

WORKING REMAINS

University of Cape Town

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R o r y E m m e t t    W O R K I N G   R E M A I N S



R o r y E m m e t t

Michaelis School of Fine Art  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Cape Town

DECLARATION

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

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In partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
Master of Fine Art

2022

*This project is dedicated to Winston John Meiring (1966–2022).*

*Thanks for everything, Pops.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank all those who supported me in realizing this project:

Friends and family: Nicole Emmett, Milton and Merle Emmett, Chrystal Meiring, Grant, Lauren and Grayson Goldshmidt, Liam Emmett, Vaughn and Ruth Abrahams, Catherine Meiring, Stanley Amon, Melusi Dlamini, Kamil Hassim, Thomas Pienaar, Ryan and Sheronda Brown and Sinethemba China Hlokoza.

Classmates: Yun Young Ahn, Vanessa Cowling, Ulriche Jantjes, Andrew Juries, Oskar Keogh, Maia Lehr-Sacks, Nobukho Nqaba, Jean Claude Nsabimana, Emme Beatrix Pretorius, Lerato Maduna and Jared Leite.

Michaelis School of Fine Art technical, administrative & academic staff.

Director and HOD at Michaelis: Dr Kurt Campbell

Special thanks to my supervisors:

Fabian Saptouw and Berni Searle, who've shown immense patience, encouragement and support throughout the theoretical and practical processes.

The staff, instructors and horses at Oude Molen Stables.

The staff at Mervyn Gers Ceramics.

The staff at Beziab Construction.

Photography & videography: Ashley Walters, Paris Brummer & Andrew Juries

Sound engineers: Cathy Bailey & Paul Bailey

Fashion designer: Sophia Lavigre

Proofreader: Thomas Cartwright

Book design: Index Collective

Printing: Trident Press (Pty) Ltd

Binding: The Bookbinding Company

Laser engravings: Jonathon Durno

UCT Postgraduate Funding Office:

Siyakhula Scholarship, Harry Crossley

Research Fellowship

Fig. 1

MFA studio, Michaelis School of  
Fine Art (UCT), Cape Town. 2022.  
Photo Credit: Ulriche Jantjes.





## INTRODUCTION

The legends, stories, histories and anecdotes of a colonial culture offer the subject a primordial Either/Or. Either he is fixed in a consciousness of the body as a solely negating activity or as a new kind of man, a new genus. (Bhabha, 1994: 108)

*Working Remains* grapples with colonial legacies and their remnants inscribed on the cultural, socio-political and topographical contemporary Cape landscape. The remnants suggested by the project's title pertain to concerns about self, place, labour and culture that permeate personal and collective history and memory. *Working Remains* adopts a self-reflexive and critical approach to representation through painting, installation, sculpture, performance and video.

The term 'remains'<sup>1</sup> in the title references the creative process of finding and reworking existing remnants in the form of found materials and objects that hold contextual meanings and associations – both personally and more broadly. These remnants are soiled, sometimes literally with paint, and thus inscribed with experiential and explanatory information – which I attempt to unpack in this project. Throughout this text I use the words 'remains' and 'remnants' interchangeably to refer to this framework of thought. The aforementioned 'information' imbues the surface of the found material in the form of texture, stain or mark and reveals hints into the process of its inscription as a gestural trace or consequence of action. I am interested in uncovering the past within the present by considering historical detritus through the conceptual framework of excavation, the process of digging, burying and actively seeking out. I thus seek out particular markers of identity in my surroundings and attempt to utilise the theoretical framework of excavation as a generative praxis that speaks to the salvaging and reconfiguring of found objects in *Working Remains*.

Excavation in my practise is thus not intended to be understood solely as an archaeological field technique (Camic, 2010: 81). I rework the objects I find and place them in relation to one another to come to terms with their complexity in the research process. I explore how

<sup>1</sup> I am aware that the term has broader associations to specific archaeological relics and is also used when referring to a person's body after death. Within my investigation, however, the term is used to deal with remnants from the past, in the form of found information and objects abandoned and left behind.

combining these elements suggests an amalgamation of fragmented cultural and historical accumulation that promotes alternate readings of entrenched narratives. The concept of bricolage<sup>2</sup> is attributed to the French social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and can be understood in my practice as “the process of taking the materials at hand and using them in an improvisatorial fashion” (in Eriksen, 2003: 230; and Knepper, 2006: 71). The intuitive logic of this concept proves useful throughout my theoretical and practical engagements as the creative acts become a perpetual, cyclical process of bricolage, unpacking ‘identity’ as it relates to self, place and practice – thus making the process of excavation active and present in the contemporary moment towards a revised critical understanding of ‘identity’.

The constellation of ‘coloured identity’ constructions and my personal relation to this complex positionality in the context of post-apartheid Cape Town, South Africa constitute a key element of my creative enquiry. The use of existing terminologies associated with painting and racial nomenclature allows for visual and textual word play in this text and exhibition. In this project I map out my concerns through frameworks, methods and emblematic gestures of excavation to view my praxis of performance and painting with the material sensibilities of objecthood and the context in which objects function, and how this affects perceived value as context changes. In setting out these conceptual and contextual parameters, I suggest that ‘race’ and ‘place’ hold ideologically constructed meanings. By fostering an anti-essentialist logic, I seek an unfixated positionality.

The term ‘coloured’ is used in quotation marks in this text to signal its history in the invented racial nomenclature that originates in apartheid.<sup>3</sup> I take my cue from Zimitri Erasmus’ (2001: 13) articulations of the

<sup>2</sup> This conceptual and creative framework is engaged in more detail later in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Apartheid was a racist policy by which peoples of South Africa were categorised according to ‘race’ under the ethos of separate development and white supremacy, specifically in terms of the Population Registration Act of 1950 and the Population Registration Amendment Act of 1967.

fallacies inherent in habits of thought that legitimise ‘race science’ and its resulting terms of racist categorisation. I remain cognisant of the label’s charged social and political history, which I cannot disavow or explicate fully within the limited scope of this document.

Much scholarship exists on the topic of ‘coloured identity’ in South Africa by thinkers and makers in the field who function within and outside of academic institutions. This is an area of ongoing conversation and investigation in my work, and in the work of my contemporaries and the researchers who paved the way for our investigations, including Yvette Abrahams, Mohamed Adhikari, Neville Alexander, Gabeba Baderoon, June Bam-Hutchison, Vivian Bickford-Smith, Jakes Gerwel, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Jonathan D. Jansen, Shamil Jeppie, Alex la Guma, Jared Leite, James Matthews, Malika Ndlovu, Siona O’Connell, Adam Small, Crain Soudien, Richard Rive, Richard van der Ross and Christopher van Wyk. This list is by no means exhaustive, and many other individuals have engaged this vast and complex field of ‘identity’ – and specifically imaginative formulations of ‘coloured identity’ within the South African context – in ways that resonate with my practice. A key challenge with a topic this broad is to acknowledge the breadth of the terrain and identify the specific area within that terrain that will be the focus of the research project.

To direct that process, I have divided this text into three main parts: *Seeing Self*, *Picturing Place* and *Performing Painting*. This structure of person, place and practice sets the parameters for a consideration of how these entities meet and intersect through my engagements with land, culture and identity in the South African context.

*Seeing Self* draws on selected theorists who have engaged with a process of re-imagination and productive counter-narration of conceptions of 'identity'. I refer to texts that interrogate 'colouredness' and conceptions of 'race' more generally. I begin the section with a discussion of Roderick Sauls' critical engagement with the performance of 'colouredness', and I refer to Lionel Davis' work to provide further context on identity through minstrelsy.

In *Picturing Place*, I draw on artistic examples as investigative tools for re-imagining conceptions of place in relation to self. I discuss place with reference to the artistic practice of Berni Searle and Zyma Amien, paying close attention to how they materialise these concerns. The exhibition 'Athlone *in Mind*', curated by Dr Kurt Campbell and Dr Heidi Grunebaum (2017), is invoked with a concise focus on the key intentions of the exhibition as they relate to my research project. I situate the discussion of place-making and how notions of place are constructed imaginatively, realised physically and performed ideologically in relation to these examples. I also refer to how thinkers like Zimitri Erasmus (2001), Helene Strauss (2004), and Édouard Glissant (2010) invoke notions of creolisation, and how this rich field of thought and scholarship relate to my research.

In the third and final section, *Performing Painting*, I discuss my creative output and key works produced for this project. I attempt to piece self and place together by considering the practice of two artists, Stephané E. Conradie and Renée Green. This discussion precedes a critical engagement with my own practice, in which I put my works in conversation with the key themes and ideas set out in the preceding sections of the document to draw links with artistic precedents and previous creative and theoretical engagements. I provide in-depth

context for the video piece *Refrain*, which I consider central to my submission and body of work. The 'stage'/'performance site' is brought into a contemporary dialogue with the past as I consider it in the centre of discursive mythologies around Cape Town's formation as a city.

# I

## SEEING SELF

There is no such thing as the Black ‘race’. Blackness, whiteness and colouredness exist, but they are cultural, historical and political identities. To talk about ‘race mixture’, ‘miscegenation’, ‘inter-racial’ sex and ‘mixed descent’ is to use habits of thought inherited from the very ‘race science’ that was used to justify oppression, brutality and the marginalisation of ‘bastard’ people. To remind us of their ignoble origins, these terms have been used in quotation marks throughout.

(Erasmus, 2001: 13)

### ‘Racial Identity’: Terms and Conditions

In South Africa, ‘coloured’ remains an official – albeit contested – administrative category that denotes peoples who share diverse origins of ethnicity. I am interested in new forms of conceptualising this identity. To describe it as a contested term acknowledges its reliance on normative and ‘essentialist’ ways of knowing ‘race’ (Erasmus, 2001: 13). Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018: 196) describes essentialism as “a misstep in the realms of creed, color, country, class and culture”. The propensity to use identifying terms to fix and essentialise is grappled with in various creative processes through my multi-media practice of performing, painting, finding and placing found remnants in conversation with one another. In my practice I grapple with conceptions of *self* and how these are ideologically constructed through notions of ‘race’ and culture. The *self* I refer to in my project is thus a complex construct, as personhood is shaped by several interconnected facets that are ever-changing and unstable.

In *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity*, Appiah cites developmental psychologist Susan Gelman’s extrapolation of the term to bolster his thesis of the reductive lens of essentialism (Appiah, 2018: 32). Gelman proposes that essentialism is “the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, but that gives an object its identity and is responsible for other similarities that category members share” (Appiah, 2018: 32). In a contemporary South African context, ‘race’ is a persistent factor in identity and sense of self – whether recognised and embraced or not. The ‘box’ on bureaucratic documents must be ticked. Appiah (2018: 25) speaks about such recognition, calling it the ‘Medusa Syndrome’:

To recognise is to respect, but it is also, to return to one of my themes, to essentialise. When the state gazes at us – with its identity cards, educational stipulations and other instruments of recognition – it invariably fixes and rigidifies a phenomenon that is neither fixed nor rigid. I have called this the Medusa Syndrome: what the state gazes upon, it tends to turn to stone.

Such social – and indeed, institutional – gazing and surveillance endure in the post-apartheid South African context. The works presented in my project draw attention to these persistent methods of fixing that which is fluid – just as dried paint suggests the viscous nature of the once moveable material, and how found objects are re-appropriated in shifting iterations.

Many South African theorists have engaged with post-democratic identity and the limitations presented by ‘race’, as in the collection of essays, artworks and other texts in *Under Construction: ‘Race’ and Identity in South Africa Today*, edited by Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn (2004). In the collection’s introductory chapter, the editors draw attention to problematic traditions in local academia that accept ‘race’ as an uncontested, given category in which difference is essentialised (Distiller & Steyn, 2004: 1).

Distiller and Steyn propose ‘race’ as a precarious matrix of ‘self’ informed by one’s material and ideological contexts. The various performances of ‘South African culture’ manifest in the contemporary moment to “forge something that is informed by the past, and that seeks to transcend it” (Distiller & Steyn, 2004: 1). ‘Race’, suggest Distiller & Steyn, is “given meaning by the political economy in which

it is located. It needs props, a social and economic script and co-actors before it can assume its commonsensical proportions” (Distiller & Steyn, 2004: 4). In addition, the authors suggest that ‘race’ is most obviously registered visually, which implicates an audience in the meaning of the social stage on which ‘race’ is performed (Distiller & Steyn, 2004: 4).

