Ungrounding Landscape

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Abstract

My project interrogates traditional Western landscape painting in light of the contemporary understanding that 'nature' has been rearticulated, even plasticised and hence rendered malleable, through human action. The idea of a plasticised natural environment is concomitant with the age of the Anthropocene which has brought with it a tremendous rise in the use of plastic since the 1950s, and the consequent polluting effect it has had on the 'natural' environment. In recent years evidence indicates that traces of plastic are now *in* the earth, which suggests a need to rethink what exactly the 'natural' environment is comprised of. With reference to traditional Western landscape painting, my work explores the idea of a socially and materially constructed landscape. Utilising the medium of acrylic paint, I reimagine the landscape by using a material that embodies plastic. Removing the dried and solidified acrylic paint from its ground, the landscape painting is liberated from its supporting canvas and frame in an attempt to deconstruct traditional Western landscape painting. My project aims to rearticulate the language and meaning that is associated with landscapes and the natural environment.

Introduction

My project interrogates traditional Western landscape painting in light of the contemporary understanding that 'nature' has been rearticulated, even plasticised and hence rendered malleable, through human action in the age of the Anthropocene.

The land becomes a *landscape* when it is viewed/framed in a certain way. The concept is derived from the 16th century Dutch *landschap*,[1] where the suffix -*schap* ('-scape' from Old English *sceppan*) means 'to shape' – a transformative action that turns one thing into another. Thus the land is rendered (shaped) into a landscape through a specific framing or way of *seeing*. This understanding has led generations of scholars to mistake the connotations of -scape with -scope (the latter is derived from classical Greek, *skopein*, 'to look'), which has no connection in its etymology (Scott and Swenson 2015: 3). However, the landscape as a 'scopic regime' informs the transformation of land into scenery.[2] One could therefore say that the 'scope' (framing) of a specific scenery is in fact the 'scape' (shaping) of land into a landscape. My project is concerned with the idea that how we see (our cultural perception) is a transformative action that shapes our ideas about the natural environment[3].

This relationship is explored specifically in relation to the cultivation and transformation of plants into a garden/landscape (*landscaping*). I play on this in my work by creating landscape paintings that mimic elements of the natural environment – and then using those paintings to construct a garden, an immersive space in which the viewer becomes part of the landscape.

My landscape paintings are painted with acrylic paint on plastic sheeting and then, once the paint has dried and solidified, the paint is peeled off the sheeting and can function as a painting/artwork made up only of paint. This methodology is key to my conceptual concerns, as there has been a tremendous rise in the use and production of plastic since the early 20th century, both as a 'material element of modern life' and as 'a growing environmental pollutant… a key geological indicator of the Anthropocene, as a distinctive stratal component' (Zalasiewicz 2015: 3).[4]

1. The first recording of the term was adopted from Dutch in the 1590s as that of *landschap* and *landskip*, before the spelling 'landscape' came into being in 1605 (Berger & Overton 2016: ix).

2. In *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*, Scott and Swenson (2015: 3) write: 'The equation of the shape of land with its look – of the *scaped* with the *scopic* – has become firmly lodged in the vocabulary of modernist art history. Landscape thus has come to be identified with scenery and with an art of description that would spread out on a canvas, much as in the subsequent development of both cartography and photography, it would come to be projected onto a plate or screen, or the pages of an atlas.' Considering the aforementioned, it is evident that the term 'landscape' is related to ways of seeing.

3. 'The concept of landscape has, in fact, been hitched from the beginning to aspects of human use – labour, property, domestication, jurisdiction, and so on – with a dialectic between humans and the land at its core. Derived from the Dutch word *landschap*, landscape by definition acknowledges the mutual "shaping" of the land and people. According to many scholarly interpretations, it furthermore denotes a view or composition of the world, one that implicitly coheres customs and laws for human coexistence with the land, or a domain for civic life' (Scott & Swenson 2015: 3).3. Although plastic is 'most immediately evident in terrestrial deposits', it is becoming more abundant as 'microscopic fragments in marine sedimentary deposits in both shallow- and deep-water settings' (Zalasiewicz 2015: 1).

The word 'anthropocene' comes from ancient Greek: the suffix '-cene' from *kainós*, meaning new, and *anthropos* meaning human. Thus in the Anthropocene 'we have entered a new epoch in Earth's geological history, one characterised by the advent of the human species as a geological force' (Scranton 2015: 17) and that 'marks the extent of human impact on the Earth's systems and processes' (Hood 2016: online).[5] Earth's biosphere[6] has been irreversibly changed by human activity, which has resulted in changes to weather patterns, sea temperatures and a permanent alteration of the icecaps (Dickinson 2015). These changes have led to increased CO_2 levels in the atmosphere[7], mass extinctions of species and the transformation of nitrogen cycles (Hood 2016: online). The process is thought to have begun a mere two hundred and fifty years ago with the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and amplified dramatically during the period of Great Acceleration[8] after the Second World War in the first half of the 20th century.[9] Since then, plastic has been produced in abundance for its 'remarkable utility and versatility' in the marketplace (Zalasiewicz 2015: 2).

Evidence is all around us that plastics are an integral material in contemporary human daily life, but also one of the greatest environmental pollutants. I utilise plastic in my work as a vocabulary central to the Anthropocene, as a material that is deeply incorporated into

4. Although plastic is 'most immediately evident in terrestrial deposits', it is becoming more abundant as 'microscopic fragments in marine sedimentary deposits in both shallow- and deep-water settings' (Zalasiewicz 2015:1).

5. According to Carrington (2016: Online), 'The current epoch, the Holocene, is the 12,000 years of stable climate since the last ice age during which all human civilisation developed. But the striking acceleration since the mid-20th century of carbon dioxide emissions and sea level rise, the global mass extinction of species, and the transformation of land by deforestation and development mark the end of that slice of geological time, the experts argue […] The Earth is so profoundly changed that the Holocene must give way to the Anthropocene. The new epoch should begin about 1950, the experts said, and was likely to be defined by the radioactive elements dispersed across the planet by nuclear bomb tests, although an array of other signals, including plastic pollution, soot from power stations, concrete, and even the bones left by the global proliferation of the domestic chicken were now under consideration.' Furthermore, Hood (2016: online) writes that 'the Anthropocene sets the rapid rate of potentially irreversible change to the environment over the last few decades against unimaginable geologic pasts and futures during which, respectively, fossil fuels were formed and nuclear waste will remain.'

6. The biosphere is the surface of the Earth's crust that interacts with the atmosphere (Dickinson 2015).

7. According to *The Guardian* (Watts 2017) the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere hit a record level globally at 403.3 parts per million (ppm) in 2016. Watts maintains: 'This acceleration occurred despite a slowdown – and perhaps even a plateauing – of emissions because El Niño intensified droughts and weakened the ability of vegetation to absorb carbon dioxide. As the planet warms, El Niños are expected to become more frequent.'

8. The 'Great Acceleration', refers to the vast growth in the human population, industrialisation and resource consumption around the mid-20th century or post- World War II to the present day (Zalasiewicz 2015: 2).

9. The extraordinary global expansion of plastics can be seen in the production from the less than 2 million tonnes manufactured in 1950 to the 300 million tonnes made annually today. Furthermore, 'the cumulative amount produced as of 2015 is of the order of 5 billion tons, which is enough to wrap the Earth in a layer of cling film, or plastic wrap. The current global annual production represents $40 per kilogram of plastics produced annually for each of the 7 billion humans on the planet, approximating the total human biomass (Zettler et al. 2013). The amount projected by 2050, on current trends, is about 40 billion tons (Rochman et al. 2013), which is enough to wrap 6 layers of cling film around the planet. It is an enormous industry, currently using approximately 8% of global oil extraction for its manufacture' (Zalasiewicz 2015:2).

the natural environment (which I refer to as a *plasticised world*). In deconstructing traditional Western landscape painting[10] my project aims to rearticulate the language and meaning that is associated with landscapes and the natural environment.

While questions such as, *How do I deconstruct preconceived perceptions of the landscape without erasing knowledge and reiterating a history of violence over land?* could be related to considerations of ground, it is not my intention here to explore notions of belonging in relation to land[11]. Rather I wish to focus on the formal aspects of painting, specifically contemporary landscape painting in relation to traditional Western landscape painting and how it may be ungrounded in order to reveal environmental instability. In order to do so, I maintain that one must demonstrate how highly constructed perceptions of the natural environment are. My project thus creates an anthropogenic landscape to illustrate that nature is a malleable construct that is physically altered by human shaping.

It is my contention that the physical elements of the canvas and the frame that holds and supports the image of a painting are as implicated in the construction of symbolic meaning as the representation of it. Hence, to deconstruct the complicit meaning one must remove the painting completely from its supporting systems – which I do by peeling my paintings off their supporting structures. My work explores ways of reimagining the landscape by literally removing it from its ground. In the following chapters I will explore other ways in which my painting deconstructs traditional Western landscape painting, namely by:

Liberating the surface layer

In traditional painting methods paint is usually applied to a physical ground, for example wood, canvas, linen, a wall or any other physical object. This ground operates as a base upon which the paint can function as a painting, and this substratum is part of the final art object. My paintings are liberated from the supporting ground and function as an independent surface layer that becomes the artwork/painting.

10. It may be argued that the act of painting landscapes or natural scenery predates the seventeenth century Dutch Landscape paintings, yet in the context of this paper I refer to the specific tradition of landscape painting in the West, referred to as *Classical Landscape*, which was highly stylised and artificial in its depiction of the 'natural environment' (discussed in Chapter 1).

11. I understand that in a South African context the notion of 'landscape' is specifically relevant and loaded, where areas of land are enormously contested and signify a history of trauma and loss. Notions of belonging and alienation in a South African context and abroad (considering the current international refugee crisis) are important when considering ground as a boundaried area of land. In a South African context the term 'landscape' has strong sociohistorical implications that relate specifically (but not exclusively) to the apartheid Land Act of 1913. Godby states that 'As a genre, Landscape is possibly more encoded and pregnant with meaning and power than any other' (2010: i).

12. Most landscape paintings include reference to plant matter in some form, yet it is unusual for plant matter to become the focus of traditional landscape painting.

Artificial nature

My paintings underscore traditional Western landscape painting's highly artificial nature (its inclusion and exclusion of certain elements within a frame) by focusing on the materiality of acrylic paint as a type of plastic – an artificial material synonymous with ideas of fakeness.

Plants without ground

My work focusses specifically on plants and the enormous regenerative benefits and ecological support they provide in and to the natural environment. In my paintings, however, the plants lack the substrate of the land, separated as they are from their ground.[12]

The painter takes the role of landscaper

After the dried paint is removed from the substratum it is 'landscaped' in an exhibition space. As in a garden,[13] the paintings are arranged to simulate elements of nature.

'Planting' ideas

The double meaning of the term 'planting' relates both to the act of gardening and to the function of camouflage, where the intention is to conceal something that is planted within a setting for some purpose. In my work there is a blurring of boundaries, a deliberate confluence between *what is* and *what is not*.

In the following chapters I discuss ways in which landscape and the natural environment are constructed, specifically in relation to traditional Western landscape painting and how this tradition has informed many of our cultural assumptions and ways of seeing nature. I explain the significance of deconstructing this genre and its inherent symbolic meaning, with specific reference to the materiality of acrylic paint, which can function as a surface without the support of a canvas/frame.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, 'Landscapes and the Environment', the concepts of *nature*, the *landscape* and the *environment* are critically analysed. This chapter also investigates the idea that landscapes are a symbolic environment created by the human act of conferring meaning on nature and the environment, and that the definition of landscape can therefore be changed by the bestowal of different symbolic meanings and cultural settings. This manifests in my painting process when I remove the literal and figurative ground on which the landscape rests in order to open up new ways of seeing the landscape.

In order to highlight how plastic the 'natural'

13. The term 'garden' (*hortus* or *gardinum* in Latin) refers to an enclosed space or grounds where plants are cultivated, set apart from untamed nature (Robinson 2015: 17). A garden can thus be understood as 'a work of artifice', as it is consciously made or tamed (Willsdon 2015: 41). The garden is already an artificial simulation/re-imagination of the wild and untouched landscape, and here it is made even *more* artificial by plants created from plastic paint.

environment has become in the Anthropocene, the second chapter, ‘Surface and Materiality’, explores my own use of acrylic paint to construct my landscape paintings. This section explores the materiality of painting and material thinking that is akin to process-driven art production. Ways in which the material gains agency by liberating it from the canvas are also discussed and an analogy is drawn between how plant growth informs the process of my painting and the practices of gardening.

The third and final chapter, ‘Paint Becomes Plant’, gives an overview of how my paintings aspire to become plants but can never succeed. Here my project shifts towards an investigation of the techniques of camouflage as a tool of mimicry and a symbol of the artificial. This section also explores the ambiguity and (literal) double-sidedness of my paintings in relation to the artificial nature of camouflage.

John Constable’s *The Hay Wain* (1821) among a few other renown traditional Western landscape painting, discussed in **Chapter 1.**

The work of South African artist Penny Siopis will be discussed in relation to my own work in **Chapter 2.**

Yukota Sone’s exhibition *Island* (2011) will be discussed in **chapter 3** in relation to the idea of fake foliage.

Opposite page: *Ungrounded Landscape* II (2017), Acrylic Paint.

Studio documentation: pieces of dried acrylic paint to assemble *Paint Becomes Plant* series (2017)

Landscapes and the Environment

> Landscape painting is and has been for about two hundred years a major preoccupation of painters and patrons. Its iconography has spread all through the image system of commerce, tourism and entertainment; and in so doing has acted as the bearer of national and regional ideologies, concepts of natural philosophy, beliefs about Man (sic), Nature and God. (Brett 1989: 14)

Landscape painting and landscape art remain important genres as a vehicle with which to voice sociopolitical and/or environmental concerns by artists of the 21st century.[14] Since the 1950s art has been an important vehicle with which to address environmental concerns, but according to Kate Hood (2016: online), 'The Anthropocene makes the task [of artists] more ambitious, and more urgent.' The term Environmental Art has generally been used to describe art that is predominantly concerned with the environment (including contemporary and traditional / representational landscape art), as the term includes both theories of culture and nature (Thornes 2008: 393).Environmental Art encompasses a range of genres dating back to Land Art of the 1960s.[15]

This chapter focusses on the concepts of the *landscape* and the *environment*, as well as the notion of 'nature' (and the 'natural') and the need to recontextualise/reimagine these socially constructed concepts in the age of the Anthropocene.

