University of Cape Town

Re-Forming the Monstrous

Gabriele Jacobs

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University of Cape Town

Re-Forming the Monstrous

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Art.

Michaelis School of Fine Art
Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2022

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Supervisors: Jane Alexander and Jean Brundrit

DECLARATION

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

Signature:

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CONTENTS:

Abstract 7

Introduction 10

Part 1: Anthropocene Icarus 14
    Icarus 27

Part 2: No Heroes 32
    A brief word on Monsters 43

Part 3: In the Mythic Sanctuary 46
    Fieldwork 54
    Denizens of the Sanctuary 59
    Care 80

Part 4: Materiality and Methodology 86

Conclusion 95

References 98

List of illustrations 104

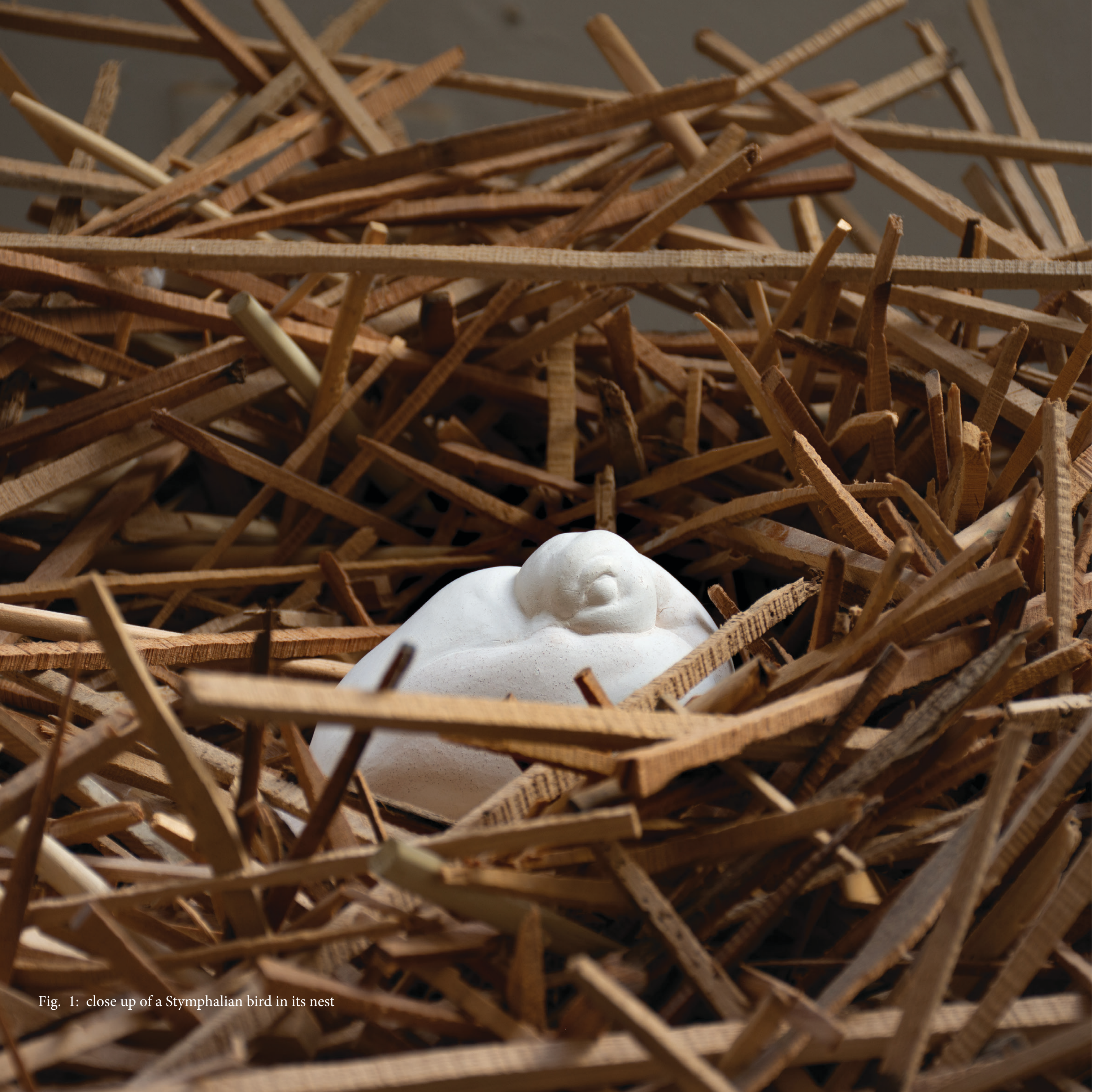

Fig. 1: close up of a Stymphalian bird in its nest

ABSTRACT

Re-forming the Monstrous consists of an installation of ceramic and wooden sculptures accompanied by an audio piece and an explicatory document. This artistic project aims to critique the entwined social and ecological violence associated with the current era, as governed by hegemonic patriarchal capitalism, with particular reference to the work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Donna Haraway. In the artwork, this is articulated through an imaginative reinterpretation of selected characters from Greco-Roman mythology. The trope of the hero who must slay a monster to gain redemption for his transgressions (as in the case of Heracles) is examined and subverted. The process culminates in a sculptural installation in two parts: the first is a metaphorical contemplation of ongoing ecological and social devastation, while the second is composed of several discrete tableaux symbolising a sanctuary for the monster. In this figuration, the monster, represented by particular South African and domestic fauna, provides the departure point to consider issues of the environment, queerness and care through the immersive format of installation. The writing of queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam is considered with reference to this body of work, as well as artworks by a number of local and international artists, with the aim of imagining a creative salve to current global crises.

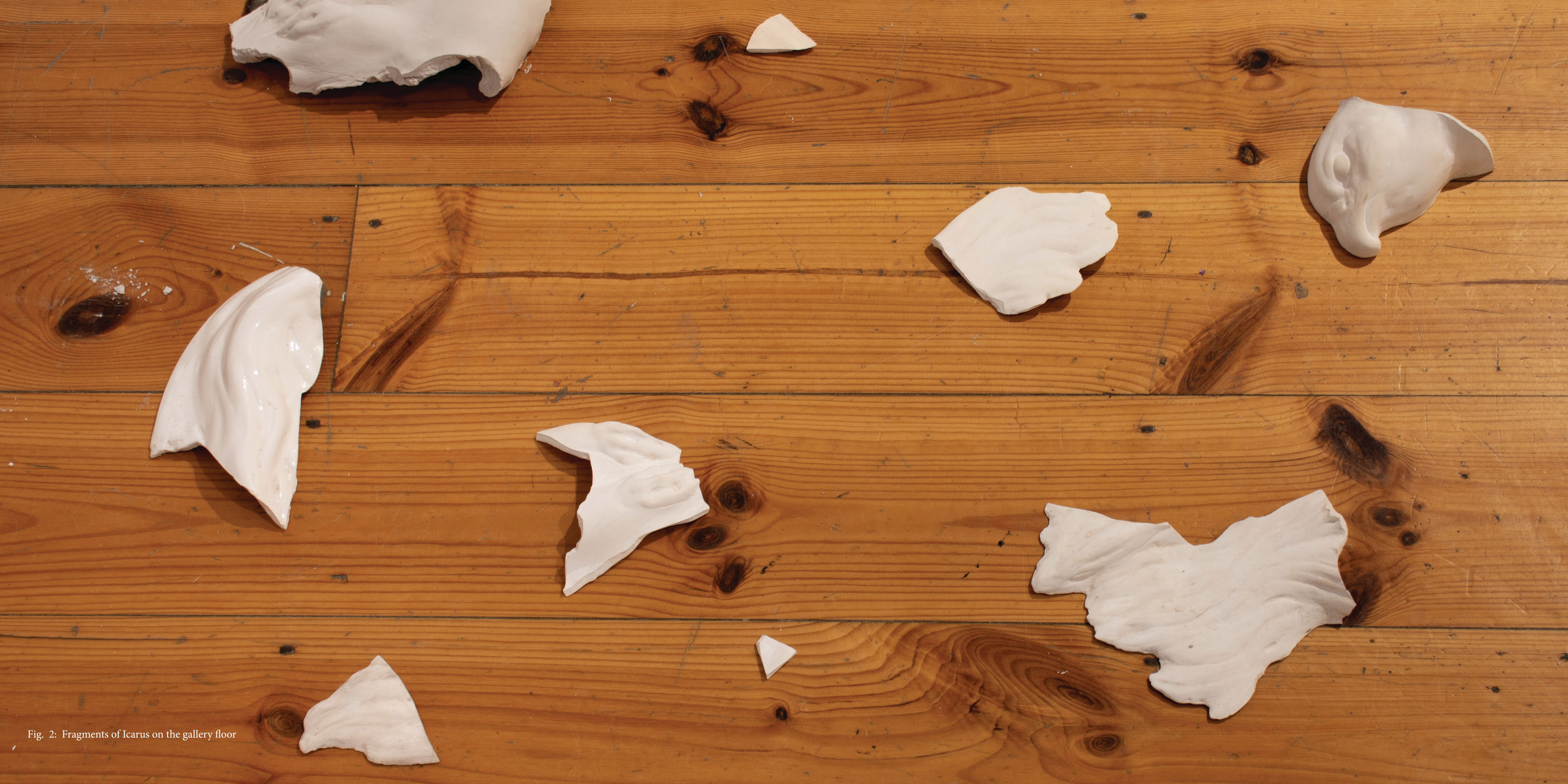

Fig. 2: Fragments of Icarus on the gallery floor

INTRODUCTION

Re-Forming the Monstrous consists of an installation of ceramic and wooden sculptures accompanied by an audio piece and explicatory document. This artistic project aims to critique the entwined social and ecological violence inherent in contemporary society (as governed by hegemonic patriarchal capitalism) through the reinterpretation of selected characters from Greco-Roman mythology.

In this accompanying document, I offer an explication of the intellectual process behind this body of work. Drawing from environmental science, queer theory, ancient myth~~,~~ and selected examples of contemporary art – this chimeric approach emphasises the entanglement of the issues and themes I discuss.

I have focused on the mythological figure of the monster; the archetypal other, cast as the antagonist to be slain by the righteous male hero. These characters can be regarded as some of the first martyrs of both patriarchal violence and man's domination of the "natural" world[1]. The word, "monster" comes from the Latin noun, monstrum, meaning "portent, or "divine sign" from the root verb monere, "to warn". In the cataclysmic present known as the Anthropocene[2] , the figure of the monster seems particularly relevant. In order to approach such an overwhelming topic, I refer to Greco-Roman mythology as an incipient canon of western culture. To borrow a phrase from the late queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz, this project involves "a turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, propelled by a desire for futurity" (Muñoz, 2009:31).

It is worth mentioning, at this early stage, the contested concept of "western culture." In *There is no such thing as western civilisation* (2016) Kwame Anthony Appiah articulates why the concept of "western culture" is a fairly recent contrivance (dating back approximately 200 years at most) that bears little historical or geographic truth. Today's common understanding of "the west" only emerged in "the 1890s, during a heated era of imperialism" and crystalised during the Cold War (Appiah, 2016). This conception – which Appiah points out is often merely a euphemism for "white" — has been deployed to support spurious claims of white supremacy, linking it to an imaginary whitewashed version of ancient Greece. In the following pages, I refer to this common interpretation of "the west" in relation to its pervasive impact on social behaviour rather than citing it as historical truth.

The body of work is presented in two parts. The central installation, *Sanctuary*, styled after a symbolic forest, represents a space of care and safety in which the monsters are protected rather than persecuted. In this interpretation, the monsters — Cerberus, Stymphalian birds, Hydra, Carcinos, Hera's serpents and the Chimera — are reimagined with reference to particular South African and domestic fauna. *Sanctuary* is accessed by traversing an introductory installation titled *Icarus*. It is based on the eponymous Greek myth, in which Icarus's own self-destructive hubris becomes a metaphor for the ongoing ecological and social devastation wrought by global capitalism. This installation was conceived as a kind of prologue, hinting at the exigencies which makes the concept of sanctuary so significant today.

The structure of this document follows a similar pattern to the exhibition. The first part, *Anthropocene Icarus,* provides a brief contextual overview of the disastrous impact of anthropogenic activity on the living environment. With reference to scholarship within the field of Environmental Humanities, particularly the work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Donna Haraway, the expansion of western colonialism is marked as a progenitor of globalized capitalism and a significant departure point for the self-destructive process of terraforming which characterises the Anthropocene era. Attention is paid to the descriptive limitations of Anthropocene as an epoch-defining term and more critical alternatives are suggested. Against this backdrop of ecological collapse, I follow with an explication of *Icarus*, informed by the notion of "an aesthetic of collapse" as proposed by queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2021).

[1] Although I discuss it further in the subsequent sections, I have made use of scare quotes to initially suggest a certain mistrust for the concept of the "natural", a term which has been used to ratify a heteronormative patriarchal logic, as well as cleaving a division between humanity and the rest of the living world. Timothy Morton discusses the contentious nature of "nature" at length in Ecology without Nature (2007).

[2] A broad term to describe the current era, in which accumulated anthropogenic activity has become a significant geological force.

In the following section, the scope of enquiry extends further back, before the violent genesis of western modernity, to the realm of classical mythology. *No Heroes* expands on the reference to Greek mythology, offering a critique of mythical heroism and its link to heteronormative masculinity today. Via a short reading of the labours of Heracles, we encounter some of the monsters which will become the protagonists of my artistic reimagining. This section closes with an elaboration of my conception of the monster, including its potential as an allegory for queer subjectivity.

The third section, *In the Mythic Sanctuary*, focuses on the central installation of this project. I begin by briefly acknowledging certain issues which complicate the idea of sanctuary in the contemporary moment. Against these problematics, I introduce my conception of a metaphorical sanctuary through a hermeneutic of queer utopianism inspired by José Esteban Muñoz. Having framed the concept behind the work, I situate my focus on selected examples from Greco-Roman mythology in a local context before moving on to the main subject of the work: the monsters themselves. I conclude this section by discussing the notion of care, which was a significant conceptual and technical concern in the making of this body of work.

The final section, *Materiality and Methodology*, expands on the process and significance of the materials through which this body of work was realised.

Part 1: Anthropocene Icarus

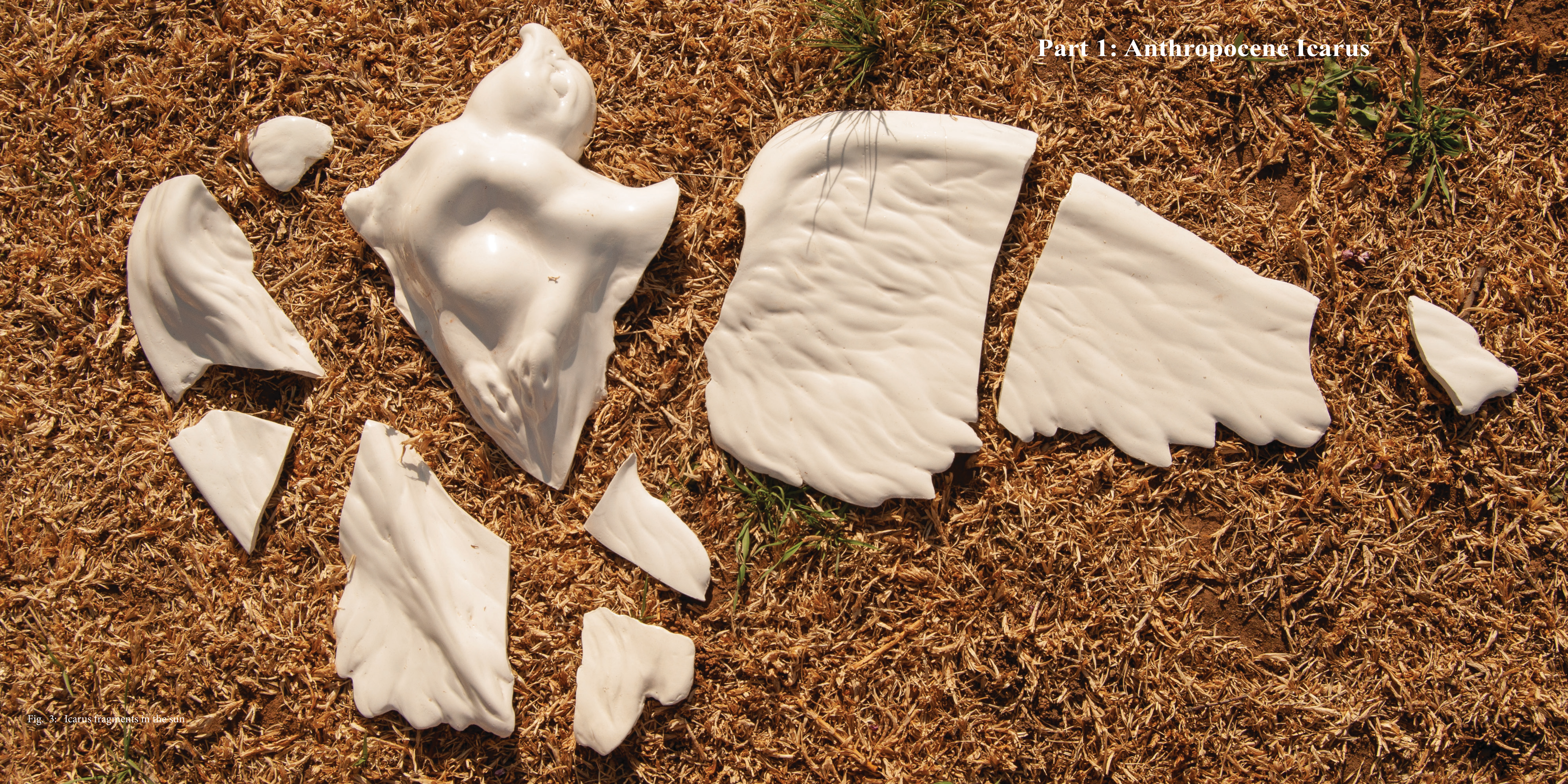

Fig. 3: Icarus fragments in the sun

And then, they were free…

The shores of Knossos and their life in captivity receding behind them.

Borne aloft on his father’s feathered wings, above the sun-gilded waves.

The relief of escape gave way to sheer exhilaration: such speed, such freedom!

His father, Daedalus, glided cautiously, just out of reach of the wind-whipped surf.

But there was so much more!

Up, Icarus climbed, above the wheeling gulls, their piercing cries mingling with his father’s shouts of warning.

Up, through tendrils of cloud, till the islands beneath him were nothing but pebbles scattered underfoot.

He was a god. Like Helios, riding his chariot across the heavens.

Helios?

At this thought, the thin air caught in his throat. Despite the cold air, he felt the sun’s heat on his back. Feathers detached from the skeletal, wooden frame; carried off by the winds, a glittering spray of wax in their wake.

And he fell to earth.

Own words, based on the ancient Greek myth which was recorded by the Roman poet, Ovid, circa the first century AD.

Though first sung millennia ago, the story of Icarus seems especially relevant today. On wings feathered with fantasies of infinite progress and human exceptionalism, "modern man" (read: industrialized hegemonic capitalism) has soared to dizzying heights. Despite assertions otherwise, this has not been a solo flight. Albeit unwillingly, the rest of the living environment has been dragged along with him. Already, countless species and ways of being have plummeted to their death in the roiling waves below.

While it is risky to reduce the multifarious strands and systems which have brought about the current crises[3] to a single narrative, the figure of Icarus serves as a somewhat pessimistic metaphor to explore the devastation inflicted upon the living environment by modern humanity. This opening section details a brief study of the Anthropocene. Attention is paid to the limitations of this term and alternatives are suggested, courtesy of multi-disciplinary scholar Donna Haraway and environmental historian and political economist, Jason Moore. As an artist without a formal scientific background, I approach the topic primarily from the perspective of the Environmental Humanities. This somewhat nebulous field, which brushes up against biology, geology, economics and anthropology, is crucial because it considers both the ecological and social context. In environmental discourse this has not always been the norm.

Since the Enlightenment, Western scientists and philosophers "have shown us a Nature that is grand and universal, but also passive and mechanical" (Tsing, 2015:9). This artificial separation betrayed an essential fundament of life – the symbioses and multispecies entanglements that have cultivated its very existence. In a social context, the same dissecting mark delineated who could be placed into the category of "human." The process of defining the natural served the purpose of "validating various man-made systems of morality, and to create a new system of norms" (Halberstam, 2020:29). A hierarchy was established, placing heteronormative, able-bodied white men at its pinnacle – a deluded justification for the subjugation and brutal exploitation of people of colour and women around the world under the banner of white-supremacist patriarchy.

> The European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.
>
> (Sartre, 1963: 22)

Over the bloody course of the previous five centuries, man's conquest of nature has had a devastating impact on various ecosystems and habitats of our planet. Amplified by global capitalism, these processes are deeply entangled with colonialism, slavery, indigenous genocide and the industrial revolution, affecting both the planet and its people.

The natural/cultural dichotomy which shaped the development of modernity forms part of the unstable foundations of contemporary civilization. The capitalist "algorithm of expansion" (Tsing, 2015:110) is at odds with the ecological cycles and biorhythms which have, over the course of aeons, proliferated life on earth. By occluding the interdependence of humanity and the rest of the living environment, the systems which sustain daily human life in late capitalism (the production of food, transport and waste management) have become so abstracted that they pose a major existential threat.

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[3] Environmental, ecological and social.

In her book, T*he Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing cites the European colonial plantation system, first imposed by Portuguese colonists in South America in the 16th century, as a progenitor of globalized capitalism and its inherent regime of ecocide. These sites exemplify the entwined social and ecological violence inherent to settler colonialism. The establishment and functioning of the plantation system relied on various forms of violence— the destruction of indigenous ecosystems (including local human populations) for the purpose of clearing land, the introduction of exotic crop species (and the plethora of associated bacterial and parasitic life forms which made the journey with them), as well as the horrific, trans-Atlantic trade of enslaved people from West Africa. This exploitative system yielded enormous short-term profits for its European originators, and so was implemented in the following centuries across colonised territories in the global South, including South Africa[4].

So began a rapid world-transforming process that catalysed many conditions leading to the current climate crises. The plantation also served as "the model for factories during industrialization" and the "formula [which] shaped the dreams we have come to call progress and modernity" (Tsing, 2015:41). By tracing this genealogy, Tsing reveals the foundation of racism, white supremacy, and ecocide implicit in hegemonic capitalism today[5]. I have dedicated some attention to the plantation because it offered me a useful example for understanding how the ecological and social interventions of European colonialism have influenced the environmental crisis.

