

NEWS RELEASE

UP honours Diane Victor, whose artwork masterfully mirrors reality



Dr Diane Victor giving an address at UP's 2025 Autumn Graduation.

PRETORIA - Artworks tell the story of our lives. They comment on society. They document the times. The artworks of Diane Victor, one of South Africa's greatest living artists, are a no-holds-barred mirror of the reality we inhabit, gliding from horror and violence to beauty, frailty and freedom.

Now, for her extraordinary contribution to the arts and society, she has been conferred with an honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria's (UP) [Faculty of Humanities](#). The honour was conferred in May, during UP's Autumn 2025 Graduation season, during which more than 12 000 students will graduate.

Victor holds a BA degree in Fine Arts from Wits University, where she majored in printmaking. She lectured in the Department of Visual Art at UP for 33 years, and taught at several other universities, inspiring generations of students. “I love teaching,” she said. “Students are very trusting, and they invite you to explore the inside of their heads with a torch. It’s quite scary at times, because you are exposed to their vulnerability.”

Satire, parody, irony and innuendo are Victor’s tools, sometimes exercised with studied precision, sometimes with a butcher’s blade. She confronts us with human failings – greed, theft from the poor, worship of financial wealth, violence against women, slaughter of national treasures such as rhino, and gratuitous self-aggrandisement on social media – “... this need for flattery through one’s postings and one’s likes and dislikes,” as she puts it.

She serves fear, anxiety, hope and freedom on the same menu, and nudges us towards the smeared vision of how we never seem to learn from our mistakes.

Her series *The disasters of peace* addresses violence and abuse in everyday South Africa.

“South Africa has an uncomfortable energy; it’s like scratching a scab,” she said. “But at the same time it is also an incredible energy that fills us with the sense that we can do anything we dream about in this place.”

Listening to Victor is like wandering through her drawings. She takes you to places where most would prefer not to go, but you find yourself wanting to hear more.

Despite its reputation as being no country for the timid, Victor says she loves South Africa. There is no place she would rather be. She is particularly encouraged by the freedom of expression South Africans enjoy. Some time back she did a residency in China, where there is a flourishing art community, but she was disturbed by the controls on freedom.

Victor has received multiple awards, and her work is part of several important collections, including at the [Javett Art Centre](#) at UP and London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. She has exhibited throughout the world, including at Johannesburg’s Goodman Gallery, the UJ Art Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, the Yale University Art Gallery, and at Australia’s Adelaide Central Gallery.

She draws inspiration from life, people, the media and literature. “I’m an obsessive reader – I can slip into another world, then come back and proceed with drawing. Music is another great escape, as are audio books.”

She works deep into the night, and should you be passing through Doornfontein in the early hours, you’re likely to see a light in her studio on the perimeter of Johannesburg’s inner city.

She works in black and white, with charcoal and ink, and experiments with different substances and surfaces, including sandstone, ash, smoke and chalkboard. Her unique approach to drawing, print and lithography is informed by her pursuit of the unexpected. “Different mediums give back in ways you don’t expect, and it’s that unexpected potential that I try to use to move me out of my safe comfort zones,” she said.

“My interest in different mediums also comes from working with students for many years, where you are constantly looking at ways to help them move out of their own comfort zones by exploring new materials and techniques. It’s in this exploration that innovative approaches present themselves.”

One of her recent shows, titled *Folly, Frailty and Fear*, was inspired while reading Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus’s text *In Praise of Folly*, written in 1511, and German humanist and poet Sebastian Brandt’s *Das Narrenschiff* or *Ship of Fools*, written in 1498. Both writers use satire and humour to parody power. During their times, people were executed for sharing dissenting opinions about the monarchy or church.

In Victor’s case, her works look to current times; to the follies of corruption, excess and violence that breed frailty and fear in people’s daily lives. “Frailty has also affected me physically in my own body,” said Victor, whose life was saved by a kidney transplant in 2015. She adds that the whole world experienced just how frail and vulnerable

we all are during the COVID-19 pandemic. People fear death, but they also fear what will become of them in life, what their future holds. Choosing the path less travelled, the artist's path, requires boldness, because there is often little security. "In my case," Victor said, "my father was determined I was going to be a dentist, but look what happened to that!"

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>> [Watch Dr Victor's address here](#)

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za