1.1. Unstable Nature

The 18th-century Irish politician and philosopher Edmund Burke believed that 'In a state of rude nature there is no such thing as people' (in Williams 1980: 68) and argued that human inventions are 'wholly artificial' creations. In this conception, nature is that 'which consists of all things unaffected by or predating human technology, production, and design. E.g., the ecosystem, the natural environment, virgin ground, unmodified species and laws of nature' (Williams 1980: 68). The Oxford English Dictionary similarly defines 'nature' as 'the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations.'

However, the idea that nature excludes all of humanity and its outputs is problematic and outdated. In a contemporary sense it is difficult to distinguish what is natural and what is not, as most aspects of the physical world are somewhat influenced by technology and science (Dennis & Mooney 2016: online). Therefore, some theorists argue that there is nothing completely natural in the contemporary world, where humans have influenced and shaped every aspect of the natural environment through various forms of industrialisation, science, growing, technology and pollution.[16]

However, if one considers the argument of German philosopher Jurgen Mittelstrass that 'nature is never fixed' as it is always evolving, and that 'different cultures bestow different meanings upon nature', then a definition of nature could evolve to include humans and their creations (Mittelstrass et al 2014: 1). This argument implies that *everything* (ie. all matter) is natural, including humans and their impact on the environment;[17] this latter theory disrupts the dichotomy between nature and culture as separate entities.

The nature/culture dichotomy is an oversimplification of the relationship between humans and the natural environment, one that sets nature and culture as binary opposites. Nature is seen as outside/other to the realm of culture, which supposedly stems from Enlightenment ideas of science, technology and progress, usually at the expense of natural resources. This way of seeing nature as apart from culture has informed many of our cultural assumptions.The human relationship with nature has always been and remains ambivalent, oscillating

> … between romantic devotion to nature and attempts to conquer it … encompassing a wide range of emotions and rationales for its exploitation, domination and preservation … this reflects modern society's nature-culture dualism, where nature is defined as "the other" vis-à-vis human society and culture. This notion is manifested in the relationship between humans and nature, whether it concerns human mastery of nature or humans as its keeper. Accordingly, the nature-culture divide permeates the underlying logic of international environmental regulation (Emmenegger & Tscentscher in Uggla 2010: 1).

Coates (2006) writes that the ambiguous relationship can be seen in terms of the *garden* (a cultural phenomenon, cultivated and controlled) and the *wilderness* (uncultivated by humankind). This relationship between the wild and the cultivated provides the background to my project.

14. This includes both art production that is directly representational of the environment and work that is non-representational, such as conceptual work that raises awareness of the landscape/environment.

15. Environmental Art encompasses a very wide range of both representational and non-representational work concerned with the environment and ecology. Environmental Art has been labeled various terms since the 1960s, such as; land art, earthworks, site-specific art, ecological art, eco-art and BioArt - all have in common that it deals with the landscape, nature or the environment (Thornes 2008: 391). BioArt uses living biological material (such as plants) and modern biotechnological tools to intervene directly in biological processes by means of genetic manipulation and the modification of biological structures. (Kurzac 2008: 61).

16. Slavoj Žižek is a controversial Marxist philosopher known for stating, among other things, that 'nature does not exist' (2010: online). Similarly, Timothy Morton (2007) argues that the chief stumbling block to environmental thinking is the idea of nature itself.

17. Davis and Turpin (2015: 12) write that one of the effects of the Anthropocene is that 'we are shaping the world around us' and that 'organisms have been shaped by human intention'. Thus, what is defined as 'natural' has shifted. As Normand (2015: 63) writes, 'The first consequence of the concept of the Anthropocene is the transfer, at a geo- logic level, of the qualification of nature as an anthropogenic entity, thus triggering a significant shift in its modern ontological status. If nature was previously conceived as the mere background to human experience, on the Anthropocenic stage nature only ever partially enters the sphere of human constructions'.

Figure 1. (Above) *WallFlower* (2005), Ken Smith.
Medium: Synthetic flowers. Knowlton School of Architecture, OSU (Smith 2005: online).

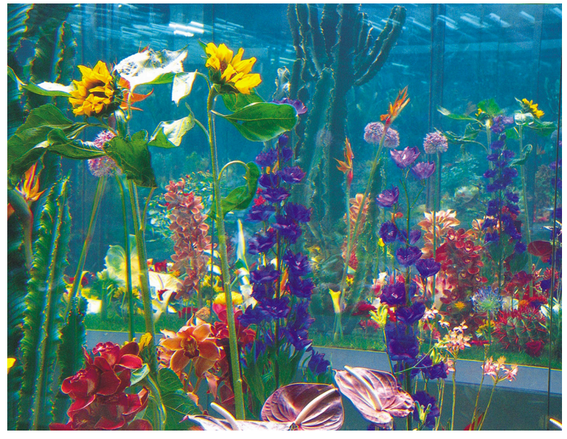
Figure 2. (Opposite page) *Garden* (2000), Marc Quinn.
Medium: Cold room, stainless steel, heated glass, refrigerating equipment, mirrors, turf, real plants, acrylic tank, low viscosity silicon oil held at -20°C. Dimentions: 320h x 1270w x 543d cm. Fondazione Prada, Milan (Quinn 2000: online).

American landscape artist Ken Smith's *Wall-Flowers* installation (2005) explores this theme: the entire surface of the gallery's interior is covered with synthetic plants (Fig. 1) and the viewer is 'invited to consider the materiality of the natural versus artificial' (Smith 2005: online). The placement of plants on the concrete floor and ceiling resonates with my work, where plants are similarly landscaped without ground, almost floating and detached from the surface of their creation. Smith plays with the materiality of plastic as a symbol of *fakeness* and highlights the artificiality of landscaping by constructing a garden inside an office space – showing that the act of landscaping is a human construct.

> A considerable part of what we call the natural landscape … is the product of human design and human labour, and in admiring it as natural it matters very much whether we suppress that fact of labour or acknowledge it. (Williams in Scott & Swenson 2015: 4).

As Williams suggests, when perceiving the natural environment the human impact on it should not be overlooked, even when not immediately evident. Nature is arguably never really what it seems, and this instability implies that its only constant is, in fact, change.

British artist Marc Quinn's *Garden* (2000) similarly contends that nature (as we have come



to understand it over the centuries) does not exist. Quinn (2000: online) states:

> I wanted it to be about the manipulation of nature – there is no such thing as nature anymore. It's all culture now. Every landscape you see is a manipulated landscape, every flower has been genetically modified through breeding to be like it is, so these pictures are about The Garden being constructed, not grown.

Figure 3. *Example of Plastiglomerate.* Natural materials combined with melted plastic (Valentine 2014: online).

The exhibition (Fig. 2) includes nearly a thousand different plant specimens from around the world, all in bloom, frozen in twenty-five tons of liquid silicone at -20˚C inside four aquarium containers. This plasticising process captures the flowering plants in an eternal moment. Quinn's *Garden* resonates with my paintings, which are also incapable of growth or decay, but nonetheless refer to the process of growth and the manner in which the *natural* has become plasticised. In these projects our plasticised natural environment is linked to the earth's ground and its plastic pollution and microplastic[18] particles, suggesting that 'plastics will likely leave identifiable fossil records for future generations to discover' (Carrington 2016: online).

Humans have produced so much plastic that it has seeped into the crevices of the earth's strata, at times combining with natural materials or filling the cavities of larger rocks. This has resulted in the formation of naturally occurring plastic-rock hybrids, or *Plastiglomerates* (Fig. 3), which were first discovered in 2006.[19] These 'rocks' are formed through natural processes and their near indestructability means they may survive far into the future as part of the geological record (Nuwer 2014: online).

18. Microplastics are small plastic pieces less than five millimeters long which can be harmful to the ocean and aquitic life (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2017).

Canadian artist Kelly Jazvac,[20] who works with the materiality of plastic, exhibited a selection of plastiglomerates as found-objects/sculptures in the exhibition *Rock, Stone and Dust* (Fig. 4). Her positioning of these objects as fossils explores the idea of the 'permanence of the disposable', which supposes that we have become accustomed to seeing plastic as a temporary, disposable material in relation to a larger scale of time (Valentine 2015: online).

One could argue that plastic, as a synthetic, human-made material, is made 'natural' by its incorporation into the natural cycles of the earth. Our consumer culture rejects articles no longer of immediate use, which are returned to the ground through waste disposal and pollution. The disposed plastic becomes part of nature and may someday be identified as a natural element in a taxonomy of plastic 'fossils'. Furthermore, these hybrid fossils could become natural resources to be extracted, utilised and commodified – a phenomenon already occurring in art, design and architecture.

An example of the commodification of this hybrid material can be seen in contemporary jewelery designer Poleta Rodete's *Plastiglomerate Collection* (2015), converted to precious stones (Fig. 5). However, while Jazvac uses the stone as a found object from the earth, Rodete creates her own handcrafted plastiglomerates from plastic and semi-precious materials (Khemsurov 2015: online):

> Trying to emulate the aesthetic characteristics of the plastiglomerate, Poleta went through a long process of development and testing by mixing limestone, marble, granite, epoxy resin and plastic waste to create a new material, which is the main component of this collection.

Here, a naturally occurring process is enacted artificially to produce a valuable resource. Similarly, Meredith Miller and Thom Moran produce their own plastiglomerates in an attempt to test the material's 'potential as an aesthetically-considered building material' –a commercially viable resource (Fig. 6). Miller and Moran's intervention into this 'naturally' occurring phenomenon 'blurs the line between what is discarded and what is valued' (Goldberg 2017: online). The exhibition *Clastic Order* (2017)[21]

19. Charles Moore, a sea captain and oceanographer at the Algalita Marine Research Institute, first discovered and documented samples of 'Plastiglomerates' on the polluted beach Kamilo, in Hawaii, in 2006. This beach's sand has an abundance of degraded pollutant particles, locally referred to as 'plastic confetti', a result of the accumulation of garbage from the circulating currents in that southeastern shoreline. The significance of this discovery was only realized in 2012, when Dr Patricia Corcoran, an earth scientist, sampled the same beach, with Moore, and discovered 205 pieces ranging in size. It was then discovered that these plastiglomerates are usually a result of the melted plastic 'confetti' binding with sand, plant material, wood, shells, pebbles, basalt, rocks or coral, creating a hybrid plastic-rock formation (Nuwer 2014).

20. Jazvac was part of the team that discovered and documented the plastiglomerates in Hawaii in 2012, along with Charles Moore and Dr. Patricia Corcoran.

21. A group project of the architectural research initiative led by the collective T+E+A+M, which includes assistant professors Ellie Abrons and Adam Fure alongside Meredith Miller and Thom Moran (Goldberg 2017).

was the first showcase for their ongoing project to develop a new building material that combines plastic waste and inorganic aggregates, which they refer to as 'post-rock'. This crafted building material is essentially an artificial production of plastiglomerates, made of waste products from the construction industry and plastics – a 'hybrid material of waste polymers and inorganic matter' (Taubman College 2017: online). The project's use of a material that contains both artificial and natural aggregates (plastiglomerates) inspired by a naturally occurring phenomenon (rock formation) embodies my own interest in engaging what is natural or artificial.

Another synthetic-rock formation that is relevant to my work is the 'accidental' formation of fordite, a by-product of hardened enamel paint in automobile factories that has dripped and dried, setting in colourful layers after being exposed to a very high heat, and then polished into synthetic, patterned gemstones (Fig. 7). They are very similar to plastiglomerates, but are produced as a direct by-product of industrial factories. Fordite is also relevant to my interest in the materiality and aesthetic effect of paint.

My project focuses on the idea of a synthetic nature wherein plants have become plasticised through human interference in the ecosystem. Large-scale human impact on nature is an irreversible process that has permanently altered the parameters of what we have come to understand as pristine and wild 'nature'. The predominant response to this anthropogenic crisis of the environment has largely been to 'leave nature alone (a response that quickly slides back into the ideal of virginal nature)' (Boetzkes 2010: 22). This response neither reverses the existing anthropogenic impact, nor provides a sustainable solution for the growing human population's appetite for natural resources. Boetzkes (2010: 22) contends that 'we might instead consider the need to reconceptualise our contact with nature by remaining attentive to the limits of our grasp of it, thereby opening a space for it to exist on its own terms.'

It is my contention that once we are able to reimagine what nature is, the way we perceive the landscape will enable us to focus on the significance of both synthetic and natural materials and matter, which may ultimately create sustainable solutions of conscious consumption instead of the ongoing exploitation of natural resources (such as carbon) in the manufacturing of plastics.

Figure 4. (Following page, top) *Plastiglomerate Samples* (2013), Kelly Jasvac. Medium: geological samples of stones created through the sedimentation of melted plastic and natural materials such as coral, sand, wood and volcanic rock. Bernicke Gallery, University of Toronto, Canada (Valentine 2015: online).

Figure 5. (Following page, bottom) *Plastiglomerate Collection* (2014) Poleta Rodete. Commissioned by Angula Cero. Medium: silver and marble (Khemsurov 2015: online).

Figure 6. *Clastic Order* (2017) Meredith Miller & Thom Moran. CCA's Designing Material Innovation, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Michigan, USA (Taubman College 2017: online)

Figure 7. Example of polished fordite.

