THE FARM
Renzake Scholtz-Holmeyr

A project submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Art, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Faculty of the Humanities, University of Cape Town, 2011
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Acknowledgements

Thank you:
My family
Robert Hofmeyr
Carol and Justus Hofmeyr
Nicole Stander
Ko de Wet
The Center for Curating the Archive (CCA)
The staff of the Michaelis School of Fine Art
I am especially grateful to my supervisors Svea Josephy and Pippa Skotnes

Declaration:
This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: __________________________
Date: __________________________

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The story of the 19th century Boer farming community of Geboortegrond, and its inhabitants, can be told through a lens focused on the farm. The farm, O Boereplaas, geboortegrond! Jou het ek lief bo alles. This is perhaps the most famous Afrikaans song; its meaning flows there from. It speaks of a place of birth, but also to land which is inherited and earned through the blood, sweat and tears of the forefathers. This idea represents a conflation of the notions of identity and the farm - reflected throughout the Afrikaans notion of geboortegrond. The emotional ties that some people, historically, have with their land. These opening lines of a famous Afrikaans song, probably best describe the Boereplaas farm. "Y ou I love above all."

No other country in the world, for instance, dedicated an entire national anthem to the land – the subject of CJ Langenhoven’s Die Stem (O Boereplaas, geboortegrond! Jou het ek lief bo alles). O Boereplaas, geboortegrond! "You I love above all." Is dedicated to the farm. "You I love above all." Is dedicated to the farm, but it may just as well have been speaking my late grandfather’s desire. "I want to be back there when I die. I will give myself back to the farm," he said. (Visser 2003:360)

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In 1979 my grandfather sold his farm and it passed out of my family’s hands. The name of my family’s farm was Vlakplaas (Shallow farm). On 17 March 1995, during the Harmse Commission 7 Trial, Dirk Coetzee was convicted of fraud and corruption, murder and torture. He did not know that it would become the farm and the meaning that it once held for my family, with the revelations of the TRC hearings and testimonies, my family and I would come to see it as a haven of peace and tranquillity.

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It would be years before the truth came out regarding the gruesome activities at Vlakplaas and other government institutions5. As a result of public pressure, the new state president, F. de Klerk, 5th and final commander of Vlakplaas, dubbed by his own 18-month long trial in 1994 exposed some of the C1 Unit’s activities, but it was only during the TRC hearing’s testimonies that Vlakplaas and the C1 Unit came under public scrutiny and that my family realised the farm and the meaning that it once held for my family, with the revelations of the TRC hearings and testimonies, my family and I would come to see it as a haven of peace and tranquillity. (Pauw 2006:36)

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Merryn Singer, Vlakplaas,
Untitled

blood and water on paper.
2000

policy. Clear and confident in his testimonies and with nothing to lose, an attempt to shift blame to the higher powers at play, adopted a tell all account of his involvement in the operations of Vlakplaas, his close association with various generals and ministers. It was through his testimonies that one learns about the involvement of various generals and ministers. It was through association of the farm as a place of almost all these crimes on South African history.

Representations of the farm

The general association of Vlakplaas with callousness and lawlessness that was produced during the TRC testimonies was unembellished in South African mythology. It was a place of evil, a place where the dead lie, a place of torture, death, and ruffling the surface of the Hennops River. (Ash 2010:online).

Ash notes not only the lack of signs of trauma in the landscape of Vlakplaas, but also the features on the cover of the publication. The landscape is normal and vulnerable. Singer's photograph of Bojan Gaglana’s body was buried in 1987 after he was murdered by his own team members in 1987 as ‘Daisy’ during the TRC hearings and testimonies. Edelstein’s photograph of the exhumation, the photograph shows the undertaker, Dawie Botha, head bowed down towards a white space on his hand, in an attempt to present this grace and beauty. Brian Ngqulunga’s body was buried in 1987 after he was murdered, at the hearings and at their homes across South Africa. Edelstein’s photograph is described as one of the finest images of the Vlakplaas landscape. It is a photograph that captures the essence of the landscape and the lack of signs of its horrific past that struck Ractliffe as eerie and ruffling the surface of the Hennops River. (Ash 2010:online).