The term ‘coloured’ has been progressively re-appropriated and articulated in nuanced critical conversation by numerous scholars since the dawn of South Africa’s democracy. In the widely cited *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place*, Zimitri Erasmus (2001) explores the nature of ‘coloured’ subjectivities and deploys multiple scholarly voices<sup>4</sup> to rethink what it means to be ‘coloured’ in post-apartheid South Africa. Erasmus encourages a dialogue with history and a reckoning with the brutality of the colonial encounter, asserting that “Coloured identities are productive subjective realities shaped and re-shaped by people under the conditions given them by history” (2001: 23). These historically based conditions often appear contradictory in terms, apparently negating notions that ‘coloured’ subjectivities are malleable, but Erasmus undermines reductive labels and common-sense views. Instead, she emphasises the ambiguity and ceaseless fluidity of ‘coloured’ identity formations, while remaining conscious of the conditions under which they are produced. Erasmus’ formulations are consistent with my creative aims, as I seek to come to terms with my own sense of ‘self’ in the South African context.

My negotiation of ‘colouredness’ is unpacked within the subjective terms of class, gender, culture and ‘racialised’ self-expression in aspects of my practice. I identify potential paths of investigation within various discursive interpretations of ‘coloured’ subjectivities to fashion my

<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Hendricks, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Thiven Reddy, Shamil Jeppie, Sean Field, Crain Soudien, Desiree Lewis, Heidi Grunbaum, Steven Robins and Adam Haupt all contribute essays.

own space for creative cultivation and development of imaginative possibilities. Becoming ‘coloured’ on one’s own terms and conditions requires constant negotiation with systems of power, a process of creative bricolage. The negotiation process is thus an active stance against self-loathing and other forms of prejudice and assumes a fascination with new forms of self-fashioning that forge emancipatory relations between ourselves and others.

### ‘Performing While Coloured’: Meditations on Minstrelsy in Selected Works by Roderick Sauls and Lionel Davis (with reference to *The Cape Colourman*)

Roderick Sauls is known for his use of cretestone<sup>5</sup> to create multi-layered sculptural installations. His works explore notions of identity, representation, memory and materiality (Sauls, 2004: 54). His methodology resonates with my thinking around how the self relates to site, and how I repurpose found surfaces that hold traces of past actions.<sup>6</sup> In this section, however, I focus on his mixed media installation and video works that explore notions of minstrelsy and performance of ‘colouredness’. I also refer to a work from Lionel Davis’ ‘Masquerade’ series (2009).

Author Nadia Davids (2013: 86) contextualises the carnival procession within the city centre as “a bricolage of colonial buildings and statues”. The city centre here is acknowledged as a shifting architectural and ideological bricolage in which the built environment forms a backdrop for a multiplicity of cultural, socio-political and topographical contemporary expressions. I expand on my understanding of bricolage

<sup>5</sup> The trade name of a calcium sulphate hemi-hydrate plaster used by builders to ‘skim’ interior walls (Sauls, 2004:74).

<sup>6</sup> Sauls creates his own surfaces and imbues these with vestiges of gestural movements – often including found objects as markers of memory (Sauls, 2004: 54; Williams, 2018: 29–30).



Figs. 2–3

Roderick Sauls, *...blankes moettie innie water mossie, die kleurlinge moet it drink... [... whites should not mess in the water, the coloureds must drink it...]*, 2003. Mixed media installation. © Roderick Sauls.



Fig. 4

Roderick Sauls, *The Good, the Bad and the Coloured*, 2004. Video stills. © Roderick Sauls.

later in the text, but I note here the notion of the city as a construction that functions parallel to my process of in-studio creative bricolage.

Sauls' works recount the tradition of *Klopse*<sup>7</sup> minstrelsy at the Cape, referencing the place of District Six<sup>8</sup> and how the tradition informed his experience of 'colouredness' under apartheid. Sauls' installation (Figs. 2–3) features found *Klopse* garments, used to construct what Sauls (2004: 71) refers to as the "individual images" of colourful ghostly figures in play. Sauls (2004: 55) explains that the colourful garments were originally worn by members of the various troops in the 'townships'<sup>9</sup> of the Cape Flats – many of whom, Sauls notes, are ex-residents of District Six. Notions of visibility, masking and appearing as something alternative to one's normal way of being in the world are echoed in how I have engaged my own body as a site for painting, while retaining agency as the painter and primary guardian of my volition when performing. I expand on this later in the text.

Davids discusses the Cape Town Minstrel Carnival's identity as "entangled with the spatial and historical dimensions of urban Cape Town", functioning as "a living archive" that performs the city's "past dislocations and its geographies of loss" (2013: 86).<sup>10</sup> The performative phenomenon is loved by some and loathed by others, who consider it an enactment of a kind of Cape blackface that moves through the categories of 'race' and place, revealing the Cape Minstrel Carnival as not merely an expression of racial anxiety but a repository for the Cape slave experience (Davids, 2013: 88).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> From the Afrikaans patois *Kaapse Klopse* (*Kaapse* meaning "Cape" and *Klopse* referring to the definitive rhythm beat out of the goema drum) (Davids, 2013:94).

<sup>8</sup> District Six was a settlement on the lower slopes of Devil's Peak, formed in 1867. It was demarcated as the sixth municipal district of the city of Cape Town, where people were forcibly removed from their homes under the Group Areas Act, No. 77 of 1957 (Sauls, 2004: 13).

<sup>9</sup> Sauls notes that townships like Bonteheuwel, Langa, Rylands, Manenberg and Nyanga were developed after the Group Areas Act of 1950 (Sauls, 2004: 13).

<sup>10</sup> The Carnival procession flows between District Six and the Bo-Kaap area, with celebrations peaking on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January – referred to locally as *Tweede Nuwe Jaar*, or "Second New Year", the day on which slaves were allowed to celebrate the New Year (Davids, 2013: 96). The Carnival celebration's origins are often conflated with the processions of the mid- to late 1800s that marked the abolition of slavery in 1834 and the end of the apprenticeship system of indentured former slaves in 1838.

<sup>11</sup> An American tradition of racist caricature, blackface is "the form of entertainment associated with minstrel shows, featuring songs, dances and formulaic comic routines based on stereotyped depictions of black Americans and typically performed by white actors with blackened faces" (Smithsonian, 2018). Davids' conceptualisation accounts for the historical strategy of the Cape's emancipated ex-slave community to "affiliate itself with all things American" (2013: 88).

Sauls' video piece (Fig. 4) references the *skollie*<sup>12</sup> ritual of gang tattooing and juxtaposes this with the face-painting process of the *Klopse* tradition. "Two members of the coloured community from the Cape Flats did the performance", notes Sauls.<sup>13</sup> The main figure's face is gradually covered by paint, rendering him 'coloured-in' (Sauls, 2004: 53). Sauls (2004: 54) displays an awareness of this erasure when he notes that sound is purposely left out of the video piece "to represent the symbolic meaning of being 'voiceless'".<sup>14</sup> Sauls' autobiographical expression as someone "born under a bad sign"<sup>15</sup> and his personal affinity to the *Klopse* tradition stem from sympathies with the memory of District Six and a resolute re-viewing of the clichés and "worn out representations" of its people – rendering the figures in his work invisible and by proxy presently absent (Sauls, 2004: 34). The absent/present figures in Sauls' works relate to my exploration of costume and painted body in relation to constructions of 'self'.



<sup>12</sup> *Skollie* means gangster, a stereotype of 'coloured' people from the Cape Flats (Sauls, 2004: 2).

<sup>13</sup> The residential area of the Cape Flats is situated between the two oceans, from Table Bay to the False Bay side of the Cape Peninsula. At the advent of the Group Areas Act, the Cape Flats became one of the biggest resettlement schemes for evicted 'coloureds', 'blacks' and 'Indians' (Sauls, 2004: 3).

<sup>14</sup> Sauls explicates this sensibility further by naming only the cast character as "the *skollie* of the *klopse* tradition", stating that the students with whom he worked were themselves members of a *klopse* troupe and were acquainted with the 'art' of *skollie* tattooing (Sauls, 2004: 54).

<sup>15</sup> A song by the American bluesman Albert King, here relevant to the 'coloured' apartheid label and the 'identity crisis' experienced by many South Africans forced to adopt it (Sauls, 2004: 55).

Fig. 5

Lionel Davis, *Mask from the 'Masquerade' series*, 2009. Mixed media and collage on paper. © Lionel Davis.

Lionel Davis lived and worked as an educational officer/tour guide on Robben Island for many years and was a cultural activist during the apartheid era. He designed and screen-printed many posters for resistance organisations and trade unions, such as UDF and Cosatu protest rallies in Cape Town (Tsotsi, 2018). A contemporary of Sauls, Davis explores similar themes (Sauls, 2004: 5) through various techniques in his practice, including screen printing and collage.<sup>16</sup> The layered prints and fractured collage portraits that Davis configures create disjointed forms of *Klopse* representations in 'masked' carnivalesque figures (Fig. 5). Much like Davis' collage approach, I use existing fragments to create with, echoing what Temba Tsotsi (2018) calls the "connotations of immediacy and expedience" in Davis' practice.

The works discussed above are stellar examples of how representations of *Klopse* traditions can subvert assumptions and stereotypes birthed during apartheid that produced a visual and linguistic grammar of racist stereotyping and nomenclature. Peter Clarke, a notable South African artist and late comrade of Davis and Sauls, says in the documentary *The Luggage Is Still Labeled: Blackness in South African Art*: "And so here we are, sitting with the labels. The journey has ended, but our luggage is still labelled" (Voyiya & McGee, 2003). The film's title, derived from Clarke's utterance, affirms the persistence of post-apartheid 'race' baggage and how it plays out in the terms we still use today. This is reflected by the artists interviewed in the film nearly two decades ago, and which persists as a problem for post-apartheid generations who choose to unpack their inherited 'racial' classifications as I do.

<sup>16</sup> In *Collage, Assemblage and the Found Object*, Diane Waldman (1992) defines collage as the process of pasting together various materials on a flat surface.

*Working Remains* is preceded by the trajectory of an investigation of pigment (skin and paint) and a myriad of visual manifestations of ‘self’ and ‘site’ through works that conflate notions of time, labour and class in the context of Cape Town, South Africa. Images from my earlier project *The Colourman Chronicles* (2014–2019) are included in an addendum of selected works from my pre-registration portfolio to provide further context for my performative painting investigations. I track the journey of my constructed avatar, from inception in my final undergraduate year at UCT to the manifestations of various performances conducted as *The Cape Colourman* character, as well as the only performance done as myself (in collaboration with my father, Milton Emmett) up to this pivot point in my creative journey. These site-specific gestures all occurred in what I consider interstitial spaces: active construction sites amidst rubble and ruins, among public sculptures that have sparked local discussion (and debate), institutional establishments or simply ‘neutral’ backdrops. In tracing ‘A Brief History’ of *The Colourman Chronicles* (Addendum 2), I posit the painted figure as a retired version of ‘self’ existing in in-between spaces – *now(there)* AND *no(there)*.

