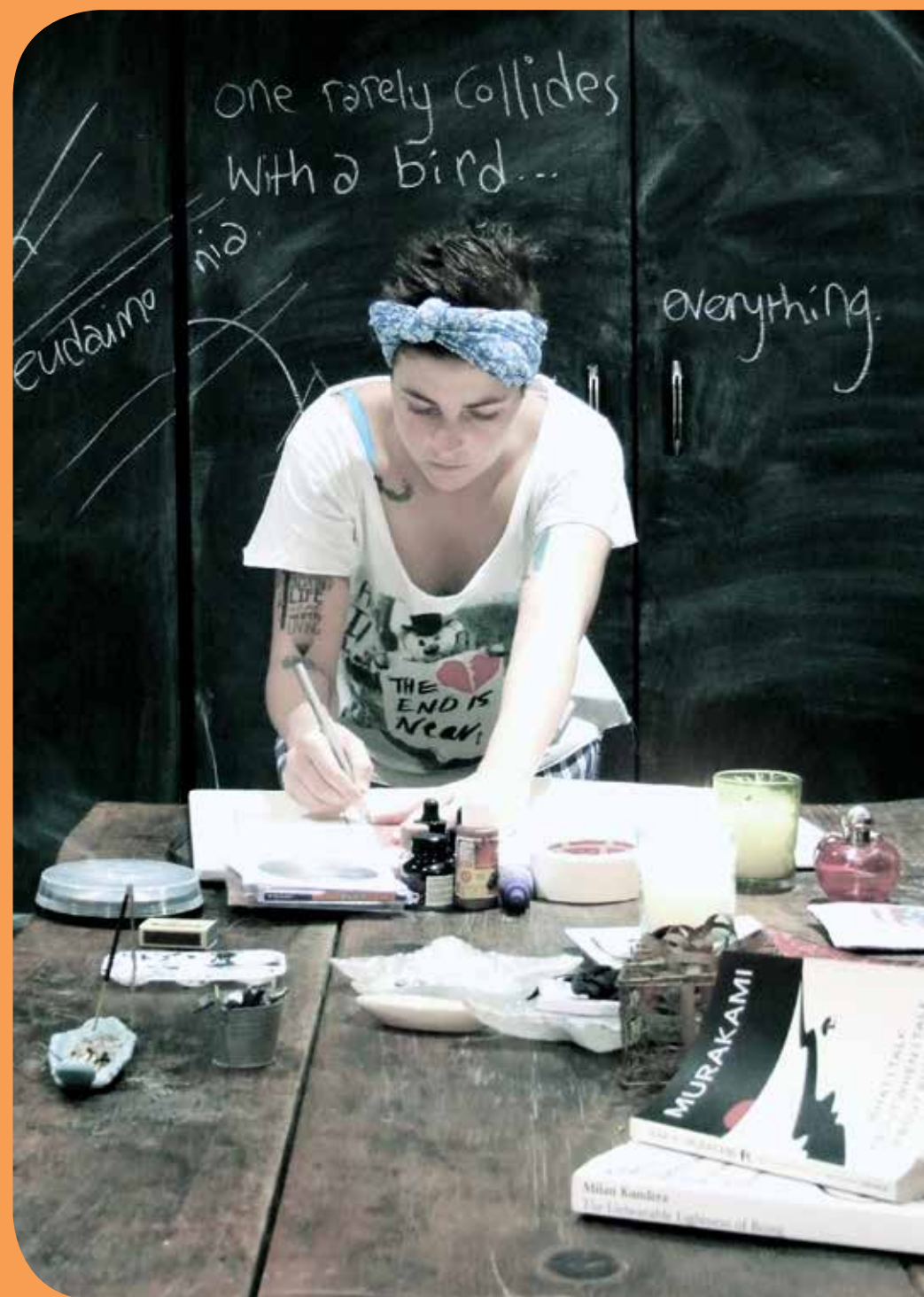
"By suppressing the feeling of doubt and transforming it into active creative problem solving, I put my all into the two year Masters programme and it was beyond rewarding to have the effort recognized," she said.

Heymans is going to be part of a project for the Performance Art section of the National Arts Festival which will see a number interventions being placed around Grahamstown as well as two site-specific performances during the festival. The project is titled 'Blindspot' and commissioned by Professor Ruth Simbao, one of Heymans co-supervisors.