1.2. Imagined Landscapes

The term 'landscape', like 'nature', can be ambiguous and misleading. The first recording of the term was adopted from Dutch in the 1590s as jargon specific to the genre of painting. Before the 16th century landscape images were mostly 'confined to the background of portraits or paintings dealing principally with religious, mythological or historical subjects' (Blumberg 2017: online). During the Renaissance, a period marked by rejection of medieval values and an interest in nature and individualism, art was seen as a source of knowledge that might provide insight into humanity's position in the universe. Artists began to view the landscape as a separate genre at a time when science was breaking itself into distinct disciplines of specialisation. In the 17th century the genre of what we now think of as Classical Landscape painting developed, evoking ideal sceneries typical of Classical Greek and Roman painting.[22] The leading artists of this genre, Claude Lorraine and Nicholas Poussin, depicted idyllic scenes with mythological or religious undertones (Figs. 8.1 – 8.2). These paintings were highly stylised and artificial in their renderings of a picturesque landscape.[22]

At the same time Dutch artists such as Jacob van Ruisdael (Fig. 9) developed a more naturalistic depiction of the landscape in accordance with what they saw in their surroundings, which 'answered no direct social need' (Berger 2016: 105). Dutch landscape paintings of this period are characterised by the depiction of vast open scenery and the inclusion of small figures that express humanity's dependence on nature.

In the 18th century Rococo landscapes became more lyrical, often called *fêtes galantes*, romantic outdoor scenes painted with 'delicate precision' (Blumberg 2017: online).[24] Typical of this style is Jean-Antoine Watteau's *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717) or Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* (1767) (Figs. 10.1 – 10.2).

In the 19th century the Romantic landscape predominated, demonstrating the power and splendor of nature – a response to a perceived growing alienation from nature because of the rapid escalation of industrialisation and urbanisation.[25] The leading artists of this time were John Constable, J.M.W Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, renowned for their detailed and evocative capturing of weather effects and dramatic scenery (Figs. 11.1 – 11.3).

22. According to the J. Paul Getty Museum; 'These landscapes were influenced by classical antiquity and sought to illustrate an ideal landscape recalling Arcadia, a legendary place in ancient Greece known for its quiet pastoral beauty' (online).

23. Paintings within this genre were typically stylised and contained symbolic, mythological or biblical meanings. The scenery was also typically elaborate to demonstrate Nature's sublime power over humanity.

24. The Rococo period originated in the 18th century in Paris and was characterised by 'lightness, elegance, and an exuberant use of curving, natural forms in ornamentation.' (Encyclopedia Britannica).

25. According to Galitz (2000), 'In Romantic art, nature – with its uncontrollable power, unpredictability and potential for cataclysmic extremes – offered an alternative to the ordered world of Enlightenment thought. The violent and terrifying images of nature conjured by Romantic artists recall the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the Sublime' (Galitz 2004). Edmund Burke (1757) wrote that 'all that stuns the soul, all that imprints a feeling of terror, leads to the sublime.'

Figure 8.1. (Top) *Ascanius Shooting the Stag of Sylvia* (1681 - 1682) Claude Lorraine. Oil on canvas, 120 cm x 150 cm. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, England (Ashmolean Museum: online).

Figure 8.2. (Middle) *Landscape with Saint John on Patmos* (1640) Nicholas Poussin. Oil on canvas, 100.3 x 136.4 cm. A. A. Munger Collection (The Art Institute of Chicago: online).

Figure 9. (Bottom) *Wheat Fields* (1670), Jacob van Ruisdael. Oil on canvas, 100 x 130.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (The Metropolitan Museum of Art: online).

Figure 10.1. (bottom) *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717) Jean-antoine Watteau. Oil on canvas, 129 cm x 194 cm. The Louvre, Paris, France (Louvre: online).

Figure 10.2. (left) *The Swing* (1767) Jean-Honore Fragonard. Oil on canvas, 81 cm x 64 cm. Wallace Collection, England (The Wallace Collection: online).

The development of portable easels and paint tubes in the late 19th century provided an opportunity for artists to venture outside to document changing light and weather in their surroundings firsthand. *Plein-air* landscape painting became the dominant practice for Impressionist painters (Blumberg 2017: online). The motivations of Romanticism (the glorification of nature) were abandoned in favour of a more subjective use of brushstrokes in an attempt to record the effects of light with paint. Artists such as Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir turned to their own gardens for inspiration (Fig. 12.1 – 12.2). The great horticultural movement of the 19th and early 20th century extended the parameters of landscape painting to include the 'enclosed garden' within its vocabulary. The cultural act of cultivating (*landscaping*) a garden became acceptable subject matter for landscape paintings and the wilderness was no longer considered separate or apart from culture.

Historically the Western tradition of landscape painting has informed many of our cultural assumptions and ways of seeing the 'natural' environment as separate from culture. The classical architecture and statuary of classical landscape painting speaks to an ordered and regulated world under control, whereas the period of Romantic painting speaks to a time when 'sublime nature' was glorified. In the Impressionist period artistic practice reflected the contemporary science of perception. The innovations of landscape painting 'led progressively away from the substantial and tangible towards the indeterminate and intangible' (Berger & Overton 2016: 105). All of the above informed ideas of the landscape and its imaging.

The evolution of the term 'landscape' over the centuries has come to mean 'all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary: online). In contemporary art the term 'landscape' has come to include much more than simple pictorial and aesthetic concerns, also considering land in terms of its utility for practical and ideological purposes (Scott & Swenson 2015: 2). Accordingly, the verb 'landscaping' has come to mean the shaping of land, or 'to make (a garden or other area of ground) more attractive by altering the existing design, adding ornamental features and planting trees and shrubs' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary: online).

Figure 11.1. (Top) *The Hay Wain* (1821)
John Constable. Oil on canvas, 130 cm x 185 cm. National Gallery, London. (The National Gallery: online)

Figure 11.2. (Middel) *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (1812) J.M.W. Turner. Oil on canvas, 371 × 607 cm. The Tate Gallery, London (Tate Gallery: online).

Figure 11.3. (Bottom) *Monk by the Sea* (1810)
Caspar David Friedrich. Oil on canvas, 110 x 172 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany (Pollit: online).

Figure 12.1. (Left) *Water Lilies* (1905) Claude Monet.
Oil on canvas, 89.5 x 100.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, USA (Royal College of Art 2015: 228).

Figure 12.2. (Below) *Women in a Garden* (1873) Piere-Auguste Renoir.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm. Private location (Royal College of Art 2015).

In *Landscape and Western Art*, Malcolm Andrews makes a clear distinction between 'land' and 'landscape', claiming that landscape is a specific view/framing of scenery in the natural environment, while land is the raw material that is processed and translated into an image. In this text the term 'landscape' relates to its acculturated usage in painting, while 'land' refers to the physical world.

According to Andrews (1999: 15) 'it is unlikely [for one] to be a passive consumer of a landscape image', since our own 'sense of identity and relationship to the environment' is always implicated in our response to images of the landscape. Greider and Garkovich (1994: 1) support this theory:

> 'Landscapes' are the symbolic environment created by a human act of conferring meaning to nature and the environment, of giving the environment definition and form from a particular angle of vision and through a special filter of values and beliefs. Every landscape is a symbolic environment. These landscapes reflect our self-definitions that are grounded in culture.

This definition of landscape is based on the idea that even though the same physical area of land (for example an open field) may carry multiple meanings dependent on its perceived functions, when converted into an image it carries 'values by which people define themselves' (Greider & Garkovich 1994: 1).

> Like a canvas in a gallery, a landscape comes to life in the eyes of the people who look at it. In return, the observer confers meaning on the works of nature and artists and the hybrid forms produced through human action on the environment, and transmits that meaning to others. (Schwimmer 2000: 3)

In other words, our perceptions of landscapes reflect our perceptions of who we are. Landscapes are 'reflections of cultural identity', meaning the natural environment is transformed into a landscape by cultural groups that experience it, through the use of symbols with different meanings attached to them. This implies that any physical environment may embody multiple landscapes, 'each grounded in cultural definitions of those who encounter that place' (Greider & Garkovich 1994: 2).

Yet some theorists posit that seeing landscapes as cultural images reinforces misleading binary distinctions between culture and nature (Thornes 2008: 393). Simon Schama (1995: 61), for example, suggests that 'landscapes are culture before they are nature – constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock', and Ingold (2000: 189) writes that:

> The conceptualisation of landscape has persistently been bedeviled by sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space.

This latter statement is often reiterated in contemporary artworks that deal with sociopolitical issues, as the landscape becomes a site of individual and collective memories and identity politics. Beidelman highlights the emotional power implicit in individual or collective imagination and its ability to 'transform experience through the use of tropes and the manipulations of symbols'. Therefore, Beidelman concludes, there is a strong relationship between the imagination and 'the ways that people construct images of the world in which they live' (in Godby 2010: 30). It may thus also be possible to redefine the landscape through imagination. If nature is ever changing, then it may be argued that the definition of landscape is similarly subject to change through the bestowal of different symbolic meanings.

Detail of *Ungrounded Landscape II* (2017). Acrylic paint. Sections of the painting is left open that serve as negative spaces which allows the viewer to see the surrounding environment as part of the painting.

1.3. Grounding and Ungrounding

The title of my dissertation, *Ungrounding Landscape*, refers to the deconstruction of the perceived norms inherent in traditional landscape painting and, accordingly, perceptions of the 'natural environment'. In my paintings the ground is removed in order to reimagine the language associated with it. Thus the ungrounding (peeling the paint off the substrate) in my work is an act of removing the landscape from its existing conceptualisation, including preconceived ideas that limit our understanding of that conceptualisation. The following section investigates the significance of both the term 'ground' and the act of 'ungrounding' in my project.

In his text *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geo-Philosophy* (2013), Ben Woodard writes that the impact of the human race is a form of unearthing, or ungrounding, of the earth through processes such as digging for fossil fuels, carbon deposits and pollution. In short, this philosophy is based on the idea that 'privileging the human world over the natural environment needs to be overturned' (Gibson 2015: 85).

In order to understand where the *ungrounding* happens in my work it is necessary to articulate the double meaning in the word ground in this project. Firstly, and more commonly, it is defined by the *Merrimiam-Webster English Dictionary* as:

1. 'the soil that is on or under the surface of the earth'

This is the upper layer of the earth that may be dug or plowed and in which plants grow. This understanding of 'ground' resonates with concepts in my project such as plant growth and materiality. Without ground in this sense most plants cannot grow, as it provides nutrients to the plant and acts as a substrate in which the plants' roots anchor themselves. My paintings sometimes mimic plants in form, but are removed from any kind of ground. The significance, however, is that given that the ground contains traces of plastics, which might hinder or inhibit the growth of real plants, my plant-like paintings can be seen as indicators of what future hybrids this tainted soil might give rise to.

2. 'an area of land'

This suggests landscape in terms of a bounded area and land use. I organise my plant-like paintings to evoke a landscape like a garden; these paintings are 'grown' in the studio and then landscaped, in keeping with common gardening practices.[26]

26. Discussed further in Chapter 2.

3. 'a basis for belief, action or argument'

In my work I aim to unground the perception or preconceived knowledge on which ideas of the natural environment rest.

4. 'a material that serves as a substratum'

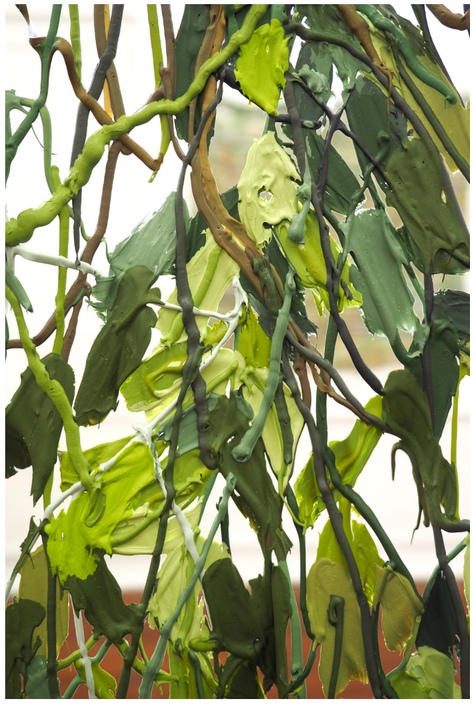
In fine art a ground is the substrate onto which paint is applied, or a substance applied prior to painting to prepare such a substrate for painting. My paintings, however, have no ground once they have been peeled away from their initial substratum. The paint becomes the sole material, without support of any ground (canvas).

5. 'the physical conditions or features that form the setting against which something is viewed'

This understanding of ground relates to the concepts of figure-and-ground/foreground-and-background. My work is double-sided, as sections are left open that serve as negative spaces. Once the work is displayed the viewer is thus able to see through the painting, but also to see the surrounding environment as part of the painting.

Considering the various definitions of 'ground' and how they resonate with my project, the act of *ungrounding* can be understood as a deconstructive and transformative action. If a painting's ground serves as an anchoring substrate, the physical act of peeling the ground away operates as a conceptual ungrounding of the traditional Western landscape and its accompanying perceptions and conceptual deductions.

Detail of *Ungrounded Landscape II* (2017). Acrylic paint. Sections of the painting is left open that serve as negative spaces which allows the viewer to see the surrounding environment as part of the painting.



Surface and Materiality

This chapter explicates the significance of removing the painting's ground and notions of *surface* and *materiality* in relation to my painting process. The first section of this chapter gives an overview of the significance of surface to painting and the concept of layering and support. In section two I explain how the medium of painting gains agency when it does not have the support of a substrate, and consequently gains the ability to support itself. The third section further explores the latter theme by discussing the work of South African artist, Penny Siopis. This chapter is concluded with a synopsis of the characteristics of my plastic medium.

2.1. Painting and its Surface

In traditional painting practice, a ground material operates as the base upon which the paint is able to fulfil its function as a painting. A painting's surface is normally considered to be the outer painted layer, but without the substratum paint is both the surface and body of the painting.

My paintings are initially painted onto plastic sheeting (a ground), but once the paint has dried (solidified into a physical object/solid state) the 'surface' is peeled off and removed from the plastic sheeting. As the paint becomes an independent physical, three-dimensional object one might question whether it falls into the category of painting or sculpture, but I maintain that they are paintings in their most absolute form, constructed as they are entirely of paint.