‘Athlone in Mind’, the exhibition discussed in *Picturing Place*, was not framed as a project about ‘race’ or ‘colouredness’ via Athlone as a case study but was conceived as a show about ‘place’. Several local exhibitions not discussed in this text have expressly questioned the positionality of ‘colouredness’ in South Africa. Most notably, these include the recent KWAAI exhibitions at Eclectica Contemporary gallery in Cape Town, which was accompanied by workshops and discussions around the topic of ‘colouredness’, particularly in the Cape Town context (Eclectica Contemporary, 2018).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> KWAAI (Vols.1, 2 & 3) attempted to “explore the question of ‘colouredness’” (Eclectica Contemporary, 2018). Christina Fortune curated works by a select group of artists in the first iteration of the show in 2018, which featured the likes of Mikhailia Petersen, Kirsten Arendse, Joshua Williams, Scott Eric Williams, QUEEZY, Danielle Alexander, Matthew Wareley, Stephané E. Conradie, Gary Frier, Hasan Essop, Husein Essop, Dion Cupido and myself (Eclectica, 2018). KWAAI Vol. 2 (2019) included Dion Cupido, Bushy Wopp, Chelsea Robin Ingham, K-Juizy, Kirstin Warries, Warren Maroon, Faatimah Mohamed-Luke, Tyrone Appollis, Danielle Zelna Alexander, Gary Frier, Kaymen Herd, ALFA and a collaboration between 20SK8, Aj, Anda, April, Bobd, Ford Breez, Kyle Kallas, Juju, Aweh Migo, CrazyJap, Fok Alles, Nacho Arts, PaperPlanez, Shala, Plan B Rob, Tyler, Toothless Coon and Max. The third iteration, in 2020, was a virtual show featuring Robyn Pretorius, Jabu Nadia Newman, Dion Cupido, Ulriche Jantjes, Urban Khoi Soldier, Faatimah Mohamed Luke, Jared Leite, Scott Eric Williams, Danielle Alexander, Kelly Johnson, Sara Jardine, Gary Frier and Al Luke.

Kurt Campbell, curator of the ‘Athlone in Mind’ exhibition, similarly describes the construction of a contemporary understanding of the criticality of race through the lens of creative practice within ‘place’ as “a critical conversation that seeks no abatement” (Campbell, 2017: 13). The artists who have participated in KWAAI are part of that conversation, and we continue to contribute to the frameworks for engaging cultural identity in the South African context.

## II

### PICTURING PLACE

What does it mean to hold a place in mind?  
(Grunebaum, 2017: 4)

#### **Athlone *in Mind*: 'Placeness' in the Work of Berni Searle and Zyma Amien**

'Athlone *in Mind*' consisted of two art exhibitions side-by-side at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town.<sup>18</sup> South African sculptor Jane Alexander's site-specific installation in The Old Stable was a pre-existing work presented alongside the 'Athlone *in Mind*' group exhibition, which featured commissioned artists Zyma Amien, Hasan and Husein Essop, Kemang Wa Lehulere, Dathini Mzayiya and Berni Searle, in the Old Recruitment Office. The commissioned artists were invited to think laterally in ways that would imagine Athlone as an expansive, fluid and composite conception.

'Athlone *in Mind*' engaged diverse artistic practices, cinematic experiments and scholarly essays to explore the challenge of artistic practice and imagine space in ways that transcended apartheid's spatial formations and temporal markers (Campbell & Grunebaum, 2017). My interest lies in how conceptions of 'place' influence the creative cultural fabric of Cape Town, and the artworks, videos, digital and photographic installations and essays in the book constitute Athlone as a *question* through an expansive, fluid and composite conception of the relationship between images, thought and place.

<sup>18</sup> "Built between 1666 and 1679 by the Dutch East India Company, the Castle of Good Hope is regarded as the oldest remaining colonial building in South Africa – and stands as a distinct reminder of the country's complex colonial past. Known locally as 'The Castle', today this 17<sup>th</sup> century bastion fort is home to a number of historical collections, including the William Fehr Collection managed by Iziko Museums of South Africa" (Iziko Museums of South Africa, 2022).

Fig. 6

'Athlone *in Mind*', 2017. Installation view.  
Photo Credit: Melvin Pather.



'Athlone *in Mind*' set out to transcend its own physicality in time and space, seeming to undermine a time-bound logic of rootedness. Technological components called i-beacons activated the exhibition beyond its physical confines (Campbell, 2017: 12–13).<sup>19</sup>

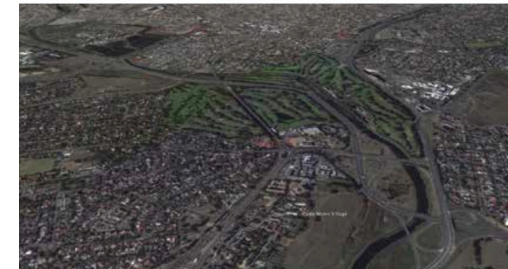
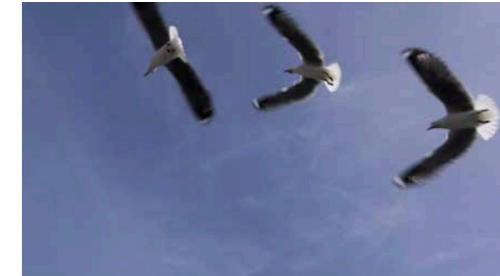
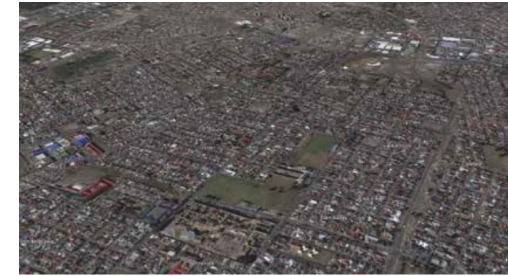
Berni Searle's and Zyma Amien's works in the group exhibition provide examples of how a site can be imaginatively activated through forms of material memory and technological imagery. In unpacking Searle's and Amien's works, I draw on Grunebaum's ideas in the catalogue text 'A Question of Place', where 'placeness' is conceived within the theoretical underpinnings of the ambitious multi-media project. Conceptual incisions are made throughout the text to picture the placeness of Athlone – approaching it as a question, not a destination (Grunebaum, 2017: 4).<sup>20</sup>

Grunebaum refers to the various forms of racial and spatial segregation, exclusion and dispossession that have shaped Cape Town and that are interwoven into the social and cultural fabric of the city. I unearth the complex landscape of 'Cape Town' through creative modalities of memorialised representation, "reconstellating the terms by which the city is encountered, many of which have become recalcitrantly normalised in the contemporary moment" (Grunebaum, 2017: 4).

Searle's video work *As the Crow Flies* (2017) (Figs. 7–10) takes a bird's-eye view of an area layered with rich socio-political and socio-economic chronicling. Aerial video footage fluidly traverses areas that viewers may (or may not) recognise from this lofty vantage point, presenting the land as removed, displaced and separate.

<sup>19</sup> I-beacons are small, battery-powered sensor devices that wirelessly transmit data to apps on mobile devices using Bluetooth technology – available to all with access to a smartphone. The exhibition deployed a number of these transmitters at various venues in Athlone, Langa and Gugulethu to disseminate the exhibition's website link and catalogue and to facilitate virtual tours of the exhibition, known as 'non-marker tracking'. This technology immersed viewers/visitors near and far in a "self-service multimedia experience" that offered a "digital bridge" from the very place the exhibition took as its object of study to the exhibition site and the proceedings of the conference (Campbell, 2017: 12–13).

<sup>20</sup> Connections to Athlone run in my family history. My father grew up in an area known as Silvertown and my mother in Crawford, a community neighbouring Athlone. A nostalgic narration of my personal experiences as a child in Athlone is not my intention here, however.



The flyover footage follows the Black and Liesbeeck rivers until they disappear into various subterranean canals, then tracks the landscape across densely populated terrain to the Indian Ocean at Strandfontein, reserved under Apartheid as a 'coloured' beach for the displaced and disenfranchised inhabitants of the Cape Flats (Garb, 2019: 21). Like the ebbing and flowing of the Two Rivers<sup>21</sup> and their meandering tributaries, Grunebaum (2017: 4) calls into question the imprecise contours of a city to come or yet to be remade.

Figs. 7-10

Berni Searle, *As the Crow Flies*, 2017. Single channel HD video (stills). © Berni Searle.

<sup>21</sup> The confluence of the Liesbeeck River and the Black River, which is a point of consideration in *Refrain* (2022), the anchoring work in my submission.



Searle’s piece invokes a cinematic procedure that takes Athlone as its narrative point of departure. The ecology and economy of the Two Rivers Urban Park area is highlighted through its irregular, rhizomatic<sup>22</sup> system of tributaries and intentionally belies linear interpretations of space demarcation that survey the land in one fell swoop. Tamar Garb (2019: 21) writes that in *As the Crow Flies*, Searle “appropriates the latest digital technology to specify the particularities and peculiarities of a place, stretching as it does between oceans and bays, across flats and tracks, along a winding and serpentine vein”. Searle digitally orientates ‘Athlone’ as central. The piece starts in Table Bay at the mouth of the Salt River on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and traverses the landscape until the Salt River connects to the Black and Liesbeeck rivers, before going underground and re-emerging as a network of urban canals (Garb, 2019: 21).

The computer-derived footage is juxtaposed with close-up shots looking up at seagulls and flamingos inhabiting the estuary, in stark contrast to “dystopian signifiers of flesh that is rotting, discarded and lost”, the guts of catfish caught from the river by local fisherman, who sell them to West African restaurateurs (Figs. 11–12) (Garb,

<sup>22</sup> A non-linear system that forms heterogeneous connections through multiplicity and connection (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Glissant & Wing, 2010).

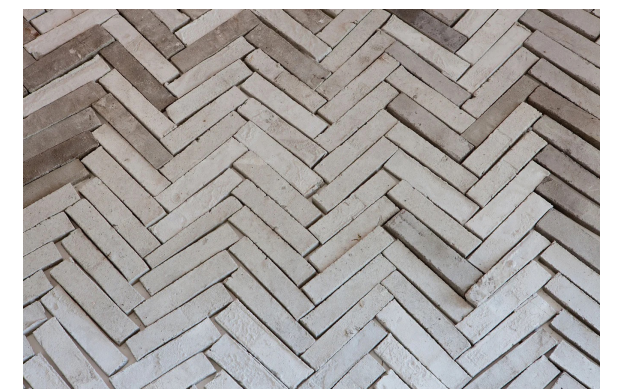
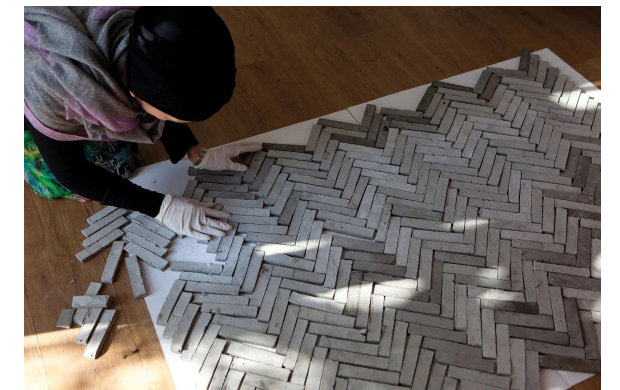
<sup>23</sup> Searle typically performs as the protagonist in her photographic works, as in *Snow White* (2001), the *Colour Me* series (1998–2000), *Seeking Refuge* (2008) and the *Into the Dark* series (2014).

Figs. 11-12

Berni Searle, *As the Crow Flies*, 2017. Single channel HD video (stills). © Berni Searle.

2019: 21). Uncharacteristically, this piece does not feature Searle as the protagonist,<sup>23</sup> marking an absence of her body as a site of fracture in the landscape. Searle thus engages in an emblematic refusal and poetic bricolage of colonial and apartheid cartographic devices in *As the Crow Flies*.

Zyma Amien was commissioned to create a sculptural installation that would evoke a sense of place-lessness through poetic material modalities, using suspended sculptures and cement castings that challenge the dynamics of space and displacement. Amien explored ‘vacated parts’ of Athlone (Campbell & Grunebaum, 2017), imagining and configuring ‘placeness’ in the absence of what had been. “Flawed” (Figs 15–17) suggests a homonym of sorts, denoting error, surface or a state of being (in). Amien creates a poetic, dream-like space of cement casts moulded from salvaged parquet wooden flooring from a once ‘occupied’ space (Figs. 13–15), carefully forming an evocative installation that seeks to memorialise the ordinary.



Figs. 13-15

Zyma Amien installing the cement casts for *Flawed*, 2017. Photo credit: Vanessa Cowling.