Although initially successful at extracting the resources which fuelled imperial expansion and modernisation, the capitalist logic of commodification has had dangerous consequences. The concept of the plantation persists today on an even more extreme scale, in the form of industrial monocrop agriculture. In order to standardise crops to produce marketable commodities and expandable factory farms, species are removed from their ecological context. Symbiotic relationships which have coevolved between flora, fauna and fungi are forcefully suppressed, leaving in their absence a niche for more parasitic relations. Despite being bolstered by advancements in modern science such as the widespread use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides (another ecological threat in themselves), this system is unsustainable, rapidly degrading soil quality and transforming once vibrant swathes of land into barren desert. Aside from leaching nutrients from the soil, these processes, coupled with the globalised transportation networks which distribute their products, also emit dangerous levels of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrate into the atmosphere (Tsing et al, 2017:19). In turn, this further destabilises meteorological patterns, increasing the severity of droughts, flooding, and storms. This is but one of the various industries which are transforming the biochemical make-up of the planet.

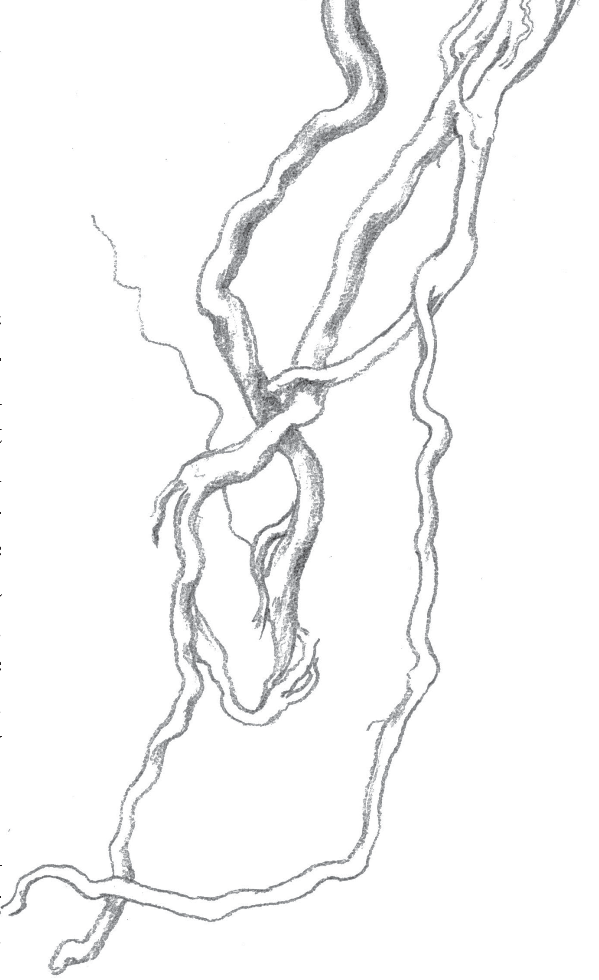
---

[4] In the 19th century, British colonists established sugar cane plantations in the tropical zone of what is now Kwa-Zulu Natal (Harries, 1987). Although this took place after the legal abolition of slavery, The system of coercive labour (of the local indigenous population) and introduction of indentured labourers from India shared similarities with the previous structure.

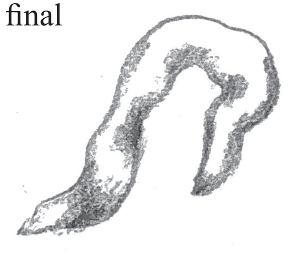
[5] There are of course, more concrete examples of white supremacy and racism in global capitalism visible today, such as the prison-industrial complex, which provides the USA with a large unpaid workforce predominantly made up of people of colour. This topic is discussed I detail in Michelle Alexander's book, T*he New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colourblindnes* (2010)

Our precarious present time has come to be known, in both scientific and social discourse (although with varying meanings)[6] as the Anthropocene. The term derives from "anthropos", Greek for "human". It is an era in which "humanity is seen to be playing an increasingly significant role in the shaping of the planet, across interwoven bio-geo-chemical terrains" (van Dooren, 2019:102). This is, however, somewhat inaccurate in its portioning of responsibility. As a species, homo sapiens have existed and influenced the planet for millennia prior to the current era of ecological upheaval: the so-called 6th mass extinction (Haraway, 2016:4), global warming, ocean acidification, soil erosion, pervasive plastic pollution, radioactive waste, global pandemics, sea level rise, ecosystem collapse, etcetera [7] – I must cut short this cataclysmic litany for brevity as well as my own emotional wellbeing.

It has not been some homogenous conception of humanity which can take credit for inducing these planet-transforming effects. That notion erases thousands of years of indigenous ways of living (Parker, 2017:383), not to mention the effects of "inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy [and] racism" (Moore, 2017:3). A more critical term to define this era, proposed by Moore, is the Capitalocene. Now, at last, the accusatory finger has settled on a more suitable culprit: "capitalism's governing conceit is that it may do with Nature as it pleases, that Nature is external and can be coded, quantified, and rationalized to serve economic growth" (Moore, 2015; 21).



However, in her book, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway points out that this name too, with its linear discourse of tipping points and defeatism, does not promote the kind of creative reimagining and re-worlding necessary to theorise an era of multispecies flourishing (Haraway, 2016). Queue the tongue twisting star of her subtitle, *Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. According to Haraway, "making kin" is an invitation to undo the "purifying division of Society and Nature," to recognise the myriad of species and forms of life which compose the biosphere, without which the ongoing sustenance of life would be impossible (Haraway, 2016:41). Through the industrious artifice of modern man, our late capitalist society has become disconnected from our terran co-inhabitants. It will only be by actively acknowledging our interdependence that the planet might be able to recover. The concept of the Chthulucene aims to do just that. The word is a "compound of two Greek roots — khthôn and kainos [-cene]." "Chthonic" refers to that which is "of, in, or under the earth." For Haraway, this suggests the microbial and multi-limbed invertebrate creatures which inhabit the soil, engaging in the "material meaningfulness of earth processes" (Haraway, 2016:2). It also describes the eventual, inexorable condition of human beings. Through this lens, the connection between humanity and earthbound forms of life, even the lowliest, is acknowledged. This prefix also adds another conceptual layer to the materiality of clay, which I shall discuss in the final section.



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[6] In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021) postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty outlines the distinction between the Anthropocene as a scientific, geological epoch (successor to the Holocene) and its widespread usage in the humanities and popular culture.

[7] The WWF's *Living Planet Report* (2020) includes various statistics and graphs describing issues of climate change and biodiversity loss. A summary of which is available at https://f.hubspotusercontent20.net/hubfs/4783129/LPR/PDFs/ENGLISH-SUMMARY.pdf

I notice a sad irony that the Greek pantheon was placed atop Mount Olympus — a distant, cloud shrouded throne, always out of reach. Below the earth was Tartarus, a place for dead souls and monsters, when in fact, the microbe-rich soil sustains life. Zeus and his cohort were eventually supplanted by a monotheistic, singular God, who in turn has been largely superseded by the secular governing forces of modernity and capital. And yet, "sky-gazing Anthropos" (Haraway, 2016:53) kept his eyes trained upward, even as the view became obscured by smog. In the Chthulucene, we must pull our eyes back down, away from the unsustainable myths of perpetual economic growth, so that we may notice all the other possible directions.

When I began working on this project, Icarus (beloved by artists from antiquity, through the Renaissance and up to the present day) seemed an appropriate metaphor for the self-destructive myopia of hegemonic capitalism. However, it is not the kind of fated, binding prophecy which we have come to know from classical mythology. By learning to notice and appreciate the multivariate forms of life around us as proposed by Haraway's concept of the Cthulucene, we may find the potential for new stories amid the ruin.

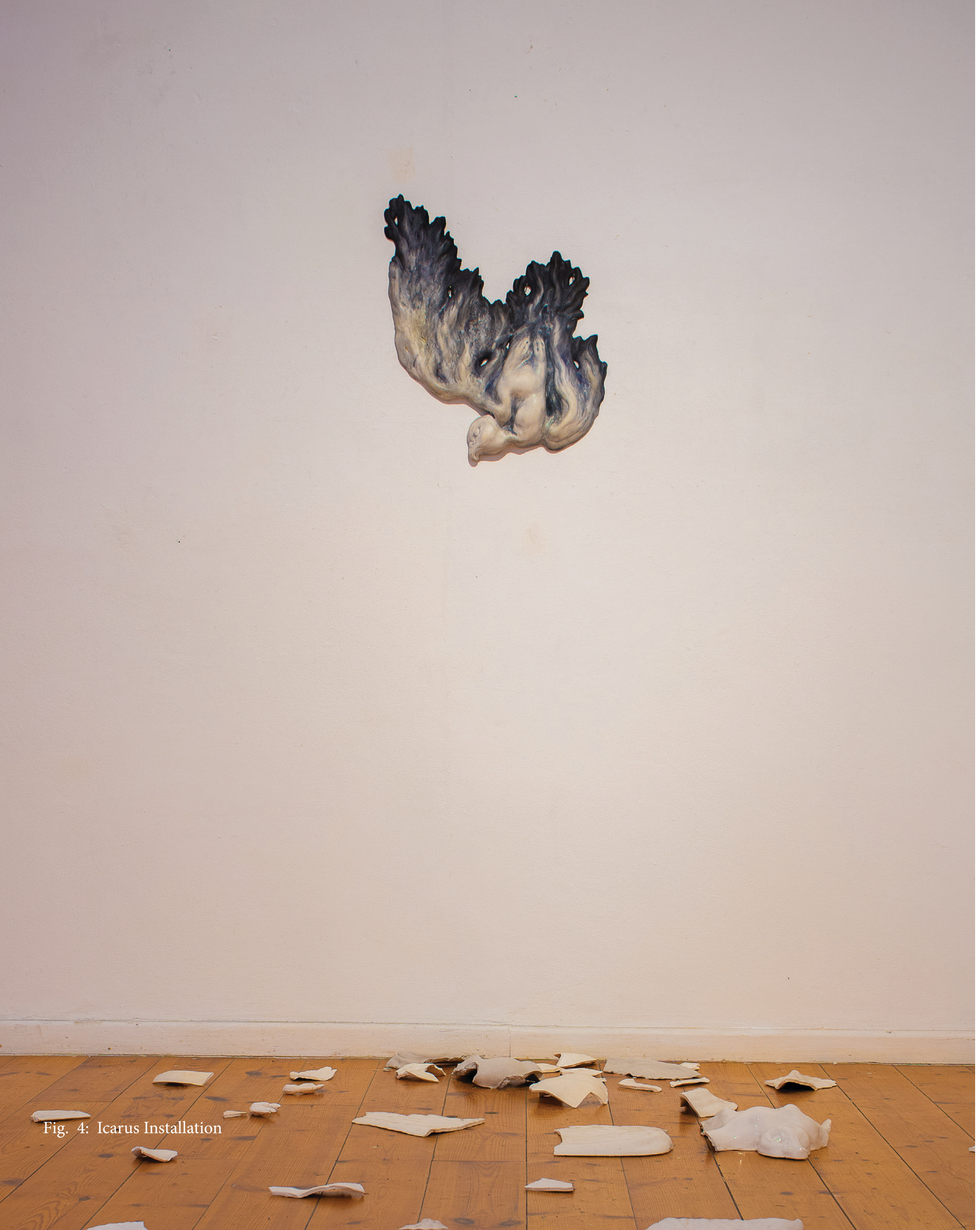

Fig. 4: Icarus Installation

ICARUS

In the opening installation of this body of work, I looked to the doomed figure of Icarus as a metaphor for the rapacious and unsustainable expansion of globalised capitalism. In an effort not to directly reference the human figure[8], I have reinterpreted Icarus as a bird of prey, alluding to their frequent symbolic associations with regimes of power and domination. In the following paragraphs, I expand on the concept of this artwork alongside South African artist Rowan Smith's iconoclastic 2014 exhibition at Whatiftheworld Gallery in Cape Town, *No Everything*, and with reference to Jack Halberstam's theorisation of an "aesthetic of collapse" (2021).

In Icarus (figure 4), a ceramic eagle is mounted, as if mid-plummet, against the wall. One wing is furled to its breast and the other extends upwards. Its mottled, blue-grey surface is reminiscent of tendrils of smoke or sunlight obscured by smog. The tips of its wings and tail are blackened in contrast to its pale head and deflated chest. The floor below is strewn with fragments of broken ceramic [9], suggesting other fallen bodies. The stillness of the scene is disturbed by a looping soundtrack of breaking pottery. Pitched to a lower frequency, it resembles the ominous sound of bombs or rumbling thunder.

The triumphant image of a soaring eagle is inverted. In place of predatory ferocity and the promise of gravity-defying freedom, the fragile, contorted form feels especially vulnerable, indicative of inevitable decline.

---

[8] One of my aims in this project was to subvert the dominant representations of Greco-Roman myth in art, which has largely been dominated by muscular sculptures of male figures.

[9] Predominantly made from the same slip cast mould as the eagle but interspersed with fragments of the other various ceramic creatures I have produced.

The image of the eagle is replete with symbolic associations. Various regimes of power have adopted it — the Roman Empire, Russia, and Germany's Third Reich to offer a few Eurocentric examples. Perhaps most renowned (and most pertinent to this project) though, is the bald eagle of the United States of America which has become synonymous with the rise of global capitalism. Perhaps in an effort to hark back to the dominance of imperial Rome, the USA claimed the bald eagle as its national symbol. There is a cruel irony to this appointment, considering that the species was hunted to near extinction by the same white settlers whose identity it has come to represent. In a sense, the action of claiming the eagle as a symbol could be viewed as an extension of the project of mastery and domination over the living environment discussed earlier.

I envision the fragments of broken ceramics on the floor as a reminder of the countless casualties of hegemonic capitalism's avaricious expansion. Their white surface is reminiscent of dried out bones or bleached coral. On a more quotidian note, broken pottery such as plates or mugs is a ubiquitous sight. Ceramic crockery is a common feature of domestic life. By juxtaposing this household material with my fragile, sculpted creatures, I hope to hint at the latent connection between the normalised lifestyle of late capitalism and the ecological devastation upon which it relies.

Although this installation is decidedly desolate, there is perhaps a glimpse of hope amongst the ruins. If the eagle is a metaphor for capitalist expansion, then its downfall offers a slim possibility of salvation. Considering that so many of the institutions and systems which govern contemporary society are inherently flawed (maintaining racist, classist, patriarchal hierarchies, suppressing alternative knowledge systems and providing wealth for a miniscule proportion of humanity at the expense of the rest of the living environment) rather than trying to reform them, it seems that the only solution is to "bring about their destruction and begin from the ground up" (Halberstam, 2021). It is here that art might be able to play the role of catalyst, offering perspective on these issues in the hope of inspiring change. Halberstam describes this concept through the work of American Artist, Gordon Matta-Clark – his "anarchic experiments with physical structures and with the economies that assign such structures value." (Halberstam, 2018: ¶13) However, in a more local, contemporary context, I see it as a useful lens through which to consider Rowan Smith's *No Everything*.

Replete with imagery of destruction, Smith's exhibition evinces this aesthetic of collapse, with shattered car windows and billowing clouds of dust enveloping buildings under demolition suggesting disintegrating ideology.

At the centre of this exhibition is an installation titled *Oh Nationalism! You look so beautiful in ruin, but we never really loved you, and chicken just tastes better* (Figure 5). A heap of concrete rubble occupies much of the gallery floor. The curving organic forms of springbok horns, cast in the same grey cement, protrude from a pile of irregular bricks and other debris. Upon closer inspection, fine concrete chicken bones are also visible, lodged in the rubble.

Alongside the title, the scene brings to mind the idea of nation-building in ruins. Cement, a construction material synonymous with urbanisation and modern growth becomes, instead, symbolic of its degradation. The springbok horns are a recognisable symbol of Afrikaner nationalism. Much like the American eagle, this is a symbol based on the domination of the living environment. Once emblematic of the white supremacist apartheid regime, the springbok retained a space in the national imaginary through the process of "rainbowism"[10] that characterised the birth of the "new" South Africa. It is still the national animal, however the springbok now finds itself among the crumbling wreckage.

The chicken bones, picked clean of flesh, bring to mind the idea of consumption – a cornerstone of capitalism. In *Oh Nationalism…*, the myth of progress and development which was supposed to liberate the socially and economically oppressed majority of South African citizens is revealed to be fantasy[11].

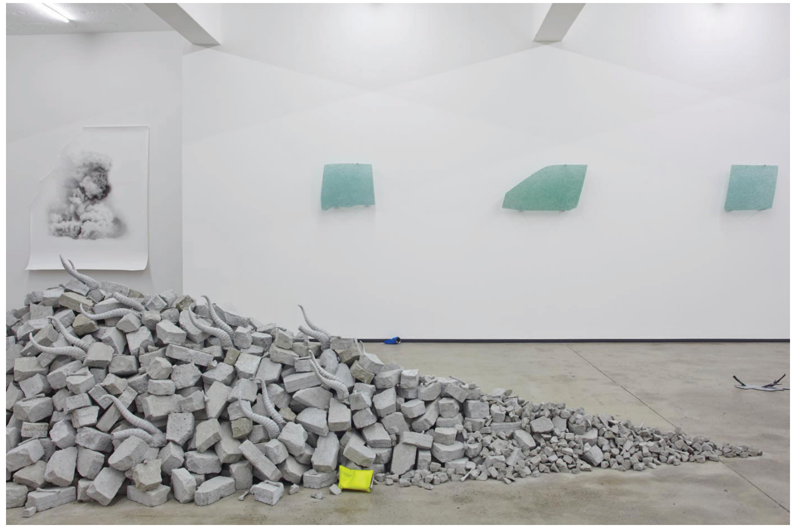

Fig. 5: *Oh Nationalism! You look so beautiful in ruin, but we never really loved you, and chicken just tastes better* (installation view) Rowan Smith. 2014.

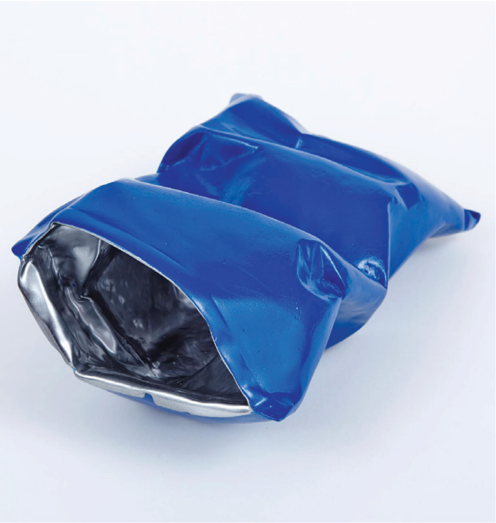

Fig. 6: *Emptiness (BBQ)* Rowan Smith, 2014.

In a review titled, *Symphony of destruction: an entropic reading of Rowan Smith's "No Everything,* Tim Leibrandt states that the body of work "renders a South African post-apartheid capitalist wasteland tangible" (2015:2). "Capitalist wasteland" is a particularly apt phrase considering that waste is an essential product of capitalism. This is implied by Smith's 2014 *Emptiness* series (figure 6) — a collection of intricately carved jelutong sculptures of empty packets of chips in a range of colours, suggesting recognisable brands. Something which has been rendered almost invisible by its ubiquity in the urban landscape becomes a gaudy focal point beside the muted grey palette of the rest of *No Everything*.

As the title suggests, this exhibition by Smith seems to propose a refusal of the status quo. To this end, he employs an aesthetic of collapse to reveal the ruined socio-economic state of contemporary South Africa. By materially communicating this state of ruin, Smith's work may prompt viewers to consider the possibility of renewal that follows in the aftermath of destruction. The atmosphere of desolation, as well as the sparse layout of the exhibition was a significant inspiration for *Icarus*. However, beyond merely the aesthetic influence, Smith's interrogation of national symbols and engagement with themes of collapse presents a generative conceptual strategy.

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[10] "The metaphor of the rainbow was intended to define a post-apartheid national identity. Rainbow nation rhetoric became a platform from which to imagine a new, imagined community; an exercise in national mythmaking intended to amalgamate a heterogenous population into a new whole" (Stielau, 2016:31).

[11] Although 1994 marked the ostensible political enfranchisement of black South Africans, the realities of global neoliberalism — pro-corporate, free-market policies which prioritise privatised capital accumulation (for a wealthy minority) over the social welfare of the majority of citizens (Duggan, 2003) have maintained and exacerbated the drastic inequality in South Africa.