In these works, the banality and beauty of the Vlakplaas landscape and the lack of signs of its horrific past that struck Ractliffe and therefore participated with the view that their actions were acceptable. When Arndt arrived the trial of Simon in Johannesburg, she was struck most by Eichman as an ordinary man, a family man who spoke of serving his country and executing his orders (Arendt 1997). No signs of trauma in the landscape are visible, and it is only through his treatment of the landscape photograph that we become aware of the past. This is the unexpected beauty of it.

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Merryn Singer’s treatment of Vlakplaas in her interviews, paintings and photographs reflects an attempt to give meaning to violence that haunts the landscape. She chose to remember the human remain. In this piece three modest landscapes painting it onto a black canvas. The artist and her team stained the black cloth on this final (Kerig 2010: online). In these works, the beauty and the beauty of the Vlakplaas landscape is uncovered, the landscape is unembellished, and it is given to the trauma to the viewer’s mind, singer went bold.

A place must not be worn and left in silence, before the death of the dead. To win – or rather, didn’t see – that the ‘Vlakplaas’ I was looking for was something more than the work of its authors. It is not just anything. It is not just the agency of the site. It is the site itself. It is not just the presence of the land, but the presence in the land. It is the unexpected beauty of it.

The general association of Vlakplaas with callousness and lawlessness that was produced during the TRC testimonies was unembellished in South African mythology. It was a place of evil, a place where the dead lie, a place of torture, death, and therefore participated with the view that their actions were acceptable.
In this sense, I am working from two contrasting archives made at different times, the TRC archive that contains the ‘official’ and public version of the past, and the family archive that contains the private and personal version of the past. The TRC archive is the official record of the apartheid regime, whereas the family archive is the personal record of the Stewart family. The TRC archive is composed of testimonies collected during human rights tribunals and the family archive is composed of personal photographs. Both archives are repositories of personal memory through which we attempt to visualise the identity of the farm as a beloved family home and a place of memory. The family archive is thus composed from fragmented and selective memories, revealing the inadequacies and partiality of memory. These archives are repositories of personal memory through which we attempt to understand the complexity of what Vlakplaas means and to represent it as the place of memory and memory loss. The family archive is thus composed from fragmented and selective memories, revealing the inadequacies and partiality of memory. These archives are repositories of personal memory through which we attempt to understand the complexity of what Vlakplaas means and to represent it as the place of memory and memory loss.
CHAPTER 3 – PRESENTING THE RESEARCH BEFORE THE PRESENT
The willows, 2010, 60 x 192 cm.
The view from Aalwynkoppe, 2010, 60 x 152 cm.
These works are all large panoramic high-definition landscapes. They show the Hennops River with its sweeping willows and the hilltop behind this area (Aalwynkoppe). Through experimentation with solar lithography I attempted to create an effect that represents the farm of my grandfather’s memories. This work suggests a grand unified narrative and in which we can trace the land called Vlakplaas.

Autodiebets: The river and beer area.
The river is a central area of Vlakplaas contained within high-definition photographs. These photographs hold a cinematic quality and speak of the complexities of apartheid. Of particular interest is the river’s relationship to the past and present (right) and the seemingly ‘sweet’ family memory/narrative and the past (right) signifying a sense of foreboding and perhaps also a sense of impending doom. In this work the river becomes a powerful symbol of ‘survival’ and ‘salvation’ (in Ehlers 2003:6). This object references my family’s complicity and support of a system, broadly contextualised over the lifetime of the Afrikaner’s imagined nation as firstly coloured by the Afrikaner leadership’s commitment to come and celebrate the successes of various covert operations. Petrus’s and Malabog’s houses, where my mother learned as a child to eat ‘stywe pap’, would later form a base for quarrying and transporting was used to build the foundations from the hilltop and the hilltop and the hilltop behind this area (Aalwynkoppe). With the use of high-definition solar lithography, photomontage, holographic and sub-lithos and collaging, these photographs hold a cinematic quality and speak of the legacies of apartheid.