This memorialisation of the ordinary is also suggested by the title of Amien’s (2015) Master’s project: “‘Real’ Lives and ‘Ordinary’ Objects: Partisan Strategies of Art-Making with Garment Workers of the Western Cape’, discussed here to provide more context for Amien’s symbolic acts of memorialisation. Amien unravels the psychological and physical trauma experienced by family members who worked in factories, because “Even though colonialism and apartheid have been dismantled at the state level, the underlying economic structures are unchanged and the physical trauma of the worker is ongoing” (Amien, 2015: 92). Holding the legacies of this violence in mind, and seeking a means of healing and repair, Amien’s work pays homage to the backbone of the contemporary economy – the working class, specifically those in Cape Town’s garment industry, with whom Amien finds kinship (2015: 92).



Amien’s tailor-made evanescent forms in *Paying Homage* (Figs. 16–17) critique hierarchical power structures and commemorate her artisanal ancestry, ‘re-dressing’ the injustices of those who have gone before her.

Figs. 16-17  
Zyma Amien, *Paying Homage*, 2015.  
5 m gauze, pins, sewing machines.  
© Zyma Amien.

The works discussed thus far recall what labour means in South Africa for people who have had colour written onto them, and intersect notions of education, labour and privilege. I have encountered this in my own research and life, particularly in relation to my father’s vocation as a trade painter. The screenshot (Fig. 18) is from a text conversation with my father, who grew up in Athlone, and provides insight into his work-life experience and his eventual resolution of holding space as a skilled painter in a different capacity to support his family.

Although this informal and truncated anecdote cannot fully articulate the nuances and intricacies of the day-to-day struggles of my father’s work life, his insight into his sacrifice for his family and experience under apartheid caused me to ask myself how many others who are considered manual labourers have faced this kind of social, political and economic injustice based on ‘race’. As I attempt to process these inherited histories and traumas from the past, my creative methodologies become a means through which I make positive and productive strides forward.

## A Cape Creolisation

Helene Strauss (2004) stays mindful of the Caribbean meanings of ‘creolisation’ and its use in unpacking processes of subject formation in South Africa.<sup>24</sup> Strauss’ understanding informs the strong commonalities between my local Cape Town context and a global post-colonial diaspora “reflected in the topographic image of the drifting archipelago of islands” (Knepper, 2006: 70).

Ma originally came to Cape Town from Kimberly I'm told !Pa was born in Gleemoor , Athlone ! I was born in Loerie rd Bridgetown and was raised in Silvertown on the other side of "Nantes "until I married mom! Finished high school at CBC Athlone ! Started work at Puma Jersey Textiles! Went to Ruth Prowse school of art where I did a textile design cert course! Never saw the cert withheld by our rascist boss ! Worked there for 8 yrs in the studio and post 94 textile industry started crashing in CT due to cheap Eastern imports !Went to visit Ma and Pa in Silvertown , unemployed and broke ! Pa said to me that day ! " U have a young family " As you are used to working with brushes,why don't you paint people's houses ! The rest is history !!!!

Fig. 18  
Screenshot from a text conversation with my father, Milton Emmett. 2022.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Creolisation’ is an imported conceptual framework that can and has been locally recontextualised to reflect ‘cultural entanglement’ in a broader South African context (Strauss, 2004: 27).

In *Poetics of Relation*, Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant frames creolisation as “a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry” (in Glissant and Wing, 2010: 34). Glissant’s framework situates his discussion in the context of the Caribbean – the context within which the theory of creolisation originates, suggesting how the discussion could expand beyond the autobiographical context of my research project.

Strauss reads K. Sello Duiker’s acclaimed literary work *Thirteen Cents* as a narrative about creolisation in contemporary South Africa, as it requires the main protagonist, Azure, to “actively interpret inconsistent cultural messages from a variety of sources” (Strauss, 2004: 32). Having grown up in a culturally diverse area in Cape Town, I am familiar with this dissonance.<sup>25</sup> A grammar of racialisation is brought to bear on Azure’s corporeality: the character occupies a body inscribed with contradiction and shame, having blue eyes and dark skin (Strauss, 2004: 31). Author Zoë Wicomb (2018: 92) writes about “a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid’s strategy of the naming of a Coloured race”. Such a stratagem, Wicomb claims, has led to attempts to establish a racially ‘pure’ category that denotes a disavowal of shame reminiscent of apartheid social engineering. In my work I am actively trying to unpack notions of shame based on circumstantial baggage.

Wicomb references ‘miscegenation’, a nineteenth-century European eugenicist<sup>26</sup> concept that “has its origins within a discourse of ‘race’, concupiscence and degeneracy” and that is “bound up with shame” (2018: 92). Wicomb suggests a means of self-actualisation inherent in imaginative self-representations at the intersection of image and text,

<sup>25</sup> I grew up in Thornton, which borders the Northern and Southern Suburbs in Cape Town, at the nexus of Langa, Epping, Goodwood, Maitland and Pinelands.

<sup>26</sup> See Erasmus, 2001: 17.

where there is space for people to resist received racial descriptions, and indeed discriminations – where there are “new discursive spaces in which modalities of blackness can wipe out shame” (Wicomb, 2018: 106).<sup>27</sup> In her analysis of the apocalyptic end to Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents*, in which Cape Town is destroyed by flooding and fireballs, Strauss suggests that processes of creolisation “remain violent processes for most, and do not necessarily offer possibilities for liberation and hope” (Strauss, 2004: 33). Respite is forged in Strauss’ poignant extrapolation of Azure’s own imaginative agency, in which he takes control of his own self-fashioning through “corporeal inscription and subjective interpellation” (2004: 32).<sup>28</sup>

Theorising cultural formations that emanate from a cross-cultural borrowing, or bricolage, Erasmus (2001) also draws on the work of Glissant. Erasmus suggests that in the process of creolisation, identity is constructed from “elements of ruling as well as subaltern cultures” (2001: 16). In the Cape Town context, the process of creolisation refers to “cultural creativity under conditions of marginality” (Erasmus, 2001: 16). Erasmus argues that two dominant discourses of national identity in South Africa constrict radical re-conceptualisations of ‘coloured’ identities: the depoliticising discourse of rainbow nationalism and the discourse of African essentialism (2001: 20).<sup>29</sup> Erasmus argues that the first undermines power relations implicit in cultural formation and other forms of representation glazed over by popular metaphors such as ‘unity in diversity’. Moreover, notions of non-racialism in the democratic New South Africa may inhibit the important processes of articulating and addressing antagonisms and conflict in productive ways toward the enterprise of anti-racist transformation, as ‘race’ “cannot be argued away” (Erasmus, 2001: 24).

<sup>27</sup> “Blackness” used here not as a ‘race’ but as a cultural, historical and political identity.

<sup>28</sup> Strauss (2004: 32) suggests that Azure achieves this whenever he escapes to the mountain: “When [Azure] goes up the mountain for the last time, he uses the ashes from the edge of his fire to draw shapes onto his body, thus enabling him to take further the project of historiographical inscription that his ancestors set in motion through their rock art. Duiker opens up a space in which Azure can re-imagine his body in a creative way, thus resisting the discriminatory labels imposed on him.”

<sup>29</sup> The terms “Rainbow People” and “Rainbow Nation” were coined by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe a multi-racial, post-democratic South Africa.

The second perspective, that of an African essentialist discourse, seeks absolutes and denies creolisation and hybridity as constitutive of African experiences, thus excluding ‘coloured’ identities from those defined as ‘black’ and ‘African’ (Erasmus, 2001: 20). Erasmus asserts that neither of these dominant discourses can foster constructive articulations of progressive ‘coloured’ identities. ‘Coloured’ identities are instead negotiated through cultural creativity and creolised formations shaped by South Africa’s history of colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid (Erasmus, 2001: 13).

In this project, I investigate cultural and historical tributaries, seeking to trouble and unsettle that which is sometimes perceived as ‘fixed’. I gesture to imaginative methods of representation in still and moving images, and through videography and the viscosity, opacity/transparency and fluidity of paint. Recalling Appiah’s notions of the Medusa effect, I advocate an anti-essentialist reading of selfhood that evades reductive fixity.

Traversing notions of self and place as transitory and ‘imagined’ is a slippery slope, especially when engaging places of immense socio-political and cultural influence – such as Athlone, Bo-Kaap, the Two Rivers and District Six. Given the depth of post-colonial and post-apartheid trauma brought to bear on the land, body, mind and souls of the city and its inhabitants, momentary respite is alluded to in instances of collective catharsis in the contemporary context. The inner traumas and their outer workings remain; yet the quiet activism echoed through the works of Sauls, Davis, Searle and Amien critically commemorate and celebrate creative gestures, forming important foundations upon which to think about my practice of performing painting.

# III

## PERFORMING PAINTING

### **Possibilities of Cultural Hybridity: Renée Green's 'Sites of Genealogy'**

Renée Green is an artist, filmmaker and writer whose multi-disciplinary work includes films, essays and writings, installations, digital media, architecture, sound-related works, film series and events (MIT, 2022). Her work investigates circuits of relation and exchange over time (MIT, 2022). One such work is 'Sites of Genealogy', which was installed in an attic of P.S.1 for the Museum of Modern Art's 'Out of Site' exhibition in New York (1990–1991; Fig. 19).

Green's ability to pry open the gaps between public and private memory and systems of imagined and invented knowledge is of particular interest. The artist uses installation to probe the dynamics of space and time – and in an anti-essentialist logic, unpacks the notion of fixity to actively evade a single interpretation. The 'Sites of Genealogy' installation calls into question complex ideas of movement and mobility – physically, figuratively and conceptually. The physicality of the work is experiential, in that viewers actively encounter the spatial elements of Green's 'site', which includes objects carefully placed in relation to their environment. The stairwell is used to convey notions of cultural hybridity and seemingly codified knowledge systems that are subsequently unravelled (like threads) through the lyrical use of legible and ambiguous architectural interventions.

In the post-colonial theory of *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994: 5) discusses Green's architectural interventions in 'Sites of Genealogy' to allow his readers a more intimate understanding of the *liminal* space, which he defines as an interrogatory and interstitial space in which the act of representation and community is questioned. Bhabha

argues for thinking beyond initial narratives of subjectivities to look at the ‘in-between spaces’, where articulations of cultural differences bring about innovative sites of collaboration among subject positions (1994: 2). For Bhabha, the in-between space “carries the burden of culture”, and articulations of cultural hybridity make it possible to envisage anti-nationalist histories of a ‘people’ (1994: 56). Bhabha uses Green’s stairwell as a point of specific elaboration, describing it as “liminal space, in-between the designations of identity” and opening up “the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (1994: 4).

Fig. 19

Renée Green, *Sites of Genealogy: Loophole of Retreat*, 1990–1991. Installation view, P.S. 1 Museum, New York. Photo Credit: Tom Warren, © MoMA.



The notion of an imaginative place of cultural hybridity is elaborated by Bhabha as the “Third Space of enunciation”, in which the structure of meaning and reference is made through an ambivalent process (1994: 54). Bhabha proposes that it is only in understanding that “all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation” that claims to cultural ‘purity’ and inherent originality are flawed (1994: 55). The “Third Space of enunciation” is a theoretical mechanism through which a positionality of relation can be practiced to “emerge as the others of our selves” (Bhabha, 1994: 56).

This fluid stream of transition and movement is expressed in my embrace and celebration of the ‘accidents’ that occur during the art-making process, where spills, drips and splatters trace gestures and vestiges in time. The symbolically rich stairwell lends itself to my conception of the confluence of the Two Rivers as a symbolic place when thinking through past and future subject positions. Green’s evocation of the stairwell thus functions as a generative sense of movement that is porous and dynamic.