Once I have peeled the dried paint off the plastic sheeting there are two sides from which one can view the painting. The outer layer is the last one to be applied, the most visible on a traditional painting. The inner layer becomes the non-visible side while I am painting, the paint layer directly in contact with the plastic sheeting. This side is only visible once the painting is removed from the plastic; its surface is completely flat and glossy and most closely reflects the quality of the temporary plastic substrate (see Fig 13). On one side I can manipulate and control the outcome, but the other side is only visible once the paint has been peeled from the ground. [27]

This mode of double-sided painting enables the viewer to look *through* the painting, as sections in the paintings are left open and serve as negative spaces (Fig. 14). This negotiation between positive space and negative space allows the viewer to see through the painting, but also to see the surrounding environment as part of the painting.

When one painting is displayed in front of another, those paintings become different layers

27. Unless it was painted onto glass, which would also allow the viewer to see both sides. The process of painting onto glass informed my process of peeling the painting off the substrate.

Figure 13. Documentation of the double-sidedness of my paintings.

in a bigger painting (Fig. 15), but the relationship of those layers is ever changing as the viewer alters their angle of vision. Changing the viewer's angle of vision literally changes the way they see things or perceive a landscape, disrupting how people infer meaning when they view things. I regard this as another mode of *ungrounding*, as the painting's layers are 'taken apart' and suspended and the view may never really be completely grounded.

Layering enables the medium to support itself: the paint is applied in multiple layers as thick impasto to create a kind of accumulation or growth in layering. The more paint is applied, the more stable the structure becomes and the more able the paint is to support itself.

Strength through layering is also achieved in the *Woven Painting* series (Fig. 16), in which several strips of paint are dried and then interlaced together in a rectangular format. This technique of compact layering through weaving creates structural strength. In this example of my work the paint has no extrinsic supporting structure, but the paint is able to support itself. Instead of working the paint onto a surface the paint *becomes* a surface. The woven paintings also *become* the canvas, in that canvasses are typically made from tightly woven linen or cotton.

Figure 14. (Left) *Hanging Landscape III* (detail): The viewer is invited to look through the painting, since there are sections in the paintings left open that serve as negative spaces. Acrylic paint.

Figure 15. (Opposite page) *Hanging Landscape III* (detail): When one painting is displayed in front on another, then those paintings may become like different layers in one painting, yet those layers are ever-changing as the viewers alter their angle of vision. Acrylic paint.

Figure 16. (Following page) *Woven Painting* series. Acrylic paint.

2.2. Paint Plays the Protagonist: The Materiality of 'Plastic Paint'

The notion of materiality is paramount to the understanding of my work, which foregrounds the physical characteristics of acrylic paint as a medium by using it as the sole medium.

In contemporary art materiality is understood to be 'a relic of the artist's process of investigation into the nature of things … The current notion about materiality in art is that materiality is how art's material qualities are sensed, interpreted and understood' (Mills 2009: 2).

My project aims to demonstrate that the natural environment has become plasticised, so its use and theoretical contextualisation are pivotal to understanding my work. Plastic is a synthetic material that has come to symbolise fast-growing industry and the mass production of cheap materials and products. In the 1950s the first synthetic (polymer-based) acrylic paint was developed and used by artists for its versatility and affordability. This period coincided with the development of many other synthetic polymers.[28] During the Second World War the conservation of certain natural resources became a necessity and demand arose for synthetic substitutes (nylon, for example, was used as an inexpensive substitute for silk in the production of parachutes), which led to increased production of synthetic-polymer plastics.[29]

Some natural polymers (like cellulose, derived from plants) are used to make synthetic polymers, but mostly the latter are made up of carbon, which is derived from fossil fuels.[30] Thus, all plastics are essentially made from natural resources. This is an interesting cycle to consider in my painting process, in which landscape paintings are painted with acrylic paint – which contains synthetic polymers, or carbon, derived from fossil fuels extracted from the ground.

The materials and tools used in my painting process include various plastic-based materials;

- The substrate (*ground*) on which I paint is industrial plastic sheeting.
- The acrylic paint I use is a mixture of

Figure 16.2. (Left) *Woven Painting* series (detail): documentation of dried strips of paint used to weave with. Acrylic paint.

28. Polymers are made of long chains of molecules and are in found nature in many of the materials in living organisms. Cellulose, the material that makes up the cell walls of plants, is a very common natural polymer (Encyclopedia Britannica: Online). Leo Baekland developed the first fully synthetic polymer (without cellulose), Bakelite, in 1907. After WWII many other synthetic polymers were developed and remain prevalent in contemporary plastic production (Freudenrich 2007: online).

29. The production of plastics increased by 300% during WWII.

30. Carbon, which is typically derived from fossil fuels and crude oil, is an essential component in the production of synthetic polymers to make plastic. Fossil fuel is a type of hydrocarbon, which is made up from organic matter (mostly decomposed plant matter) over a million years old. Fossil fuel is an important natural resource that includes coal, natural gas, petroleum, heavy oils, tar and bitumen. The consumption of fossil fuels as a natural resource rapidly accelerated after the Industrial Revolution, the main contributor to human-induced global warming (as a result of fossil fuel's by-product, CO_2, being released into the atmosphere) (Encyclopedia Britannica).

pigmented Plascon Acrylic PVA house paint (a water-based acrylic emulsion paint),[31] pigmented Zellen artist's acrylic paint (a water-based acrylic emulsion paint) and Zellen titanium white acrylic modelling paste.[32]

- The tools I use for painting include rubber spatulas, plastic syringes, paintbrushes, a plastic spray bottle and rubber gloves.
- The paint is stored in five-litre plastic containers.

My production process is very methodical and labour intensive, from the manipulation of the paint until the process is given over to the medium itself. First the painting mediums are mixed to an emulsified, thick consistency. Once a variety of colours have been mixed they are stored in the airtight plastic containers. The paint is applied in impasto directly onto the substrate with an assortment of the tools listed above. Once the paint has dried and been removed from the substrate it no longer holds its original form (Fig. 17).[33] Various external processes may alter the painting's appearance, including gravity, humidity and where and how the painting is suspended for exhibition.

The external forces that influence the shape of the painting are what I referred to earlier as the 'process given over to the medium itself'. Process-driven production offers a very specific way of understanding the world, one that is grounded in 'material thinking' rather than merely conceptual thinking – thus, thinking through

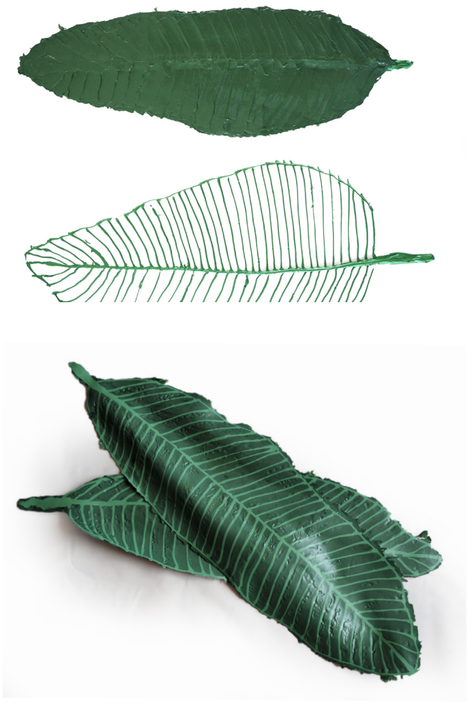


Figure 17. (Above) *Paint Becomes Plant* series (process detail): Once the paint has dried and removed from the substrate, it no longer holds its original form that it had on the plastic substrate. Acrylic paint on plastic sheeting. Dimensions variable.

31. I use Smooth Matt Super Acrylic Polvin tinted with various pigments, which allows for more volume and elasticity after it has dried. It is ironic that an industrial medium and likely polluter is used in the creation of my ungrounded landscape paintings, but it also references the domestic sphere that has tamed the wilderness, and the domestication of the natural environment through gardening.

32. Modelling paste dries without losing its form and resists deformation by shear or tensile stress. Its ingredients are very similar to those of acrylic paint, except for the coalescing ingredient that serve as an agent for latex formation (Zellen: online).

making. Barbara Bolt (2006: 1) makes reference to Heidegger's premise that we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling:

> In this conception the materials are not just passive objects to be used instrumentally by the artist, but rather the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that come into play in interaction with the artist's creative intelligence.

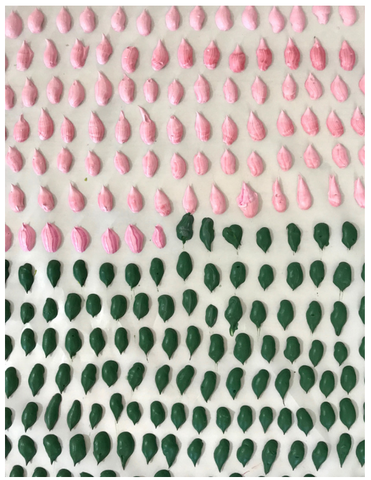
The manner in which I handle, manipulate and am informed by the paint differs when it is in its fluid state and in its dried state. When the paint is in a fluid state it permits itself to be manipulated (or rendered) – it can be smeared, painted, squirted, modelled, etc. Once dried, however, the new form of the medium dictates the form of the painting. The shape and character of the dried paint then becomes nearly identical to the plastic on which it was moulded: elastic, durable, malleable and resilient. The medium allows for a certain degree of manipulation even after it has dried, so it is still in some sense 'fluid', but the medium also restricts manipulation.

The predominant restriction of the medium is its ability to stand up straight without support. Support (strength) in the medium is generated by applying multiple layers of paint, so that in its totality it becomes dense and durable. Paintings can also grow. The *Paint Becomes Plant* series was assembled (Fig. 18) by adding dried pieces of paint to each other, gluing them to one another with wet paint to create a literal 'growth' in size. In this example, density creates strength in an attempt to counter the restrictive forces of gravity. Sometimes, however, gravity wins the battle and the painting collapses. Like nature, my paintings are ever changing in their form and appearance, dependent on the context and external factors that they are exposed or subjected to.

I am interested in the natural environment as being wild or cultivated, and how they are similar and different. My paintings also have a natural state (when the medium is solely paint, before it is rendered and manipulated onto the plastic substrate) as well as a cultivated, manipulated state. The act of painting is a metaphorical form of gardening in which the painter occupies the role of the gardener and the paint stands in for the plants in their liveliness and vibrancy, and in that they are both the subject of the painter/gardener's action. As with gardening, in painting some areas are manipulated by the artist (as a gardener cultivates a landscape), yet the paint (and the growing plant) has its own agency and informs the outcome (through its sporadic growth and individual characteristics).

33. The paint takes from approximately 12 to 48 hours to dry completely (depending on the thickness of its application), when it can be peeled off the plastic substrate with ease.

Figure 18 *Paint Becomes Plant* series (process details): *Paint Protea* (2017). Dried pieces of acrylic paint and plastic assembled with wet paint. Dimensions variable.



Paint Becomes Plant series (process details): Individual pieces of dried acrylic paint assembled with wet paint and onto the plastic stem of a fake flower. Dimensions variable.

2.3. The Agency of Matter

I am interested in the agency of the artist (in other words how much the artist aims to control, contain or manipulate the medium) in relation to the agency of the medium itself (as discussed above). Jane Bennet[34] refers to the agency of the medium as the 'vitality of matter' and contends that there is a need to think about the vibrancy of matter instead of creating binaries between 'dull matter' (it, things) and 'living matter' (us, beings).

This leads me to the question, *Can an artwork make itself?* Various factors are critical to art production, including external forces such as the environment in which it is created; the vibrancy or liveliness of the medium; and the control (and intention) of the artist. The artist may set the conditions of production, but the medium has its own agency which ultimately informs the outcome of the artwork. In other words, it becomes a kind of collaboration between medium and artist, as well as between time and labour.

South African artist Penny Siopis works with the idea of process and the agency of the medium. With Siopis's most recent glue and ink paintings (Fig. 19) there is a 'giving over to the process, an immersion in it' (Mbembe 2014: 39). With these paintings Siopis sets the conditions for the artwork: ink and glue are poured over the canvas on the floor, which is then lifted so that gravity and other natural processes (e.g. evaporation) can take over (Fig. 20). Mbembe (2014: 39) writes that this type of production involves

> giving over control to a process without always having a clear idea of what the outcome will be. It implies a certain reliance on the material natural energies and forces of the thing or entity itself and its capacity to free itself from stable identifications.

Of this process, Siopis herself states:

> Back and forth, [the canvas is] up on the wall and down on the floor. Sometimes I try to direct these configurations into recognisable images, other times I just let the medium have its way. (In De Angelis 2014: 277)

Mbembe (2014: 39) continues, stating that this process

> implies the crafting of an unstable relation between form and formlessness, in the understanding that the process of becoming proceeds in ways that are almost always unpredictable and at times accidental.

34. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), political theorist Jane Bennet shifts the reader's focus from our subjective experience of things to things themselves. Bennet theorises that all things, human and non-human, contain a 'vital materiality'. She asserts that dissolving the subject-object binary will improve 'ecological sensibility' (in Trout 2012: 62).

Figure 19.1 (Above, left)
Siopis in process at Open Form / Open Studio (2017)
Penny Siopis. Ink and glue on canvas. Maitland Institute, Cape Town (Maitland Institute 2017: online).

Figure 19. (Below)
Transfigure I, II, III (2017) Penny Siopis. Ink and glue on canvas. Zeitz Mocaa, Cape Town (Zeitz Mocaa 2017: online).

Figure 20. (Following page)
Open Form / Open Studio (2017). Penny Siopis, Ink and glue on canvas. Maitland Institute, Cape Town (Maitland Institute 2017: online).

My work is inspired by the 'material thinking' so grounded in Siopis's art production. However, in Siopis's work there is very little intervention in the process of transformation (De Angelis 2014: 277).