Speaking about having worked with both Prof Simbao and Professor Dominic Thorburn during her Masters, Heymans said, "I am exceptionally grateful for their advice, support and the confidence they had in me to achieve the most I could."

Prof Simbao was highly complementary when speaking about having worked with Heymans, describing the Masters graduate as "humble despite her intelligence and always willing to learn". "Simone is an incredible individual who completely throws her entire being into everything she does," she added.

Support is something Heymans both contributed to and experienced throughout her six years with the Rhodes University Department of Fine



Simone Meymans

Art. Being involved in tutoring, teaching, and running the stockroom allowed Heymans to foster relationships throughout the department and created a support structure which she described as conducive to experimentation. "The relationships established, and everyday routine, is really one that I will miss," Heymans said.

Prof Simbao added that this involvement in the growth of others' intellectual and creative abilities was a major contribution Heymans made to the department. "Her success and her contribution go way beyond being awarded a distinction," she said. Heymans is currently doing freelance work, writing academic papers, and completing a few practical projects, but looks forward to applying for various residences in the near future and hopefully becoming established with a full-time studio in Cape Town after some travelling and working.

"Visual and Performing Arts of Africa" is a Mellon funded research team based in the Fine Art Department and is one of four Humanities Focus Areas at Rhodes University.



# Machona investigates political identity

The first in his family to pursue postgraduate study, Zimbabwean-born Gerald Machona needed to do something to make his parents feel proud. “Coming from Zimbabwe it’s quite difficult; one’s sense of achievement is really limited. It was important for me to give my parents something to be proud of,” he said.

heard about the course offered at Rhodes from a colleague. Following successful contact with potential supervisors in the Fine Art Department, Machona made the move. “I suppose you could say I was in the process of changing careers when I got the acceptance letter to study Masters at Rhodes. I realized this was the moment to pursue my dreams.” During his Masters, for which he was awarded a distinction, he constructed a space suit out of Zimbabwean dollars. Machona believes it was this portfolio that led him to be noticed and ultimately represented by the Goodman Gallery, one of South



From left to right: Gerald Machona, Prof Ruth Simbao and Kelebogile Marope

Machona was named as one of the Mail & Guardian’s Top 200 Young South Africans in 2013 and as one of the top 10 young artists practicing in South Africa today in 2011 by Business Day and the Johannesburg Art Fair. It was also Machona’s experience of identity as a Zimbabwean and foreign national living and working in South Africa during a spate of xenophobic attacks that swept through South Africa in 2008, that prompted his interest in exploring notions of identity specifically relating to ‘the Other’.

At the time of the violence, Machona was studying at the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town and had been exploring issues of migration, which seemed all the more meaningful given the intensity of the violence.

“I was interested in engaging with political identity in relation to foreign identity and the experience of being foreign in South Africa and needed to make my contribution to the discourse of identity politic and the representation of ‘the Other’ in art. My approach in questioning identity was definitely inspired by the xenophobic violence and even though I never experienced the violence firsthand, I felt the effects of it manifesting in attitudes. I experienced it in an emotional way and being aware I was someone from another place considered alien in this space, wanting to blend in so I wasn’t victimized,” he said, adding that he had altered the way he dressed to fit in more. After taking a gap year to decide whether he wanted to pursue art as a full-time career, Machona

Africa’s most prestigious commercial galleries. “I’ve found the use of currency as material to be a very interesting concept. I chose to use something that is quite loaded, and currency symbolizes national identity. I decided to mix other currencies in and explore what it could all mean,” he explained.

He also created a protea made from old South African currency, and inserted other African currencies into the leaves of the sculpture. “I was trying to question national identity in relation to ‘the Other’ and how it is all constructed. Through my work I try to engage with social, economic and political questions we have within postcolonial society,” he said.

Maureen de Jager who supervised Machona’s studio practice, said she was impressed with his “open and optimistic approach” to making art, despite being a perfectionist. “As is often the case in art-making, one’s technical solutions don’t always work, or don’t necessarily work as planned, and Gerald embraced these challenges and setbacks with good humour. He accepted them as part of the process and didn’t let them break his stride.”