### ‘Creolised Objects’ in ‘Coloured Cabinets’: Material Culture in the Bricolage Works of Stephané E. Conradie

In thinking about notions of confluence, creolisation and the use of found objects in my practice, I consider Stephané E. Conradie’s works, in which the artist incorporates found objects in relation to photographic tableaux. Through her scholarship and creative outputs around material culture in lower middle- and working-class homes<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Particularly the homes of her own family in Namibia and South Africa (Conradie, 2017).

in South Africa, Conradie fleshes out a formation of ‘coloured’ identity referred to as *ordentlikheid*. In Afrikaans, *ordentlikheid* (respectability) describes how residents from Conradie’s field research in Cloetesville chose to present their identity in living rooms and, by extension, to the outside world (Conradie, 2017: 3).<sup>31</sup> Conradie (2017: 1) notes that the domestic environment and its resultant material cultures of collecting, arranging and displaying objects and/or trinkets in the home are often ignored in scholarly investigations into ‘colouredness’ as a positionality in post-apartheid South Africa. Wendy Knepper (2006) draws heavily on cultural bricolage to discuss how disparate, jostling fragments coexist and can remain independent or be combined:

As an activity, bricolage is a means of creatively and critically engaging with the world and renewing the possibilities for interpreting and constructing its meaning. Bricolage not only reconfigures objects and memories, but also notions of place and relationships to and in the world. Bricolage can be seen as the transformation of cultural disinheritance into a strategy of resistance, re-membling. (Knepper, 2006: 73)

This act of creative self-determination through “intensive critical and imaginative effort” is made visible through Conradie’s handling of found objects (Knepper, 2006: 73). Conradie’s methodology provides a language with which to investigate creolised identity formations linked to South Africa’s history of colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid and is foundational to my understanding of these approaches in my own work with found materials.

Through tangible interpolations with ‘creolised objects’, Conradie assumes the role of a contemporary *bricoleur*, piecing together ornate

<sup>31</sup> Nadia Kamies (2018) also writes extensively on this topic in her thesis ‘Shame and Respectability: A Narrative Inquiry into Cape Town’s ‘Coloured’ Families through Photographs, Cultural Practices and Oral Histories (c. 1950 to 2016).’

sculptural arrangements with ‘a bit of this and a bit of that’. Conradie refers to creolisation as ‘historical flux’ – a means by which ‘coloured’ identity formations and the ambivalence based on political and socio-cultural facets of these identities (which developed because of incomplete and simultaneous practices of erasure and reification under apartheid and colonialism) can be further problematised (Conradie, 2017: 3).



Fig. 20

Stephané E. Conradie, *communion*, 2019. Mixed media relief sculpture: resin, found objects, imitation copper leaf, enamel paint and spray paint. 50.5 x 69 x 10 cm. © Stephané E. Conradie.

Conradie's floral-like bricolages are accented with prints, paintings and film photography (Figs. 20–21) suggesting reconfigured 'sympathy bouquets' expressing a more 'morbid' sensibility.<sup>32</sup> Notions of historical disjuncture are echoed in the processes of fixing the disparate objects and trinkets together in 'condolence gestures' on behalf of the past. A combination of appending strategies comes to the fore in the examples presented above, as a range of materials are placed and then fixed to a surface, screwed, fastened and painted in mixed shades to bring about a heterogeneous cohesion.

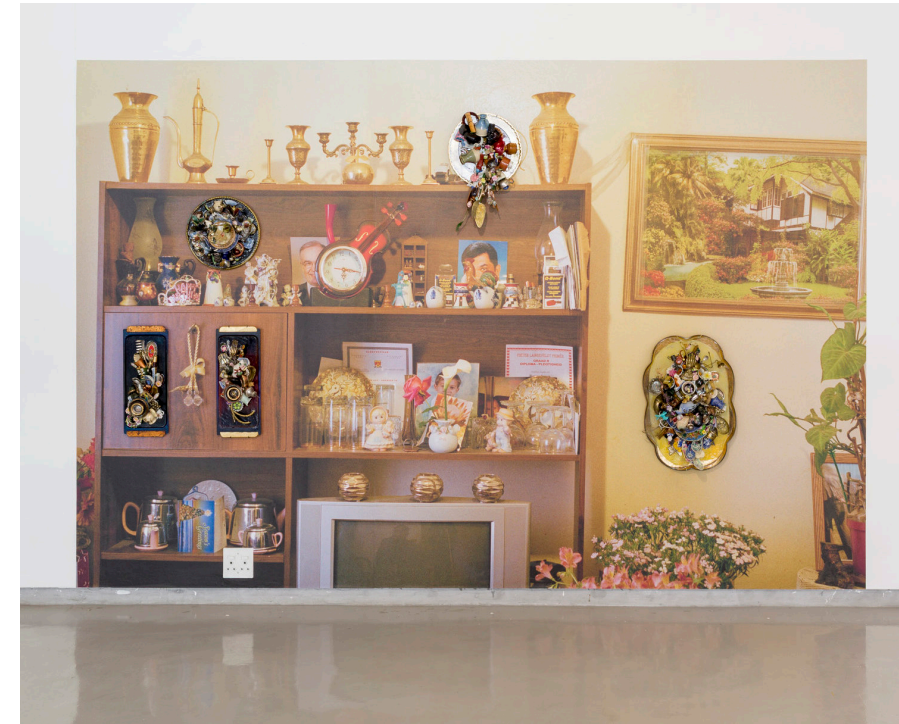
The focus of Conradie's research, presented in 'Coloured Cabinets: A Reflection on Material Culture as a Marker of Coloured Identity in Cloetesville, South Africa' (2018), engages the proposition of these material cultural clues by collecting, arranging and displaying what Erasmus calls "coloured cultural possessions" (2001: 20). Material cultures affect the process of creolisation and promote creative identity formations in Cloetesville (Conradie, 2018: 18). Conradie refers to the cherished collections in residents' homes as "cabinets of belonging" that occupy a hallowed place in the private domains she enters in her fieldwork (2017: 15). I do not posit my research methodology as sociological, ethnographical or anthropological as Conradie's praxis (Conradie, 2017: 2), but the conceptions of nostalgia present in the work resonate with my interest in the evocative power of remnants from the past in the present.

Conradie's 'Coloured Cabinets' may not be ascribed the same institutionalised credibility as other forms of archiving and collection, which claim 'archive' as a space for securing meaning through the imposition of structure, order, annotation, metadata and modes of categorisation according to the archival programme and priorities of



<sup>32</sup> An arrangement of 'sympathy flowers' is typically gifted to express condolences and convey support for those experiencing loss or grief (From You Flowers, 2022).

Fig. 21  
Stephané E. Conradie, *regional variations*, 2017. Mixed media sculpture: resin, found objects, imitation gold leaf, enamel paint and spray paint. 158 x 35 x 40 cm. © Stephané E. Conradie.



the respective institution. Conradie's practice elevates everyday objects from relative invisibility to create repositories that provide an important lens through which to examine value placement and meaning-making.

Through the act of bricolage, Conradie's objects acquire new value and meaning, related to but separate from their previous meanings. This echoes my interest in the process of excavating found objects and artefacts from different contexts in an attempt to reinterpret these objects in relation to my creative practice.

Fig. 22  
Stephané E Conradie, installation view: *Cape to Tehran* (curated by Sepideh Mehraban). Credit: Kleinjan Groenewald, courtesy of Gallery MOMO, © Stephané E. Conradie.

## Materiality and Methodology

My studio practice is an improvisational uncovering of the past in the present, and the studio is a space of experimentation to an uncertain end. Eriksen writes that “the engineer splits, the bricoleur unites” (2003: 230); I have sought to occupy the position of the bricoleur, restructuring and reshuffling found materials in new relationships. In this section I expand on how my use of materials such as spraypaint, doilies, hessian, cast and glazed ceramic objects and oil-based and water-soluble painting mediums collate in a fragmented resolution in this project. My use of video also relates to the disjointed nature of bricolage, as cutting footage to form a sequence reflects the use of fragmentary materials to suggest a particular narrative in my work.

The found objects<sup>33</sup> I use are imbued with significance before they are reconsidered as (part of) the artwork. For example, laminated hessian<sup>34</sup> dropsheets are commercially mass produced and are usually regarded as throwaway materials on building sites. These dropsheets are what remain after the completion of a painting or renovation process, visually significant elements in and of themselves in the context of the gallery. The used dropsheets are not manipulated in any way beyond being arranged, fastened to a wall or painting or stretched over a wooden frame.<sup>35</sup> Some of the antique furniture and picture frames in my project were inherited from family members or bought at flea markets and allude to my subjective notions of home. Doilies (crocheted woollen or cotton placemats, typically white, are quintessential in domestic spaces in certain communities to signal *ordentlikheid* (Conradie, 2017: 19)) function visually in my works primarily as stencils through which I apply layers of spray paint to question where paint does and does not spill or belong. Although

<sup>33</sup> Working with found and bought objects follows a long tradition, with one of the most recognisable examples of a recontextualised found and seemingly banal ‘readymade’ object as art being *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), in which Marcel Duchamp combined the utilitarian commercial objects of an inverted bicycle wheel and an ordinary kitchen stool (Waldman, 1992: 135–137). Duchamp coined the term ‘readymade’ for artworks made from found objects or for ‘non-art’ designated by the artist as a new artwork (Waldman, 1992: 135). My work is more closely aligned with assemblage, and my use of the term *bricolage* encompasses this mode of working.

<sup>34</sup> A strong natural fabric derived from jute – a plant with long, soft, shiny fibres that make strong, coarse threads (Jutebag.co.uk, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Framing a dropsheet shifts the context and meaning of the object. In *Conversation (Among Artisans)*, two dropsheets hung on the wall in the installation are framed by a kiasat wooden cover strip (one in portrait orientation and the other in landscape), a nod to painting-format conventions.

doilies have wide social and cultural readings, I use them as an ancestral acknowledgment of my grandmother, who was skilled at the art of crochet and embroidery. The application of aerosol paint links exterior and interior space in my work, as it is commonly associated with the Hip Hop tradition of graffiti and the appropriation of public spaces and surfaces (Haupt, 2004: 203). Similarly, the use of ceramic objects in the exhibition was influenced and facilitated by my mother, Merle Emmett’s, employment at a hand-made ceramics studio, where I learned the craft of slip casting and other ceramics processes.<sup>36</sup> The ceramic items are reminiscent of the ornaments in display cabinets in the homes of elderly family members throughout my childhood. The visual language of the cast and glazed items refers to Delftware.<sup>37</sup> These materials hold a personal resonance and relay broader associations of their original purpose.

Hessian comes to me via my father’s painting vocation, which I expand on later in this text. It is a by-product of jute, which has a long history of global imperialism and trade.<sup>38</sup> Jute, also known as ‘the golden fibre’, dates as far back as 16th century Mughal rule in India and entered the non-woven industry as one of the most cost-effective high-tensile vegetable fibres (Worldjute.com, n.d.). It is now second only to cotton in terms of production. The British East India Company was the first company to trade jute and exported approximately one hundred tons of it in 1793 (GoJute, n.d.). Jute is used in packaging materials and is woven into hessian (also called burlap) sacks, fishing baskets, shoes, paper, carpet backing cloth, carpet yarn, cordage, felt, twine, ropes, decorative fabrics and miscellaneous items for industrial use (Worldjute.com, n.d.). The inexpensive fibre was essential in the arms and construction industry and continues to be used in a range of goods and materials (Worldjute.com, n.d.; Jutebag.co.uk, n.d.).

<sup>36</sup> My mother has worked at Mervyn Gers Ceramics in Cape Town since 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Delftware is a Dutch, tin-glazed earthenware that emerged in the late 16th century, influenced by Chinese porcelain. It is characterised by blue and white painted and glazed items typically depicting floral motifs, natural landscapes and historical or biblical iconography. The major centre of its production was the Dutch city of Delft; it was also known as *Delft Blauw*, or “Delft Blue” in English (Coggins, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> For a comprehensive history of jute see worldjute.com; for more about jute’s imperial history see Cox (2013).



Fig. 23  
 Ibrahim Mahama, *Labour of Many*, 2019.  
 Hessian sack installation. Norval Founda-  
 tion, Cape Town. Dimensions variable. Photo  
 Credit: Dave Southwood.

Jute thus has many historical links to commerce and labour and takes on multiple formal iterations in my project. Artists like Ibrahim Mahama, Jannis Kounellis and Alberto Burri have used the material in various ways, including in installations (Fig. 23), using sacks as found objects (Fig. 25) and as an alternative painting substrate (Fig. 24).<sup>39</sup>



Fig. 24  
 Alberto Burri, *Nero bianco e sacco* (Black  
 White and Sack), 1954. Oil, fabric, burlap,  
 pumice and PVA on canvas. 125 × 107 cm.  
 Photo Credit: Paolo Vandasch and Romina  
 Bettega; © Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Col-  
 lezione Burri, Città di Castello/2015 Artists  
 Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome.

