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### **Keynote Commencement Speech 2024**

President Brian Pellinen, Board Chair Mercedes Sherrod Evans, esteemed trustees, Deans, parents, families, biological and blended and chosen; friends, Workers, ushers, volunteers, thank you for being here today. It is such an important day. And last but not least, the 74 students graduating today, Montserrat College of Art, Class of 2024, congratulations!

I come from a country in the southernmost part of Africa, a small teapot shaped country called Zimbabwe. By the time I had left my country to study at university level there was only one university with a studio art program offering a degree.

When I finished high school in the year 2000 I had looked at many art schools in the US: Parsons, Ringling, SCAD, but I didn't come across Montserrat.

This is a plug to the admissions team, you are missing out if you don't have Zimbabwean students here.

But to be fair, I didn't even sniff a formal art education for 7 years after I graduated from high school. There was no art school for me to go to in my home country, and even though I knew of programs abroad, I could not afford any of them. So I had to make my own university.

There was no name, no mascot... but there were teachers, there were colleagues and mentors. My libraries, materials, and studios were spread out all over the city in unexpected places.

What made me even want to pursue artmaking in Zimbabwe, a country with no art schools? I want to tell you about what made it possible for me to persist for those

seven years of uncertainty about whether I would ever get a formal degree for studying art. To do so, I have to introduce the people who have been instrumental to my growth as a human and an artist. Without them, I would not have known that being an artist was possible.

I know that my standing here before you at this podium registers that I have attained a level of success in your minds... but I'd be really dishonest if I didn't acknowledge all the help I have had along the way.

Class of 2024, I hope this helps you to reflect on those important anchors who helped YOU achieve this summit.

My Mother.

Along with my father, she was one of the first Black physicians in our country.

I wanted to be just like her and one day I told her just that. I thought she would be impressed by my ambition or at least flattered but her response was quite different.

My mother asked me why I would want to spend 8 years studying something that I didn't. She had noticed my talent for art and encouraged me to pursue that as a career. She told me that our society needed artists too!

I was confused. Her advice was the complete opposite to what everything else around me affirmed. I had never seen a Zimbabwean who called themselves an artist. All my relatives wanted me to be a doctor, lawyer, nurse, maybe engineer but most of all they hoped that at least one of my parents' brood of 4 children would become a medical doctor.

Without my mother I would never have thought of myself as an artist. She gave me permission to forge a path no one else in my life had imagined.

Next, Mrs. Lannas, who I now call Jo. She was my social studies teacher when I was 10 years old. I will never forget seeing her bright red letters at the bottom of my homework:

IF ONLY YOU PAID AS MUCH ATTENTION TO THE REST OF YOUR WORK AS YOU DID WITH DRAWING.

I was actually quite surprised by this note! I thought everyone else could draw like me. I thought all the other students' homework books looked like mine, but it turned out my book full of drawings illustrating concepts we were learning about was unique.

I put a lot of effort into illustrating the essays and assignment sheets in all my subjects! Books without pictures were boring so I would create illustrations across the entire page spread. To this day, I design books for other artists, more images than words! I've designed books for almost every major cultural institution in New York City, but I've also dedicated my practice to designing publications that represent the work and cultural production of academics and cultural producers from the Africa diaspora.

8 years later, Jo gave me my first teaching job, teaching art to students ages 6 to 12. She was going on leave and wanted to leave the whole department in my care. I was 19 at the time. After seeing those old notebooks, she knew very early on what I'd spend my life doing.

As a teacher, I took what I had been doing at 10 years old and expanded it into an art curriculum for an entire school. I learnt that I had something significant in my hand, even if I was using it in a way that did not seem all that helpful when it was discovered.

My mother, Jo, and countless other teachers taught me to see my work as serious, necessary, and valuable. When I finished high school, I didn't feel that my inability

to get an art degree could keep me from being an artist. Instead, I held a few consecutive full-time teaching positions at high schools in the city.