Part 2: No Heroes

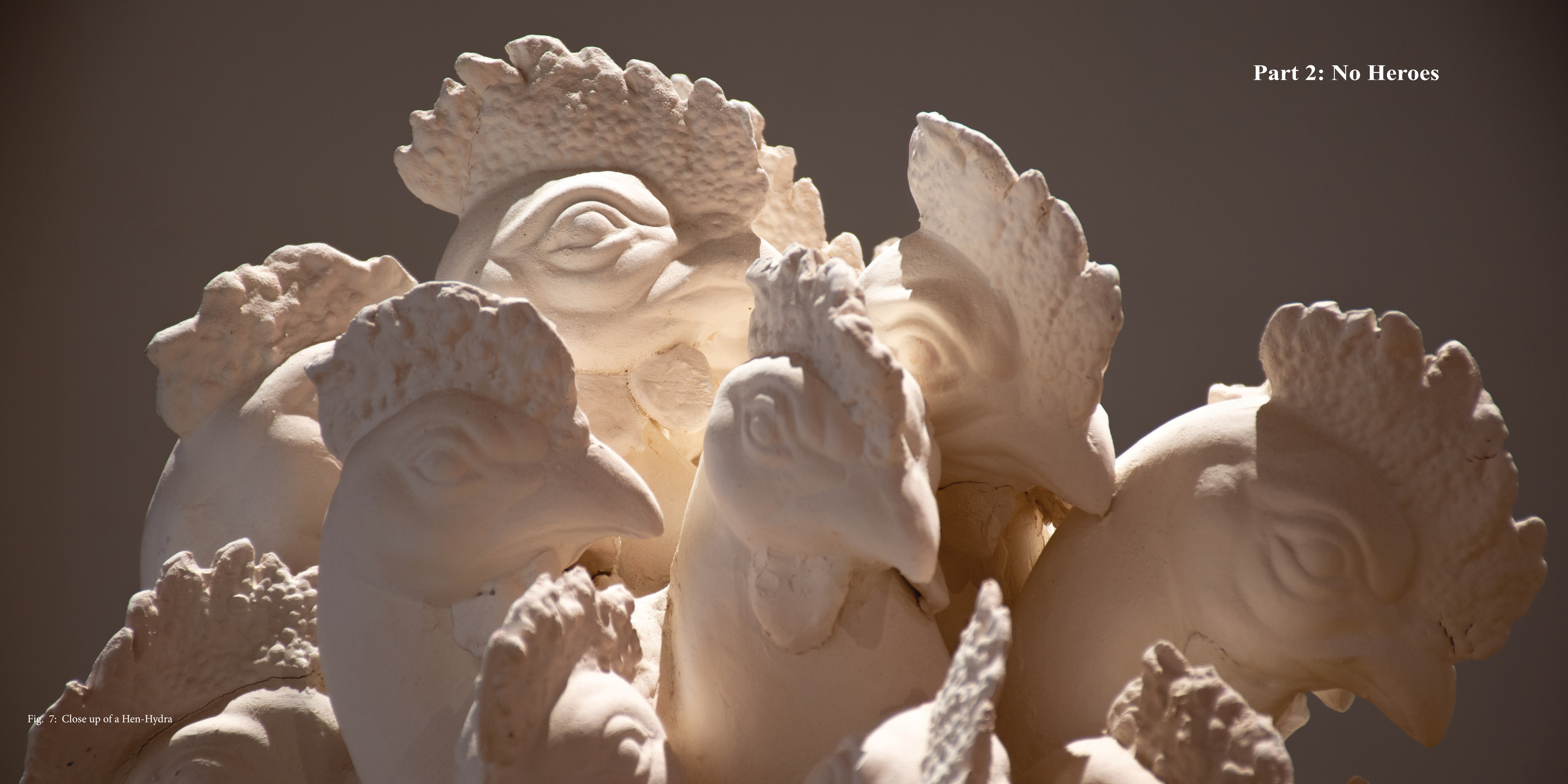

Fig. 7: Close up of a Hen-Hydra

Yet we are not used to reading stories without human heroes.

(Tsing, 2015:219)

Although seemingly distant from our contemporary reality, classical civilizations such as ancient Greece are credited as progenitors of western culture which, through colonialism and globalisation, has come to preside over much of human society.

Mythology has played an important role in the formation of cultures. These stories, spoken in a masculine voice or written by a masculine hand, served to inscribe patriarchal[12] values in the structure of civilizations, the influence of which is still present today. The character of the hero (a staple of classical mythology, quintessentially male and always the protagonist of the story) was a potent force for inculcating ideas of male superiority. Heroes epitomise those espoused values of patriarchal society — strength, dominance, and a proclivity for violence — and can be seen as archetypes for toxic male gender roles today. These figures, made so large through centuries of retelling, offer a target for a critique of hegemonic patriarchy.

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[12] "Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence" (hooks, 2010).

Aside from glorifying violence and physical strength above all else, the cult of the hero also promotes the spurious notion that individualism is the key to success — one of the tenets of Western philosophy (Haraway, 2016). Although most of their heroic deeds would have been impossible without the aid of various deities and (often female) human companions (see Jason[13] or Theseus[14]) the way in which these myths have been told serves to elevate the singular hero.

One such myth formed the departure point for this body of work — that of Heracles[15]. The aim of my project was quite specifically not to further celebrate the male hero, but in order to provide some context, a brief retelling of the story of his labours is unavoidable.

Widely regarded as the greatest of the Greek heroes, Heracles was the son of Zeus by Alcmene, a mortal woman. Zeus's wife, the goddess Hera, was angered by her husband's actions (even though Zeus's infidelity, often in the form of rape, was a ubiquitous feature of Greek mythology) and so persecuted his son. She sent serpents to kill him as an infant. However, blessed with superhuman strength, the baby Heracles was able to defeat them. Despite such attempts at his life, Heracles was able to grow to adulthood and became a famed warrior. He married Megara[16], princess of Thebes, and fathered three sons with her. Unfortunately, his brief moment of domestic bliss was brought to an end when, in a fit of blind rage attributed to the magical influence of jealous Hera, he murdered his family. At the risk of sounding crass, it seems quite fitting that the renowned and revered symbol of masculinity and strength would also be a perpetrator of gender-based violence and familicide.

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[13] Renowned for his adventures aboard the Argos to retrieve the golden fleece from Colchis, Jason would have been unable to successfully navigate Aeetes's tasks (or evade his vengeance) without the magical assistance of Medea (Aeetes's daughter).

[14] Theseus is best known for slaying the Minotaur in the labyrinth of Crete, a feat he was only able to achieve with the guidance of Ariadne (daughter of Pasiphae and half-sister to the monster

[15] Better known by his Roman name, Hercules.

[16] The actual description of this act in most retellings of Heracles's story was that she was given to him by the King of Thebes in honour of his efforts in quashing the Minyan rebellion — no point trying to sanitize the misogyny of classical mythology in this critique.

In order to expiate his sins, Heracles was told by the Oracle of Delphi to attend King Eurystheus, who would devise twelve seemingly impossible labours for him to carry out. They were as follows[17]:

1. To slay the Nemean Lion
2. To slay the Lernaean Hydra
3. To capture Artemis's sacred Hind (deer)
4. To capture the Erymanthian boar
5. To clean Augeius's stables in a day
6. To exterminate the Stymphalian birds
7. To retrieve the Cretan bull
8. To retrieve the mares of Diomedes
9. To take the girdle of Hippolyte (queen of the Amazons)
10. To retrieve the cattle of Geryon
11. To steal the apples of Hesperides
12. To retrieve Cerberus from Hades.

Almost all of these tasks involved killing or seizing some form of creature or plant (aside from cleansing the stables and stealing the girdle, although in the latter Hippolyte herself acts as the monster for him to overcome).

This much-vaunted mythological convention[18] of the hero who must slay a monster to redeem himself for his transgressions serves to glorify the use of violence as the solution to the problems of men and situates the non-human subject as something to be dominated and destroyed. The legacy of these ideas can still be seen reflected in human behaviour today — ecocide at the hands of capitalist exploitation as well as the prevalence of gender-based violence and the marginalization and discrimination against all bodies that do not conform to cisgender heteronormative identification.

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[17] Considering the word count, I am unable to dedicate more text to explain each of the mythical figures and places discussed in the Labours, but you can find a more in-depth retelling online at the World History Encyclopaedia (https://www.worldhistory.org/hercules).

[18] The myth of Bellerophon, Pegasus riding slayer of the Chimera, presents a similar trope.

Clearly, in the hope of imagining a world in which the rupture between humanity and the rest of the living environment is in some way repaired, "the story must change" (Haraway, 2016:40). What might people have gleaned from a mythos which is not bound in human exceptionalism and a disregard for other forms of life? Of course, this is not merely a rhetorical question. Mythologies which encouraged a society more in tune with the rest of the living environment have existed around the world in the form of many indigenous belief systems[19]. However, the virulent and forceful spread of western domination has actively suppressed such cultures.

Excluding the hero himself, I have focused instead on the non-human characters — the beasts and monsters which are typically cast as antagonists, to be slain by the righteous male hero. In fact, they are not even given the honour of that role. These creatures are merely obstacles to be destroyed by the male protagonist. "Their job is to be in the way, to be overcome" (Haraway, 2016:39), acting as props for his character development. Such stories, in which nature is denied agency and presented as something to be conquered, seem ironic in the present time in which so much is vulnerable to disturbed climate conditions.

The decision to omit the representation of the hero in my project is an attempt to subvert the dominant representation of myths in the western art canon, shifting attention away from the pervasive male, human figure.

This conceptual strategy shares some similarities with the large installation, *Inopportune: Stage Two* (2004) by Chinese contemporary artist, Cai Guo-Qiang. This artwork includes nine naturalistic, sculptural tigers pierced by multiple, white fletched arrows (figure 8). At first glance the sculptures appear to be taxidermized animals, however the pelts are not from dead tigers, but are painted goat skins. Some of the tigers are suspended in the air, their bodies painfully contorted, faces in perpetual grimaces of agony.

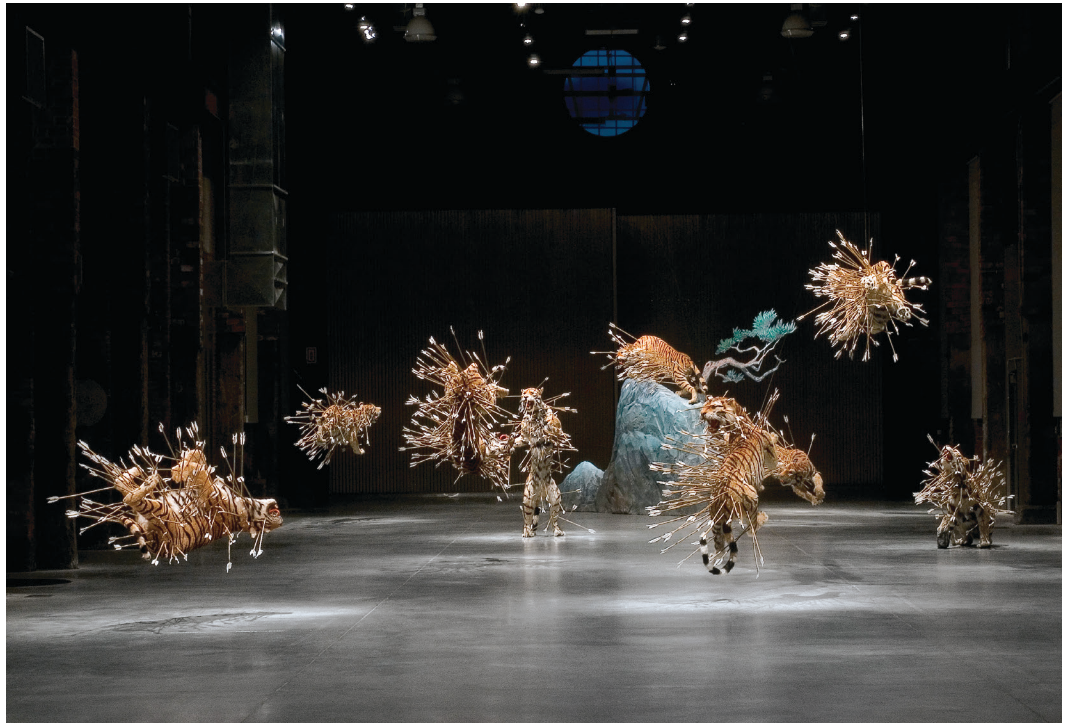

Fig. 8 : *Innoportune: Stage Two,* Cai Guo-Qiang (2004)

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[19] The local San society provides a perfect example (Davis, 2009:22)

This installation was partly inspired by the story of Wu Song, a hero of Chinese legend from the 13th century (MASS MoCA, 2004). According to legend, Wu Song slew a man-eating tiger with his bare hands, for which he gained legendary renown. Instead of celebrating this anthropocentric tale of masculine violence and domination, Cai chose to focus on the tiger, depicting its anguish in visceral detail. After decades of persecution in China, these big cats are almost extinct in the wild while the demand for their pelts and bones for traditional medicine is satisfied by commercial farming (Earth Touch News, 2017). In *Inopportune: Stage Two*, this cruel history is alluded to in spectacular, gravity-defying detail.

However, unlike in *Inopportune: Stage Two,* I have steered away from depicting slaughter in the hope of telling a different story. In my reimagining, the mythical creatures are protected rather than persecuted. This represents an attempt to shift the allegorical meaning from one which glorifies violence and domination, towards a narrative of care and empathy. In this way, my project aligns with another, more recent sculptural installation by Cai, titled *Heritage* (2013).

Part of his expansive solo exhibition, *Falling back to Earth* – likely another reference to the myth of Icarus – at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art in 2013, Cai once again makes use of faux taxidermy. In *Heritage*, 99 life-sized creatures of various species all drink from a blue pool of water (figure 9). This impressive tableau has a surreal quality to it. The presence of a pristine blue watering hole inside a gallery, as well as the seemingly harmonious coexistence of predators and prey (at one end a family of Bengal tigers crouch beside a relaxed water buffalo) reinforce the impossibility of the scene. This idealised depiction of wildlife is particularly poignant considering the harsh reality experienced by living animals. The solemn stillness of *Heritage* is disturbed by the sound of water dripping from the ceiling into the pool. The rhythmic splash provides an analogue soundtrack, aurally and symbolically reminiscent of the ticking of a clock.

The title of this work is also significant in the context of my study. Heritage is a term typically used in the domain of the human. By invoking it in reference to a collection of creatures, Cai asserts the connection between humanity and the rest of the living environment. In my *Sanctuary*, I share this ambition of eroding the human/animal distinction that has had such a disastrous impact on the living environment.

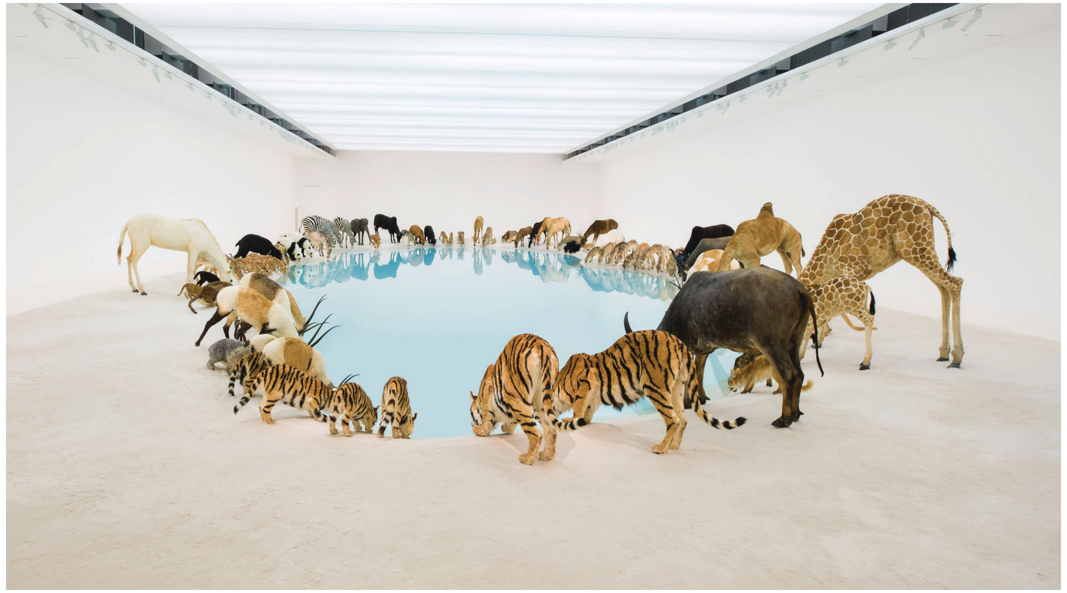
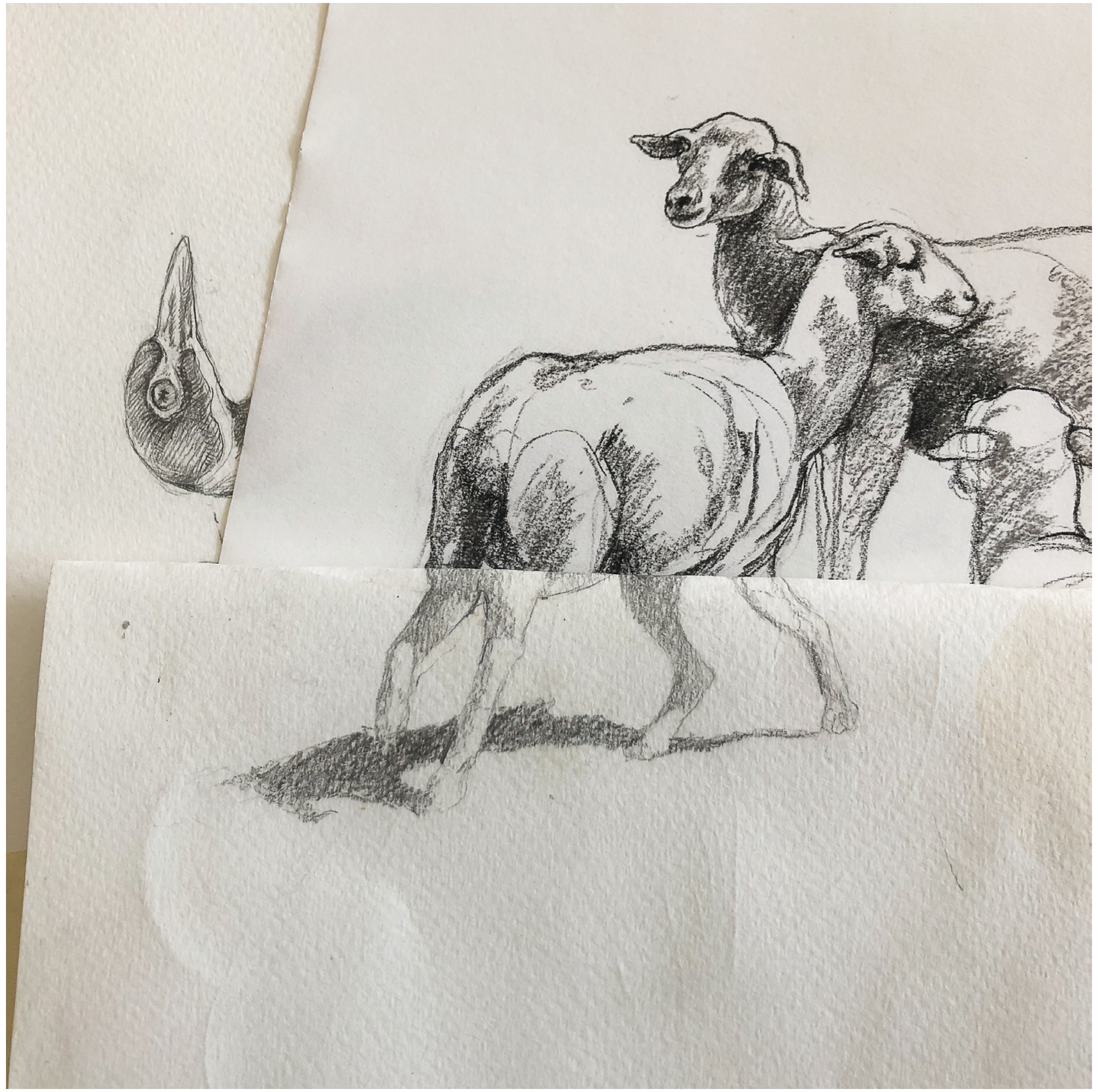


Fig. 9 : *Heritage*. Cai Guo-Qiang. (2013)



A BRIEF WORD ON MONSTERS

If mythology is a way of canonizing hegemonic ideas, perhaps there is more to learn from its vilified characters.

From an artistic perspective, the monsters of classical mythology provide fascinating subjects. Many-headed or fantastically hybridized, they have captivated the collective imagination. Throughout history, monsters have been favoured by artists and storytellers. From the bestiaries and illuminated manuscripts of medieval times to becoming a staple of Gothic art and literature, their enduring popularity in fantasy writing and television is a testament to this fact. However, beyond their aesthetic appeal, these monsters also make for intriguing metaphorical avatars through which to explore ideas of alterity and humanness. Victims of persecution and martyrs to patriarchal violence, they can be interpreted as representations of marginalisation or otherness, icons of subalternity.

Fig. 10 : a hybrid collage

As we have been taught by millennia of anthropocentric myths, monsters are dangerous, a threat to civilised society and something to be eradicated. As a means of reinforcing normative (and indeed heteronormative) binaries, those who do not fit into socially acceptable categories have been made into monsters and subjected to persecution and violence. As a member of the LGBTQIA+[20] community, this analogy resonates with me. It reflects the treatment – both historical and current – of queer people, even in a supposedly "progressive" society such as South Africa[21]. Within this project, I attempt to subvert the typically negative associations between queerness and monstrosity[22] by celebrating the monster .

In her 2016 MA thesis, *Double Agents: Queer Citizenship(s) in Contemporary South African Visual Culture*, academic Anna Stielau defines queerness as denoting "an oppositional subjecthood, and in its theoretical application it stands for a political praxis set against dominant or normalising ideologies" (2016:13). In this context, the monsters I have portrayed can be seen as proto-queer subjects.

> Queer is an anti-essentializing force that embraces its ambiguous "otherness" and opts for a discursive home on the fringes and in the margins. Queer rejects a legacy of dominance and works to explore and protect alterity in all of its multiple, irreducible manifestations.
>
> (Peterson, 2012: ¶ 3)

The mythical creatures in my *sanctuary* provide an apt metaphor for the animal species threatened by the exploits of global capitalism. Beyond this ecological allegory, though, they can also be seen as symbolic of all those beings (human and otherwise) who experience an oppressed, fugitive existence. I am, however, especially cautious to offer them directly as a symbol of marginalised people, due to the history of "racialised animalisation" (Jackson, 2020:22) which haunts modern conceptions of humanity. Considering my positionality as a white (gay) male, I have thus framed the monsters through a queer reading.