<sup>39</sup> Paintings are generally made on a surface that is prepared with a water- or solvent-based primer or that is left unprimed, depending on personal preference. Cotton, linen, wood and other smooth substrates have been favoured in the Western painting tradition for their fine thread/surface. In contemporary painting practice, what is painted with holds significance in conjunction with what is painted on.



In my work, the material is used in paintings, in the installation of used hessian dropsheets and re-worked and re-placed jute sacks and in the garment<sup>40</sup> worn in *Refrain* (Fig. 27). I also make use of juco fabric, a blend of jute and cotton that combines the fine thread of cotton with the strength of jute (GoJute, n.d.). I embrace the eclectic range of references of this material and its metaphorical links to a heterogeneous culture – such as the creolised Cape context in which African, Eastern and Western influences amalgamate.

My creative approach in *Working Remains* follows a long tradition of artists who have found, collected, purchased and repurposed existing objects and materials.<sup>41</sup> The bits and pieces are interconnected through conceptual, formal and material relations to form new artworks,

<sup>40</sup> The three-piece suit and top hat are derivative of various examples of Western men's fashion from popular media but are also a reference to the strategies deployed by Rastafarian traditional medicinal healers known as *sakmanne* who live and work in and around the city (Oliver, 2010). Also referred to as 'bush doctors' or 'herbalists' and recognised as the authentic carriers of indigenous Khoi/San medicinal knowledge, *sakmanne* are distinguished by their ash-blackened faces, self-patterned clothes made of rough, brown hessian material ('sackcloth') and their bare feet (Oliver, 2010: 24).

<sup>41</sup> Artistic precedents in this methodology include Robert Rauschenberg, David Hammons, Nari Ward, Rachel Harrison, Jimmie Durham and Kurt Schwitters.

Fig. 25  
Jannis Kounellis, Untitled, 1969. Burlap sacks, beans, chickpeas, coffee beans, green lentils, green peas, kidney beans, white beans and maize. Dimensions variable. © Jannis Kounellis.

Fig. 26 (p.61)  
Hessian sack purchased at a twine and packaging store in Woodstock, Cape Town. © Rory Emmett.





echoing my interests in cultural hybridity and cultural bricolage as expressed by Green and Conradie. I do not seek to destroy the cultural symbols I borrow from but to add nuance to conversations inherited from the past and to reimagine these oral and visual artefacts in the post-colonial Cape Town landscape. As a result of my site-specific research outside of the studio, the studio took on the form of a conceptual excavation site. I thus view the art-making process as a form of digging, sometimes literally (as with the performance works) but also metaphorically, working and reworking detritus to produce something new from the salvaged. By excavating remnants that have been lost to time and considering them anew, I grapple with the complexity of coming to terms with objects that are traces of the past through the lens of the contemporary moment.

Fig. 27 (p.62)  
Three-piece hessian suit and hat. 2022.  
Dimensions variable. Designed and tailored  
in collaboration with Sophia Lavigre. Photo  
credit: Andrew Juries.

## REFRAIN

*Refrain* (Fig. 28) is a single-channel split-screen video projection with sound. *Refrain* is set on the bank where the Liesbeeck and Black rivers meet as tributaries of the Salt River, one of greater Cape Town's major catchments (River Health Programme, 2005: 28). The connection to the Two Rivers site is a throughline in both Searle's videos and my own. The site marks the approximate location of the first colonial battle between the indigenous Goringhaiqua and a group of Portuguese soldiers who attempted to raid and ransack the community in 1510 – remembered as the 'Battle of Goringhaiqua' or 'Battle of Salt River' in *The Lie of 1652* (Mellet, 2020: 101). The landscape is thus imbued with this violence.

In *Wheatfields and Windmills* (2014), Jim Hislop writes that this area was originally used as seasonal grazing land by indigenous Khoe herders and was later appropriated for some of the first European farms in the country. The first land grants were issued to a handful of Dutch East India Company employees, who were released from service and granted farmland along the Liesbeeck River as "free burghers" (Hislop, 2014: 6).

The picturesque setting, with its idyllic view of Devil's Peak and Table Mountain, is fraught with colonial and imperial interferences that have taken on various iterations up to the present moment. The waning knowledge of the immense spiritual significance of the Liesbeeck and Black rivers' confluence for indigenous peoples and their descendants is exacerbated by these contested developments (Hislop, 2014; Kretzmann, 2019). The heritage of the confluence site in the Two Rivers Urban Park predates Dutch agricultural settlement at the Cape and is considered "ground zero for the first displacement of indigenous people" (Kretzmann, 2019).

Fig. 28 (p.65–71)

*Refrain* (stills), 2022. Single-channel split-screen video, sound. Dimensions variable, 7 minutes. © Rory Emmett, video credit: Ashley Walters.



A significant part of this area, known as the River Club, was acquired in 2020 by private developers who knew of the site’s historical and cultural significance. The floodplain was also zoned as open space with conservation status (Kretzmann 2019; Attwell & Associates, 2017), but this did not stop the commencement of development.<sup>42</sup>

*Refrain* suggests not doing something – such as discontinuing my performances (as Colourman). The polysemous term also suggests the inactivity of the cranes that stand stationary in the background, marking a recent court ruling that disrupted the Two Rivers development project, of which American tech giant Amazon is an anchor tenant, halting construction on the land (Broughton, 2022). The case brought to light issues around the lack of meaningful engagement with all involved parties and an inadequate consideration of the site’s heritage (Broughton, 2022). At the time of this text’s completion, development of the site had resumed: “after a brief lull, the developers started building again, claiming that if they did not, they would lose millions” (Evans, 2022).

Through the symbolic act of burying memorabilia from previous performances and various cultural symbols in a particular place, I recall personal, artistic, cultural and historical narratives. The buried items were clothing (overall pants and work boots donated from my father, a black suit jacket and a high-visibility vest) used and worn in performances as *The Cape Colourman* avatar (2014–2022) and objects with intrinsic resonance, such as a doily and Delft plate (discussed earlier), a hand-made colour palette, underwear painted in the same pattern as *The Cape Colourman*’s skin, and wheat plants.<sup>43</sup> These objects were covered by a hessian sack and buried in a shallow grave, suggesting possibilities for excavation and reinterpretation in the

<sup>42</sup> The objective of conservation and open space zones is to conserve natural, remote and environmentally unspoilt areas. Such areas may or may not be proclaimed nature areas, but the range of permitted uses in such zones is limited (Claassen, 2004: 76).

<sup>43</sup> Alluding to the first crop planted by settlers in the Cape (Hislop, 2014).



future. The objects were removed after the performance and placed in the cabinet's drawers as part of the installation discussed next.

Assembling the objects in a specific place imbued the burial performance with several layers of meaning. I remember the objects' past histories and utilities while evoking their myriad associations for the viewer, allowing for new meanings to arise. The combination of dissimilar fragments in the hole proposes a dislocation in time and place, what Diane Waldman (1992: 11) describes as a "special bittersweet quality based in sentiment and nostalgia". Revealing what has been concealed and bringing to the fore what has been overlooked suggests a state of transition – as each object is revealed from the hessian sack, so too are the histories and associations they evoke.

In making a three-piece suit out of hessian, I draw on sartorial<sup>44</sup> forms of self-fashioning, making my body a site of inscription and meaning. The video of this event is a symbolic gesture and performative ceremony for someone or something that has transitioned. I consider the act of holding a place *in* mind while performing an imaginative gesture.

One meaning of the title, *Refrain*, is as a technical term for the repetition of a phrase of music. In this case, my arrangement of different renditions of the hymn 'Only Remembered' is rendered by my voice. *Refrain* was initially inspired by the lyrics of this hymn, which I first encountered during a burial ceremony at a funeral service. The song, written by Horatius Bonar of Edinburgh in 1870, is now widely used in remembrance of those who fell in the 'Great War' (Quigg, 2008). The vocal medley is an amalgamation of various harmonies stacked to create a spectral, choral effect. Starting as a faint humming

<sup>44</sup> For further research in the field see De Greef (2021) and Miller (2009).

of the refrain "only remembered...", the singing builds to a triumphant crescendo of overlaid harmonies and is layered over the visuals and natural sounds of the location. By layering my own vocal harmonies to sound like a choir, as if singing at my own emblematic funeral service, I pay homage to the ideological invention of *The Cape Colourman* character – my alter ego laid to rest. Appropriating a Western, Christian hymn as the soundtrack to the piece suggests "multiple belongings" (Wicomb, 2018: 105), proposing a counter-hegemonic stance to tradition, identity and culture.

*Working Remains* asks questions about what it means to 'make' work, what kind of work is considered more/less valuable, how that value is determined and perceived, and by whom. Thus, *Working Remains* alludes to the notion that the 'work' is never done, yet we are wholly defined by it, and in some cases are never afforded the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of our labour while alive.

*Refrain* is a triptych that acts as a perennial space, leaving the three frames as open-ended places of transition. To further emphasise this perpetual action, splitting the video across three parts suggests fracture and a collapse of linear time. To re-write and re-claim a sense of agency (even if momentarily), I engage the site through various historical narratives around the Two Rivers and through a re-imagination of self and place.



## CONVERSATION (AMONG ARTISANS)

*Conversation (Among Artisans)* is an installation that occupies an entire wall of the exhibition space (Fig. 34). Re-using found and alternative processes and materials helps make and reveal meaning through various forms of 'work'. Barbara Bolt writes eloquently about the 'work' of art as labour and craft that contributes to the performativity of imaging. Bolt suggests that our focus on artworks rather than on practice has produced a gap in our understanding of the work of art as process (Bolt, 2004: 45).

I tease this idea out by displaying the hessian dropsheets used by my father, Milton Emmett, in his work as a trade/commercial painter as presentable artworks. I bought these dropsheets new from paint supply stores and gave them to my father and his team to use on their residential and commercial sites in Cape Town. They carry the traces of my father's labour and the labour of his colleagues, rich with time made visible through the marks that accumulate as the residue of the painting *work* remains on the surface. The dropsheets unify the installation, bringing into conversation a range of artisanal crafts, including the woodwork, tailoring, painting and building trades. I am interested in how paint generates different meanings when applied to different surfaces, the residue of different actions as they pertain to labour, time and craft. The dropsheets are imbued with their own history and carry a particular mark from protecting surfaces from paint splats and spills (Fig. 29).

Figs. 29-30 (p.73)

*Conversation (Among Artisans)* (detail), 2022. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.





The cabinet references the formal stylistic qualities of an antique Dutch colonial cabinet in the William Fehr Collection, on display at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town (Fig. 33). I applied a mixture of salt, vinegar and hydrogen peroxide to the cabinet's bronze-plated hinges, accelerating oxidation and rusting the shiny brass hinges in minutes. I used a mixture of water and potassium permanganate crystals to tarnish the newer wooden frames and the fresh wood used in the cabinet's joining. To make the cabinet in which the delicate cast stones are displayed, I collected old pallets from waste depots and reassembled them, altering their original function. The remnants from the *Refrain* performance were excavated from the performance site and placed in the bottom drawers of the cabinet. The hessian suit was folded and placed neatly into the top two drawers (Fig. 30).

Figs. 31-32 (p.74)

*Conversation (Among Artisans)* (detail), 2022. Cabinet made from recycled pallets, found wood, nails, glass, glazed ceramics, and brass. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.



Fig. 33

Dutch colonial cabinet with Delftware, on display in the William Fehr Collection at the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town. © Rory Emmett.



Figs. 34

*Conversation (Among Artisans)*, 2022. Used laminated hessian dropsheets, house paint, recycled pallets, found wood, wooden hanger, pine, potassium permanganate, glass, glazed ceramics, found carpet offcut, oil bar, permanent marker, spray paint, nails, hessian. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.

The Strand Street stone quarry has significant links to the history of slavery and indentured labour at the Cape, with stone masonry and hard labour by both indigenous and immigrant populations forming the large worker and artisan class of residents of De Waterkant and Bo-Kaap (O'Donoghue & Büttgens, 2010). Stone from the quarry was used to build large Cape buildings such as the Castle of Good Hope, with slaves forced to work in the quarries to extract stone until the abolition of slavery in 1838.<sup>45</sup> I made moulds from pieces of slate collected at the Strand Street quarry site in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town (Fig. 35) to cast multiple ceramic stones that suggest a delicate and decorative rubble (Fig. 31–32). Where Amien's cast installation transmutes wood to concrete as a symbolic image of a reimagined home's flooring, the material transformation in my process is from the solidity of stone to fragile, hollow ceramics. Casting ceramic stones embraces paradoxes around Cape Town's cultural, architectural and topographic fabric.