Since graduating he has participated in a number of group exhibitions and is anticipating his upcoming solo exhibition in Johannesburg with The Edelweiss, a delicate sculpture of Switzerland’s national flower, made with decommissioned currency and suspended under a glass dome, that speaks powerfully of the

## “Rhodes has nurtured my growth as a scholar”

PhD graduate Nomusa Makhubu’s passion for art and art history was inspired by her parents’ enduring love of education and teaching. So much so that she completed a Postgraduate Diploma in teaching after completing her Masters in Fine Art and while working on her doctorate.

Originally from the Vaal Triangle, Gauteng, Makhubu decided to study at Rhodes after attending a presentation by a recruitment team while she was at school at Riverside High. Her passion for art had started during her final years at school. “I studied art at high school and my highest marks were in art. I did consider pursuing other things like architecture or medicine at other universities but settled on art at Rhodes,” she said.

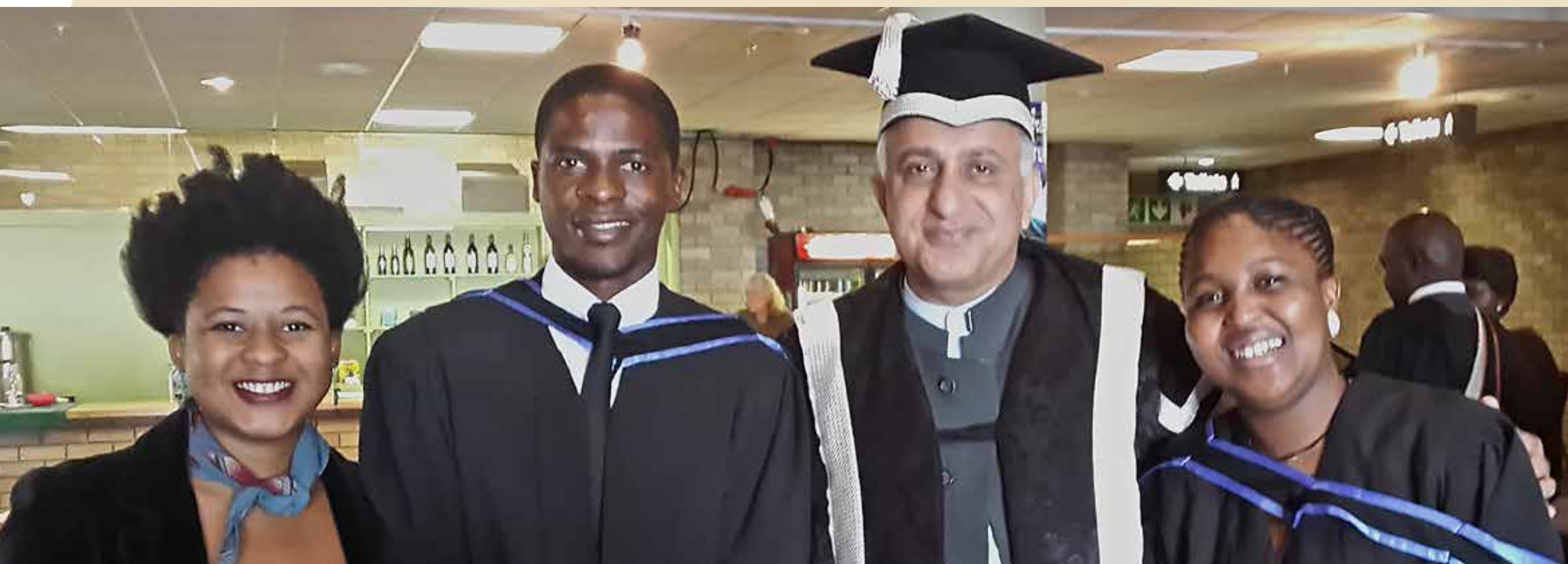
Describing the experience of postgraduate study as “mind-opening” she said the 10 years she spent at Rhodes as a staff member and working on her Masters and Doctoral research enabled her to meet an array of artists and art historians who she could engage with on different levels. “In all these 10 years there are more pleasant memories than unpleasant ones. Rhodes has nurtured my growth as a scholar,” she said. Her advice for aspiring artists and art theory enthusiasts? “If you must procrastinate, do so in the company of good-minded people because the best ideas happen within communal discussion.”