The interplay between surface and unpredictability in Siopis's work is also what resonates with my work, where there is an interaction between what the artist manipulates and how much is left to chance, or to the agency of the medium.[35] In Siopis's work the residue of time is evident in the 'surface textures and the physical making'. Mbembe (2014: 39) writes:

> If the artist works with matter, matter is not inert. It is an active agent. Time has to pass through matter for it to act a certain way, to flow, or dry, then crack. Matter manifests the passing of time and time the passing of matter, its becoming something else, that is, its permanence under a different form. With Siopis, the artist is engaged in a constant attempt to find form in formlessness.

Isabelle Graw (2016) writes about the liveliness of the medium, specifically in relation to painting, maintaining that the brushstrokes or application of paint are an indicator of the artist's subjectivity in the painting (as it contains the artist's time, labour and creative expression).[36] She writes that painting often seems enriched by the artist through 'living labour'. Thus the labour and the lifetime of the artist are seemingly stored in it.

Siopis's canvas contributes to the making of her work, but the paint is not dependent on the canvas for it to change and *act in vibrant ways*. Her process therefore involves this living labour, or physical interaction with the canvas itself, 'splashing, dripping and moving the canvas to direct the flow' (Mbembe 2014: 39).

Another aspect of Siopis's process that resonates with my work is the interplay between *formlessness* and *collapse*. In discussing the idea of surface in relation to Siopis's cake paintings of the 1980s, Colin Richards (2005: 16) writes:

> The artist was also interested in how heavily impastoed forms test gravity, often giving in under the weight of the paint and collapsing into formlessness.

35. Siopis explains that 'The drying time of the glue depends on the thickness of the layer. There is a strong element of surprise in this, partly because the glue is white and opaque when wet and only becomes transparent when dry. Only then can I see what has actually happened to the painting. It's not all chance, of course. I have long experience with manipulating material, and this experience becomes a kind of second nature that pushes and directs me when I can't see how the opaque surface is going to settle down. You could say that I set up the conditions for chance to operate along certain lines. I have always been intensely interested in materiality as idea and sensation, as something more than merely a means to make an image' (in Nuttall 2009).

36. According to Graw, in painting there is 'a renewed concern with the idea of the medium, due to the rising interest in making and materiality that, in turn, stems from the recognition of the material and technical register of the work of art as the very site rather than a mere support of meaning' (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016: 8).

Collapsing form suggests the non-form we might associate with entropy and decay. The contortions of paint caught in collapse is evident in *Plum Cream*, where Siopis manipulated chance, producing the conditions for 'things to happen' and animating the paint. Here passive medium becomes passionate materiality.

Siopis's *cake* paintings (Fig. 21) explore the latter ideas, as the paint was applied to be affected by gravity; to wrinkle, crack and decay. In the production of these paintings Siopis used cake-icing nozzles instead of conventional brushes and treated the oil paint conceptually, as a medium that embodies the passing of time. Speaking about the *cake* paintings, Siopis remarks that the oil paint that is 'built up into relief evokes associations with human skin and flesh, changing as it does in time, aging, wrinkling and cracking as it loses its juices' (in Richards 2005: 16). Richards writes that the concept of skin (as a surface) is a key concern in many of Siopis's paintings, and specifically in the *cake* paintings. This interest in skin is not merely represented through paint, but by evoking its physicality, experimenting with 'how the chemical changes of the wet paint under the skin actually determines the surface of the painting' (Richards 2005: 16). This idea of the wet paint dictating the surface resonates with my own mode of painting, in which a layer of dry paint forms over the impasto paint, which may wrinkle or collapse into itself due to gravity. However, unlike oil paint, acrylic paint acts more like plastic, though maintaining a sense of fluidity or elasticity that is also characteristic of skin.

In the following section, in line with Siopis's experiential way of handling matter, I discuss the ways in which I further examined my medium of choice to test its durability and strength.

Figure 21.1. *Embellishments.* (1982). Penny Siopis. Oil and found objects on canvas, 150 x 202 cm. University of Witwatersrand (Smith (ed.) 2005: 24).

Figure 21.2 *Plum Cream* (1982). Penny Siopis. Oil on canvas, 159.5 x 201.5 cm. Private Collection, Cape Town (Richards 2005: 15).

2.4. Testing Matter

In an attempt to test the durability and characteristic of my medium I exposed it to some natural elements: water, gravity, ultraviolet and fluctuations in temperature. It was interesting to see the different impacts these factors had on the dried paint as a physical object.

After immersing a dried piece of acrylic paint of thick density in water for over a week the paint became softer and more elastic. However, the dimensions of the solid paint remained relatively unchanged and the pigment dulled slightly . To see what extreme heat would do to the paint I placed a dried piece of acrylic paint in a microwave oven for 60 seconds. Like plastic, the paint wrinkled (Fig. 22) and softened, but became hard and brittle when it cooled down. The sun (UV) had very little effect on the dried paint's form, although the pigment dulled slightly after several days. Gravity proved to have the greatest impact on the dried paint's form and strength. When applying the paint in thick impasto it slowly slid into formlessness, unless I worked against this by applying several layers after it had dried.

Gravity also makes it difficult for the paint to stand up straight by itself after it has dried. By contrast, the vitality of living plants enables them to counteract the vector of gravity. Considering this notion of collapse conceptually, one can return to the idea of a plasticised natural environment in the Anthropocene, where environmental collapse may be inevitable. These experiments have shown that my paintings, unlike plants, are unlikely to completely decay. They represent plants and are indirectly derived from plants, but they lack many of their essential and defining characteristics.

Figure 22. Testing Matter: the result of dried acrylic paint placed in the microwave for a minute.

Paint Becomes Plant series Acrylic paint. Dimentions variable.

Camouflage series (2017), Acrylic paint. Dimensions variable.

'Women attach cloth garnish to camouflage netting in an old school building in London, 1943' (Newark & Miller 2007: 124).

Paint Becomes Plant

> "A 'landscape', cultivated or wild, is already artifice before it has become the subject of a work of art. Even when we simply *look* we are shaping and interpreting. A landscape may never achieve representation in a painting or photograph; nonetheless, something significant has happened when land can be perceived as 'landscape'" (Andrews 1999:1)

In my work paint is manipulated to become plant – a figurative growth or transformation from one thing into another. This is generally the task of a painter – to render paint into form. Form is also associated with plant through visual perception.[37] Therefore, the act of *looking* is a transformative action that facilitates something to *become* something else. The transformative powers of perception led to my interest in using some of the techniques of camouflage to illustrate that *things may not be what they seem*.[38]

It has been established that the concepts of 'nature' and 'landscape' are unstable (informed by language) and ever evolving in their meaning, according to context. My project draws on the idea that perception is equally unstable, as it is always subjective and may therefore be questionable. Greider and Garkovich (1994: 2) write that 'meanings are not inherent in the nature of things', and it is my contention that the subjectivities of visual perception inform our interpretation of 'nature' and 'landscape'.

I wish to deconstruct extant ways in which the natural environment is regarded (and may have been regarded in the past) – to reveal, in a sense, a socially constructed concept of a social construct. In order to rearticulate the language and meaning that is associated with landscapes and the natural environment, I have already investigated how highly constructed these perceptions are. In this chapter I discuss how my project utilises techniques of camouflage through the tools of mimicry and disguise.

My paintings in some way represent and mimic plants, thus distracting the viewer from their material value as paint – disguising the material of paint through representation. The paintings ¬– removed as they are from the canvas – reveal their materiality. This double trick of camouflage and revelation is central to my concerns.

37. Our senses are not always completely accurate, which makes perception sometimes subjective and unreliable (Crane 2007: 237).

38. In Plato's *The Phaedrus* (370 BC), the character Phaedrus famously states: 'Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many.' This has become a popular quote used to refer to how visual perception can deceive.

3.1. Camouflage

Camouflage is a deliberate play with perception, a way of concealing something so that it is difficult to see at first glance. The techniques of camouflage take their inspiration from nature, where it functions as a form of biological defense. Some animals, insects or plants adopt an unremarkable feature from their surroundings in order to blend into their environment as a tactical survival strategy (Newark 2007: 8). Before this strategy was coined 'camouflage', naturalists like Abbot H. Thayer noted the biological use of visual subterfuge in many animals' form and colour as a method of concealment from their predator (or prey) (Behrens 1978: 203). Subterfuge is in a sense about artifice – its goal is to blend in and to become inconspicuous (Newark & Miller 2007: 8).

This strategy was implemented in the early twentieth century as 'camouflage' by the military in both world wars (See Fig. 23).[39] At the urging of French artists (who were familiar with the optical techniques inherent in Cubist painting[40]), the first camouflage equipment was conceived by the French military in 1915 (Behrens 1980: 10). Visual artists such as Franz Marc, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Arshile Gorky were enlisted as 'camoufleur' designers in the development of military equipment. British artist Norman Wilkinson developed 'dazzle' camouflage based on Cubist principles of breaking up the surface with line and colour (Bowring 2005: 18). It has also been suggested that the advent of military camouflage coincided with *Gestalt Theory* in psychology. Artists thus played a major role in the development of military camouflage. The study of natural camouflage, according to Thayer, 'has been in the hands of the wrong custodians … It properly belongs to the realm of pictoral art, and can be interpreted only by painters. For it deals wholly in optical illusions, and this is the very gist of a painter's life' (in Behrens 1978: 203).

Behrens outlines the requirements for 'distinguishability', or what perceptual psychologists refer to as figure-and-ground theory.

> Rooted in early-20th-century German Gestalt psychology, figure and ground refers to a theory of the mind's organizing tendencies, in particular the way the human brain perceives physical form, distinguishing an object or form from its context or surroundings – a figure from its background.

Generally, the figure's distinguishability is related to 'the degree to which its components are visually homogenous' and 'the extent to which the figure is dissimilar from its surroundings or ground' (Behrens 1978: 203). According to Behrens there are four techniques of camouflage that break the distinguishability between figure and ground. Firstly, *blending* happens when the 'colour or other properties of the figure tend to resemble the characteristics of the background' (Fig. 24.1). With *disruptive patterning* (Fig. 24.2) 'the integrity of the figure is weakened by the visual heterogeneity of its components'. This technique is prominent in military camouflage uniforms and has become a symbolic emblem of camouflage in popular culture. *Countershading*[41] happens when a three-dimensional figure 'bears a pattern of gradation that contradicts the gradation produced by sunlight, making the object look flat'. Lastly, *mimicry* is when 'a figure imitates the appearance of some other recognisable object' (Fig. 24.3) (Behrens 1978: 203).

My paintings use the visual vocabulary of military camouflage netting (Fig. 26.1) and the disruptive colouration technique (Fig. 26.2). However, I have also used camouflage to indicate that there are forms of deception and ambiguity at play in my paintings.

Figure 23. *American Camouflage of the 1960s:* Modern military camouflage, which was first used in World War I, used the disruptive patterns either printed or painted to disguise soldiers and equipment (Newark et al 1996: 58).

39. The term camouflage is derived from the French verb 'camoufler', which means 'to mask or to disguise' (Behrens 1980: 9).

40. Pablo Picasso observed that the camouflage in World War I military resembled the 'dazzle' shapes inherent in Cubist painting (Behrens 1980: 10).

41. In *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*, Thayer writes that countershading employs the technique of chiaroscuro. But countershading makes a three-dimentional object seem flat, whereas in painting chiaroscuro is employed to make something flat seem three-dimensional.

Figure 24: Camouflage Techniques
1. Top: Example of 'blending' in camouflage: 'a Siberian tiger hidden amongst tall grasses' (Newark & Miller 2007: 25).
2. Middle: Example of 'disruptive patterning' in camouflage: 'a hog-nosed viper, whose disruptive pattern allows it to merge with dead foliage' (Newark & Miller 2007: 24).
3. Bottom: Example of 'mimicry' in camouflage: 'a bark-mimic butterfly' (Newark & Miller 2007: 16).

3.2. Pretending // Behaving // Becoming

Camouflage can be regarded as 'an abstract representation of the natural environment that was invented as a defense against deadly man-made machines' (Newark 2007: 8). It is a natural function (or inspired by nature) made artificial.[42]

Bowring (2005:17) believes that 'Camouflage and mimicry are predicated on concepts of simulation and resemblance, and the desire to produce and discern likeness is ingrained in human experience.' Walter Benjamin (1933: 333) writes that this impulse/desire is a social practice in which the self is assimilated into the other – a foundation for art and language.

> Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's (*sic*). His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else.

This ability to behave or become like something else is fundamental to my project. There is a strong relationship between painting and mimesis (or camouflage) when its intention is to imitate nature. In the main, humans use camouflage to mimic nature – as do my paintings.

However, in a sense my paintings subvert camouflage's function to hide or conceal, as they do not mimic their surrounding environment. Rather, the paintings are like props, mimicking elements of plant material and plant growth in order to become a landscape on their own. It is the paint itself that is questionable. Thus the object becomes the subject of camouflage, raising questions about its very nature: *Is it a painting, a plant, or a landscape?* The answer may be that it is all those things, but at the same time it is only paint shaped into form by intention. Thus, the association that accompanies that form transforms the material into something else. Perception creates opportunities to see something anew, or to see differently. In that regard, my project, through the basic principles and visual vocabulary of camouflage, aims to open up different ways of looking at the landscape.

42. A a natural process made artificial is a central theme in this dissertation. Seen in the context of nature and landscapes, natural elements are socially constructed, or in gardening the natural process of plant growth is artificially cultivated. This phenomenon is also prevalent in the context of plastic fossils (as discussed in chapter 1), wherein a naturally occurring process creates a hybrid between artificial and natural matter.

Figure 25. Camouflage Netting

1. Left: My paintings specifically use the visual vocabulary of military camouflage netting as a manner of disguise.

2. Above: *German camouflage netting*. According to Newark, this would be interwoven with local foliage and used to cover a soldier (2007:94).

Figure 26. Disruptive Camouflage:

Left: *Camouflage Painting I* (2017). Acrylic paint, approximately 110 x 130 cm.

Above: *Camouflage Painting III* (2017). Acrylic paint, approximately 135 x 150 cm.