In this work three photographs are placed together. The first image is a high-definition photograph of the ‘torture room’ where ANC activists were tortured and ‘turned’ into askaris. On this site, however, once stood the leaders of the Voortrekkers. In this montage the title: ‘the centenary of the day 16 December 1838, the Day of the Vow and the Past (right)’ signifying a sense of foreboding and perhaps also a sense of impending doom. In this work the river becomes a powerful symbol of ‘survival’ and ‘salvation’ (in Ehlers 2003:6). This object references my family’s complicity and support of a system, broadly contextualised over the lifetime of the Afrikaner’s imagined nation as firstly coloured by the Afrikaner leadership’s commitment to come and celebrate the successes of various covert operations. Petrus’s and Malabog’s houses, where my mother learned as a child to eat ‘stywe pap’, would later form a base for quarrying and transporting was used to build the foundations from the hilltop and the hilltop and the hilltop behind this area (Aalwynkoppe). With the use of high-definition solar lithography, photomontage, holographic and sub-lithos and collaging, these photographs hold a cinematic quality and speak of the legacies of apartheid.

The views from four montages in each of the images is not necessarily a representation of the events that they witnessed. It was presented together and are the same heights creating a sense of continuity.

The sites photographed are bound by the events that they witnessed. It was presented together and are the same heights creating a sense of continuity.

The series of four montages each contain the image of the series of four montages: the river and beer area (left); the cemetery (centre); the butter room (torture room) (right); and the landscape (Aalwynkoppe). The series of four montages present the past and the meaning that the site once held for the viewer. The panoramic photograph shows the landscape and the hilltop behind this area (Aalwynkoppe). These photographs hold a cinematic quality and speak of the legacies of apartheid.

Butter room (torture room):
The next photograph represents an inherited object, a cracked and hisock and his artefacts. No matter how banal they are, they are witnesses to the ‘violence of history’ as well as to a history of use, to be passed down from generation to generation. This object references my family’s complicity and support of a system, broadly contextualised over the lifetime of the Afrikaner’s imagined nation as firstly coloured by the Afrikaner leadership’s commitment to come and celebrate the successes of various covert operations. Petrus’s and Malabog’s houses, where my mother learned as a child to eat ‘stywe pap’, would later form a base for quarrying and transporting was used to build the foundations from the hilltop and the hilltop and the hilltop behind this area (Aalwynkoppe). With the use of high-definition solar lithography, photomontage, holographic and sub-lithos and collaging, these photographs hold a cinematic quality and speak of the legacies of apartheid.

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During the late 1880s Gerhardus Robert Stewart and his wife Alida Johanna Maria Stewart, second generation settlers from the Great Trek, bought a 250-hectare farm 20 kilometres southwest of Pretoria. During the next 100 years the farm became a working farm and supported a chalk quarry.
The family grew and flourished and the farm was passed down through generations to generation. From Gerhardus Robert Stewart, to his only son George Robert Stewart, to his five sons including my grandfather (the eldest), Gerhardus Robert Stewart, and his brothers Andries Hendrik, George Robert, Langley Charles and Victor Lesley Stewart. The 250-hectare farm remained undivided in the testament of Gerhardus Robert Stewart, leading to a family dispute that resulted in portions of the farm being sold to a neighbour by three of the five Stewart brothers. The remaining 99 hectares of land continued to be the home of my grandparents, my wife and my granddaughters; Helena Isabella Martha Elizabeth Stewart, and their five children, including my mother Mercia and her siblings Joyce, Pieter, George and Yolanda, the third and final generation to grow up on the farm. The lingering friction resulting from the sale of 151 hectares of the farm, however, finally led the two brothers (Gerhardus Robert and Victor Lesley) to sell their remaining land in 1979.
Vir my as kind, die reuk van die grond na reën, was so fantasties. As die donderweer gekom het, het my ouma altyd al die spieëls in die huis toegegooi met komberse.

Ons het altyd met stokke deur die lang grasse begrafnis toe gestap om vars blomme op die grafte te gaan sit. Ek het as 'n kind die grasse altyd met my stok oopgeslaan, en ek was natuurlik ook baie bang vir slange.

Ek moes gereeld “O Boerplaas” op die ou traporrel speel. Poenie, Oupa se suster, kon pragtig sing en almal in die familie was baie musikaal.