<sup>45</sup> The British Empire abolished slavery and officially emancipated slaves on 1 December 1834, but slaves in the Cape Colony were only freed in 1838 after serving an apprenticeship with their slave masters. Many of these slaves came as indentured labourers from Indonesia and India; their descendants became skilled artisans and craftsmen who contributed to the evolution of the Cape's architectural landscape (Sauls, 2004: 23; South African History Online, 2022).

Fig. 35

Stones collected from the Strand Street quarry, sorted and prepared for mould-making. © Rory Emmett.

By remarking these specific stones materially and displaying them behind glass, I refer to this historical labour force and the intrinsic role that these master craftspeople played in realising Cape Town's built environment. I note the vulnerability of the cast stones as decorative ornaments in contrast to the stability of their original reference. Similarly, their otherwise pristine display behind glass suggests 'look but do not touch' but is disrupted by a single broken glass pane that alludes to an ominous rupture in the sanctification of these re-placed artefacts.

On a morning run, my eye was caught by a tool board in two parts on a neighbour's scrap heap of things being cleared during a renovation project. Outlines of the tools were marked on the board for organisation purposes. I pieced the two found surfaces together, one facing back to front, with the accumulated dirt and stains left as they were. I eventually made a few marks on the surface in oilbar and spray paint to bring the object into further conversation with the other elements in the exhibition space.

Working with the sensibilities of bricolage, my practice is not limited to oil painting specifically. I use aerosol paint, which comes in ready mixed colours in a can, in conjunction with conventional oil colours from tubes. The spray-paint layers are sometimes tinted with oil paint washes as I apply various patterns and marks onto the surface(s). Similarly, the cobalt glaze used in the Delft rubble's motif is splattered and sprayed onto the objects before firing. In borrowing a wide range of mark-making tools and approaches, I consider the multiple possibilities of painting as a verb and not merely as an artistic tradition.

I present these materials as remnants of what Appiah (2018: 152) refers to as “human capital”, defined in economic terms as the knowledge, abilities and physical attributes that affect the value of one’s labour. I attempt to pay homage to my father’s work while questioning more general notions of economic and social value, shifting the status of the dropsheet from something that ‘protects’ the floor from paint to being an item of aesthetic consideration. This level of visual primacy and focus is also applicable to the high level of acuity with which the suit, cabinet and cast objects are fashioned, explicating notions of crafting and creative acts of labour that manifest visually in the work.

## EXTENDED PRACTICAL WORK

In the mixed media installation *Fantastical Disappearing Act* (Fig. 37), a figure (reminiscent of Sauls' and Davis' *klopse* figures) is simultaneously revealed and concealed by the application of aerosol paint over a netted stencil, oscillating between opacity and transparency (Fig. 36). Cape Town's City Hall is rendered in the background with an oil bar/oil stick, which repelled the water-based liquid paints used to splatter the surface in later layers. Vestiges of a trailed action are visible as traces of paint splatter on a hessian 'backdrop', forming a banner suspended by a found metal pole and found metal coat hooks. I bought a piece of screen-printed hessian fabric that had a striped zebra pattern, which I used as a dropsheet while making other paintings.



Fig. 36

*Fantastical Disappearing Act* (detail), 2022.  
Photo credit: Paris Brummer.

Fig. 37 (p.83)

*Fantastical Disappearing Act*, 2022. Mixed media installation: oil, spray paint, oil bar, ink, acrylic, hessian, screen-printed hessian, found pole and brass hooks. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.



The title of the work recalls an 1886 *Cape Times* article describing the Carnival scene at the Cape: “frivolous groups of Coloured people [...] dressed most fantastically, carrying guys,<sup>46</sup> and headed by blowers of wind and players of string instruments” (in Davids, 2013: 87). The reference in the title to a magic trick alludes to statements by various stakeholders of the Cape Town Minstrel Carnival who reject racist implications of blackface and see the carnival as momentary respite, expressed as “fundamentally about escape”<sup>47</sup> (Davids (2013: 89).

<sup>46</sup> The term ‘guy’ could refer to a figure representing Guy Fawkes that is burnt on a bonfire on Guy Fawkes Night or to the verb meaning “to make fun of” (Oxford Languages, 2022).

<sup>47</sup> Davids (2013: 89) quotes one of the troupe leaders as saying, “All the heartache and pain you went through in the year is now behind you. When it came at the New Year, everyone partied. People painted their faces and went crazy.” Another participant said, “The tradition of the *klopse* comes from the time of the slaves. The slaves were only let out once a year and if you only get out once a year, you’ll go crazy. People jumped, danced and could do what they wanted” (in Davids, 2013: 89).

*Conveyance (of Conjugal Cargo)* is a mixed media installation of elements that form colour relationships and material connections. Notions of history and labour converge starkly in the work’s materiality. The painting conjures ancestral links to processes of intercontinental slavery, depicting portraits of anonymous indentured labourers brought to the Cape to serve as artisanal craftspeople. The portraits were sourced from film stills and reworked with a mixture of oil paint and cretstone. This combination of materials suggests a meeting of two polarising surface-coating applications: the fine art practice of oil painting and the plasterer’s technique of skimming.<sup>48</sup> The found materials are reconstructed to suggest a wrecked landscape, where the stencilled silhouette of a doily suggests a setting sun, the presence of the brown hessian dropsheet reads as a potential ‘ground’ and the fraying yellow dropsheet a disjointed horizon.

<sup>48</sup> Skimming is a construction term and can denote a mode of reading, passing over a surface or removing a substance from the surface of a liquid (Oxford Languages, 2022).

Fig. 38

*Conveyance (of Conjugal Cargo)* (detail), 2022. Photo credit: Andrew Juries.



The painting substrates include a reconfigured DHL shipping crate, laminated hessian, canvas and concrete. To render a ghostly colonial vessel, water-soluble graphite was used to make a fluid impression of 'De Goede Hoop', one of the three ships in Jan Van Riebeeck's 1652 entourage (South African History Online, 2012). The scene recalls the erasure implicit in migration narratives and how the Cape Dutch colonial voyage has been idealised in the collective imagination through outdated school curricula that maintain historical biases. The various elements are installed in relation to one another to appear precarious and transitory.

Fig. 39 (p.87)

*Conveyance (of Conjugal Cargo)*, 2022.  
Laminated hessian, water-soluble graphite, cardboard, MDF board, cretstone, concrete, silicone, oil, acrylic, house paint and spray paint. 203 x 232 cm.  
Photo Credit: Andrew Juries.





*Incongruous Stage* (Fig. 40) depicts a horse and rider. The horse is vibrantly coloured and patterned, while the rider appears to be gradually being covered in yellow. The title is polysemous, suggesting a platform, theatre or arena where a play or act is 'staged'. *Incongruous Stage* suggests a transitional juncture or point in time. The root-like appendages aboveground hint at the formation of organic connections. The work references found sources and fragments that function as stencils (such as doilies, stones and the offcuts of tree branches) and form silhouettes in combination with more overtly painted elements. The netted barrier at the top of the composition is often seen on construction sites, and doilies are stencilled to suggest the texture of bricks on a walled facade – another kind of barrier. The figurative elements in the composition were sourced from a found illustrated children's dictionary under the term "incongruous", defined in *The Waverly Children's Dictionary* (Wheeler, 1930) as "not agreeing or harmonising; unsuitable." In the illustrated definition, the umbrella is marked as being incongruous with the attire of the figure on the horse, who appears to be wearing knight's armour. Instead of providing shelter, the umbrella appears to leak from within, spilling a mysterious yellow fluid onto the figure. The drama of the scene is heightened by the constructed landscape of elements forming present/absent and receding/protruding spatial dynamics.

Equestrian display considers the horse's body as a carrier of historical power relations. In "Race" Horses: Horses and Social Dynamics in Post-Apartheid Southern Africa', Sandra Swart (2004: 14) notes the political history of horses and their implication in conflicts between indigenous peoples and European settlers at the Cape Colony, referring to the animal as a "symbol of power and site of struggle". Referencing a horse and rider in *Refrain* reflects these affected displays of class and power.

Fig. 40 (p.88)

*Incongruous Stage*, 2022. Oil paint, spray paint, acrylic PVA and hessian on canvas. 130 x 150 cm. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.

The duality of pride and shame is implied in the symbolism, echoing Erasmus' warning of the dangers associated with forms of ethno-nationalism that "ride the wave of fashionable indigeneity, claiming authenticity based on historical links to the Khoi-San" (2001: 20). I envisage the symbolic and paradoxical act of riding on horseback as processing notions of identity formation in relation to historical sites and events and their myths of origin.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> I learned how to ride a horse (named Karieba) for *Refrain*. I had lessons at Oude Molen Stables, located in the vicinity of the early displacement of indigenous peoples by Dutch 'free burgher' settlers (Hislop, 2014: 6). Serendipitously, the stables were close to the location where the video was eventually filmed.

My research led me to the figure of the Two Rivers' confluence. The perpetual flow of knowledge in various forms becomes a metaphor for how notions of site and self are formed – not fixed – in *Working Remains*.

*Confluence* (Fig. 41) is an amalgamation of visual references, textures and layers of paint that form a dense surface evoking the meeting of the Two Rivers in a stylised body of water, woven together with a visible seam that mediates the two panels.

Used rags – collected from the studio over time – form a fractured landscape in the bottom of the composition. The background is a collage of found images from books, newspapers, online references and drawings accumulated over time. These reference diverse historical scenes, from mining the Big Hole in Kimberly, the formation of the African National Congress, to a drawing of a rainbow<sup>50</sup> done in the national Covid-19 hard lockdown of 2020. The process of covering and revealing is explored in this work by revealing/concealing elements behind washes of paint. The detritus in the panels reflect the litter in and around the rivers. The painting uses principles of bricolage, juxtaposing found fragments to suggest an imagined landscape. I consider this work a record of 'moments', bringing them into conversation with one another – some more disparate than others. The fluorescent rainbow appears on the 'horizon', a reminder of ideals often inconsistent with lived realities. However, what remains of the *Confluence* site – as the lyrics of the lament sung in *Refrain* suggest – are those "lines on the land", the impressions left behind when we are "only remembered for what we have done".



Fig. 41

*Confluence*, 2022. Mixed media on board.  
130 x 268 cm. Photo credit: Andrew Juries.

The series of 'performance sketches' titled *Sweeping, Eating and Burying* (Fig. 42) is a painted triptych on juco, which is grainier than canvas but smoother than hessian. The series captures the performative through the painted, rendering stills of performative gestures in oils, spray paint, liquid acrylic paints and a mixture of salt, vinegar and hydrogen peroxide.<sup>51</sup>

Water from the Black River and the Table Bay beachfront was used to dilute water-soluble graphite to produce images that are performative in subject and execution and are not static or bound to a didactic narrative, favouring the non-prescriptive view of place and personhood and echoing the anti-essentialist theme of my project. Having performed for the camera, I selected film stills from the documentation of the activity as source material for the paintings.

<sup>50</sup> Families and individuals made rainbow pictures and put them in their windows for others to see on their daily walks during the 2020 lockdown. This was a positive gesture dubbed the 'Chase the Rainbow' trend, intended to promote creativity through crafts and spread a sense of hope and solidarity (BBC, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> This solution was used to rust the hinges and screws in *Conversation (Among Artisans)*, but the reddish-brown liquid was also used as a pigment in the paintings.



Fig. 42

*Sweeping, Eating and Burying*, 2022. Acrylic gesso, oil, spray paint, ink, water-soluble graphite, potassium permanganate, salt, vinegar, hydrogen peroxide solution and acrylic paint on juco. 132 x 516 cm. Photo/video credits: Ashley Walters, Nicole Emmett, Paris Brummer and Andrew Juries.