3.3. *Planting*

It is interesting to consider the double meaning of 'planting' in my project. The Latin origin of the word is *plantare*, which directly means 'plant' or 'fix in a place'. According to definitions from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (online):

> 'planting'
> *1. put (a seed, bulb, or plant) in the ground so that it can grow.*
> *2. set or place in a particular position.*
> *: establish (an idea) in someone's mind*

While these meanings are straightforward, there are additional implications to 'planting', such as to:

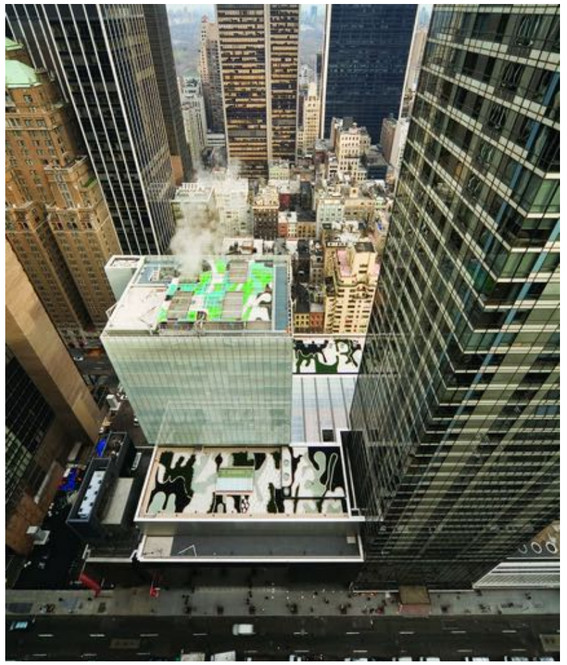
> *: secretly place (something)*
> *: put/hide (something) among someone's belongings to compromise or incriminate the owner.*

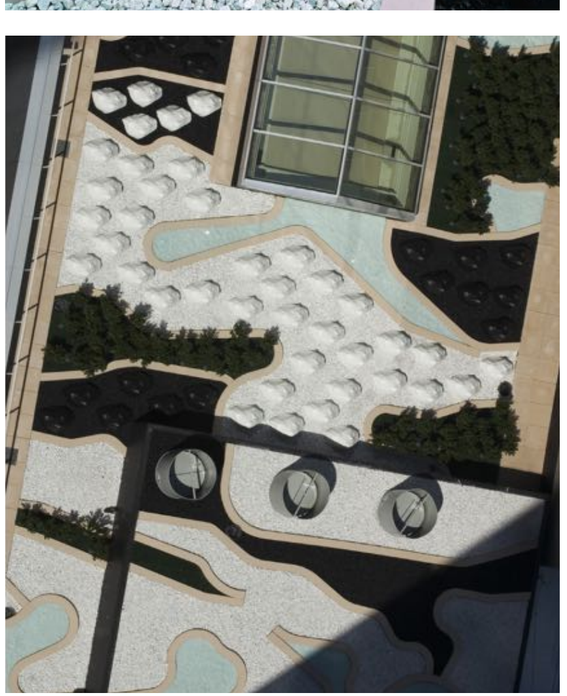
This latter definition is interesting as it relates to camouflage, where the intention is to conceal something that is *planted* in a setting for some purpose; it is placed in a context that is not innate to it. Pretense is thus critical to camouflage – but it is also about placing something into a setting where it does not necessarily belong, an intruder (in other words, the artificial is made to seem natural, or part of the natural environment – like the plastiglomerates).

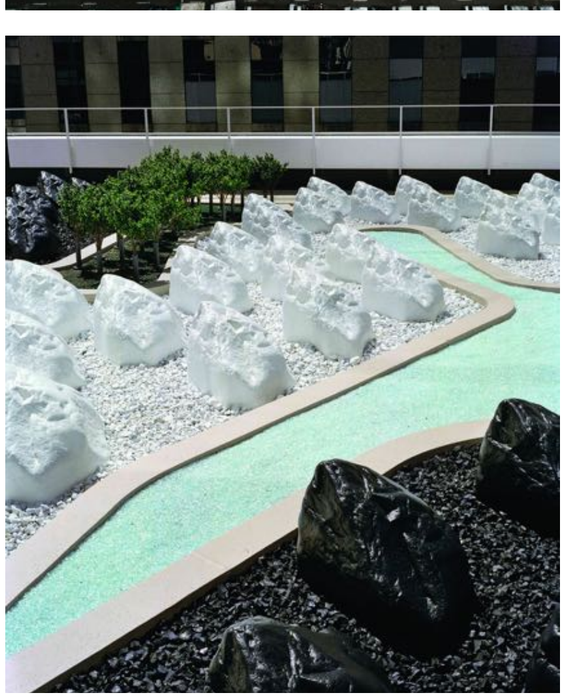
'Planting' also relates to the act of landscaping. In constructing a garden, plants are cultivated and positioned to grow in a certain manner. Ken Smith's *WallFlowers* installation (2005) explored the materiality of the synthetic in relation to what is considered natural. Smith is a practicing landscape architect who frequently questions the field that he works in – specifically the idea of landscaping in a broader context. Smith questions the very essence of landscaping as an artificial way of cultivating 'nature' into a landscape.

His *Camouflage Garden* (2004) was a temporary synthetic-garden installation on the rooftop of the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, using the visual aesthetics of military camouflage (Fig. 27). Like *WallFlowers*, this work comments on the artifice of the practice of landscape architecture/ design, 'where the fake natural is used to disguise ugly elements in the environment' (Bowring 2005: 17). Similarly, this garden contains only synthetic materials. According to Bowring, this is an 'underreading of both the garden and the nature of camouflage'. In other words, a garden is artificial and so is the nature of camouflage, and Smith conflates these two concepts through the act of *landscaping*. In discussing his design concept, Smith (2009: online) states that

Figure 27. (Following page)
Camouflage Garden (2004), Ken Smith. Artificial boxwood shrubs, recycled rubber chips, crushed glass, crushed marble stone and artificial boulders. Museum of Modern Art, New York (Bowring 2005).







The history of landscape design is filled with examples of camouflage and simulation. Central Park, for example, is a large-scale garden that artistically simulates visual and spatial aspects of an idealised pre-industrial arcadia and disguises a large territory of the Manhattan grid with a simulated nature. Contemporary landscape design often deals with the fundamental issue of ameliorating or covering up the impacts of the constructed environments.
Practitioners refer to it as 'remediation', 'shrubbing it up', 'contextualisation', or simply 'naturalising'. This practice of landscaping as camouflage is a common but critically unrecognized aspect of simulation in the landscape architecture profession.
In contemporary urban life camouflage is ironically used to both blend in and stand out. This project takes the art of camouflage and the artifice of simulation a step further by using the simulation of camouflage itself as a source for design speculation. One might think of this as the simulation of a simulation or using imitated nature to generate a new nature.

The decorative garden is moulded on the generic pattern of disruptive camouflage that has become synonymous with army uniforms. The garden, however, is made even stranger and more artificial by utilising only fake materials rather than organic matter (Bowring 2005: 19) (Fig. 27.2).[43] According to Smith, 'The notion of simulated nature and the simulation strategies and theories of camouflage were used to generate the roof garden forms.'

The rooftop, which is on the sixth floor, is inaccessible to the museum visitor and only functions as a 'viewing garden for the neighbouring Midtown high-rise community'. The garden thus requires some imagination to access it visually. Although the garden prohibits the viewer from physically entering, it subverts camouflage's function to hide or conceal (Bowring 2005:17). Smith's aim was to appropriate the visual vocabulary of camouflage to create a garden that 'simultaneously disguises the roof while making it highly visible'. This is summarised by Bowring (2005: 21) as 'disguise becomes display':

> Adding to this twilight zone of mimicry is the construction of the garden in materials, which are fake versions of nature – mock rock and faux foliage. This evokes a sense of soul sickness as commentary on the contemporary human condition within the city. It is a garden with a 'malady of the soul', one which reveals how the attempts at concealment paradoxically create a condition of weakness. The garden becomes a microcosm of societal psychoanalysis, simultaneously pushing and pulling through its milieu.

43. The materials include artificial boxwood shrubs, recycled rubber chips, crushed glass, crushed marble stone and artificial boulders. According to Smith, 'the garden was to be designed for a program requiring minimal maintenance and no irrigation; and use of living plant materials was discouraged. Because the museum had already purchased the black and white gravel the design was encouraged to incorporate those materials as well' (Smith 2005).

The artificial evokes a type of melancholy in its commentary on 'the contemporary human condition', or our ambiguous relationship with the natural environment. The artificial, or the fake, is a replacement of the real and may evoke a sense of loss of the real. Bowring (2005: 18) states that 'the links between the abstracting of nature into camouflage patterns and subsequently into this faux-natural garden are giddily circular'.

Similarly, Japanese artist and architect Yutaka Sone's practice blurs the lines between organic and synthetic materials in his examination of the relationships between architecture and nature, city and jungle. Sone's exhibition *Island* (2011), at David Zwirner gallery in New York (Fig. 28), intensifies the dialogue between the natural and the artificial. Simulated trees are made from rattan woven around a metal armature and the leaves are painted with acrylic paint to imitate real leaves (Fig. 28.2). In juxtaposition to these plant sculptures and their organic shapes, Sone's marble sculptures (Fig. 28.3) have sharper architectural lines that contrast the relation between cultivated land and 'natural' land. Sone is interested in how landscapes are shaped:

> Whether using miniaturisation or magnification, Sone's three-dimensional work conjures up an imaginary realm, which in turn forms part of a larger effort to extend the idea of sculpture to encompass landscape (David Zwirner 2011: online).

Thus, Sone simultaneously separates and conflates the human-made landscape with the natural landscape – they are carved from different materials but exhibited in the same space as one environment. The marble sculptures appear both individually and collectively as self-contained environments in relation to the plant-like sculptures.[44]

44. Similarly, South African artist Tanya Poole's exhibition of the same title, *The Island* (2017), showcases paintings of fake palm trees inside a plastic container as miniature, contained environments of what she refers to as 'paradise', as expressed by the trope of the tropical island. Inside a plastic container these islands become miniature simulacrums of a utopian landscape (Everard Read Gallery: online).

Figure 28.1. *Island* (2011), Yukota Sone. Medium: Woven rattan, metal, acrylic paint. Dawid Zwirner Gallery, New York (David Zwirner 2011: online).

Figure 28.2. *Island* (2011), Yukota Sone. Marble sculptures. Dawid Zwirner Gallery, New York (David Zwirner 2011: online).

3.4. *Plastic Plants and Fake Foliage*

The gardener paints his landscape with plants. (Ferarri 2010)

My project focuses on plants within the landscape and the enormous ecological support and regenerative qualities they provide in and to the natural environment.

> Plants are mirrors of human growth and development; they manifest the same energetic properties that govern all life. As such, they have been aestheticised through a full spectrum of expressive possibilities – from the purely ornamental or festive to the deeply symbolic, ritualistic and devotional. (De Wachter 2016: online)

Plants have been domesticated within the interior spaces of home or office[45]. The houseplant's original intention was to serve as interior decor and 'to soften our transition from nature to domestic space. It freshens the air, appeals to our aesthetic senses and reminds us of idealised places we are outside' (Khana 2013: online). It stands as a symbol of the natural environment in a domestic, cultivated sphere.

BioArt has emerged as a contemporary art form in which the incorporation of living plants as a ready-made becomes a performative symbol that questions the status of these beings (De Wachter 2016: online).[46]

This approach also addresses the current heightened cultural awareness of environmental issues, which has pushed plants into the socio-political spotlight that provides the creative fodder of cultural critics and artists. There is also an undeniable escapist aspect of the houseplant, as it is kept inside as a reminder of the outside, natural world. This adds to the plant's ability to represent tropical and indigenous cultures that have more intimate relationships with nature. (Kahna 2013: online)

In the 1960s practitioners of Ecological Art/BioArt[47] began to experiment with living biological materials and specific ecosystems in an attempt to explore the relationship between humans and the natural environment (Kurzac 2008: 55). Artists such as Hans Haacke began to explore biological issues such as death, growth, reaction to stimuli and processes of reproduction through the use of plant matter.[48] In his 1965 manifesto, Haacke observed that 'living plant material introduces elements of changeability, instability, indetermination and impermanence into art' (in Kurzac 2008: 55). Furthermore, Haacke observed that 'Organic forms are ruled by their own biological laws and, as non-linear systems which develop in rather unpredicatable directions, they restrict the artist's creativity and his authority over the work' (in Kurzac 2008: 55).

Haacke's observations are important to consider in relation to my work's interest with the plants within the landscape. In my work, however, plants are linked with the landscape in the age of the Anthropocene, made plastic in order to mirror the devastating anthropogenic impact on the landscape. The plants in my paintings are like artificial plants – they mimic plants, as a substitute or a prop. They play with the elements of changeability, instability and impermanence that plant matter constitutes.

It is interesting to consider the symbolism of plastic plants as an artificial substitute for living plants in the plasticised natural environment (or the estranged relationship we have with the natural environment, especially the plant world). The craft of imitating plants (especially flowering plants) for decorative purposes out of various materials both natural and artificial dates back to the earliest days of civilization (Berrall 2013). However, the emergence of artificial plants made from plastic and polyester as a popular decorative replacement for living plants is relatively modern and became especially popular in the 1950s. Fake plants soon became synonymous with kitsch and contemporary consumer culture.

In 2007 the Ethnobotany Research and Applications Journal published a tongue-in-cheek 'research' article, *Artificae Plantae: The Taxonomy, Ecology and Ethnobotany of the Simulacraceae*. The article, though written ironically, poses questions that are conceptually interesting in relation to my work.[49] *Simulacracea* (the family of synthetic plants and artificial flowers) 'have been found in all manner of ecotypes: house plants, fish tanks, home gardens, costumes, cemeteries, concrete gardens, parades, restaurants, museums, dentists' offices, supermarkets, igloos, hotel rooms, zoos, hats, and building lobbies.' The authors contend that 'There seems to be no limit to the habitats in which the *Simulacraceae* can grow, except perhaps, in the

45. In *Empathetic Gardeners: On Plants in Contemporary Art,* Kurzac (2008: 54), writes that 'Plants in still lifes, interior scenes or visions of paradise functioned as ornaments, as well as tools, used to convey symbolic, philosophical and moral meanings. Plants were predestined to play this role due to their variable nature and passing beauty.'