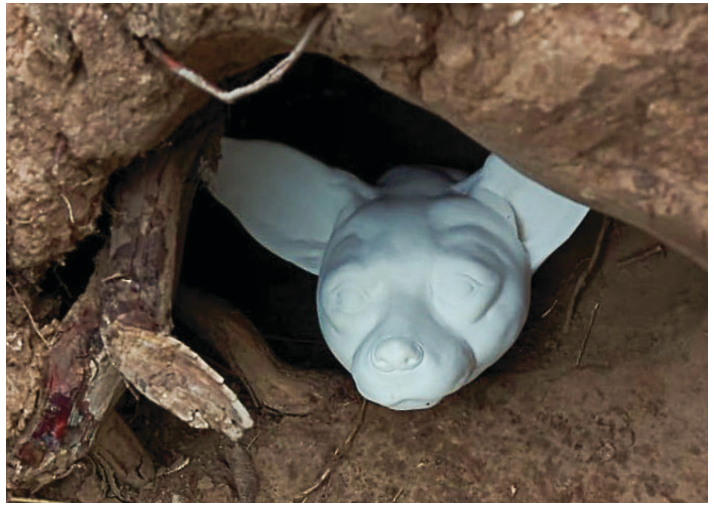


Fig. 11 : One of Cerberus's heads peaking out of a burrow, Rosendal

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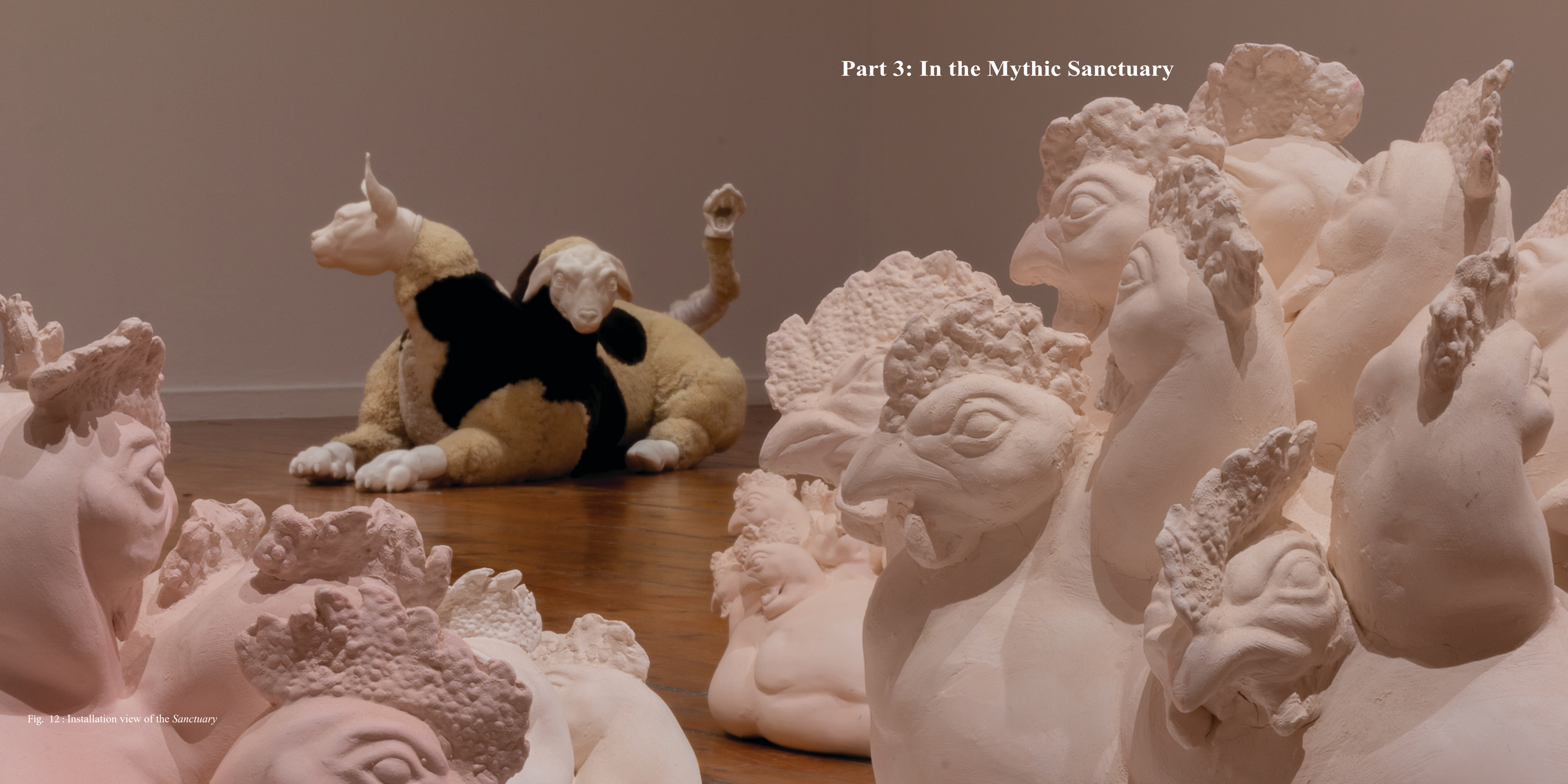
[20] Standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer (or questioning), Intersex, Asexual (or Ally), this abbreviation represents a range of non-heterosexual identity expression. To avoid excluding groups, the collection of letters continues to grow, however the plus symbol attempts to acknowledge other forms of identity.

[21] Despite boasting a constitution and bill of rights which claims to protect all citizens from discrimination, there are almost daily reports of homophobic and gender-based violence in this country. In *The country we want to live in* (2010) Mkhize et al draw attention to the violent homophobia which takes place in South Africa, particularly towards black lesbians.

[22] This action of reclaiming the "monstrous" label applied to queer people was fiercely advocated by historian and queer theorist, Susan Stryker in her text, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein* above the Village of Chamounix (1994), in the context of transgender subjectivity.



Part 3: In the Mythic Sanctuary

Fig. 12 : Installation view of the *Sanctuary*

Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge.

(Haraway, 2016:40)

Before I delve into the particularities of my installation and its inhabitants, I would like to address a few concerns that complicate the notion of sanctuary today.

The concept of a sanctuary implies a certain external threat. As discussed in the opening section, *Anthropocene Icarus*, it is evident that hegemonic systems of white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy have fostered an environment in which much of the living world needs protection. In an essay titled *Reflections on Home in Motion*, multidisciplinary artist and academic Thulile Gamedze explains how notions of belonging, home, and the potential for safety and settledness have been complicated by the infectious spread of settler colonialism (2019:34). More and more people around the world are forced (by circumstance or violent displacement) to seek asylum, a situation predicted to increase with the worsening effects of climate change. Unfortunately, this coincides with the increasing trend of western countries closing their borders to refugees. This situation gained publicity under the USA's Trump administration but is mirrored by European powers (Gamedze, 2019:36). However, as the current conflict in Ukraine has demonstrated, many of these countries are willing to open their borders to refugees provided they are white. Safety is political. The formation of safe spaces which exclude the most vulnerable only serves to exacerbate the problem.

The term sanctuary is commonly used in an environmental context, describing areas of land which are protected (also commonly referred to as nature reserves) ostensibly for the benefit of endangered species. However, this noble pursuit is frequently tarnished by the methods with which it is implemented. Around the world, conservation efforts have come to resemble a form of neo-colonialism[23] in which indigenous people are displaced by predominantly white-led conservation non-profit organisations, once again predicated on the modern division of nature and culture. In such cases, wildlife advocacy is often at the expense of already historically oppressed communities. In an article on the Cayambe Coco National Park in Ecuador, political and environmental journalist Alexander Zaitchik explains that “conservation policy often conflicts with the indigenous traditions of stewardship that have kept the rainforests intact and in balance for thousands of years” (Zaitchik, 2018). Such efforts not only negatively affect local communities but also tend to inhibit their very goal of “protecting” vulnerable ecosystems.

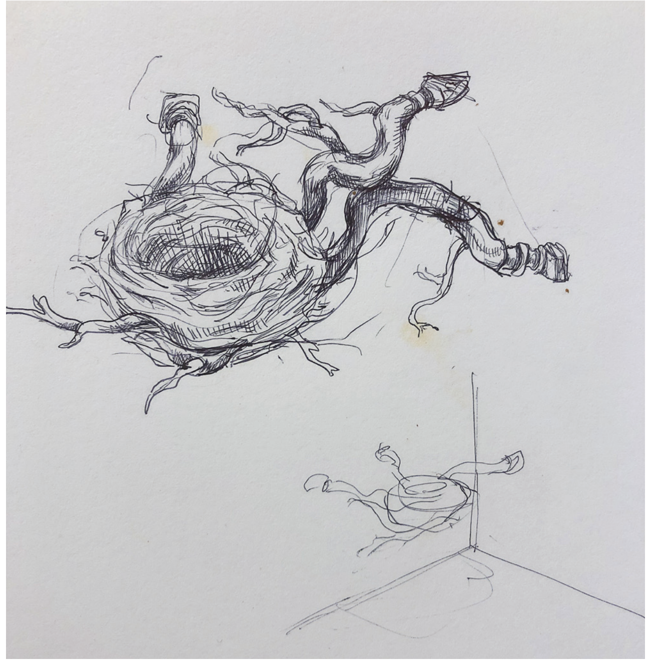


Fig. 13: sketch for Stymphalian nest

South Africa in particular has a complicated relationship with nature reserves. Throughout the country, there are various tracts of land that function as game lodges in which paying customers can see and experience wildlife in person. Author and academic Njabulo Ndebele describes how these game lodges act as sites of “leisure colonialism” (Ndebele, 1999:99) in which predominantly white clientele can restage a colonial encounter with an imagined wilderness. While such spaces do offer various plant and animal species protection from the encroachment of urban development, “the game lodge impedes the emergence of an image of Africa and its diverse cultures as transforming [the] historical phenomenon” of colonialism (ibid).

In spite of these problematic associations, or perhaps all-the-more because of them, I maintain that the conceptualization of a metaphorical sanctuary is a meaningful gesture in the face of hegemonic capitalism’s logic of domination. It forms part of the urgent project of trying to imagine creative alternatives to the perilous, polluted present-day. The point is to imagine *otherwise*! In this case, the others in question are the mythical monsters. Admittedly, my concept of an inclusive sanctuary is an idealised, utopian imaginary. However, In *Cruising Utopia* (2009) José Esteban Muñoz reminds us that the utopian represents a necessary critique of the here and now. In a similar vein, he frames queerness as a “mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (2009:1). To Muñoz, queerness becomes a window through which we can glimpse a better, less oppressive world. I attempt to align my conception of the sanctuary with this vision.

Muñoz’s temporal conception of queerness as something “not-yet-here”[24] is proposed as a necessary opposition to what he calls “straight time”. By this he refers to the “stultifying temporal logic” that is anchored on “a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalises cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity” (2009:25). In the case of my *Sanctuary*, I view the turn to the mythic (a fantastical realm which is not governed by the same spatio-temporal limitations) as part of the project of disrupting the hegemony of straight time.

[23] Environmental philosopher Thom van Dooren discusses this issue at length in his book, *The Wake of Crows* (2019) within the context of corvid conservation in the Mariana Islands, a small archipelago in Micronesia, which is under the political authority of the USA.

[24] Muñoz adopted this phrase from the German Philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose 1954 treatise, The Principle of Hope was a prominent inspiration for theorizing utopia.

This concept is also discernible in the work of another South African sculptor who explores classical mythology- Wim Botha. In his 2021 multimedia exhibition[25], *The River*, at Stevenson Gallery, Botha created a miniature sculptural landscape, suggesting a stylized waterway. Intricately carved figures are dotted along its banks (Figure 14). Many of these characters resemble mythological figures from the western art canon such as *Silenus Cradling the Infant Bacchus* (circa 4th century BC), or Peter Paul Rubens's *Saturn Devouring his Children* (1636)[26] reimagined in an indistinct, skeletal form. Considering this reference to Greco-Roman mythology and morbid physiology, the eponymous river seems to be an allusion to the river Styx, the mythical boundary between the living world and the dead. The denizens of *The River* embody this liminal state between life and death.

According to the accompanying text on Stevenson's website, "Botha's figuration makes allusions to forms of existence beyond linear time" (Stevenson, 2021). His reference to Saturn (also known as Kronos to the ancient Greeks) is particularly significant in this context because he was the deity responsible for time and the ordering of ages. Rivers also have their own innate associations with time. The continuous motion of flowing water acts as a physical embodiment of chronology. In the case of Botha's *River*, however, time is stilled. The suggestion of water is created using panes of iridescent coloured glass – there is no movement. The river's surface becomes a mirror in which Botha's atemporal, contemplative figures are reflected. Botha's invocation of mythical figures as a means to question normative ideas of linear time resonates with the concept behind *Sanctuary*.

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[25] The installation is composed of wood, dichroic glass, brass, marble, and semi-precious stone.

[26] These artworks refer to the Roman names of ancient Greek deities

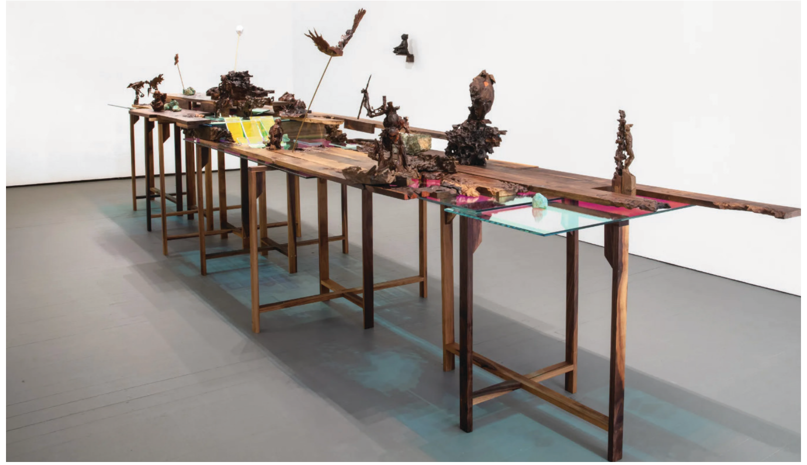

Fig. 14: *The River.* Wim Botha. (2021)

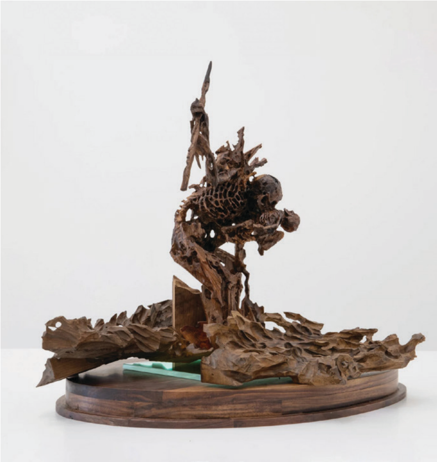

Fig. 15: *The River* (detail) Wim Botha. . (2021)

FIELDWORK

Although the monsters I have sculpted have their origins in ancient Greece, for the purpose of my reimagining, I have looked to indigenous South African species for inspiration, as well as common, domesticated creatures. This, in a small way, serves to ground the work in a more contemporary, local and familiar setting. However, I concede that such Eurocentric myths shouldn't sit too comfortably in a South African context[27]. Perhaps more importantly then, this focus provides me with the opportunity to pay attention to my own surroundings, heeding Haraway's Chthulucene directive.

As a result of personal circumstances during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, I spent a few months in Rosendal, a small, semi-rural town in the Eastern Free State. From there I was able to explore first-hand the surrounding landscape and take field recordings which I used to construct the sound piece that plays in Sanctuary. The area is predominantly comprised of veld and farmland; swathes of golden grass are broken up by willow-lined streams, steep-sided sandstone kopjes and thickets of conifer, poplar, and eucalyptus trees. These pockets of feral forest, mostly comprised of alien trees initially introduced for timber and industry, are of particular theoretical interest to me because they represent living embodiments of the ecological impacts of colonisation. They also show that human-disturbed landscapes are not exclusively the barren wastelands of dystopian sci-fi. Walking in the little cypress forest at the edge of town, one is treated to a chorus of birdsong. Amidst the trees' roots, burrows of various sizes can be seen — possibly inhabited by an aardvark, porcupine or the ubiquitous yellow mongoose which is a common sight in the town. This environment exemplifies the "contaminated diversity" (Tsing, 2015:58) which characterises the majority of the so-called "natural world" today. In conceptualising the habitat for my monsters (themselves the confluence of Western mythology and South African ecology) this type of hybrid landscape became a significant inspiration.

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[27] They do find themselves in good company, though, in the alienating space of the "white cube gallery" (Gamedze, 2019:36), the not-yet decolonised institution of the university, and Cape Town/ South Africa as a whole, with its segregated spatial planning and still prominent Cape Dutch and neo-classical aesthetic.

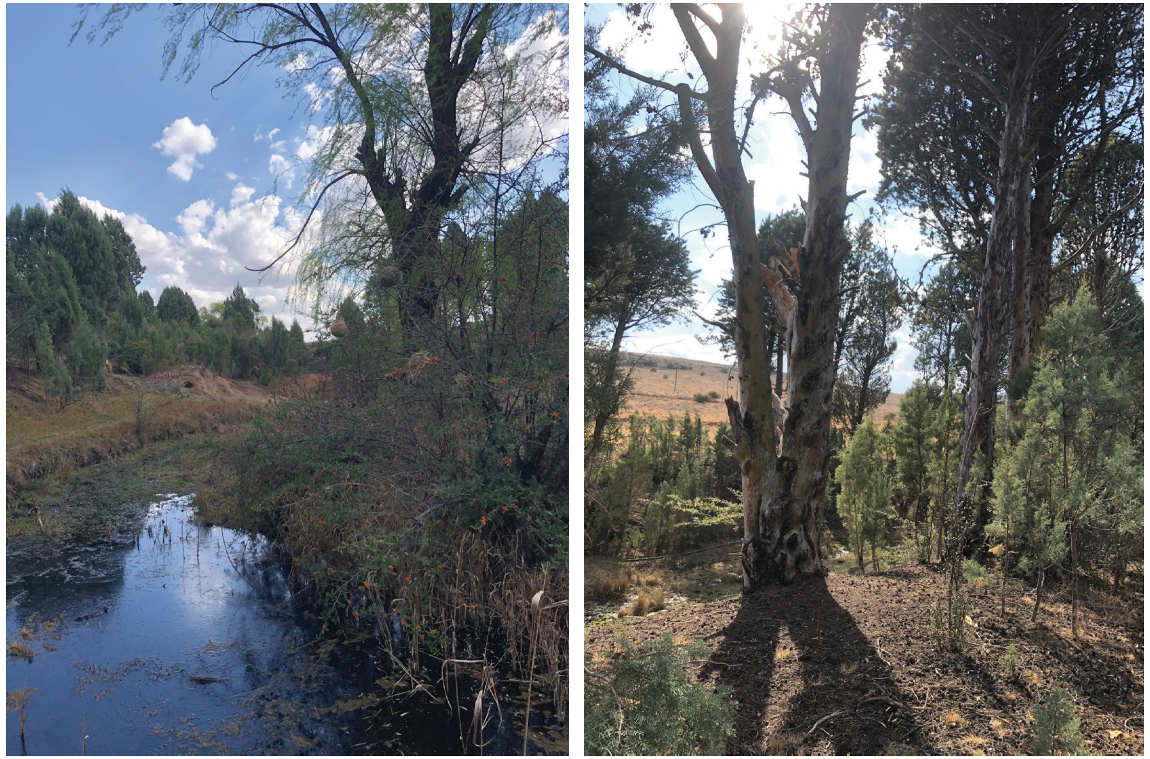

Fig. 16 and 17: Forest on the outskirts of Rosendal

The material and metaphorical concept of a forest informed my conception of Sanctuary. Connected along networks of mycelial threads, a forest is an enormous multi-species entity – a living chimera. Although the most prominent elements of a forest are the trees, these great entities rely on multiple other organisms to exist (Tsing, 2015:238). Tiny pollinators, such as insects or birds, facilitate their reproduction; their seeds are dispersed by fruit-eating animals, and below the ground, mycorrhizal relations between root and fungi allow these giants of the forest to absorb life-sustaining nutrients and water.

As a way of articulating, or at least honouring, this idea of multi-species entanglement, the artistic mode of an installation seemed most fitting. Rather than placing the monsters onto plinths (the conventional western art-historical mode of paying tribute to a figure) and presenting them as alienated individuals, I have situated them within an environment. They are presented in relation to their surroundings, to each other and to the viewer. Home to multiple, intra-acting inhabitants (of various scales), Sanctuary aims to emulate an ecosystem, proposing a form of mythology that is in aid of ecology rather than merely affirming the notion of human exceptionalism. However, it is not an overly abundant installation. The sparse layout emphasises the vulnerability of the creatures, as well as opposing the material excess of capitalism.

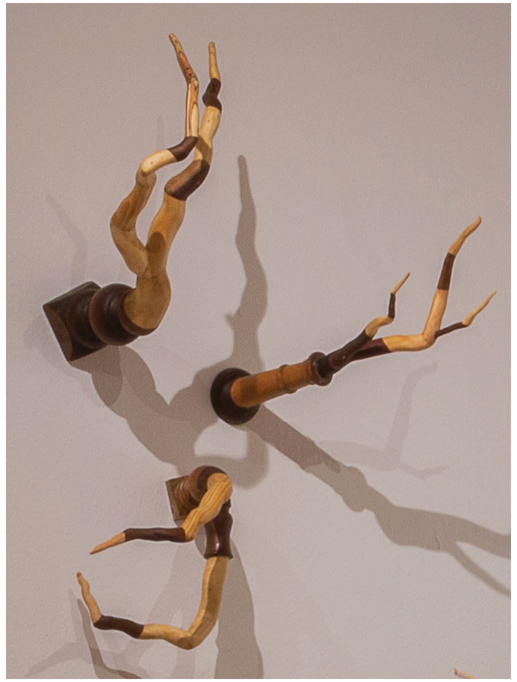

Fig. 18: Branches carved from furniture pieces

In a literary sense, the forest is also an especially storied setting. It is the backdrop to many fables and fairy tales, a space in which things are not as they seem. Animals speak and people can transform. Here we might be able to explore imaginative alternatives to society's oppressive limits. My thoughts around this subject were once again enriched by the work of Jack Halberstam. In his 2020 book Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire, he proposes a theory of *Bewilderment*— accessing a queer realm that exists outside of, and in opposition to, the ordered space of modernity. Considering the toxic, ruinous impact of modern civilisation, Halberstam turns his attention to civilisation's obverse in search of creative alternatives to the status quo. In doing so, he grapples with the racialised, colonial narrative which framed wildness as adhering to a primitive past in need of "civilising", amounting to indigenous genocide and the subjugation of people of colour. On this note, he acknowledges the risk of engaging with the word – that of "reproducing the terms it seeks to displace" (2020:46). I share this concern with regards to offering my monsters as symbols of oppressed people. However, Halberstam deems it a risk worth taking in order to "critique those regimes of meaning" and open the "possibility for unmaking and unbuilding" which is so necessary for conceiving a less oppressive world (Halberstam, 2020:4). The wild, in this conception, becomes a potentially decolonial paradigm.

