UC SANTA BARBARA

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Shelly Leachman

At the Apex

Selected for his proposed book project to examine the study of African art history, UC Santa Barbara scholar Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie has been awarded a 2016-17 Smithsonian Institution Senior Fellowship. He will begin his research residence July 1 at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

“The Smithsonian Institution Senior Fellowship is one of the most prestigious fellowships available to scholars in any field,” said Ogbechie, a professor of art history at UCSB, where he specializes in the visual culture of global Africa. “For scholars in my field of African art history/studies, it is perhaps the apex grant and a validation of one’s research and standing in the field. As a full professor, I am happy to receive this fellowship since it speaks to continued validation of my research in my field.”

For his Smithsonian-supported project, Ogbechie will be working on a book about “the historiography of modern and contemporary African art, a broad overview of emerging methodologies that takes a critical look at how the history of modern and contemporary African art is being written over the past three decades.”

Titled “Rethinking African Art History: Indigenous Arts, Modernity, and Discourses of the Contemporary,” Ogbechie’s project will investigate what he characterizes as a “fundamental split between the study of pre-colonial African art forms and those that developed in response to colonial and postcolonial experiences, urbanization and globalization.”

In addition, Ogbechie said, the work proposes a historiography of modern and contemporary African art that analyzes principal texts, artists and artwork, and discursive practices in order to map how the shift from historic to modern and contemporary arts affects African art history. It also suggests analytical frameworks that link both contexts to give the former discursive relevance and the latter historical awareness.

“The critical analysis proposed in this research is the first of its kind,” Ogbechie said. “I hope it will provide a framework for analyzing modern and contemporary African art and also help us understand how the field of African art history is changing in relation to its emergence into global discourse.”

The author of “Making History: African Collectors and the Canon of African Art” (5 Continents) and “Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist” (University of Rochester Press), Ogbechie also is the founder and editor of Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture, and director of Aachron Knowledge Systems. He has previously received fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, Institute for International Education, Getty Research Institute, Mbanefo Foundation, American Academy in Berlin and TEDGlobal, as well as from Northwestern University. He has presented lectures at leading international museums and art history institutions in the United States, Brazil, Europe, Africa and Asia.

The Smithsonian Institution (SI) Fellowship Program is the Smithsonian Institution’s centrally funded flagship fellowship program. SI fellowships are awarded annually to scholars wishing to conduct independent study or research at one or more of the Smithsonian’s 19 units and research centers. The program supports projects related to Smithsonian facilities, experts or collections for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.