Today she works across a range of different areas and fields with a variety of themes in her practical work as with art history. She counts her supervisor, Professor Ruth Simbao as having had a significant influence on the completion of her PhD, as well as her partner Greg Ruiters, dearest friends Tanya Poole, Injairu Kulundu, Lindi Arbi and Khona Dlamini and lecturers at Rhodes Fine Art Department Brent Meistre and Dominic Thorburn for their support and advice.

impact that seemingly abstract economic policies have on our daily lives.

Visual and Performing Arts of Africa (ViPAA) is a Mellon funded research team based in the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University and is one of four Humanities Focus Areas. The ViPAA research unit was launched in January 2011 and is led by Prof Ruth Simbao. Machona is one of the students who graduated from the Focus Area.





Zamansele Nsele (PhD candidate and newly appointed staff member in Art History and Visual Culture starting in July 2014); Gerald Machona; Dr Saleem Badat and Kelebogile Marope.

## MFA graduate explores the use of domestic objects in arts

Rhodes Master of Fine Arts (MFA) graduate, Kelebogile Marope, investigated the role of household objects in arts in her thesis and exhibition.

She produced an exhibition on household objects and a thesis on the same topic in order to fulfil the requirements for the MFA degree.

“Throughout my thesis I was trying to work out the emotional value that we do put on objects,” she said. “Sometimes we don’t even notice them because the objects become over familiar, we don’t realise it because we need them and we need that structure around us.”

Investigating the role of house objects in arts, she started with a question of whether household objects had emotional value? She ended up exploring how these objects acquired ‘emotional value’ and found that all these objects’ stories were linked to her. “It’s almost like you are getting surprised at the fact that the household object that has become normalised in the house has become special when you put it in the art space,” she said.

Marope’s co-supervisor, Professor Maureen de Jager said during her exhibition, Marope was initially interested in ‘quiet violence’ of families and homes, a theme that is evident in her Masters work.

“I remember the conversation vividly, and though the work has shifted in several ways,

the image of ‘quiet violence’ remains for me a compelling sub-narrative,” said Prof De Jager. “Implicit for instance, is the ‘quiet violence’ of cleaning as gendered labour, of housework as woman’s work - a stereotype that persists in popular culture.”

A woman or the female figure has always been the focus point in painting throughout history. These women were depicted when they were “either washing or ironing or cleaning the house”, said Marope.

For Prof De Jager, household work can be more than just work.

“The gentle labour of maintaining the home - of cleaning, mopping, dusting, painting, sanding, wiping, whitening; the endless litany of wash, rinse, dry, repeat - could also be seen as a labour of love,” said Prof De Jager. “It mirrors the relentless maintenance of familial relationships: the smoothing of unsightly seam-lines; the rending, repairing, rebuilding of bonds.”

Marope has been working with domestic objects since her second year and said that it was easier for her to talk about these objects because they were like her “favourite toys”.

“I did a project in my third year where about a hundred plates were on the wall and all of them were dirty,” said Marope. The dirty plates represented “the loss of intimacy” and a sense of “no family”.

Marope has made making sculptures her art

and household objects the tools with which she creates her masterpiece.

“Where many of us may look across the exhibition and see masses of mops, toilet rolls and folded sheets, each barely distinguishable from the next. I am almost certain that Kele would recognise every sculpture as uniquely individual, having laboured with such care over each and every one,” said Prof De Jager.

During the cause of her MFA degree, Marope discovered that her grandmother used to travel from Botswana to South Africa to find work as a washerwoman in the 1950s.

“She was known to be the best washerwoman and they used to call her ‘magic-hands’,” she said. “It felt like the sculptures were a monument to my grandmother and I didn’t intend to do it like that, I wasn’t even aware when I was working through those sheets.”

Prof De Jager said that there was an ironic link between Marope’s grandmother’s story about being known as the best washerwoman and Marope’s exhibition.

“There is a delightful irony in the perfectionism with which Kele has produced and refined her lowly domestic objects, crafting them as if with her own ‘magic hands’.”

Prof De Jager said that Marope’s “MFA submission is really the product of a tender and thoughtful unfolding; and with it, a lifetime of ‘small’ meditations on the insurmountable ambivalences of ‘home’”.