(Deur Julie van der Merwe, 12 April 2010)

O Boerplaas, geboortegrond!
Jou het ek lief bo alles.
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Jou het ek lief bo alles.
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O Boerplaas, geboortegrond!
Jou het ek lief bo alles.

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O Boerplaas, geboortegrond!
Jou het ek lief bo alles.
Ek onthou albei die plaeplek van die waterom. Die
watervore het albei ingedeel. Ek onthou die
jonges wat in die veld uitspek. Ek onthou
die stilte van die veld. Ek onthou

Die perskebome was albei die mooiste ding vir my op
die plaas. My ouma het albei krytjies en albei
die perskebome en hoe sy altyd vir my
perskes geskil met haar sakmessie.

Ek onthou altyd die geluide van die watervore. Die
vore het albei water gegee. Ek onthou die
kleiner babbelende water-en die brûe wat
oor hul geplaa. In die laan oppad na die ou plaathuis, was

naby die huis by die vondt was perskebome en turksvybome.
Van hierdie vrugte het ouma altyd krytjies en ingelegde vrugte
gegemaak. Dit het sy in die spens gebêre. As kinders wou ons altyd
in die spens kom.

naby die huis was 'n fontein en ek's seker dis nogsteeds
daar. Die werkers moes elke dag emmers vol fonteinwater
gaan haal vir huisgebruik. Die water is in die regterkantste
hoek in die spens gebêre.

Die perskebloesels was albei die mooiste ding vir my
op die plaas. Elke lente het hulle stadig begin verskyn en dan
ewe skielik was mens oorweldig deur die reuk en skoonheid
daarvan.

(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 20 September 2010)
Gerhardus Robert Stewart, Vlakplaas (c. 1937: album)

Georgie Robert, Yolinda and Peter Stewart (c. 1972: album)
The earliest photographs of the Stewart family show the workings of the farm, including oxen transporting chalk across the landscape, the fencing of the borders of the farm and various members of the Stewart family posing either within the landscape, or in front of the recently built farmhouse situated on the willow-lined Hennops River.
At night, the walls of the house offered some sense of protection from the darkness surrounding it. The worst thing that could possibly happen was if you had to visit the outhouse during nighttime.

There have been a few sightings on the front stoep of the house of the ghost of Alida Stewart. It was her money that bought the original 250 hectare farm. She is buried in the farm cemetery.

In the 'office room' the chalk quarried from the farm was accounted and noted. This chalk was used to build the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The office room no longer exists.

The bedroom of Gerhardus Robert Stewart is situated at the entrance of the house on the left. It is here where he died. I remember next to his bed was the family 'wakus' and on top of it, his whip.

“I shall refer to the property as Vlakplaas, although it became clear on our visit there, that it is merely one of the sub-divisions of the farm Vlakplaas. It lies to the south east of Pretoria in the Erasmia area and is situated in a farming district. To reach Vlakplaas one travels approximately 10 kilometres along a dirt road and arrives at the property which is to be found near a river. The property leads off the dirt road through a gate which can be locked and we were informed by Mr de Kock that when the property was in use there was an armed guard at the gate and that the guard was trained to do the job. The area of the gate, the man also informed us, was surrounded by a fence and there was a number of trees which were a firebreak. There was no trace of the gate. The surrounding fence was about 1 metre high and was only a low wooden fence.

We visited the farmhouse. I regret I didn't draw a plan detailing the number of rooms, but there are a number of rooms and a stoep which leads onto the driveway. Mr de Kock pointed out three of the rooms to us which had been fitted out with metal doors, which were used to store arms and ammunition which had been obtained from various sources.

We were also informed that there had previously been two metal containers situated across the driveway in front of the house. They had been used for the same purpose. Other rooms in the house were used for office purposes for people carrying out their official duties and there was an end room which, as I recollect, was used as a gymnasium. There must have been some sleeping arrangement in the house, which I don't recall seeing, in light of the fact that Nofomela said that he slept in the main house when he first arrived there. It may of course mean that some temporary sleeping arrangement was made in one of the rooms used for other purposes. Behind the house there was a large covered braai area which was used for the same purpose. There was also a large room, which was used for accommodation purposes.