46. The publication of the book *The Secret Life of Plants*, by Peter Tomkins and Christopher Bird, which documented controversial experiments that reveal plant communication and apparent sentience, led many artists and thinkers to consider plants as sentient beings. Research has been conducted about whether plants are able to communicate with one another, whether they feel pain and touch and more to determine whether plants are conscious beings. Today the idea of plant sentience is considered as pseudoscience, however the idea of plant communication remains relevant in current biological studies (Wang 2014: online).

47. Biological Art (BioArt) 'not only works with living biological material, including plants, but also uses the research methods of biology and genetics, genetic engineering tools and modern biotechnological tools to intervene directly in fundamental life processes by means of genetic manipulation and the modification of biological structures. (Kurzac 2008: 61).

48. In Kurzac's (2008: 55) words, 'Plants have gone a very long way in art: from aesthetic objects and prototypes for technically excellent paintings or sculptors to objects of human empathy and concern.'

49. An example is that the simulacracea poses 'a genuine scientific conundrum, as the taxa lack genetic material, appear virtually immortal, and have the ability to form intergeneric crosses with ease, despite any evident mechanism for cross-fertilisation.' (Bletter, Reynertson & Runk 2007)

wild, although the expansion of the range can be directly correlated to human impact' (2007: 161). Considering that all simulacraceae are 'typically composed primarily of complex polymers of long-chain hydrocarbons [plastics], indicative of their origins in the petrochemical industries' (2007: 165), the authors have dubbed the 21st century (in the age of the Anthropocene) the botanical *Age of the Simulacraceae*. This article is an indicator of how plasticised our relationship with the natural environment has become, where plastic plants are almost equally abundant in metropolitan areas as actual living plants. This article also highlights the relationship between plastic and consumer culture.

British artist Jane Benson's *Imitation Day* (2004) explores the use of plastic plants in consumer culture in her temporary ceiling installations of artificial plant garlands in fast-food restaurants (Fig. 29). Benson plays with the idea that large chain companies, restaurants and offices use fake plants as decoration to soften the transition from outside to inside to 'calm' the consumers.[50] This project 'embraces affinity for artificial intervention, addressing the role of decoration and deception in contemporary consumer culture.' Benson's garlands uses the visual language and colours found in military camouflage – greens, deep browns and black. The meaning of the decorative garland is morphed and replaces the 'familiar context of celebration with a spectacular canopy of deception.' Furthermore, Benson's interest in forms of camouflage can be read as a 'masquerade of self-representation in which the works initially make a decorative impression, and, on closer reading, reveal complex critiques of the superficial and decorative motifs' (Benson: online).

Benson's series *Faux Flora* (2002–2005) similarly explores the use of artificial plants as a substitute for the real. Each artificial leaf or petal is shaped into geometric shapes, such as triangles and squares (Fig. 30). Benson states that these fake plants are literally reinvented as they are 'twice removed from their original context' (Benson: online). Placing these fake plants in the World Financial Center's lobby in Manhattan, Benson questions the reality and value of our everyday experiences and, in placing artificial objects that pretend to be something other into a workspace of capitalist society those objects both interrogate and become emblematic of mindless consumerism.

My work *Paint Becomes Plant* series (Fig. 31) similarly questions the plant world and consumerism. These painting-objects are assembled by gluing bits and pieces of dried paint together with wet paint as 'leaves' and 'flowers' then glueing the latter onto painted plastic stems of fake flowers – almost as a plastic toy would be assembled in mass production. Some of these 'plants' are entirely fanciful; sometimes only a few elements suggest the living counterpart that inspired them (which ironically draws more attenton to the fact that they are artificial). My use of domestic house paint and the stems of commercial plastic flowers as my medium draws a link between domesticity and the artificial nature of the fake plant. Showcasing these plant-like objects as objects that are 'assembled' piece-by-piece I draw on the idea of the commodification of the plant world for natural resources.

It is clear that the artificiality of plants is central to Smith, Sone and Benson's work. Plants become a stand-in for or symbol of the larger natural environment and the way in which it has become plasticised and artificial, (n)ever growing and (n) ever decaying. Furthermore, the plant as a prop (epitomised by indoor fake plants) captures the idea of disguise and mimicry that is linked with camouflage.

Pretense or mimicry is critical to camouflage, but it is also about placing something in a setting where it does not necessarily belong. The idea of something – plastic – intruding upon the environment and not being visually obvious suggests that plastic is operating under a form of camouflage, under which it in fact physically affects the constitution and taxonomy of the natural environment.

Figure 29. (Above)
Imitation Day (2004), Jane Benson. Plastic plant garland. Jamaica Flux, Queens (Benson 2004: online).

50. Studies have shown that plants, especially flowers, have a positive and uplifting effect on the human psyche, most commonly reducing stress and anxiety (Haviland-Jones, Rosario & Wilson, eds. 2005: 1). The use of fake plants for decorative purposes may have a similar 'placebo' effect on people, although there is no evidence to support this. The idea of using fake plants to calm customers is another form of camouflage.

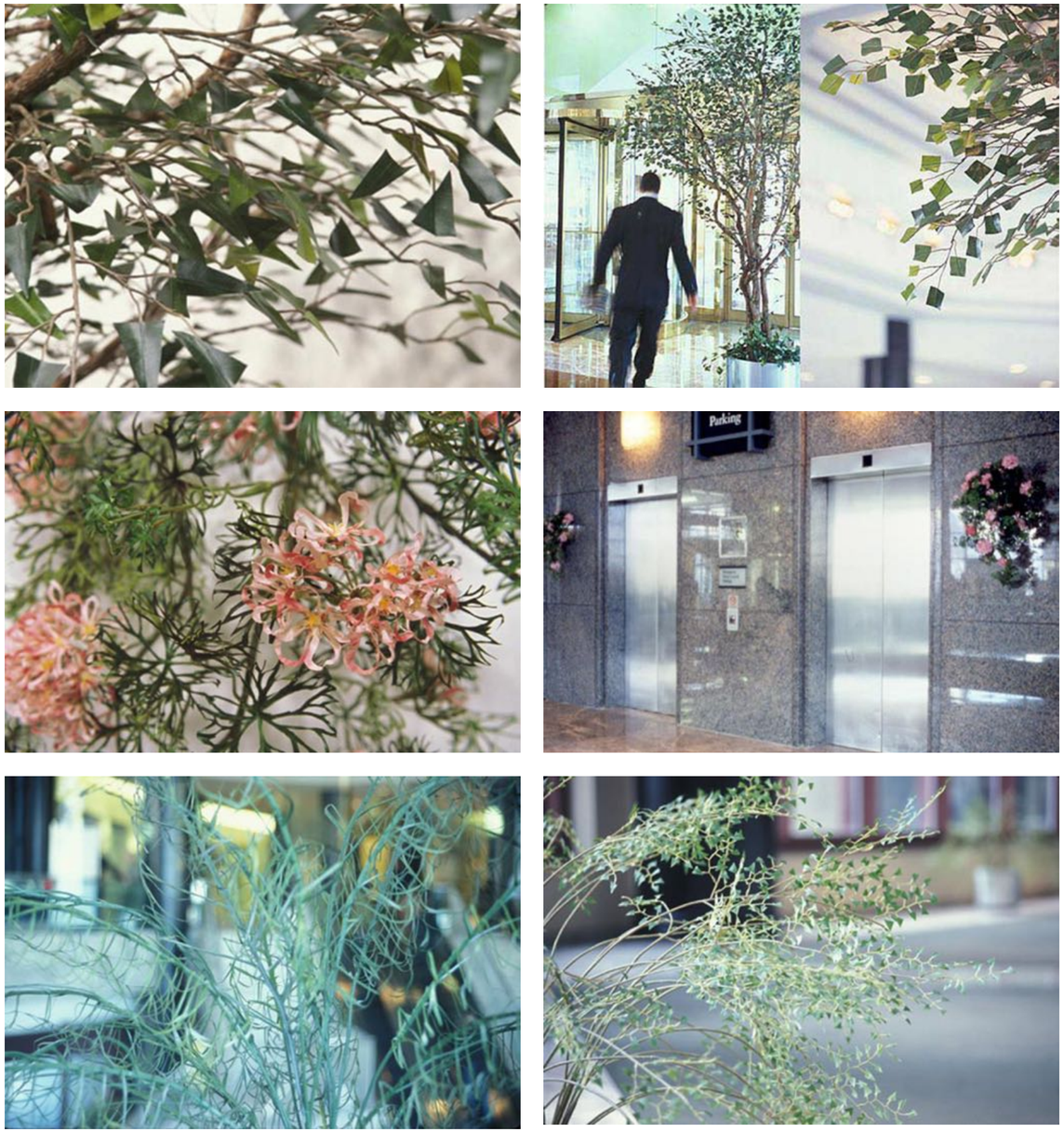
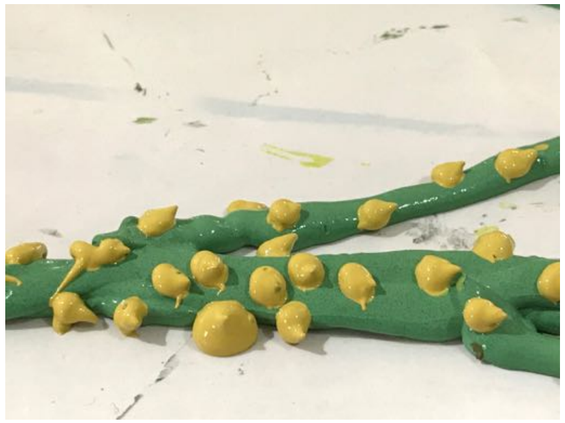


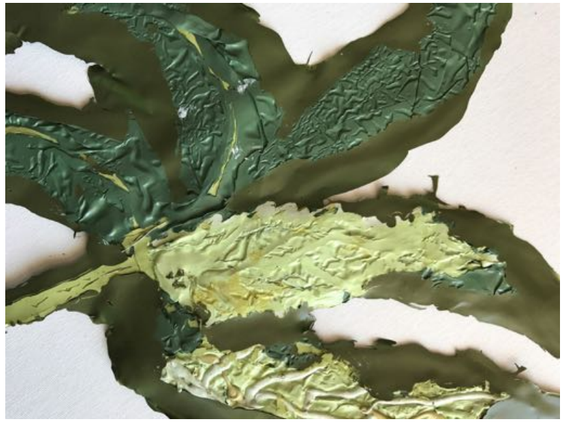
Figure 30.
Faux Flora (2002-2005), Jane Benson. Plastic plants. World Financial Center, New York (Benson 2002: online).

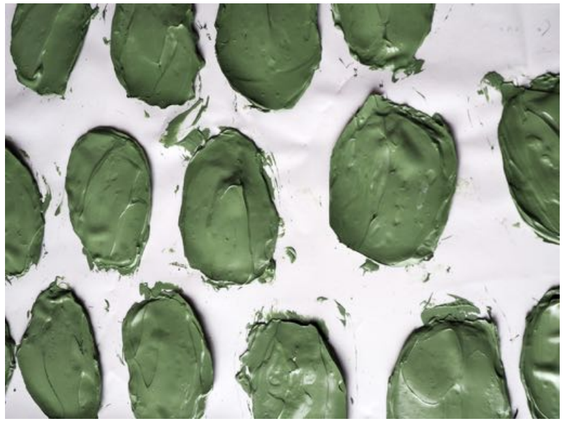
Figure 31.
Paint Becomes Plant Series #2. Acrylic paint and plastic.

Paint Becomes Plant Series #1 (2017).
Acrylic paint suspended from nails on a white wall.

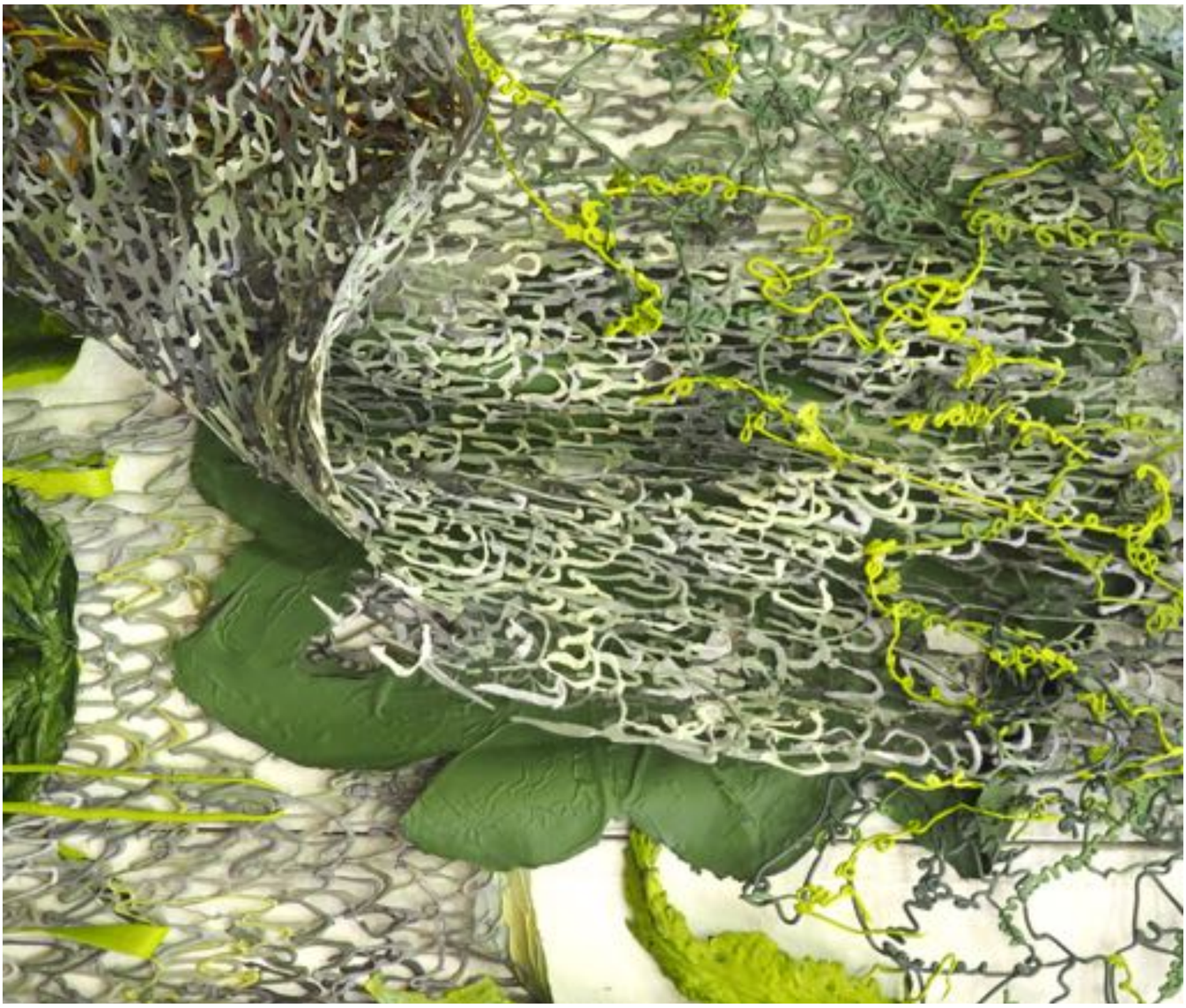
Paint Becomes Plant series: Dried pieces of acrylic paint and plastic are glued together with wet paint in order to ‘grow’ the plant painting.