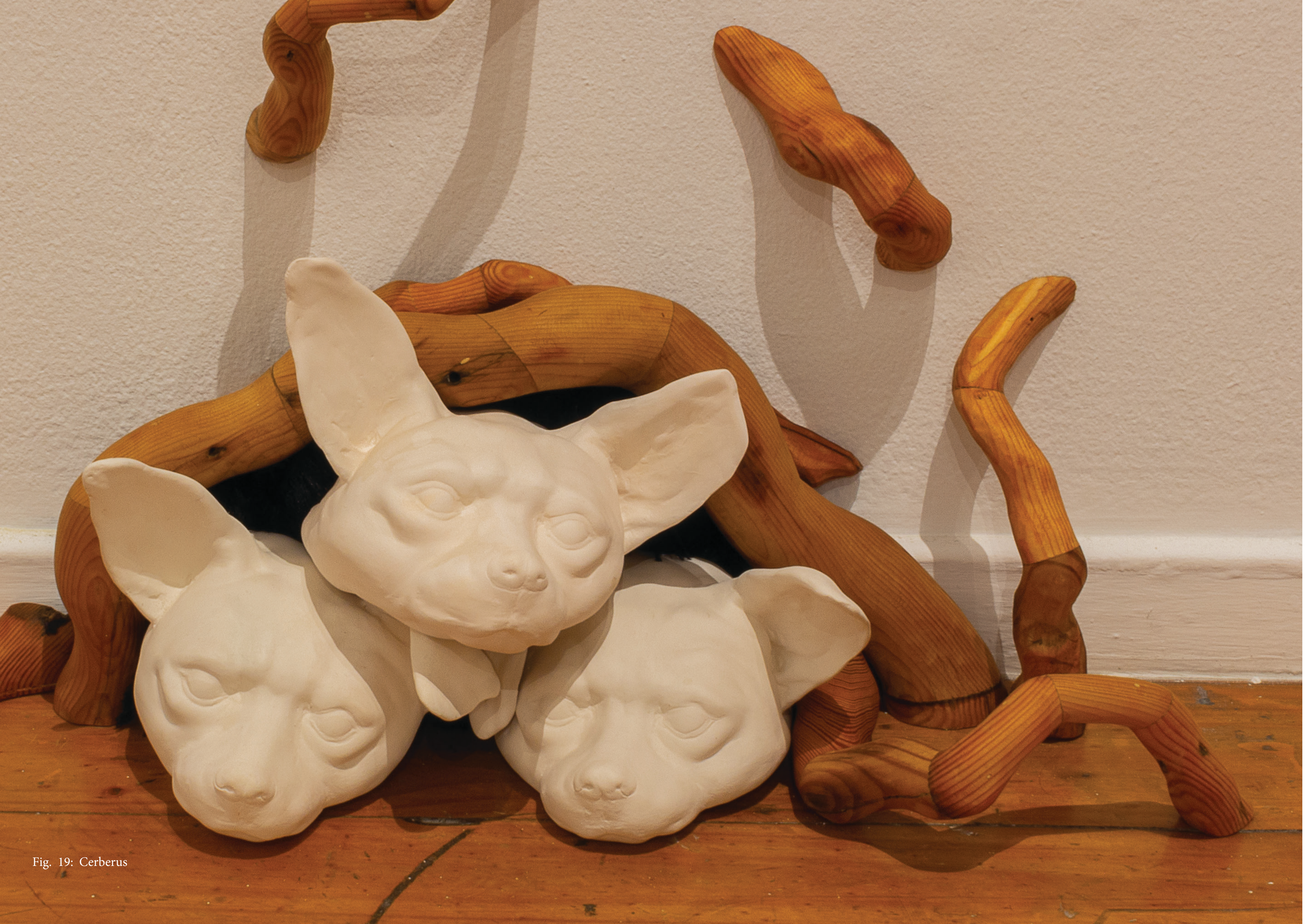

Fig. 19: Cerberus

DENIZENS OF THE *SANCTUARY*

Cerberus (the three-headed hell hound who was famously dognapped by Heracles) and his den at the entrance of the underworld offers a figurative and literal portal to the earthly, Chthonic realm. In my *sanctuary*, Cerberus has been reimagined as an aardwolf. Although not technically part of the canine family (they are more closely related to Hyenas), their large ears and pointed snouts do give them a dog-like appearance. In honour of breaking taxonomic distinctions, they offered a perfect candidate. Much like Cerberus of myth, aardwolves spend most of their time away from the surface world in subterranean burrows. Generally nocturnal foragers (unlike other hyenas they are not scavengers but subsist on termites), they are shy and rarely seen by humans. My only contact with the species has been with victims of roadkill. Such encounters are a sad reality because their termite prey have found a niche on farmland and grazed pastures.

Amidst tangled wooden roots, his three heads protrude from their den. The rest of his body is hidden from view. How far does the den extend, and what else might be hiding in its secretive depths?

Concealing Cerberus's body was a conceptual tactic to draw attention to the predominantly invisible processes which constitute the activities of the biosphere. The low position of the den mouth also encourages viewers to peer, or even bend down. This action is symbolic of the importance of paying attention to the earth, noticing that which is usually overlooked.

The figure of Cerberus, or a creature possibly inspired by him, also appears in a recent body of work by Mary Sibande, in which she focuses on the colour red. In a series of life-sized sculptural installations and photographic works, the South African artist presents her recurring motif, a black fibreglass figure modelled after Sibande's own image. Clad all in red, she is accompanied by a monstrous cohort of red dogs. While her work does include a central human character, Sibande subverts the dominant heroic representation by elevating the historically marginalised figure of the black woman. However, in the context of my project, her attendant monsters will be my focus.

Inspired by the isiZulu idiom of the red dog as an expression for an angry person, Sibande explores the role of righteous anger against ongoing structural inequality in South Africa. These hellhounds (the term used to describe the red dogs in the accompanying text) seem to be under the command of the red figure. In the 2022 sculptural installation *A Red Flight of Fancy* (figure 20), the hounds take the form of articulated puppets, connected to the central figure via red fabric tendrils. In this series, Sibande reimagines the monstrous as a generative force in opposition to the hegemonic systems of oppression.

In Sibande's 2019 sculptural tableau *Domba Dance* (figure 21), we encounter a multiheaded version of the red dog (beside a seated figure) that most explicitly conjures associations with the mythical Cerberus. The sloping backs and ferocious snarling jaws of these hellhounds are also reminiscent of hyenas. While this similarity suggests another connection to my Aardwolf Cerberus, it also seems conceptually relevant. Spotted Hyena clans follow a matriarchal hierarchy, signifying female dominance. This resemblance seems important considering Sibande's empowering portrayal of the black female figure.

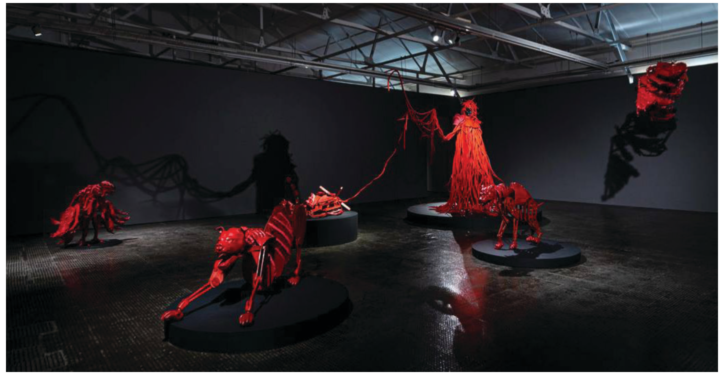

Fig. 20 : *A Red Flight of Fancy*. Mary Sibande. (2022)

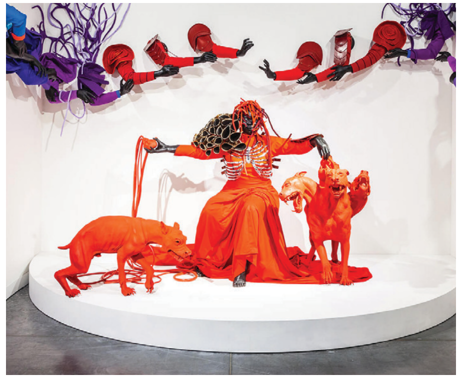

Fig. 21: *Domba Dance*. Mary Sibande. (2019)

Back in the *Sanctuary*, another creature that can be found nesting on the forest (gallery) floor is my interpretation of the Lernaean Hydra. According to myth, this lake-dwelling, polycephalous creature possessed the ability to regrow extra heads after decapitation. For me, this story conjures up the image of battery chickens — their swollen forms crammed so tightly together that a viewer is unable to differentiate the individual bodies, instead appearing as a many-headed mass. The Hydra was described as a terrible monster. However, her[28] monstrosity was not an inherent quality — rather, it was foisted upon her by the person who attempted to slay her. This imposed mutation is also a characteristic of the poultry industry. Since the 1950s, chickens have been subject to genetic manipulation and have been administered a plethora of hormones, antibiotics, and painkillers in order to induce "forced maturation and disproportionate tissue development" (Haraway, 2008). The resultant birds are barely able to walk, let alone fly. However, this situation suits the transnational poultry industry because battery broilers provide little space to move in any case. Aside from the suffering and slaughter of billions of birds worldwide, such practices also have a disastrous environmental impact. Waste runoff from factory farms pollutes nearby water sources and the extreme number and proximity of birds incubates avian flu, which is all too easily transmitted via global trade networks. The hen-as-Hydra juxtaposes the mythical monster with a contemporary counterpart — that of industrial agriculture. Their presence within the *Sanctuary* also places the industrialised farm animal in relation to "wild" creatures (such as the aardwolf), suggesting an equivalence of value for living beings.

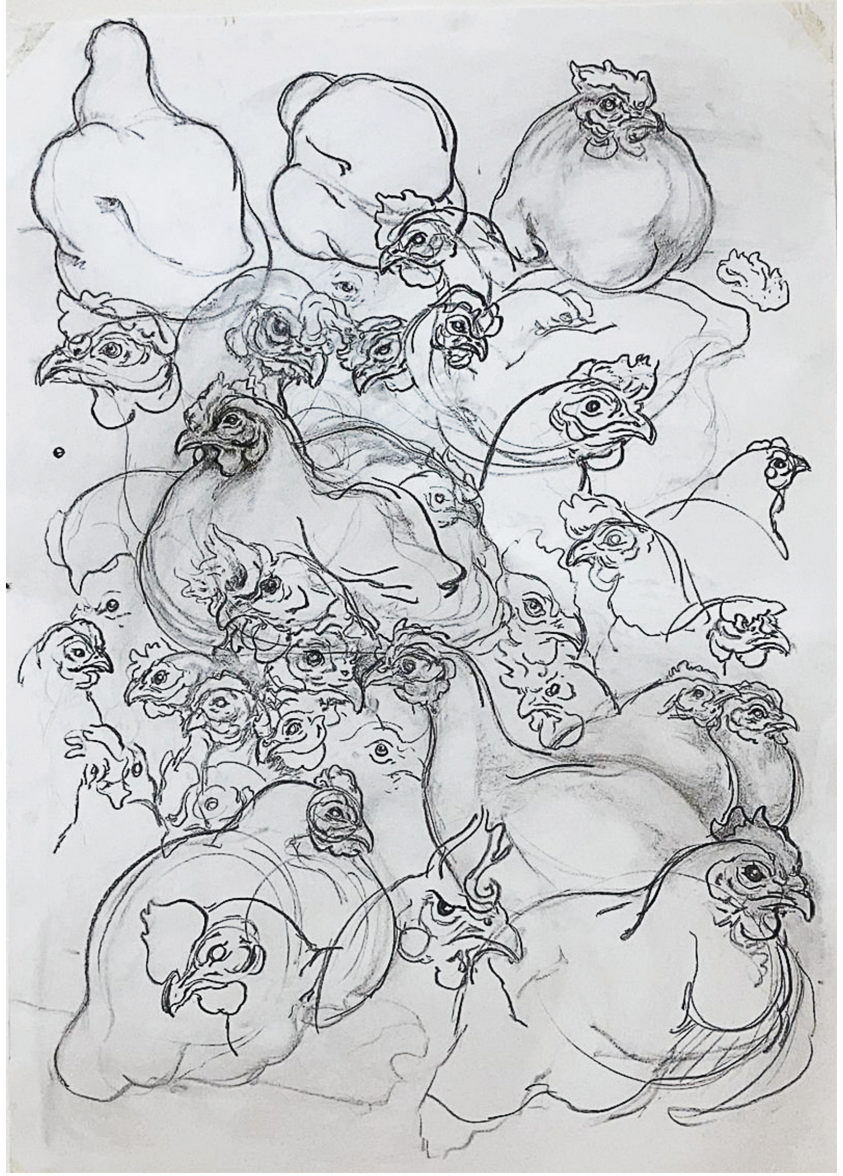

Fig. 22: Sketch for battery hen Hydra

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[28] Like many of the monsters of Greek mythology, the Hydra was explicitly feminised.

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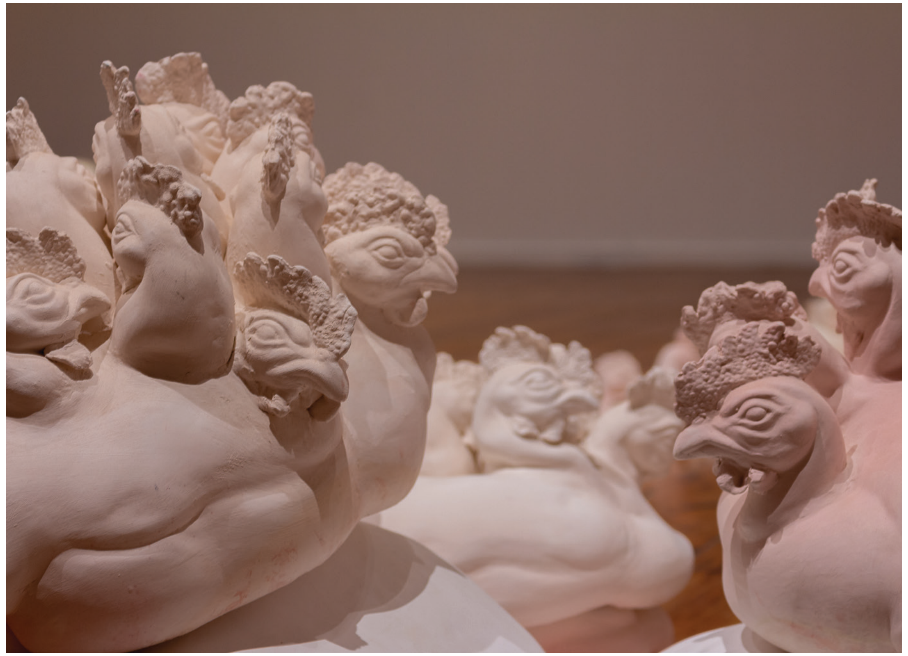
[29] Something else which is deemed monstrous and pathologized within our overtly fatphobic society.



In places, the Hydras' plump, slip-cast bodies bulge and collapse under the weight of their many heads. Although in reality the ceramic is brittle, the seemingly soft, dimpled forms resemble folds of ample human flesh; patterns of hairline cracks recall stretch marks. In this way, viewers might be able to identify with these abject animals.

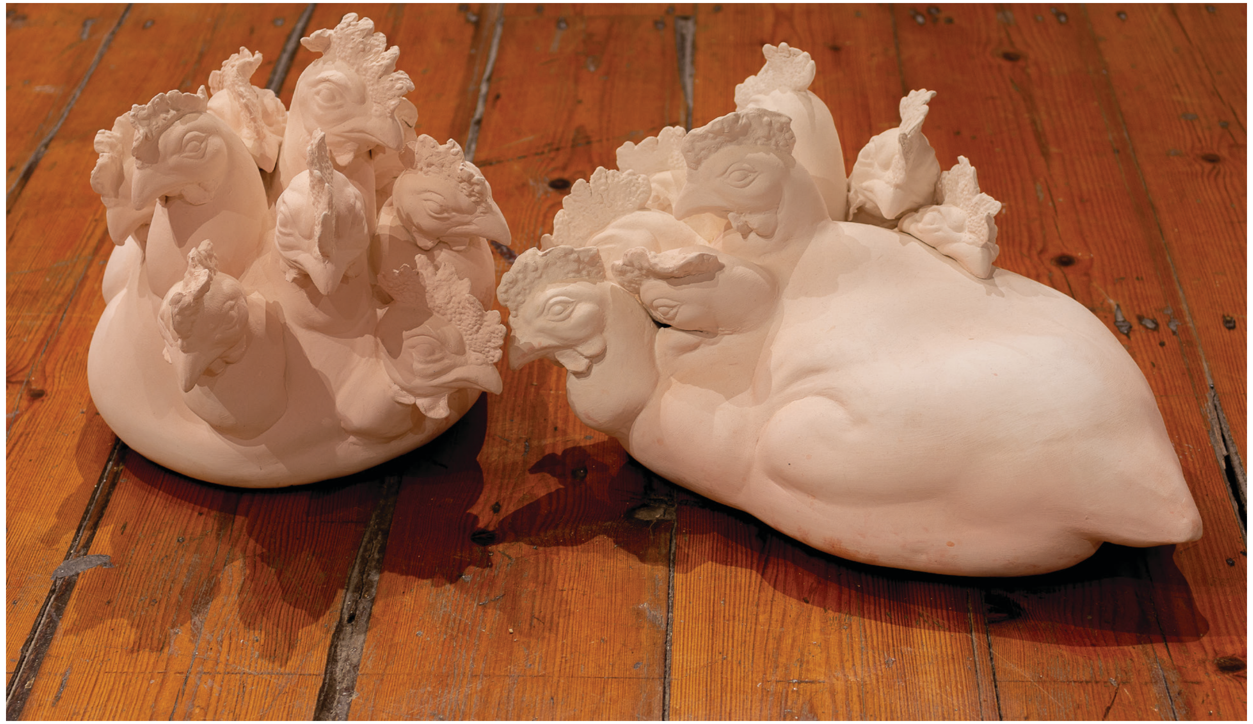


Fig. 23 and 24: Hen-Hydras in the gallery

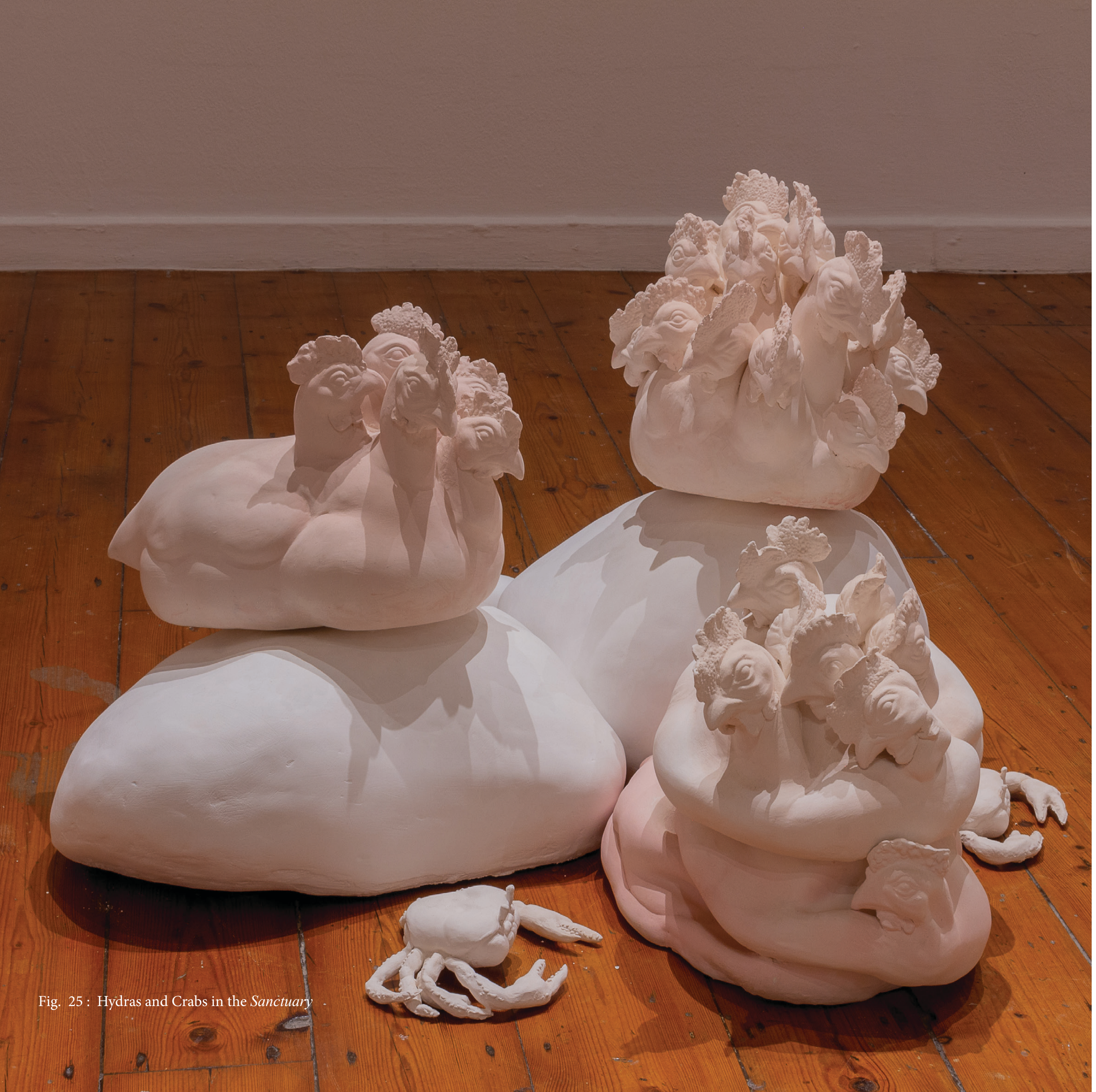
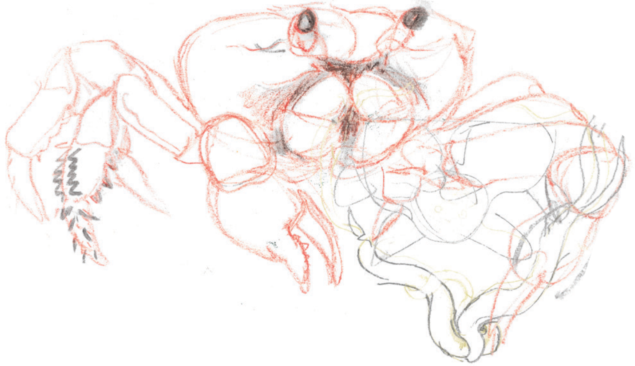
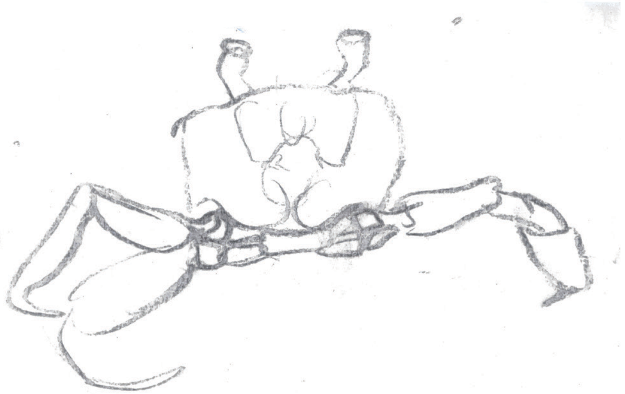
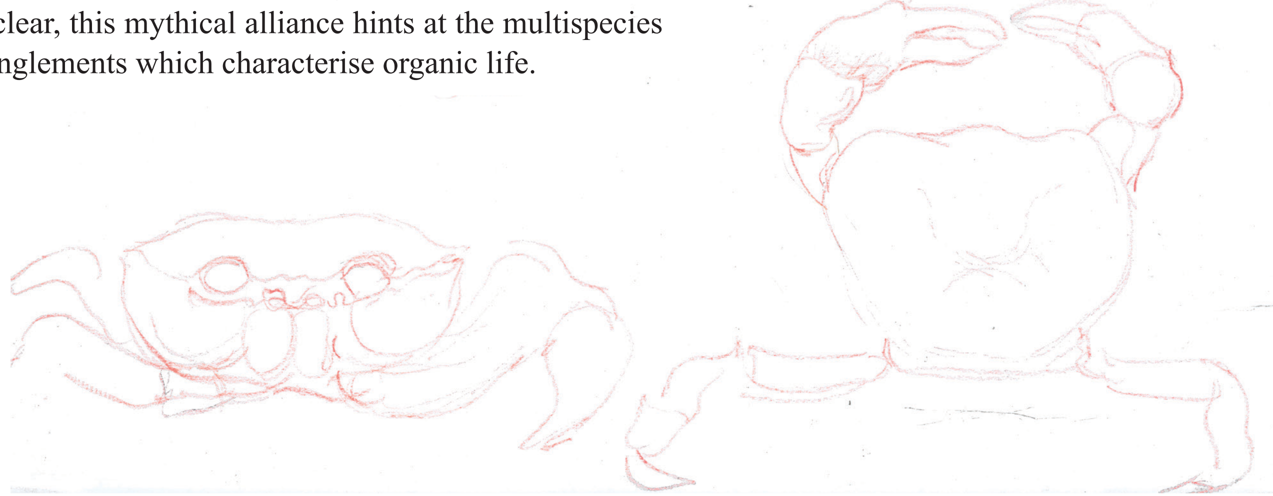