There were hills to three sides of the property, overlooking the property, which is, as I said, some 99 hectares in extent. Part of this Vlakplaas extends over one of the hills. The property leads off the dirt road through a gate which can be locked and we were informed by Mr de Kock that when the property was in use there was an armed guard at the gate and that the guard was trained to do the job. The area of the gate, the man also informed us, was surrounded by a fence and there was a number of trees which were a firebreak.

Outside and away from the old main house there were a number of concrete slabs and there was more accommodation space which had been used for various purposes, these buildings being used for various purposes. One, in the same area as the bar room, had been further off a place where a great deal of work had been done. In the vicinity of that area was another room which had been further off a place where a great deal of work had been done. In the vicinity of that area there had been two metal containers which had been used for the storage of arms and ammunition which had been obtained from various sources.

There was also a large garage which had been used for vehicles which had been used for various purposes, some of which had been used for vehicles which had been used for various purposes. Some of the vehicles which had been used for various purposes were used for the transportation of arms and ammunition which had been obtained from various sources.

Mr de Kock further informed us that there had been a number of other rooms which had been used for various purposes, some of which had been used for vehicles which had been used for various purposes. Some of the vehicles which had been used for various purposes were used for the transportation of arms and ammunition which had been obtained from various sources.

[Tracing and transcription assistance: South Africa]
Reeds, Hennops River, 2010

Willows, Hennops River (detail), 2010

Braai area, Hennops River, 2010

Central Willows, Hennops River (detail), 2010
We used to swing from the willow branches into the river. We would have picnics and braais and the best memories of my childhood were on the banks of the Hennops River. My grandmother used to send me to the river with her blue watercan and bowl, some soap and my favourite doll. I would play for hours on the riverbank, washing my doll and all her clothes. We often washed in the river. Ouma Pokkie used to send us with Lifebuoy soap just before dark, to get ready for supper. Sometimes we would lose track of time, and we’d have to run for our lives to get back before dark.

(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 20 September 2010)
MR HATTINGH: Without going into too much detail, where was Mr Maponya, was he inside a vehicle or outside a vehicle when you saw him?

MR VAN DER WALT: When I saw him, he was outside a vehicle.

MR HATTINGH: Was he lying on the ground?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes.

MR HATTINGH: Was he disguised or covered with a blanket as Mr Fourie said?

MR VAN DER WALT: I cannot recall the blanket, I think he wore a balaclava over his head.

MR HATTINGH: Did you see Mr De Kok assault him?

MR VAN DER WALT: Also not, I also don’t think that I saw him assaulting him, that is the same as my initial statement.

CHAIRPERSON: What time of the day was it at that stage, was it dark or was it still light?

MR VAN DER WALT: It was about quarter past five, half past five in the evening. It was still light, Mr Chairperson.

MR HATTINGH: Did any person give an order for the interrogation and the accompanying assault to be ceased?

MR VAN DER WALT: That is correct, Mr De Kok said that it had to stop.

MR HATTINGH: Did he say words to the effect that it wasn’t serving any purpose, that it was clear that the man wasn’t going to talk?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes, I could imagine that, I think he said that.

MR HATTINGH: Very well, and that is where you observed the assault on Mr Maponya?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes, there was a shooting range near the river, where there was also some form of a picnic area.

MR HATTINGH: You said that you went there directly when you arrived at the farm?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes.

MR HATTINGH: Are you convinced of that?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes.

MR HATTINGH: You said that you went down there and that Mr Fourie, according to your testimony, go to here with you, no. Mr Fourie would be reading a statement?

MR VAN DER WALT: That is correct, Mr Chairperson, I could not recall a statement in writing at all, but that is a misrecollection. My recollection is that I went directly to the river.

CHAIRPERSON: With Mr Fourie?

MR VAN DER WALT: With Mr Fourie yes.

CHAIRPERSON: When you say you went directly to the river, with a motor vehicle?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON: You drove down there and parked at the shooting range?

MR VAN DER WALT: We drove down there, yes.

CHAIRPERSON: You didn’t park at the canteen and walk?

MR VAN DER WALT: No, we drove there.

CHAIRPERSON: With Mr de Kok?

MR VAN DER WALT: With Mr de Kok, sir.