I kept painting and drawing to develop my visual language, and I spent lots of time at the National Art Gallery reading about international artists. To connect to the community of artist in my home country, I curated art exhibitions featuring artists who I admired, and got to know well, and participated in a few exhibitions myself! I also designed sets for dance and theater exhibitions and painted huge banners for community organizations I was connected to.

During that time, I also shadowed an artist named John Ghusinyu to better understand what it means to be a visual artist in Zimbabwe. By the time I started art school at Yale School of Art, at age 27, I was well versed in what it meant to research, study, collaborate to build complex projects and work with mentors.

I say all this to demonstrate that, like my mother and Jo taught me, you often have more than you realize, just by being open, curious and willing.

Our societies do not always value signs of artistic ability early. The degree being conferred upon you today proves that you are resourceful, capable artists, and there is no reason to wait for institutional license to pursue the fulfillment of your visions in the world, even those that may have seemed impossible.

But Nontsi, you say, “what if ” I run out of money, or “what if” I run out of ideas, or “what if” I forget how to etcetera, etcetera. Trust me, I spent 7 years between high school and college so you don’t have to; if you are willing to ask for help, and to continuously approach making as a student, the resources you need to grow as an artist or whatever you choose to do will be available. In fact they are a part of you.

Okay back to family.

Let me tell you about my sister younger sister Tenjiwe. We were brought up like twins. Dressed alike, we really look alike too. But we are different in one important way. Tenjiwe always tells me, stop playing “what if.”

She could not understand why I thought about things through the lens of fear and anxiety, always anticipating that what I desired could never happen to me. I’ve long wondered how she managed to live without playing this same game. Without that “What if” lens overshadowing everything. But recently, after having a conversation with her about a music festival she is resurrecting after a hiatus of about 5 years I realized that Tenjiwe does play what if, but in a different way.

What if, for her, is a statement predicated on curiosity and potential! It is a mischievous “What if,” that is daring, that wants to test the boundaries of things, and the boundaries of the self!

But don’t take my word for it. I eventually made it to grad school, which made even more connections possible for me. It still seems miraculous to me that I attended the Yale school of Art given my biography, so you can imagine the terrified awe I experienced when Chris Offili visited the program during my first year. I had already been a long standing admirer of his work by that point, and didn’t think he could impress to a greater extent but he did. Firstly he had traveled to my home country!!! He is also even more handsome in person than I could have imagined. But it was not his relationship to my homeland or his good looks or incredible body of work that truly captivated me. In his lecture he said something that I can’t put out of my mind to this day. He said, **DON’T LET WHAT YOU DID YESTERDAY STOP YOU FROM DOING WHAT YOU WANT TO DO TODAY.**

He told us a story about wanting so badly to see an elephant in real life when he went to Zimbabwe on a residency program. He was sad that he didn’t see a single elephant, even when he went on safari. What he DID see was a lot of elephant dung the safari guide was tracking to try to find the herd. Chris decided to pick up some of the dung... (don’t worry it was already dry), and he returned to the UK with it. The dung stayed in his studio for some time and one day whilst preparing for a studio

visit he used two balls of it to raise a painting up from the floor. When the curator came in they were in awe of what they felt was a really bold and daring move. That wasn't Ofili's original intention but it became his signature for a very long time.

He ended his lecture by telling us how he had moved to Trinidad to get away from the pressures of the gallery world so that he could make what he wanted. He had gotten tired of the paintings propped up by dung and wanted something else for himself. His gallerist was not supportive of this move, so he left England and went to a place where he could start over and discover what else he could make. This is how his famous blue black paintings were born.

They were inspired by the absence of light pollution in Trinidad's night sky. They were inspired by what he saw when we're not supposed to see anything. Chris is a master of seeing what you have when it doesn't look like what you expect.

DON'T LET WHAT YOU DID YESTERDAY STOP YOU FROM DOING WHAT YOU WANT TO DO TODAY.

Chris taught me to stay in touch with your curiosity even when it diverges from what defined you in the past.

### Closing

Class of 2024, there is no straight road to success but lessons and teachers past and present will always guide you.

Be present to catch unexpected gems that might not look like much at first.

Play "What if, so you can expand.

Be open to opportunities.

Be truly pioneering.