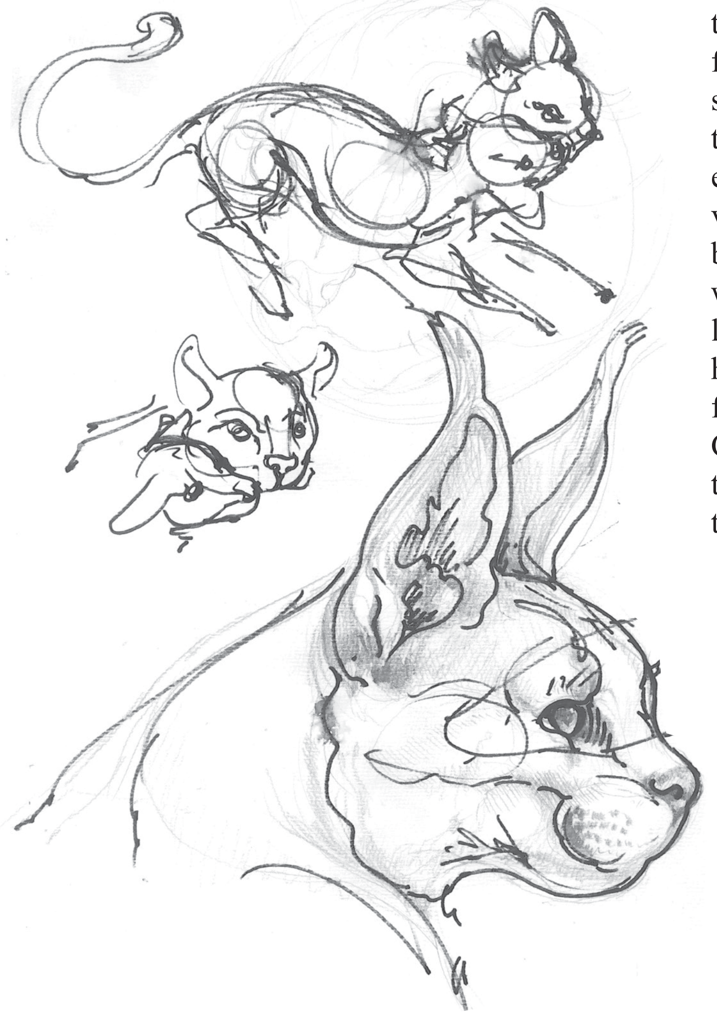
Fig. 25 : Hydras and Crabs in the *Sanctuary*



In the marshes of Lernea, the Hydra did not lead a solitary existence. According to myth, when Heracles attacked, a giant crab came to her aid. This was Carcinos. For me, this brief example of queer, multispecies allyship is the most exciting part of that story and is deserving of celebration. In the *sanctuary*, the hen-hydras have maintained a bond with their crustacean companions. Gregarious creatures, the hydras and crabs mingle together among plaster rocks. A broody hen might sit on a crab, offering warmth and protection. Although the specific, symbiotic details behind the Hydra-crab relationship are not clear, this mythical alliance hints at the multispecies entanglements which characterise organic life.



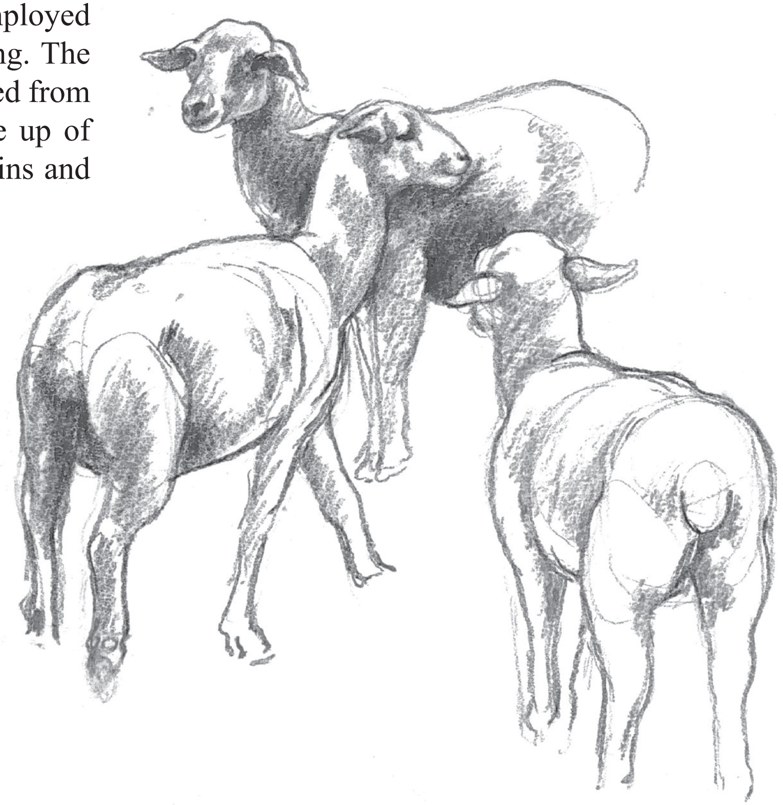




Another monster which inhabits the sanctuary goes even further in breaking down the modern conceit of individualism. The Chimera was a fire-breathing hybrid creature most often described as having the body of a lion with a goat's head protruding from its back and a tail ending in the head of a snake. Unlike the *sanctuary's* other inhabitants, the Chimera was not a victim of Heracles but rather his Corinthian counterpart, Bellerophon. In this version, I have referred to a feline with fewer symbolic associations — the caracal, a smaller African wild cat. Unlike lions, which in South Africa only live in nature reserves, caracals have adapted to human disturbance. They are commonly found in farmland, and even on the fringes of cities such as Cape Town. This proximity to humans often leads to persecution, particularly due to their tendency to prey on livestock (Bergman et al, 2013).

The Chimera's fantastical physique eludes classification. Incorporating both predator and prey, mammal and reptile, it is a monster of multiplicity. I see the Chimera as an embodied critique of the kind of taxonomy that propped up the racist, patriarchal, anthropocentric hierarchy of modern thought.

Considering the chimera's inherent multiplicity, for my sculptural portrayal I employed a mixed media approach in its making. The creature's various heads were modelled from earthenware clay, its soft body made up of a patchwork of second-hand sheepskins and fabric off-cuts.



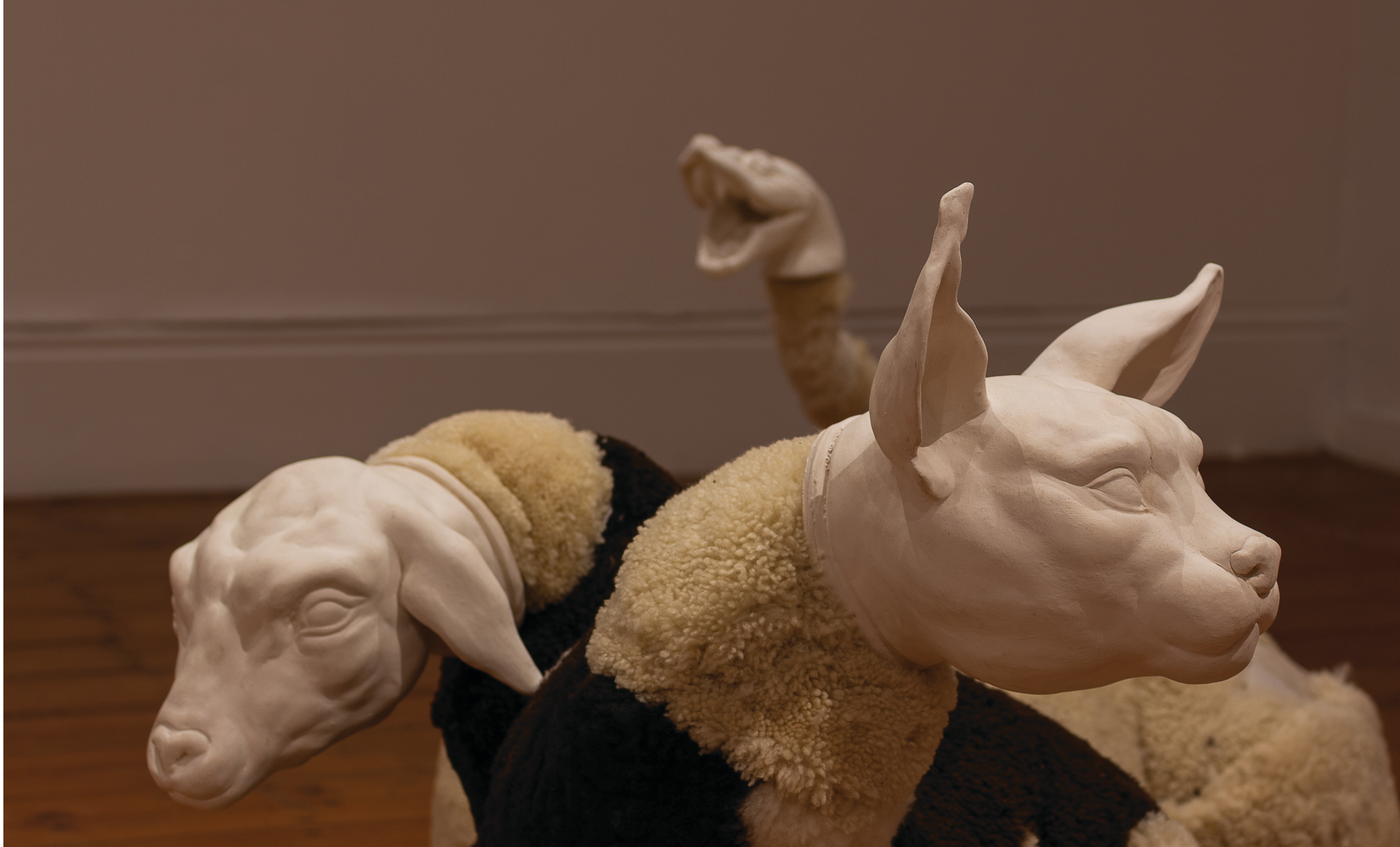


Fig. 26: Close-up of the Chimera's heads

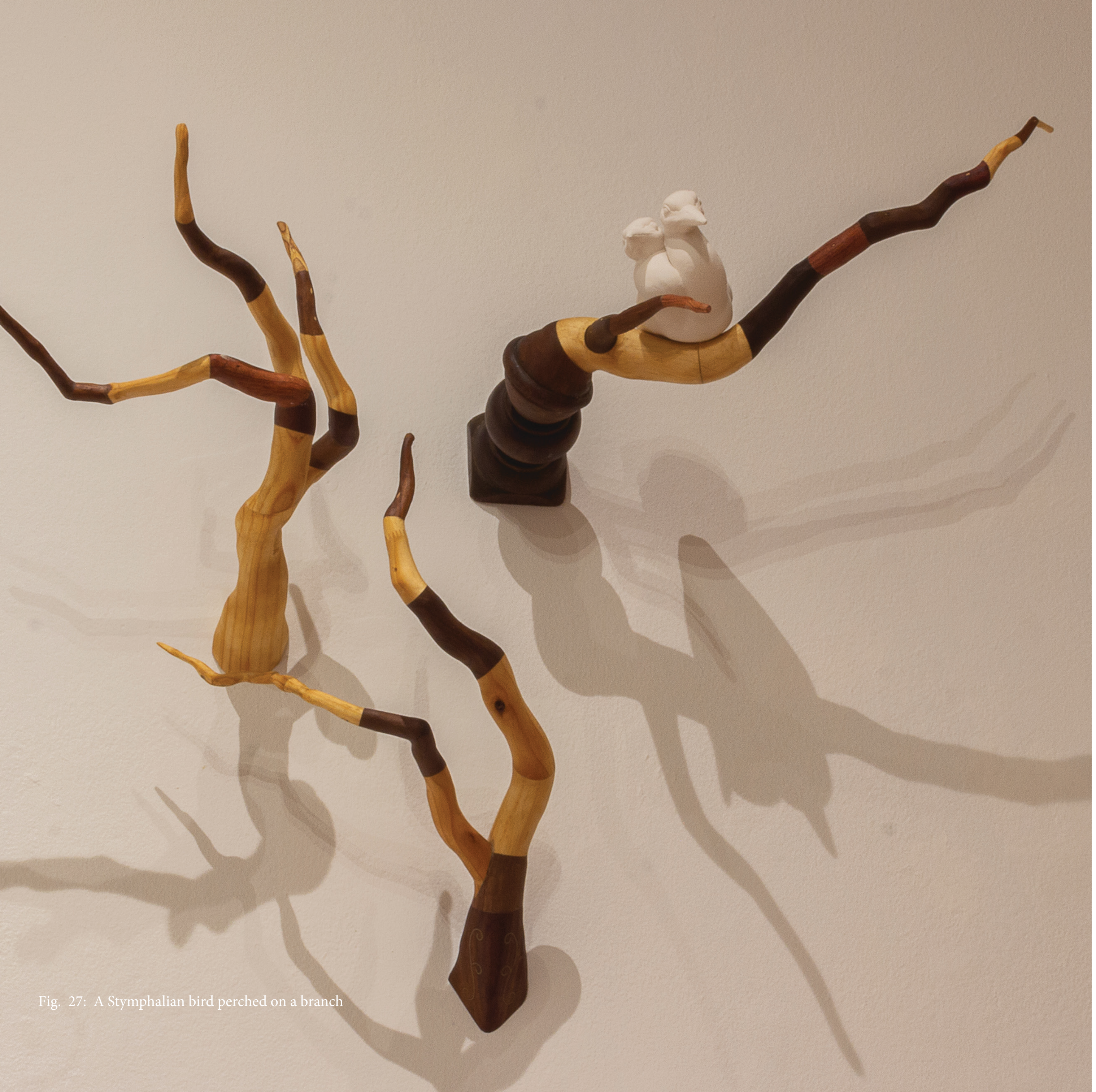
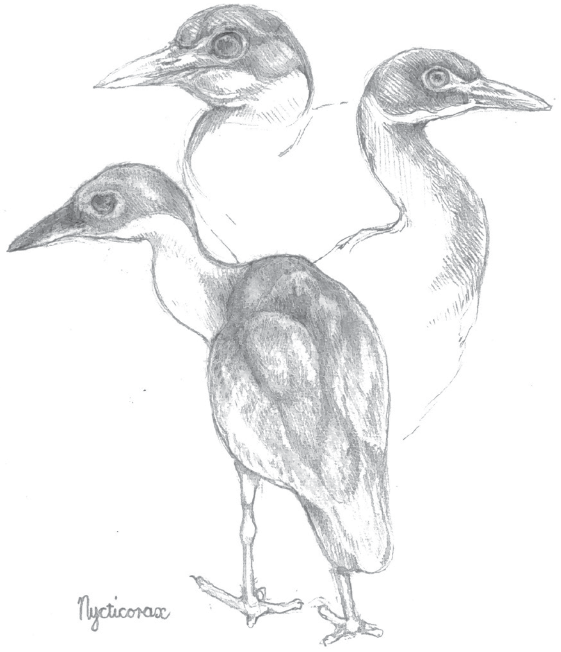


Fig. 27: A Stymphalian bird perched on a branch

Among the branches, another avian species makes its home in the *sanctuary*. Originating in the swamps of Arcadia, the Stymphalian birds were described as man-eating, bronze beaked monsters. According to Pausanias[30], they would “fly against those who come to hunt them, wounding and killing them with their beaks” (Jones et al, 1918). Although for anyone who has ever come across a nesting lapwing, this actually sounds like typical bird behaviour. For protecting their territory, they were deemed a threat, and so Heracles was dispatched to exterminate them.

In my interpretation of the Stymphalian birds, their features are based on South African wetland birds, the white-backed night heron and the flufftail. These species are secretive, more often heard than seen



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[30] Pausanias was a 2nd century writer who described many of the sites of ancient Greece (World History Encyclopaedia, 2017).

While sculpting them, I was partly inspired by a moment in Wim Botha's *The River*. At one end of his long, table-like tableau, a pair of broad-billed water birds are perched as if gazing into the depths of the coloured, glass river (figure 27).

Wetlands are important environments, not only because of the wealth of biodiversity they support, but also for the role they play in absorbing excess rain. In spite of this, they often come second against the expansive demands of industrialization , urbanisation, and water-intensive agricultural practices.