CHAIRPERSON: When you say you went directly to the river, with a motor vehicle?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes, sir.

CHAIRPERSON: You didn’t park at the canteen and walk?

MR VAN DER WALT: No, no, we drove there.

MR HATTINGH: Is there any court document to explain the circumstances and the accompanying assault to be ceased?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes, I think we have a file for that.

CHAIRPERSON: Is there any further evidence to shed light on any aspect of that event to the Court?

MR VAN DER WALT: Yes, I would imagine that, I think for that.
There were two little outhouses next to each other. One was the ironing room where all the washing was ironed. The iron was heated using an old Primus stove. This room was always very hot and claustrophobic. I used to go in there just to smell the freshly washed washing. I can still remember the smell. The other room we used to call the 'butter room'. Here Ouma Pokkie used to make butter. There used to be big silver jugs on a wooden table filled with fresh cow’s milk. I remember the small rounds of butter on brown paper. From here we would cut and dry our meat to make biltong.

The butter room (torture room), Vlakplaas, 2010 (In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 12 March 2011)
The cemetery, Vlakplaas, 2010.
The cemetery was a very important place for the family. It was cared for, regularly cleaned, and the children had to take flowers weekly to put on all the graves. When someone died, the tradition was that the spouse had to mourn for months, and this was symbolised by wearing a black band around the upper arm. Before the burial, we would gather at the farmhouse for the ceremony. We always sang Gesang 12.

(In conversation with Mercia Scholtz, 13 July 2011)
"I can still remember that we had a lot to drink, " he said. "Upon our arrival at the farm we proceeded to the canteen and had more drinks. While we were busy playing snooker, two members of the unit approached me and said Mr Nthelang had been found by other askaris (ANC members who defected to the apartheid police) at a shebeen, " De Kok testified. "They brought him to the canteen where I questioned him about his whereabouts. " When Nthelang failed to answer his questions and said that he had lost his service pistol at the shebeen, "I hit him three times with a snooker cue, " De Kok said. "I left the canteen to calm down. It was clear that we had a latent defection on our hands. I and other security police members descended upon Nthelang when he left the canteen. Mr Nthelang had been brought to the canteen by the shebeen owner. He ordered that he be searched and locked in the store cupboard. The body was found in an enlarged warthog hole in Zeerust where it was buried. Other former Vlakplaas operatives - Douwville, Piet Snyders, Leon Flores and Andries 'Brood' van Heerden - also testified about their roles in the killing. Van Heerden said Nthelang was nonchalant and had an 'I don't care' attitude. He said that after De Kok left the canteen, Nthelang was assaulted and 'tubed' (a tube placed over a person's head to suffocate him). Snyders denied taking part in the 'tubing'."

Braai area, canteen, Vlakplaas, 2010
The helipad, Vlakplaas, 2011

Petrus leading the ox wagon.

(Date unknown: album)
The helipad, Vlakplaas, 2007
(photograph by Peter Stewart)

Crosses at the crest erected on the top of Aalwynkoppe, 2007 (photograph by Peter Stewart)
Chinas (belonging to Babs Stewart), 2010

Arachnoid (belonging to Babs Stewart), 2010

Glasses (belonging to Alida Stewart), 2010

Peach peeler (belonging to Alida Stewart), 2010

Bridesmaid’s headbands (from Helena and Gert Stewart’s wedding day), 2010

Praise books (belonged to Gerhardus Robert Stewart), 2011

Riddiculous headband (from Helene and Ger Stewart’s wedding day), 2011
Shaving bowl (belonged to Gerhardus Robert Stewart), 2010

Ceramic birds (belonged to Helena Stewart), 2010

Wedding headband (belonged to Helena Stewart), 2011

Wedding gloves (belonged to Helena Stewart), 2011
Baby net (belonged to Mercia Stewart), 2011