The multimedia installation *Epitaph Razing* (Fig. 43) comprises photographic documentation of the section of ground in front of the Michaelis Building (UCT Hiddingh Campus), where I buried a *Cape Colourman* figurine in a site-specific performance (Fig. 44).

The image exists in a found frame that reads as a painting above a mantelpiece. The frame was purchased at a flea market, and the image and glass fit its exact dimensions – seamlessly merging old and new technologies. A restored antique half-moon table that belonged to my grandmother is set against the wall below the framed photograph. A doily purchased at a flea market is on the table and a glazed ceramic vessel (in the same colours as the figurine) is on the doily. A sympathy floral arrangement (a nod to Conradie’s bricolages) extends condolences to the colourful action figure. The *Colourman* pattern is transferred to the veneer of the ceramic object, which has casts of the stones from the cabinet installation incorporated into its surface, suggesting that the character’s skin has adopted new forms in different iterations.



Fig. 43 (p.96)

*Epitaph Razing* (installation view), 2022. Multimedia installation comprised of a second-hand frame, glass, a giclee print on watercolour paper, a glazed ceramic vessel, a restored half-moon wooden table, a cotton doily and a sympathy bouquet. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.

Fig. 44

*Epitaph Razing*, 2022. Site-specific performance, Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT), Cape Town. © Rory Emmett.

Over-simplified notions of apolitical rainbowism risk contributing to reductive forms of and cultural representation within the collective consciousness, such as the dance-music-and-dress minstrelsy and other forms of trivialised typecasting. (Erasmus, 2001: 20)

*Un(becoming)* consists of 13 frames, 12 of which bear the residue of face paint from wiping my face after the last (and final) time I wore the *Cape Colourman* pattern on my skin. The calico cloth<sup>52</sup> used in the video hangs from a single nail in the exhibition space (Fig. 46). As in *Epitaph Razing*, a video is played on a loop on a small screen and is framed with a juco backing, in the same dimensions as the face wipes' frames, suggesting a moving painting in a frame (Fig. 59). The frames are aged with the potassium permanganate solution – in the same process as the tarnishing of the new wood in the *Conversation (Among Artisans)* cabinet.

The video shows me wiping my face clean from the disguise with a thin piece of material, rendering a kind of portrait (Fig. 45). The 'mask' recalls examples of face-painting discussed earlier, highlighting assumed pejorative assumptions of homogenised 'coloured' group culture, casting 'coloured' experience as one of "easily summoned characters" (Davids, 2013: 94) and "trivialised typecasting" (Erasmus, 2001: 20). I emerge from a dark background to face stark frontal lighting. The colourfully saturated skin is disarming, yet my demeanour is sombre. There is no sound, symbolising the notion of being 'muted', as in Sauls' work, and alluding to the voicelessness of the character and my own interpolation of choral lament in the *Refrain* video. I never spoke while performing as the character, and nor did the *Cape Colourman* ever sing.



<sup>52</sup> Cotton duct canvas proved too thick to function as a face cloth.

Fig. 45

*(Un)becoming*, 2022. Site-specific performance, Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT), Cape Town (video still). Video credit: Jean-Claude Nsabimana, © Rory Emmett.

Fig. 46 (p.99)

*(Un)becoming/Rag*, 2022. Calico fabric, nail, face paint. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.



Figs. 47-49

*(Un)becoming/Remnant #1-3* (left to right), 2022. Used face wipes, face paint, upholstery tacks, juco, board and wooden frame. 28 x 38 cm. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.



Figs. 50-52

*(Un)becoming/Remnant #4-6*, 2022. Used face wipes, face paint, upholstery tacks, juco, board and wooden frame. 28 x 38 cm. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.



Figs. 53-55

*(Un)becoming/Remnant #7-9* (left to right), 2022. Used face wipes, face paint, upholstery tacks, juco, board and wooden frame. 28 x 38 cm. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.



Figs. 56-58

*(Un)becoming/Remnant #10-12*, 2022. Used face wipes, face paint, upholstery tacks, juco, board and wooden frame. 28 x 38 cm. Photo credit: Paris Brummer.





Fig. 59 (p.102)

*Un(becoming)*, 2022. Single-channel video, screen, juco, board, wooden frame. Dimensions variable, 2:27 mins. © Rory Emmett.

I began the above discussion of my work within the site-specific context of the anchoring video piece in this body of work, *Refrain*. By activating my body in time and space, as painter and performer, I actively inscribed various surfaces, including my own skin, with visual data to become alternative substrates for meaning. Through the creative act of performing in the landscape and making marks from that which I excavate from sites, I attempt to investigate where performance and painting sit in relation to body, artwork and artefact. I propose symbolic representations of beginnings and endings, deaths and rebirths, exploring the potential of making meaning through labour. As a central work in this pursuit, *Refrain* calls to mind the confluence of the Liesbeeck and Black rivers as a symbolic holder for past-present and ongoing contestations around land, and how authentic subjectivities are articulated in relation to place.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, his odyssey asks us to imagine what he seems to have yearned for: a world free of racial fixations.<sup>53</sup> It asks if we could ever create a world where colour is merely a fact, not a feature and not a fate. (Appiah, 2018; 126)

*Working Remains* argues that ‘identities’, and in particular ‘coloured identities’, are subjectively formed to give meaning to the experience of living with the repercussions of failed nationalist projects. *Working Remains* does not seek to provide a definitive account of the explored topics, and I am aware that my creative research is directly linked to my personal sense of self, place and practice. I have located this study within a very specific context and am excited by the possibilities to expand the research terrain beyond the Cape Town landscape and beyond my personal context and biographical narratives to broader geopolitical issues.

The creative methodologies of excavation and bricolage have proven useful frameworks for my creative practice in this research project. I have grappled with my lived experiences and with historical trauma through symbolic gestures to process inherited and imagined narratives. Through the works I endeavour to reimagine boundaries of physical and ideological places in relation to ‘self’, a metaphorical bricolage of imposed terms and conditions of my being in the world.

Creative precedents and contemporaries in this research field are numerous, with the work of many established and emerging creative practitioners correlating meaningfully with my research interests. I have sought to propose an alternative way of seeing ‘self’ and ‘place’ in the contemporary South African context. I began my project by considering how symbolic forms of representation can speak to an anti-essentialist conception of personhood(s). This state of being in flux, a perpetual state of becoming, eventually manifested in various material processes through the bricollaging of seemingly incongruous elements, while performative, time-based media proposed a deeper consideration of what remains in the wake of the past. By performing, painting,

<sup>53</sup> Appiah refers to Anton Wilhelm Amo, a German philosopher of African descent who Appiah notes was discriminated against as being ‘*the African*’ (Appiah, 2018; 126). I view in the context of my research as a performative painter in *The Colourman Chronicles*, and beyond.

cutting, casting, stencilling, scraping, sanding, sewing, burying and binding found materials, I have attempted to rethink associations with the objects that surround me daily as a means to grapple with the complexities of identity formation.

I have suggested an anti-essentialist approach to engaging with notions of ‘race’ and its related nomenclature, particularly within the post-colonial and post-apartheid South African context, to come to terms with the past and to make productive strides forward in my creative practice and daily lived experience. I have referred to the research of numerous scholars to reconceptualise ‘identity’, ‘race’ and particularly ‘colouredness’ in a local context. I have indicated the complexity (if not impossibility) of trying to locate the entirety of the ‘coloured’ experience within the limited length of this document. These ideas have been connected to the creative practice of artists like Zyma Amien, Berni Searle, Roderick Sauls, Lionel Davis, Stephané E. Conradie and Renée Green.

By viewing my creative practice through the lens of excavation and cultural bricolage, I acknowledge the disjunction and fragmentation of the materials used and their potential to form a unified whole when placed in relation to each other. I have amalgamated these various components to create an immersive space in which to present my research as a prompt to reconsider the established relationships and meanings of the materials. This visual strategy speaks to my pursuit of an anti-essentialist approach to acknowledge the multitude of experiences and ideas in my creative enquiry.

I have investigated time as the vehicle through which experience is filtered, knowledge is gained and, in some cases, in which information is concealed. I intentionally use the traces or remains of painting and performance to engage a dialogue between past, present and future. This is seen in my usage of doilies, ceramic casts, spraypaint and the hessian suit worn in *Refrain* that reappears in the cabinet drawers. Symbolically excavating and burying materials played a significant role in the studio-based work and in performances beyond the studio. Through these overlapping actions, I link disparate moments in time to create an interwoven and self-reflexive practice.

*Working Remains* suggests workable methodological and imaginative propositions, grounded in this text via theory and practice. I have proposed the practical and conceptual frameworks of excavation and bricolage to work with found materials in various disjointed and fragmented ways. Through the creative practices and scholarship referenced in this dissertation, my practice has evolved meaningfully, and I have attained a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between painting, performance and bricolage. My practice and understanding of the relevant issues have evolved considerably, and I imagine that subsequent investigations will yield similar results as my research continues with more complexity and scholarly rigour. Accordingly, I have set myself the task of placing this body of work in an archive that other researchers can analyse and build on through further creative study.

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## ADDENDUM I

### *Only Remembered*

Fading away like the stars in the morning,  
Losing their light in the glorious sun.  
Thus would we pass from the earth and its toiling,  
Only remembered for what we have done.

Refrain:

Only remembered, only remembered,  
Only remembered for what we have done;  
Thus would we pass from the earth and its toiling,  
Only remembered for what we have done.

Only the truth that in life we have spoken,  
Only the seeds that in life we have sown.  
These shall pass onward when we are forgotten,  
Only remembered for what we have done.

[Refrain]

Horses and men, plowshares and traces,  
Lines on the land and the paths of the sun.  
Season by season we mark nature's graces.  
Only remembered for what we have done.

[Refrain]

Who'll sing the anthems and who'll tell the story?  
Will the line hold, will it scatter and run?  
Shall we at last be united in glory?  
Only remembered for what we have done?

[Refrain]

## ADDENDUM II

### *“A Brief History”*

“It began when I became a colourman<sup>54</sup> ...”

<sup>54</sup> colourman  
in British English  
or US colorman (ˈkɒləmən) plural -men  
a person who deals in paints [Collins English  
Dictionary, 2022].

The character’s name was changed from  
‘Colourman’ to ‘Cape Colourman’ to specify  
context.

Screenshot from Tumblr web page  
(2014-2019) © Rory Emmett.



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*"A Brief History"*  
2015  
Mixed Media Installation  
Featured in "But he doesn't have anything on!" group exhibition @ Commune.1 Gallery in Cape town.  
All Images by Commune.1.



Rory Emmett in collaboration with Milton Emmett. *Rhine Castle*. 2017. Site-specific performance: AVA Gallery, Cape Town. Photo Credit: Kirsten Mackrill and Ridar Cerff. © Rory Emmett.



Rory Emmett as 'The Cape Colourman'  
in collaboration with Garth Erasmus.  
*Cutting in (White Wash)*. 2019. Site-specific  
performance: SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch.  
Photo Credit: SMAC. © Rory Emmett.

Rory Emmett as 'The Cape Colourman'. *Colourman Study; Brick Burial*, 2014. Site-specific performance: Thornton, Cape Town. Photo Credit: Liam Emmett. © Rory Emmett.



Rory Emmett as 'The Cape Colourman'. *Colourman Plays the Hues*, 2017. Site-specific performance between St George's Cathedral and the Association for Visual Arts (AVA), Church Street, Cape Town. Photo Credit: Lauren Goldschmidt. © Rory Emmett.



Rory Emmett as 'The Cape Colourman'.  
*Concerning Alchemy*, 2017. Site-specific performance: Queen Victoria Street, *Die Bankie Gedagte* (*The Bench of Thoughts*) public sculpture by Roderick Sauls, Cape Town. Photo Credit: Ashley Walters. © Rory Emmett.





Rory Emmett as 'The Cape Colourman'. *Colourman (Study)*, 2014. Site-specific photoshoot: Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT), Cape Town. Photo Credit: Lauren Goldschmidt, Sitaara Stodel and Ray du Toit. © Rory Emmett.

Portrait in front of *'Incongruous Stage'* and *'Confluence'*, 2022. Second Year MFA Studio, Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT), Cape Town. Photo Credit: Kamil Hassim.



