

Title of the Impact Case Study:

Advances in Forensic Art Explore and Preserve Our Common Humanity

Submitting University:

Stellenbosch University

Summary of the Impact:

Associate Professor Kathryn Smith's work in forensic art at Stellenbosch University has made significant, practical contributions to various fields that have resulted in societal impact within and outside of academia. Her research and practice in forensic facial imaging have significantly impacted the field of identification of missing and unidentified persons, as well as the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration in South Africa.

The establishment of the imaging laboratory VIZ.lab is a first for an African university as it offers expertise in forensic facial imaging and transdisciplinary, collaborative research with a focus on visual methods. This demonstrates Prof. Smith and the university's commitment to addressing societal challenges through innovative research and education. Prof. Smith's work in the forensic humanitarian space includes identifying missing and unidentified persons, preserving cultural heritage through, among others, interdisciplinary collaborations, and advancing the field of forensic facial imaging internationally. Her research and projects have influenced public awareness and interdisciplinary collaboration, benefiting society by working towards restoring personhood for victims and communities, upholding human dignity, and promoting social justice. This has been done by working closely in interdisciplinary teams that bring about change to the lives of families of lost, missing and unidentified people. By applying her insights into forensic art within the university and in working with various institutions, also outside of academia, she is performing groundbreaking work for forensic art and its applications, formalising ways of working in the field to the benefit of society by increasing the scope and understanding of its application.

Underpinning Academic Work:

Prof. Kathryn Smith, Departmental Chair of Visual Arts at Stellenbosch University, has conducted extensive research in forensic facial imaging. Her PhD research at Liverpool John Moores University's Face Lab furthered her expertise in this field. VIZ.lab, an imaging laboratory at SU co-founded by Prof. Smith, is recognised as being at the forefront of forensic art research and application in Africa.

Narrative Description of the Impact:

Prof. Kathryn Smith's pioneering work and research in forensic art and imaging have focused on developing innovative techniques for facial reconstruction and identification, policy development for the African context, and assisting law enforcement agencies, families and communities to develop new information for complex cases involving missing and unidentified persons. Her work, which

combines facial anatomy, biological anthropology, forensic pathology, and cognitive psychology with advanced craniofacial analysis technologies, has led to the identification of missing persons and contributed to the preservation of cultural heritage. VIZ.lab's interdisciplinary approach has facilitated collaborations with international institutions such as Face Lab at Liverpool John Moores University, and a current EU COST Action on Migrant Disaster Victim Identification, enhancing the global impact of the research and building capacity.

Prof. Smith's contributions extend to the educational domain, where she has introduced workshops and courses to train future forensic artists and those involved in forensic human identification in South Africa. Her efforts are positioned within the forensic humanitarian action space, addressing social justice issues, policy and structural inequalities in forensic identification. VIZ.lab's work has received international recognition, further validating its significance in both forensic and humanitarian contexts.

Through her collaborations with organisations such as the Western Cape Cold Case Consortium and the South African Police Service, Smith's work has directly contributed to piloting operational improvements for the forensic identification of individuals who would otherwise remain anonymous.

Smith's expertise has also been instrumental in preserving cultural heritage of enslaved people and otherwise untold stories. This has not only provided closure for families but also brought about dignity for the deceased.

By reconstructing the faces and personal effects of historical individuals, her work has shed light on shared histories and fostered a deeper understanding of our common humanity across diverse communities.

The reach and significance of Smith's impact extend beyond South Africa. Her online artwork "Speaking Likeness" and her participation in other international exhibitions have raised awareness about the importance of forensic art in addressing societal challenges related to identification, human rights and cultural preservation.

Smith's interdisciplinary approach, bridging the gap between art, science, and technology, has challenged traditional disciplinary boundaries and fostered collaborations that have advanced the field of forensic facial imaging. Her work has inspired researchers, artists, and practitioners to explore new avenues for addressing complex societal issues through innovative and ethical means.

Evidence and Sources to Corroborate the Impact:

- Formal acknowledgements and testimonials from law enforcement agencies such as the South African Police Service, the Western Cape Cold Case Consortium and the International Committee of the Red Cross regarding the impact of Smith's work in assisting with forensic identification cases.
- Citations and reviews of Smith's work in policy documents, media reports, and academic publications related to forensic art, human rights, and cultural preservation.

- Quantitative data on the number of unidentified cases investigated with the assistance of Smith's techniques and collaborations.
- Exhibition catalogues and media coverage of Smith's artworks and installations, such as "Speaking Likeness" and her exhibition at various galleries and institutions including Radboud University (Nijmegen), Indiana University Bloomington, and the Goodman Gallery, highlighting the impact of her work on public awareness and discourse.
- Formal recognition and awards received by Smith for her contributions to the field of forensic art, such as becoming the first African to attain an academic qualification in forensic art and facial identification.

Any Other Information Considered Relevant:

Prof. Kathryn Smith's work exemplifies the power of interdisciplinary collaboration and the vital role that academic research can play in addressing societal challenges. Her innovative approaches to forensic art and practice have not only advanced the field but also contributed to upholding human rights, preserving the heritage of historical persons and communities, and promoting social justice on an international scale.

The innovative approach of VIZ.lab, combining forensic art with advanced technologies and interdisciplinary research, sets a benchmark for similar initiatives globally. Prof. Smith's work not only advances the field of forensic art but also contributes to the broader discourse on social justice and human rights.

For a feature stories on this work and its impact (with images) on the Research for Impact platform:

<https://www0.sun.ac.za/researchforimpact/2023/07/11/advances-in-forensic-art-explore-and-preserve-our-common-humanity/>

<https://www0.sun.ac.za/researchforimpact/2023/07/11/forensic-facial-imaging-laboratory-promotes-interdisciplinarity/>

Signed off on behalf of the University by:

Maryke Hunter-Husselmann
Director: Research Information and Strategic Initiatives
Division for Research Development (DRD)

Authorised University Representative

12 September 2025

Date