Jackal fur coat (belonged to Johanna Stewart), 2011

Shaving box (belonged to Gerhardus Robert Stewart), 2010

Camera (belonged to George Robert Stewart), 2011
POSTSCRIPT
During my first trip to Vlakplaas (2005), I was determined to photograph both the macabre Vlakplaas of public memory and the beautiful family farm of the Stewart family. The disparity of public and personal knowledge of Vlakplaas, and how to represent a site which is simultaneously remembered and reenacted in conflicting ways, was the basis of my enquiry. The resulting photographs can be separated into two series: a black and white one and a colour one. The black and white series is focused on specific sites of trauma, such as the torture room, the canteen where Phemelo Nthelang was murdered with a snooker cue, the farmhouse where the ammunition was stored in various rooms fitted with metal doors, and the office of Eugene de Kock, the most notorious and final commander of Vlakplaas. This series attempted to represent the Vlakplaas of the public imagination and corresponds with the TRC press representations of the farm as a site of horrors and nightmares. This series have series is directly confronts the viewer with the sites where atrocities occurred. The use of black and white film references documentary and news photography and its disposition to focus on the grim and sensational aspects of events. The referent is central in these images and confronts the viewer directly as if to say: ‘this is where it happened’.

Documentary and news photography is often accepted as ‘truthful’ representations, this is not the case however, as these photographs are mediated and often presented to evoke political and social responses from the viewer.
The photographs that form part of the colour series (taken in 2005 and then later for this project in 2010), on the other hand, are focused on the beauty of the farm and reflect the sites inspired by the oral accounts that have been passed down to me by my mother. My mother’s memories reflect a sense of attachment, love and longing for the family farm. Her memories are focused on the beauty of the landscape and are descriptive of the rafting long grasses of the Highveld, the gentle swaying of the willows and the making of butter and buttermilk with her grandmother in the outside ‘butter room’, and the many family braais on the banks of the Hennops River.

While I have focused on the colour series for this MFA project, all these photographs have become part of the archive of Vlakplaas. They particular archive is my own, reflecting my own subjectivities. It will, on the conclusion of this project, be accessible as an archive as part of the collections of The Centre for Curating the Archive at UCT (www.cca.uct.ac.za).
In 2005, family members of those who disappeared during the apartheid regime gathered at Vlakplaas to mourn their loss at the hands of state security agents and to commit themselves to the ongoing struggle to protect all persons from the fate of enforced disappearance (Khulumani 2005: online). In addition to that it was proposed in 2007 by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) that Vlakplaas would be declared a national heritage site and that a centre for traditional healing as well as a museum would be established. This announcement was followed by a three-day traditional healing ceremony at the farm, which concluded on 16 December, an important date in South African history25. During this event 700 traditional healers from all nine provinces each slaughtered a goat and a chicken in an effort to cleanse the land of the evil that occurred there, and to set the spirits free of those who died there (Serote 2007: online). Since Vlakplaas has become the residence of Louis Smit (in 1998), the farm’s caretaker, he has erected wooden crosses on every unmarked grave, and with his church members regularly prays for all those who died there, as well as for the land to heal from its horrific past. Over the course of the last century, Vlakplaas has thus transformed from a beloved family farm and ancestral home, to a site of unutterable trauma and horror, to a site of mourning. The establishment of a centre for traditional healing on the farm will perhaps mark a new phase and more positive transformation in Vlakplaas’s life history, even while the events that occurred on the farm between 1980 to 1993, will forever haunt Vlakplaas and those who visit it.

In my project I have attempted to resolve what I have come to understand as an irresolvable paradox: how to present the past before the present. The impossibility of this task, however, has not rendered it meaningless. Instead it has raised many issues of the difficulties of representation, of the opacity of images and the power of the words that describe or precede them. Furthermore, through this process, I have realised that in trying to understand the complexity of what Vlakplaas is, I have come to see my project not only as an act of representation but as a process of pathos and mourning. Mourning for the suffering that occurred on the land and pathos for my grandfather’s desperate attempts to return to it, and for the impossibility of achieving this desire. What would have been his legacy is now a site transformed by violence and trauma: a legacy of apartheid.

ENDNOTE

25 Currently celebrated as Reconciliation Day, 16 December was previously commemorated as the Day of the Vow (also known as Day of the Covenant or Dingaan’s Day). It is also the day in 1961 that Umkhonto we Sizwe was established.
George Robert Stewart (third) and his son, the latest named George Robert Stewart. (2011) 
The first George Robert Stewart. (c. 1935: album)