Paint Becomes Plant series: studio process documentation.



Conclusion

At the heart of this project is my fascination with the life of plants and the enormous regenerative and healing qualities they have for the environment. Through my painting, I wanted to show that 'nature' cannot be encapsulated by painting landscape scenery onto a canvas. Nature, as an unstable and ambiguous concept, cannot be framed (or grounded). Contemporary landscape painting remains an important genre for artists as a vehicle with which to voice environmental and sociopolitical ideas. However, my project highlights that the task of reimagining the concepts of landscape and nature becomes more urgent in the age of the Anthropocene. My paintings represent plants as a stand-in symbol for the larger 'natural' environment and the way it has become plasticised and artificial. Drawing especially on the mass production of plastic and its consequent pollution, I established that plastics have become 'naturalised' by their incorporation into the natural cycles of the earth, at times combining with natural compounds and becoming 'fossilised' as plastiglomerates in the ground – physically altering the constitution of the earthly ground.

This project started with the ground (the lack of it as a substrate in my painting) and ends with the ground (plastic incorporated into the cycles of the earth). 'Ground' is especially significant to my project as it encapsulates the key issues of my research: the land in landscape, the soil in which plants grow and the supporting substrate used in painting. Drawing on the plasticised natural environment (or the ground that is no longer completely natural) in the age of the Anthropocene, and linking this ground to the landscape, my work re-evaluates the language and meaning inherent in the natural environment. The act of ungrounding my landscape paintings from their supporting systems liberates the landscape from its existing conceptualisation and opens up possibilities for re-defining the 'natural' environment.

In this dissertation I have also explained how acrylic paint (as synthetic polymer, or plastic) is derived from natural resources (carbon from fossil fuels) extracted from the ground – an important and recurring cycle in my project of returning and escaping the ground. But human-made synthetic materials (especially plastics) that are incapable of returning to their original constitution as organic matter may also return to the ground as non-biodegradable compounds. This idea of the 'permanence of the disposable' is linked with the fast-growing human population's exploitation of resources. My project could serve to create awareness of the significance of exploiting non-biodegradable materials – in showing a landscape made essentially of plastic.

The materiality and plasticity of acrylic paint have been key to my project, as my paintings consist solely of paint. Basing my production process in 'material thinking' I explained how the material of plastic paint informs my process through the ways I handle and manipulate it. In discussing what the medium 'permits' and 'restricts' in relation to how much the artist manipulates, I have drawn an analogy between gardening and this relationship between medium and artist. The medium may act in ways similar to plant growth and the artist's intention may be seen as a way of cultivating, or landscaping, a garden. Reflecting upon whether an artwork can make (grow) itself, in future research I might explore whether the medium can limit the expression of the artist's intention to a state that it becomes imperceptible. This would imply that the medium exists in its purest form – an artwork in itself as untouched matter – which raises questions of the value of matter and of the artist's hand. In this project, however, I have learnt that my artworks are interactively made through the medium's vitality and my own intention – and that this relationship is much like a rearticulated nature that is ever changing in form and meaning.

I have learnt through my practical experimentation that there are ways of constituting a painting that allow a viewer to physically become part of it. The physical surface of paint has been especially significant to my project, specifically in how the medium becomes the surface and its ability to support itself through layering. I also discussed the idea that the 'ungrounded' painting allows for a double-sided viewing, which alters the way in which the viewer looks at the landscape (undermining ways of seeing landscape or nature).

During the course of this two-year project I deliberated about my own contribution to plastic pollution by using more than 200 litres of acrylic paint and conclude that my project, regardless of its positioning to highlight environmental instability, is not environmentally friendly. Instead its effectiveness is in positioning the paintings as mirrors to the current natural landscape – a camouflaged prop that simultaneously conceals and reveals its very nature. The camouflaging happens in the disguise of the actual material of paint through representation, but the paintings, removed as they are from the canvas, also reveal their materiality. This trick of camouflage and exposé encapsulates an important theme throughout my work. My paintings, through its camouflaging, plant a double meaning and a double viewing that may subvert the viewer's perception of what is natural.

Perhaps if we are able to re-imagine 'nature' as inclusive of humans *and* their impact - instead of trying to rescue a pristine and untouched nature, one that does almost not exist anymore - we might be able to re-evaluate our position in the world and learn to value the significance (*permanence* and *impermanence*) of both natural and synthetic materials. Perhaps then, we might not have an environmental issue where there is too much pollution and too little natural resources to sustain the growing human population and our daily needs and wants.

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List of Figures

ARTIST STATEMENT
Ungrounding Landscape

Since the 20th century there has been a tremendous rise in plastic as both a material element of modern life and as a growing environmental pollutant. Recent evidence indicates that traces of plastic are now *in* the earth, which suggests a need to rethink what exactly the 'natural' environment is comprised of. Plastics are now so abundant in the environment that they are recognisable as deposits in sedimental layers of the Earth, a key geological indicator of the Anthropocene (the latest geological epoch, marked by the extent of human impact on the Earth's systems and processes).

My work interrogates traditional Western landscape painting in light of the contemporary understanding that 'nature' has been rearticulated, even plasticised and hence rendered malleable, through human action. The idea of a *plasticised natural environment* is concomitant with the age of the Anthropocene.

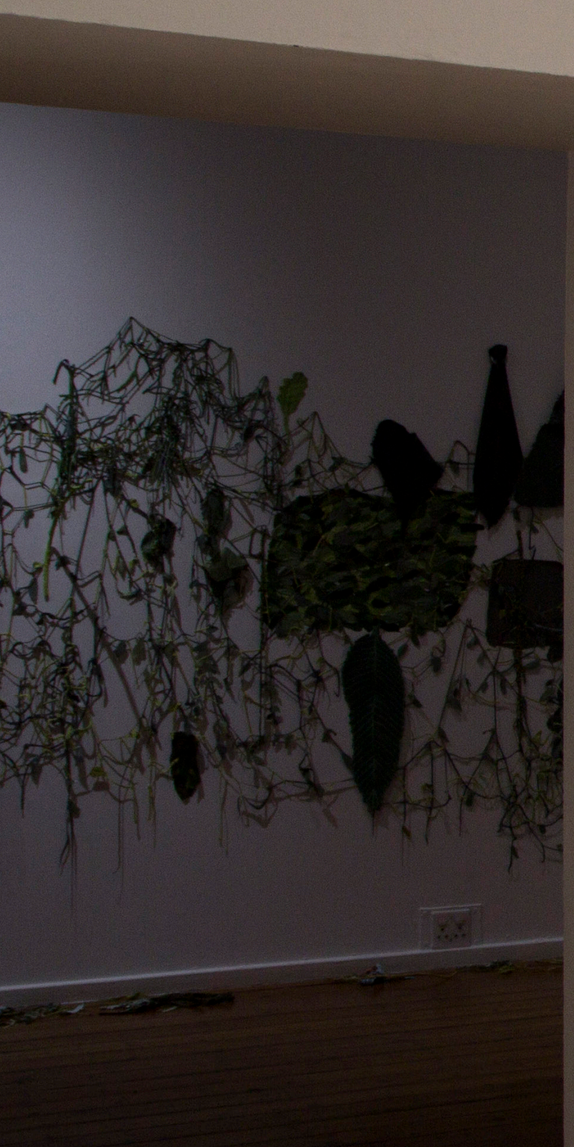
My work explores the idea of a socially and materially constructed landscape; utilising the medium of acrylic paint I reimagine the landscape with a material that embodies plastic. In traditional painting methods paint is usually applied to a physical *ground*, for example a linen canvas, a wooden board, even a wall or any other physical object. This ground operates as a base upon which the paint can function as a painting, and this substratum is part of the final art object. My work focuses on the materiality of acrylic paint as a type of plastic and its potential to function as a painting without a canvas, or *ground*.

The physical elements of the canvas and the frame that holds and supports the image of the landscape are as implicated in the construction of symbolic meaning as the representation of it. Hence, to deconstruct the traditional Western landscape painting one must remove the painting completely from the supporting systems in place.

Focussed specifically on the plants within the landscape, and the regenerative ecological benefits they provide, my paintings mimic certain elements of plants and foliage. After the dried paint has been removed from the substratum it is 'landscaped' in the gallery space. I regard this act of landscaping as a form of gardening, manipulating plant-growth to construct a landscape. As in a garden, the 'ungrounded' paintings are arranged to simulate elements of nature. The garden is already an artificial simulation of the landscape, and here it is made even more artificial. The paint becomes like camouflage, an object of simulation and trickery: *is it paint, a landscape, is it foliage?* It is all these things, but on a molecular level it remains plastic paint. Through my painting I want to show that 'nature' cannot be encapsulated by simply painting a landscape on a canvas.

Nature, as an unstable and ambiguous concept, cannot be framed (or grounded). Perhaps if we are able to reimagine 'nature' as inclusive of humans and their impact – instead of trying to rescue a pristine and untouched nature, one that almost does not exist anymore – we might be able to re-evaluate our position in the world and learn to value the significance (permanence and impermanence) of both natural and synthetic materials. Perhaps then we might not have an environmental issue wherein there is too much pollution and too few natural resources to sustain the ever-growing human population and its daily needs and wants.

Gabrielle Kruger at the opening of her Masters Graduate exhibition, *Ungrounding Landscape*. Photograph by Stephane Veldman.



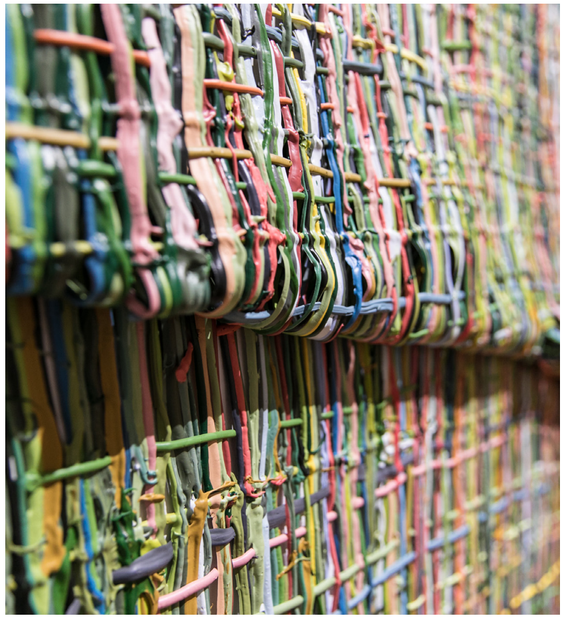
Paint Becomes Plant series #2 (2018) Acrylic paint and hard plastc suspended from nails on a white wall.

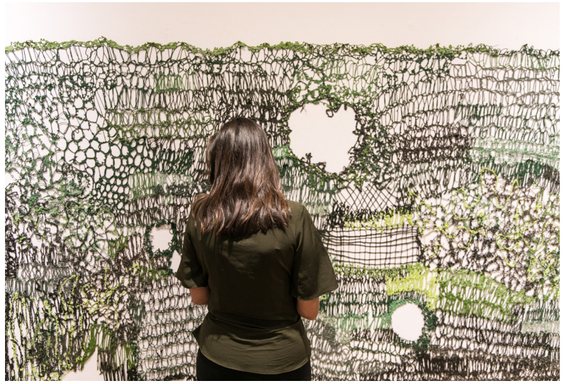
Interwoven (2018). Acrylic paint, Approx. 300cm x 153cm.

Hanging Landscape series #1-6 (2017-18). Acrylic paint suspended from stainless steel rods.

Detail of *Hanging Landscape* series #5 (2018). Acrylic paint suspended from stainless steel rods.

Woven Painting #3 (2017-18). Acrylic paint, suspended with nails. Approximately 300cm x 210cm.



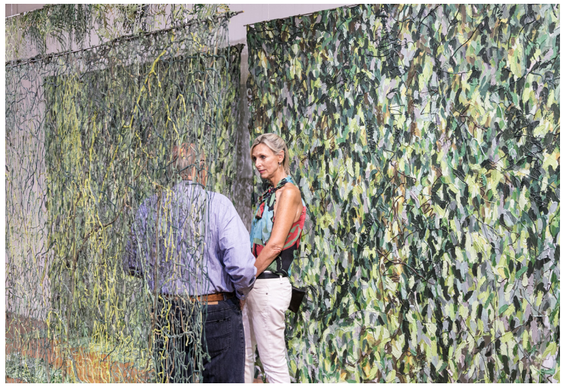












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Ungrounding Landscape

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