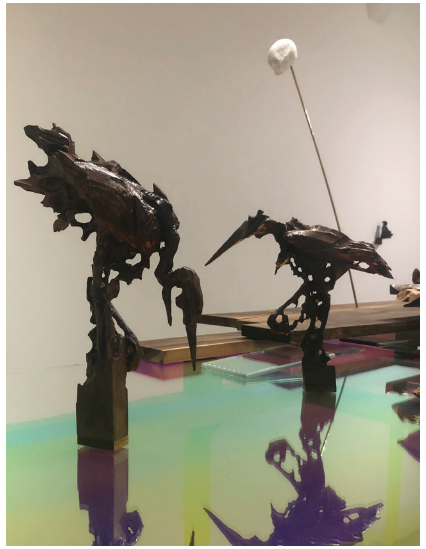
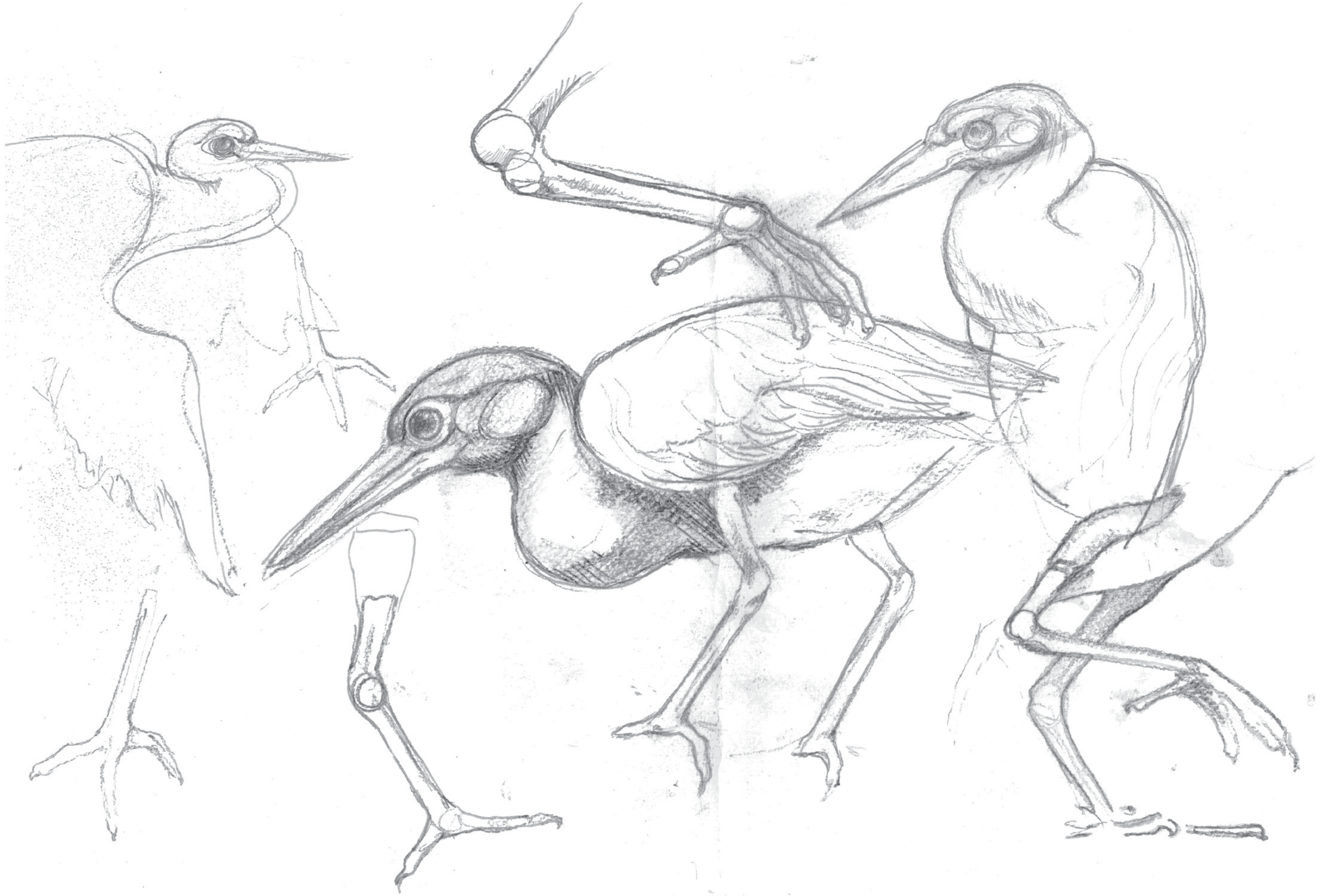


Fig. 28: *The River,* Wim Botha, 2021 (detail)



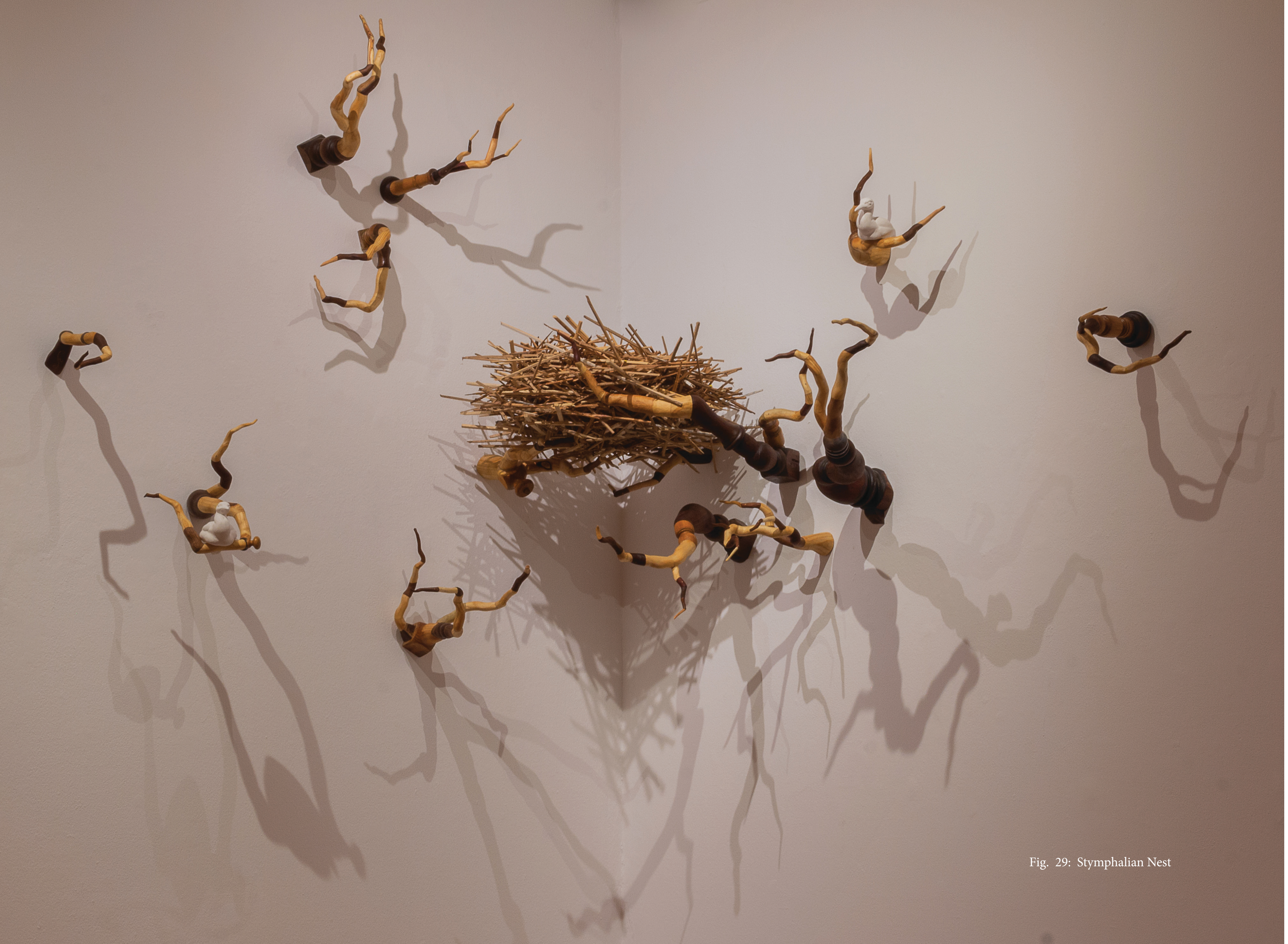


Fig. 29: Stymphalian Nest

Aside from the ceramic birds themselves, their existence in the *sanctuary* is also alluded to by the presence of a nest held aloft by branches. Composed of strips of off-cut wood gathered from the campus workshop, this piece in particular denotes the idea of "making life in the ruins", to borrow a phrase from Anna Tsing.

The sculpted elements of *Sanctuary* are accompanied by a sound piece made in collaboration with my friend and sonic producer, Katlego Gaveni. It is composed of field recordings I collected on the outskirts of Rosendal, Newlands Forest and the Overberg region. Many of the original recordings were taken at night, within the forest or beside bodies of water, and capture ambient sounds of waterbirds and insects. Manipulated with audio software, the sounds take on an eerie, otherworldly quality befitting their fantastical environment. However, this technological mediation also echoes the process by which cultural conceptions of "nature" have been constructed.

This soundtrack adds an immersive quality to the *sanctuary* — an attempt at expanding one's perception beyond merely the visual. It also introduces a temporal quality. However, the track does not have a definitive beginning or end. Sounds fade in and out; they echo and reverberate. This looping and temporal distortion suggests a cyclical quality which is counterposed against the linear progression of straight time.

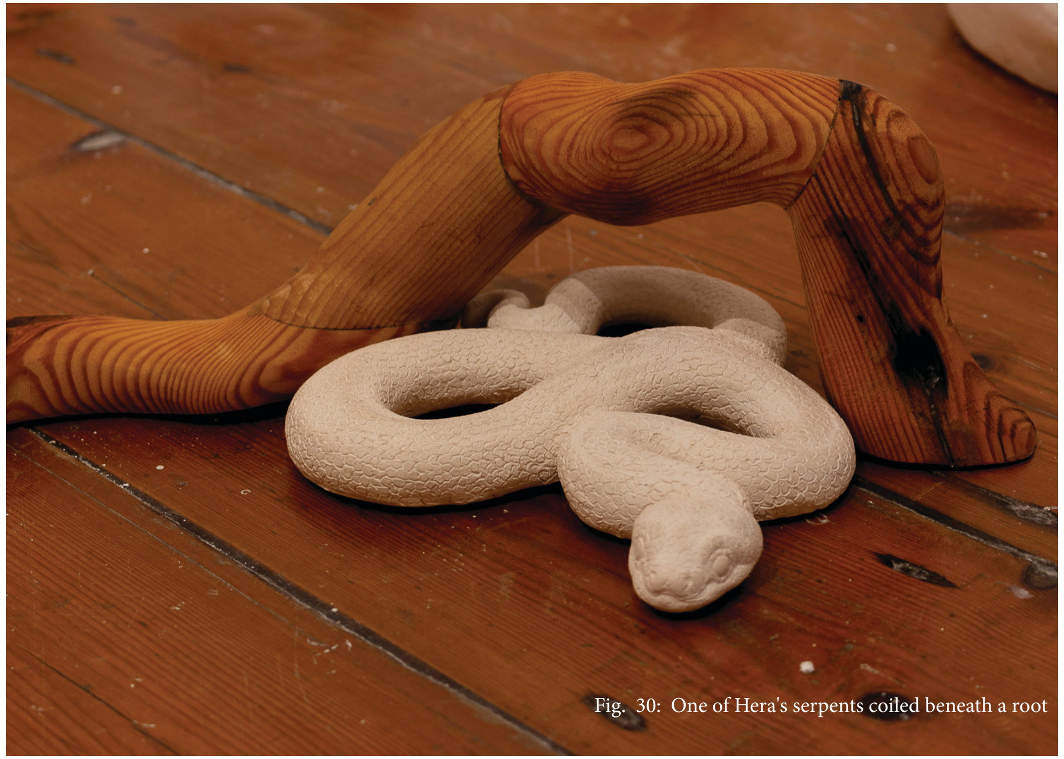


Fig. 30: One of Hera's serpents coiled beneath a root

CARE

At its heart, *Sanctuary* signifies a symbolic space of care. The monsters which originally only knew persecution and violence are instead offered a space of safety in which to experience care. However, as with the issue of sanctuary discussed earlier, care is not as innocent a concept as it has been made out to be. In *Matters of Care* (2017) interdisciplinary academic Maria Puig de la Bellacasa discusses the ambivalent, contested condition of caring and the gendered associations of caregiving, traditionally deemed to be "women's work." De la Bellacasa explores the ways in which caregiving has been co-opted by neoliberal ideology to promote an individualistic practice, and the forms of "paternalistic care" which serve to perpetuate inequality in an already "stratified world" (2017:8,9,29). A naïve investment in care, which does not acknowledge its layers of complexity, runs the risk of furthering a reductive, normative definition of care. Nevertheless, it remains a crucial topic in a time in which rethinking the ways people relate to each other and the rest of the world is an existential priority. Within *Sanctuary*, I do not pretend to offer any kind of prescriptive schematic for how to care per se, but rather open it up to cultural scrutiny.

> Feminist ethics of care argue that to value care is to recognize the inevitable interdependency essential to the existence of reliant and vulnerable beings.
>
> (de la Bellacasa, 2017:70)

In an ecological context, the late ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose describes care as "an ethical response involving tenderness, generosity, and compassion; [an] ongoing assumption of responsibility in the face of continuing violence and peril" (2017:77). In contemporary society this is surely a radical ambition. In this sense, any attempts to truly *care* (for animal life, the environment, or people) must involve an acknowledgement, and opposition to, historical dynamics of domination and oppression. This definition resonates with the late feminist theorist bell hooks's theories on love. As she wrote, "there can be no love without justice" (2000:19).

Inspired by the work of queer South African artist Goldendean (aka Dean Hutton) I endeavour to produce this work "in an ethic of love" (2018:32). Informed by the writing of hooks, Hutton invokes love as a collective practice predicated on a desire for social justice. This is entirely different from the gendered and dominative image of love proliferated by mainstream culture— an idea of "love" rooted in the entirely unloving practice of jealousy, all too often tied to the project of "reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality" (Muñoz, 2009:22). Hutton frames (queer) love as a praxis in opposition to the alienating demands of capitalism.

While some of their performance work takes a more provocative, antagonistic stance (such as the *#FUCKWHITEPEOPLE* series)[31] I am most interested in their softer, more playful *body* of work. In *Breathe* (2016) the artist adorned their naked body with golden paint – the regalia of Goldendean — and frolicked atop a mound of sand, blowing bubbles and interacting with the audience (figure 30). In these live artworks, Goldendean stages encounters of queer visibility and play. Although such performance pieces seem disparate from my own project, they involve "sharing moments of soft courage that invest trust in an audience to respond in kindness, to let our bodies be safe together" (Goldendean, 2018:35). These interactive performances become moments of sanctuary from societally enforced heteronormativity, a notion which resonates with the symbolic sanctuary I am attempting to create.

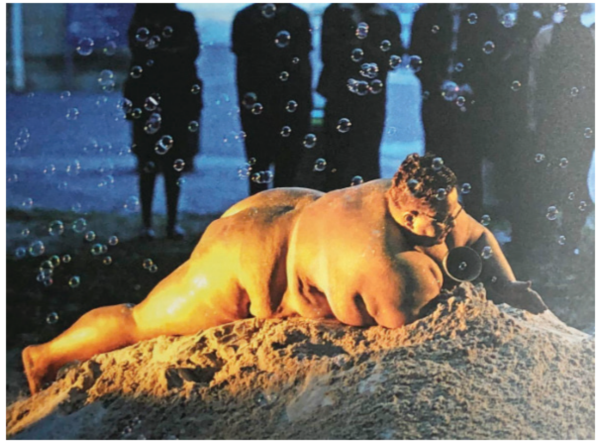


Fig. 31: Photographic documentation of *Breathe*, Goldendean, 2016

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[31] In which they produced an outfit emblazoned with the phrase "FUCK WHITE PEOPLE" in a repetitive print and wore it in various public spaces (2015-).

The concepts of care and love also animate the process of sculpting my monsters — their soft clay forms are the result of careful smoothing and stroking. As the clay begins to resemble the creatures I am rendering, the actions of sculpting feel like petting or caressing; enactments of affection and care. The fragile artefacts of this endeavour, prone to cracking with little encouragement before firing and still frangible once out the kiln, also require care when being handled and arranged.

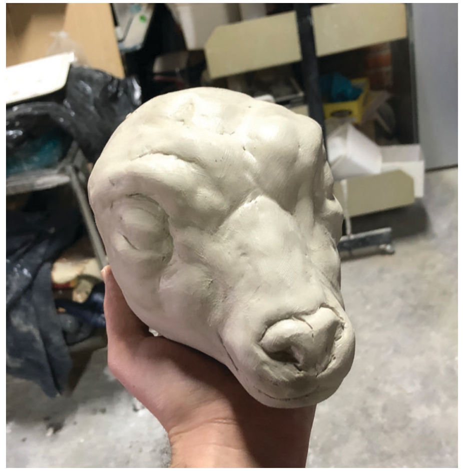
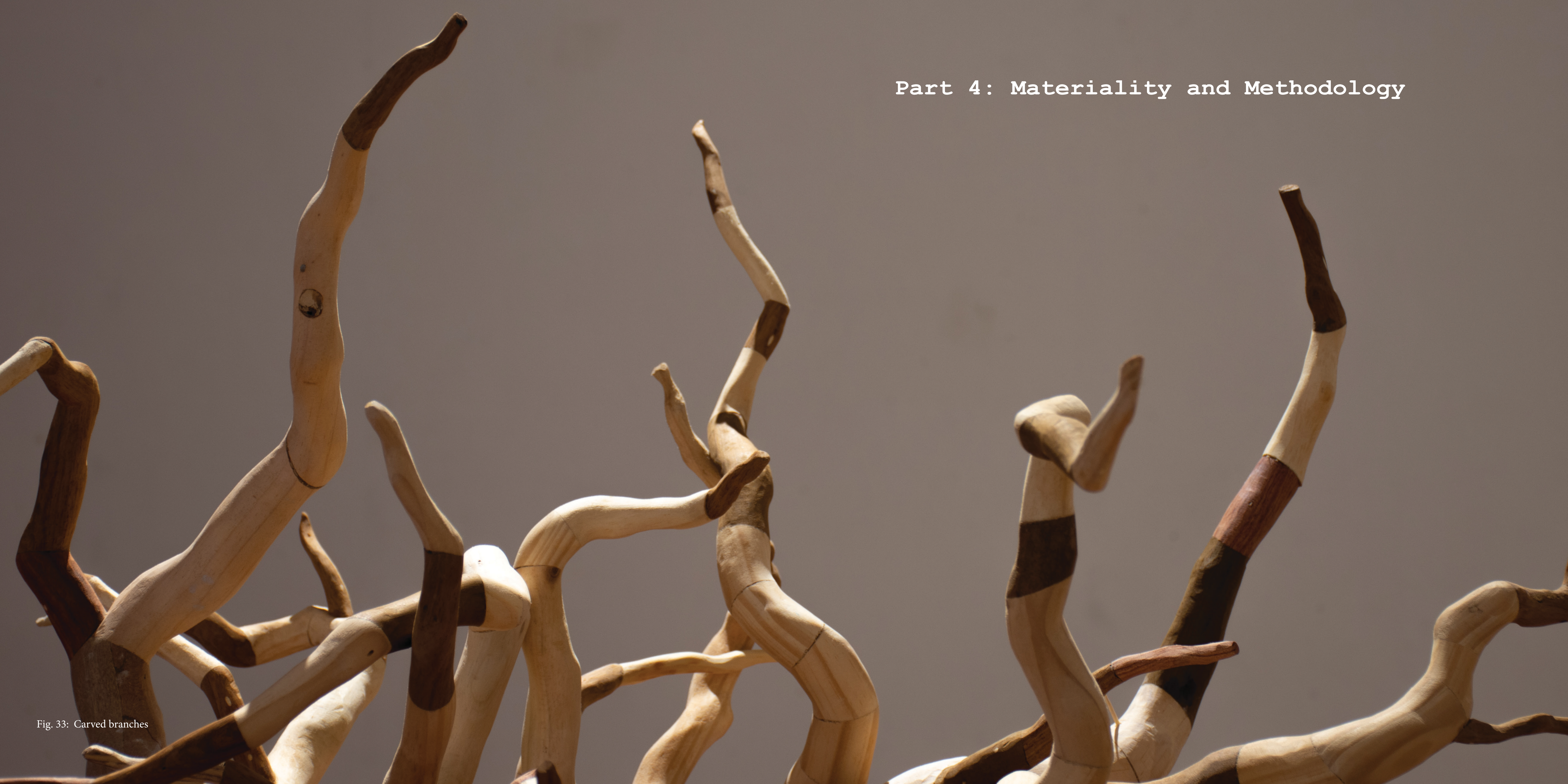


Fig. 32: Sculpting one of the Chimera's heads in studio



Part 4: Materiality and Methodology

Fig. 33: Carved branches

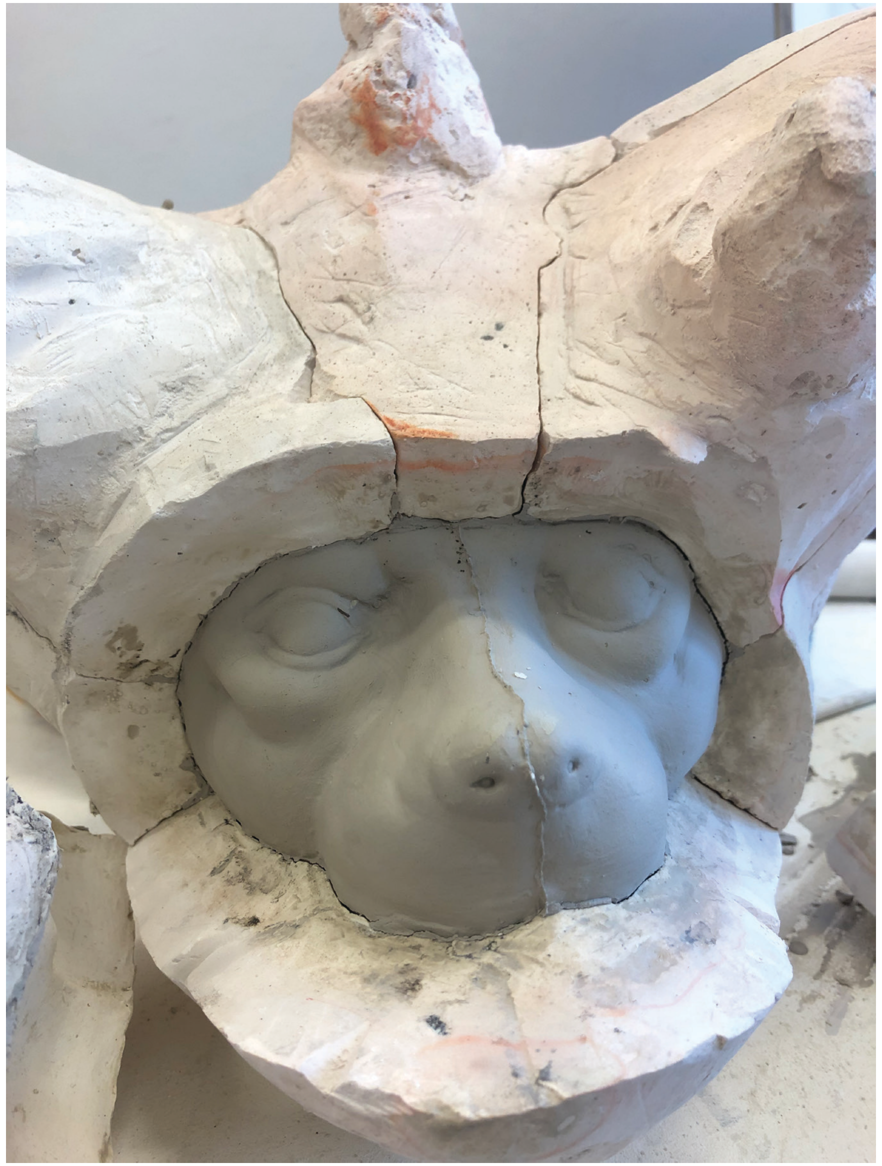


Fig. 34: One of Cerberus's slipcast heads emerging from the mould

The inherent qualities and histories of the materials with which I created this body of work contribute to its layered meanings. The primary materials used in this installation include clay, repurposed wood, and plaster of Paris.

The medium of clay is particularly fitting for reimagining mythical figures. Aside from a nod to Prometheus[32], clay and ceramics had a prominent place in ancient industry (Charleston, 1981). Some of the oldest sculpted artworks in existence were made using clay.
It is an inherently earthly material. Fine particles of mineral and organic matter are filtered through rock and it is formed by the interaction of land and water. Clay is the stuff of the Chthulucene, carrying traces of living things — bygone creatures and the microbial organisms which digest them. Although this project explores an otherworldly, fantastical realm in the mythic, the materiality of clay offers a direct link to the earth.

The ceramic technique of slip casting presents a useful solution for accumulating the many heads of the Hydras and Cerberus. This involves making plaster of Paris moulds from original clay sculptures, which are then filled with liquid clay (slip). The hydrophilic plaster absorbs moisture from the clay, forming a thin ceramic shell. Excess slip is then poured out, creating a hollow sculpture. Theoretically, this can be used to produce many identical replicas. However, between unmoulding and firing, I allowed and manipulated the still-slightly-flexible figures to sag and bulge, emphasising the idiosyncrasies of each sculpture. The mould can become like the matrix of a species. It is not a rigid system that produces uniform individuals. They are made different by dynamic encounters, the result of symbiotic coevolution.

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[32] Titan god who, according to ancient Greek myth, was credited with forming the first humans from earth and water.

The inherent fragility of this material highlights the notion of vulnerability, a significant theme of this project. This informs the finish of my ceramic creatures, which I leave intentionally unglazed and thus porous and susceptible to being marked or fractured. The unglazed earthenware also takes on a powdery, white finish which gives the monsters a ghostly, ethereal quality. I did not attempt to disguise any hairline cracks or chips, which serve as reminders of the perilous conditions of the present, as well as allusions to the violent mythical origins of the monsters. By acknowledging this material fragility, I aim to highlight the ways in which all life forms (including human) are vulnerable to anthropogenic activity and disturbance, hoping to promote a sense of responsibility for the effects of our actions in keeping with Rose's definition of care[33].

The excess plaster from mould-making provided a suitable material for sculpting another element of the installation — the rocks and pebbles upon which the Hydra and crabs congregate. Pragmatism aside, the material relationship between plaster and slip-cast ceramic proposes an intimate connection between the creatures and their habitat, which is an important concept in my configuration of the environment-installation.

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[33] As quoted in the subsection, Care (Rose, 2017: 77).

On a technical level, my plaster rocks bear the unmistakable influence of South African artist Dominique Edwards. Since 2019, Edwards has produced a body of sculptures entirely from plaster of Paris, delightfully titled, *Feelthings.* Smooth, pale forms range in size from metres across, to pebble-like objects that could be held in one's hands. While they are non-representational, their organic forms have an inexplicably evocative presence. Perhaps it reflects the lengthy, labour intensive but distinctively sensitive process by which they were shaped. In an accompanying text, Edwards's process of making the *Feelthings* is described as a "practice-based [material] meditation" (Shepherd, 2019 ¶ 2). Although my plaster rocks lack this pure, abstract quality and are physically rough in comparison, Edward's *Feelthings* inspired my use of plaster as medium of its own.

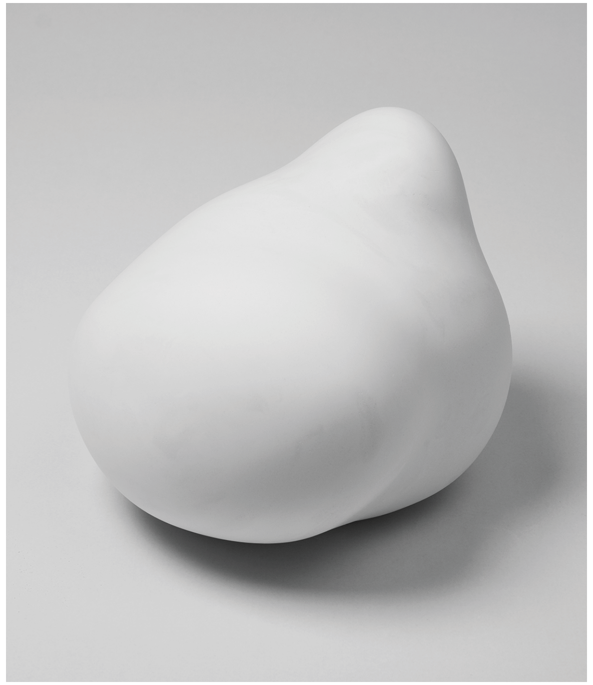

Fig. 35: *Feelthings.* Dominique Edwards (2019)

The environment of the *sanctuary* also comprises of carved branches and roots projecting from the surface of the walls and floor. This subtle disruption of the gallery's architecture suggests an invisible continuation outside of its parameters. They act as a physical reminder of the possibility of alternatives outside of hegemonic frameworks. The image of roots hints at subterranean networks and the hidden systems which support activities on the surface.

Much of the timber used to manufacture them was repurposed from the roofing and structural elements of a suburban house under renovation. Jutting from the walls above, the branches were carved from pre-existing wooden furniture elements (chair legs, curtain rods, a wooden headboard etc) salvaged from second-hand stores and wood workshops. On one hand, this was an exercise in bricolage in the spirit of recycling — an attempt at avoiding contributing to further deforestation. However, it also serves a more conceptual function. These household props are markers of domestic space. They can be viewed as representative of human society and activity. Therefore, the process of deconstructing and reshaping them into more organic, fluid forms ties into the aspirational project of dismantling hegemonic systems. It is an act of queer, creative destruction, once again aligning with Halberstam's theory of an aesthetic of collapse.

Furniture pieces of various hues and styles were taken apart and re-joined, resembling the fractal, attenuating forms of branches. With each joint, subtle patterns of connection are formed across alternating woodgrain. However, this rearrangement also weakens the structure of the wood. It is a fragile forest — a setting suffused with a sense of precarity, echoing the conditions of contemporary life.

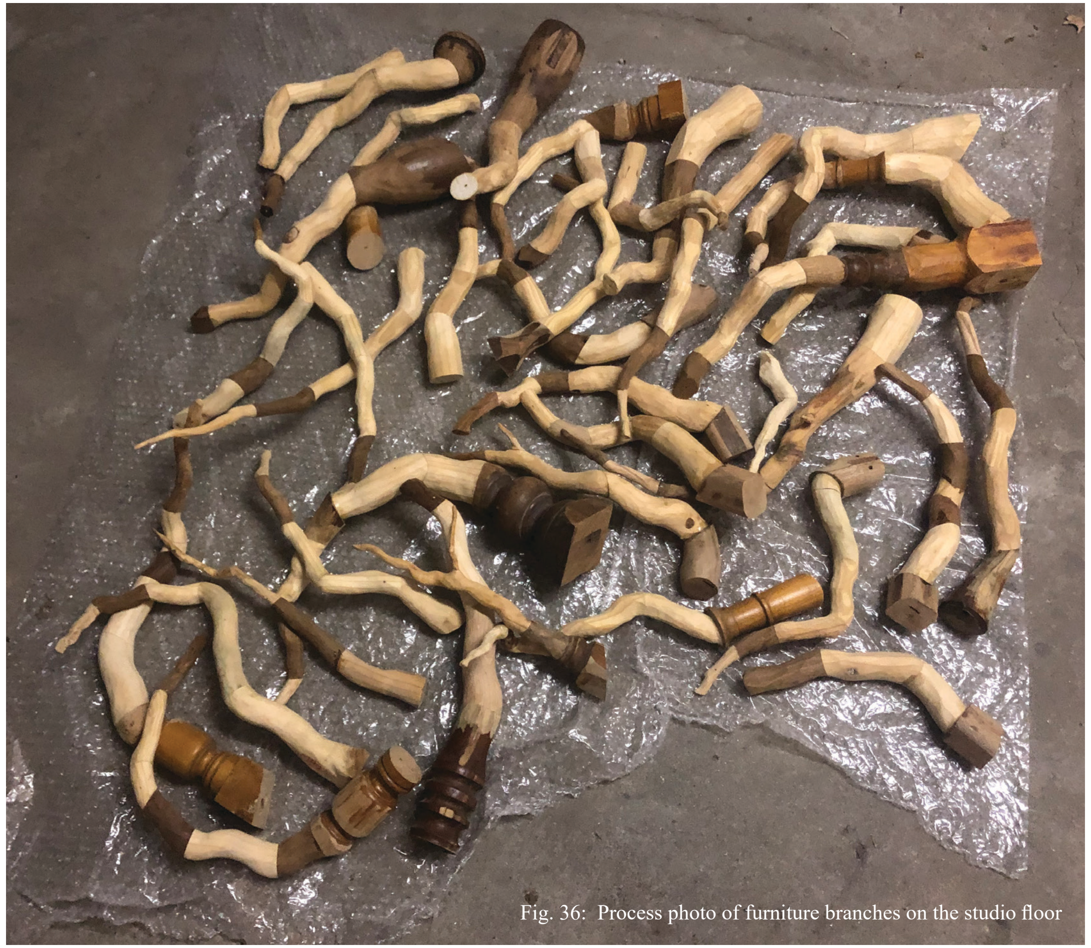

Fig. 36: Process photo of furniture branches on the studio floor

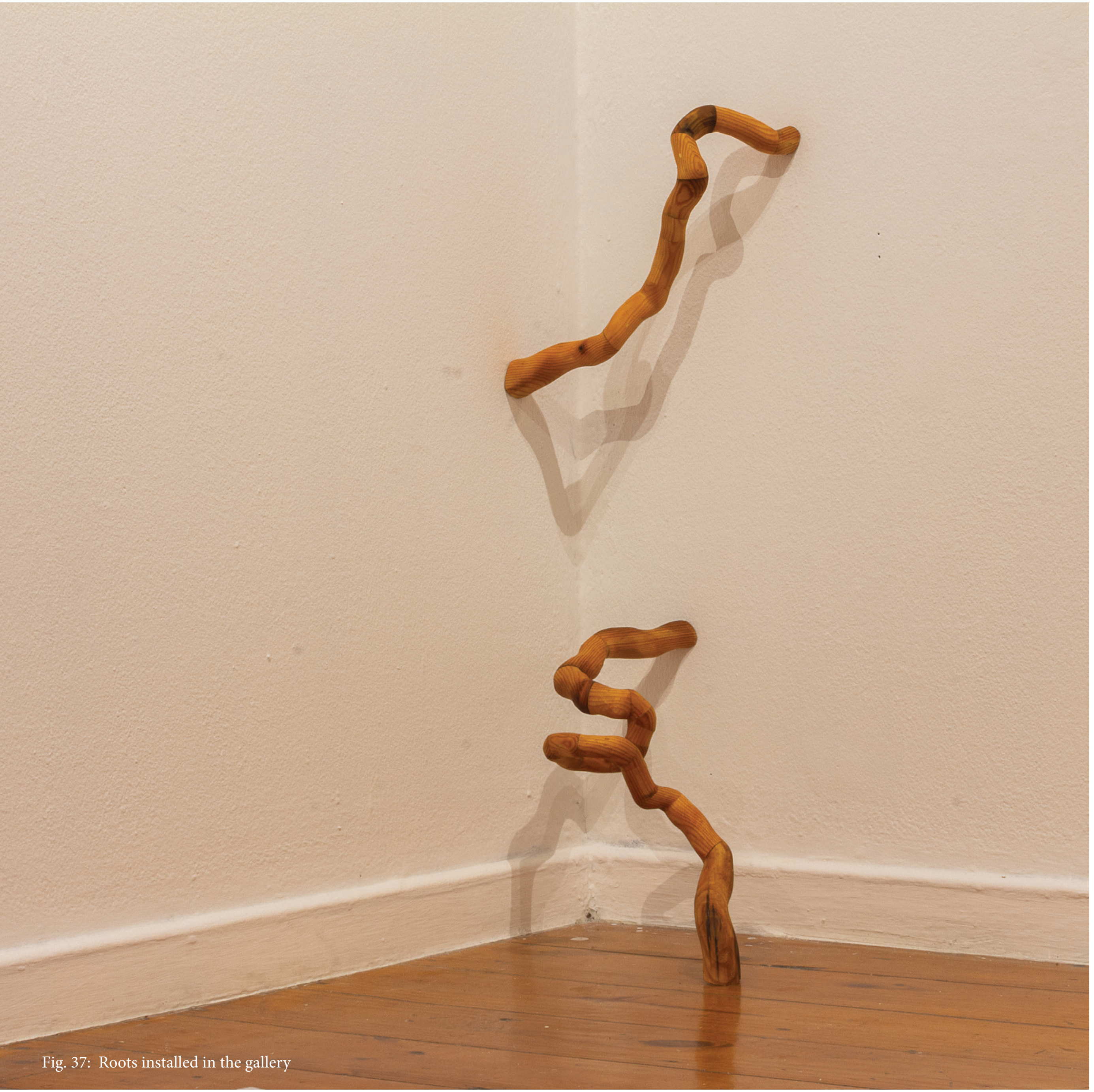

Fig. 37: Roots installed in the gallery

CONCLUSION

To rephrase the quote from José Esteban Muñoz's that opened this paper, *Re-Forming the Monstrous* entails a turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, propelled by anxiety over a future that seems, with each passing day, to be forestalled. In response to the overwhelming socio-ecological turmoil that characterizes the present, I turn to the distant, imagined past of classical mythology; to the persecuted figure of the monster, and offered them *Sanctuary*.

By invoking a symbolic space of safety and care for the monsters, I endeavour to subvert the patriarchal, anthropocentric myth of Heracles. *Re-Forming the Monstrous* queers an artistic tradition of celebrating violent male heroes. Inspired by Donna Haraway's aspirational concept of the Chthulucene[34], which demands a re-enchantment with the multivariate and interconnected forms of life that constitute the earth, I propose the concept of installation as ecosystem. In *Sanctuary*, the architecture of the gallery is disrupted by snaking roots that emerge from the floor and branches sprouting from white walls. They provide a home to the fragile, ceramic creatures. Low to the ground, or up in the branches, the orientation of the monsters reflects a desire to decentre the human (in its modern conception, laden with implicit hierarchies).

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[34] "A kind of time-place for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (Haraway, 2016:2).

These monsters offer me a figure for considering the urgent issues of both ecological devastation and – as proto-queer avatars – social oppression, that are central to the crisis of global capitalism. This polysemous conception of the monster attempts to acknowledge the entangled nature of these issues. As the intersectional black feminist theorist and activist, Audre Lorde, famously said, "there is no such thing as single-issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives" (Lorde, 1982).

Inspired by Muñoz's theory of queer utopia, my vision of *Sanctuary* represents an attempt to imagine creative alternatives to the "broken-down present" – a symbolic gesture in the face of hegemonic capitalism's logic of domination (2009:12). Through the symbolic act of protecting the persecuted monsters, I propose care and love – as defined by Rose and hooks respectively – as an ethos with which to reimagine ways of coexisting in a more-than-human world.

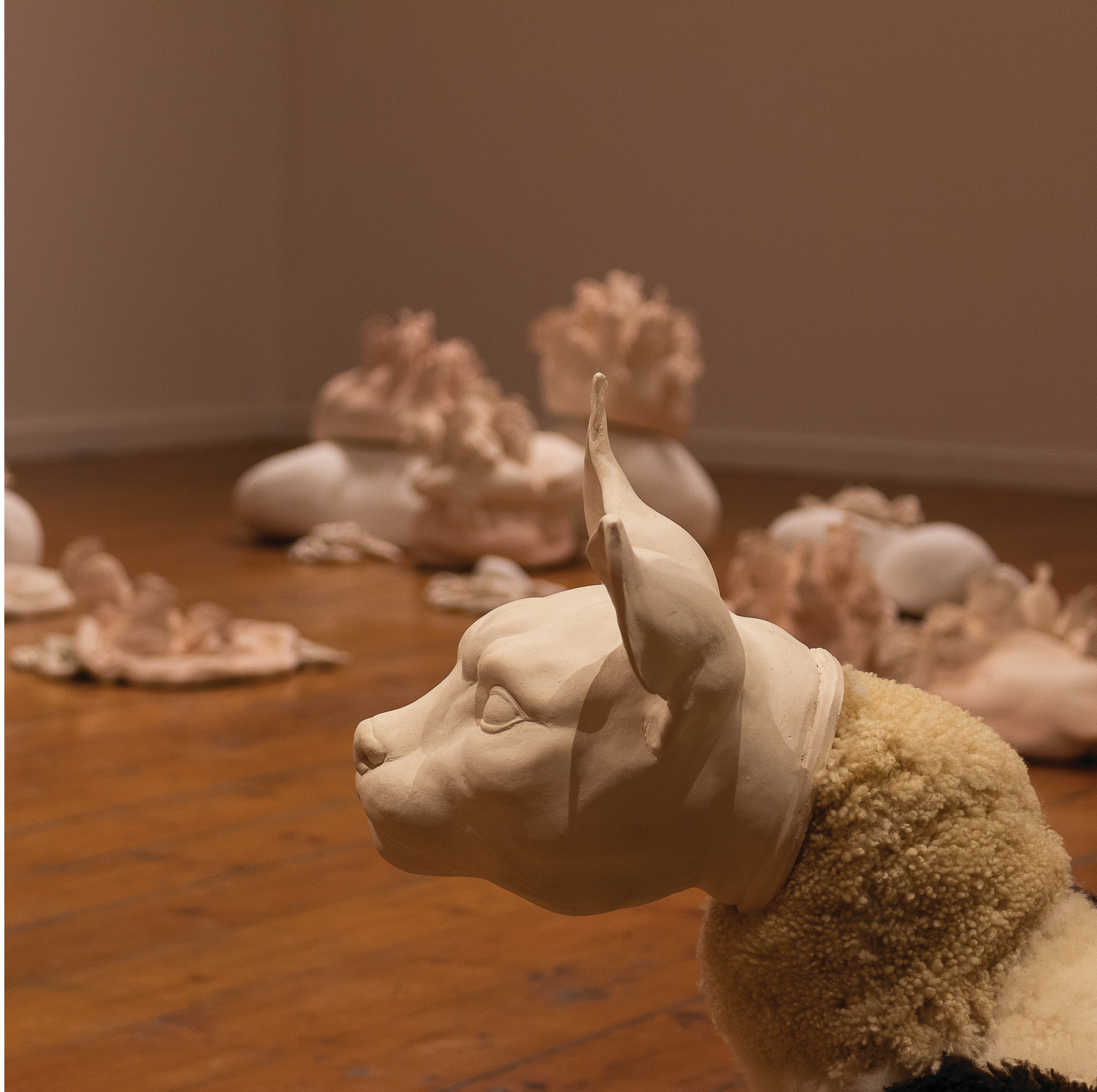

Fig. 38 Installation view of the *Sanctuary*

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Jacobs, G. 2022. *close up of Stymphalian bird in its nest* [Sculpture]

Figure 2: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Fragments of Icarus on the gallery floor* [Sculpture]

Figure 3: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Fragments of Icarus in the sun* [Sculpture]

Figure 4: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Icarus installation* [Installation]

Figure 5: Smith, R. 2014. *Oh Nationalism! You look so beautiful in ruin, but we never really loved you, and chicken just tastes better* [Installation] Available: https://www.whatiftheworld.com/exhibition/no-everything/#installation-view-ii

Figure 6: Smith, R. 2014. *Emptiness (BBQ)* [Sculpture] Available: https://www.whatiftheworld.com/exhibition/no-everything/#emptiness-salt-vinegar-ii

Figure 7: Jacobs, G. 2022. close up of *Hen-Hydra (Detail)* [Sculpture]

Figure 8: Cai, Guo-Qiang. 2004. *Innoportune: Stage Two* [Installation] Available: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/cai-guo-qiang-cai-guo-qiang-inopportune-stage-two

Figure 9: Cai, Guo-Qiang. 2013. *Heritage* [Installation] Available: https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2018/august/20/astonishing-animals-cai-guo-qiangs-heritage-installation/

Figure 10: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Hybrid* [Collage]

Figure 11: Jacobs, G. 2022. One of Cerberus's heads peaking out of a burrow, Rosendal [Installation]

Figure 12: Jacobs, G. 2022. *installation view of the Sanctuary* [Installation]

Figure 13: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Sketch for Stymphalian Nest* [Drawing]

Figure 14: Botha, W. 2021. *The River* [Sculpture] Available: https://viewingroom.stevenson.info/viewing-room/33-wim-botha-the-river/

Figure 15: Botha, W. 2021. *The River (detail)* [Sculpture] Available: https://viewingroom.stevenson.info/viewing-room/33-wim-botha-the-river/

Figure 16: Jacobs, G. 2022 *Forest on the outskirts of Rosendal* [Photograph]

Figure 17: Jacobs, G. 2022 *Forest on the outskirts of Rosendal* [Photograph]

Figure 18: Jacobs, G. 2022 *Branches carved from furniture pieces* [Sculpture]

Figure 19: Jacobs, G. 2022 *Cerberus* [Sculpture]

Figure 20: Sibande, M. 2022 *A Red Flight of Fancy* [Installation] Available: https://www.smacgallery.com/exhibitions-3/a-red-flight-of-fancy

Figure 21: Sibande, M. 2019 *Domba Dance* [Installation] Available: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/mary-sibande-the-domba-dance-1

Figure 22: Jacobs, G. 2021. *Sketch for battery hen Hydra* [Drawing]

Figure 23: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Hen-Hydras in the gallery* [Sculpture]

Figure 24: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Hen-Hydras in the gallery* [Sculpture]

Figure 25: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Hydras and Crabs in the Sanctuary* [Installation]

Figure 26: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Close-up of the Chimera's heads* [Sculpture]

Figure 27: Jacobs, G. 2022. *A Stymphalian bird perched on a branch* [Sculpture]

Figure 28: Botha, W. 2021. *The River (detail)* [Sculpture] Available: https://viewingroom.stevenson.info/viewing-room/33-wim-botha-the-river/

Figure 29: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Stymphalian Nest* [Sculpture]

Figure 30: Jacobs, G. 2022. *One of Hera's serpents coiled beneath a root* [Sculpture]

Figure 31: Goldendean. 2016. *Breathe* [Documentation of Performance] Available: https://goldendean.com/

Figure 32: Jacobs, G. 2021. *Process photo of sculpting one of the Chimera's heads in studio.*

Figure 33: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Carved branches* [Sculpture]

Figure 34: Jacobs, G. 2021. *Process photo of One of Cerberus's slipcast heads emerging from the mould.*

Figure 35: Edwards, D. 2019. *Feelthings* [Sculpture] Available: http://www.dominique-edwards.co.za/

Figure 36: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Process photo of Furniture branches on the studio floor.*

Figure 37: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Roots installed in the gallery.* [Installation]

Figure 38: Jacobs, G. 2022. *Installation view of the Sanctuary* [Installation]