



*Through  
the Garden  
Fence*

Kathy Robins

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

To all those still walking and landless  
with a child and a bag



# *Through the Garden Fence*

Kathy Robins

Submitted in compliance with the requirements of the MFA degree  
Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town

## **Supervision**

Professor Pippa Skotnes and Carine Zaayman



**Official 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 and quotation from the work, or works, of  
others, has been attributed, cited and referenced.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



## Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	009
<b>Introduction</b> .....	011
<b>The Garden as a Synecdoche</b> .....	013
<b>Land and History in South Africa</b> .....	019
<b>Interconnectedness in Theory and Practice</b> .....	025
<b>Contemporary Approaches to Interconnectivity</b> .....	031
<b>Visualising Connection: Process and Materiality</b> .....	037
<b>The Installation of Works</b> .....	041
<b>Concluding Thoughts</b> .....	145
<b>References</b> .....	151
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	155



## Preface

This project attempts to tie together different threads of my experience. It begins with the memory of looking through the garden fence and hedge of my childhood and considers the simultaneously separate and enmeshed lives of my immediate family and those outside of it. In this project I have engaged with the garden as a point of connection, a means by which to consider the possibility of more Edenic, sustainable futures rooted in concepts of care. An investigation into care, through my making, has been central to my research.

Under the harsh structures of apartheid, the natural world carried on in spite of the social and environmental restrictions implemented by the apartheid government. I am interested primarily in human experiences of care, belonging and relationship against the backdrop of migrancy, the displacement of discarded people to infertile land, and the loss of

indigenous cultures and natural areas. My intention in this work is for the viewer to be reminded of the unending cycles of nature – seasons, joy, nurturance and recurrence – in their silent yet peripatetic way. In this turning towards nature there is a recognition of the spiritual essence of the world as separate and distinct from humankind's inhumanity to each other.

In a contemporary context, the prevalence of people from across Africa displaced into South Africa demands a closer consideration of human connections to the land, as does the recent crisis of Syrian migrants in Europe and the ensuing ethnic xenophobia. At present there are 60 million people displaced due to war, religious tension, politics and race. However, there is hope in the care provided by non-governmental organisations, the United Nations, governments and grass-roots initiatives; people who want to help those with a bag and a child on their back.

By looking outward one is also re-sensitised to similar issues at home.<sup>1</sup> Moving forward from this project my intention is to continue drawing on my life work to collaborate with local community development initiatives and find links to communities and people through a collaborative art practice.

This written text serves as an introduction to the body of work that I have made. Its purpose is not to deal with the issues I raise in a methodically academic way, but rather

to describe some of the many questions I asked myself during the course of this study, and some of the answers I found. It is necessarily selective and eclectic, drawing on texts and sources that have been or became meaningful, both in elucidating aspects of my project, or for the ways in which I recognised in them some of my own concerns and responses. It is thus not an elucidation so much as a corralling of references that may assist in introducing the creative decisions I have made.

#### 1

The recent student protests about the de-colonisation of the university, equal education opportunities and fair treatment of university staff interestingly relates to the conceptual concerns of my project. As a result of the historic university shutdown that occurred at the end of my Master's process, my final exhibition, instead of being in the school's gallery, instead had to be installed in the Egyptian Building at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, a site that is significant in and of itself as the monolithic structure that was built on the former zoo grounds of the Company's Garden (Archive and Curatorship [ARC], 2011). This site immediately demands that one consider the residues of South Africa's history as they exist in the present moment.

## Introduction

A garden is a symbol of a universal ideal, a place of Edenic possibilities. My childhood garden of the 1960s in Johannesburg, an appropriated English-style garden, served as the starting point of my enquiry for this project. At this time apartheid bounded a lived experience within a solid grid, a militaristic state in which change and movement could not happen and where strict physical and ideological lines were drawn. Despite the seemingly uncompromising rigidity of the apartheid state, change in the natural world continued; an answer to French novelist Georges Perec's (1997: 176) question "what happens when nothing happens?". Natural elements moved under, over, between and through the mesh of the garden fence (the fence being a symbol of divisions in society): plants, birds, birdsongs, soil, smells, voices, melodies and words all permeated these boundaries unhindered.

A garden immediately implies a human connection and an interaction with the non-human natural world. It is a site in which garden tools become an extension of the human and a means of connection

with both the earth and the people who previously used them. This connection implies a human domination and control over nature, but it is also imbued with notions of nurturing and deep care – a levelling experience of what it is to be human on the Earth, as it shows the human need to both control and nurture. Through this project I engage with the garden as a synecdoche<sup>2</sup> for the Earth; a site of continual transformation in which ecological, sociopolitical, spiritual and ideological issues are entangled.

I engage with these entanglements through the use of found objects and conceptually significant materials. The materiality of my inquiry is steeped in a juxtaposition of permanence and impermanence, fluidity and boundaries. I engage with assemblage, layered photographs, prints, painting, *papier mâché*, sound and video as mediums for the installation that forms this body of work. In addition to the layering of these materials, the use of different levels of space in the installation lends itself to an experience of the works as entangled, interconnected and as an ecosystem in and of itself.

### 2

Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part is substituted for a whole or a whole for a part. Thus in my usage the individual garden is a synecdoche for the whole Earth.

I have situated my work in a transitional space between the personal and political to locate it within a wider context. Boundaries, some more permeable than others, inform my inquiry into the garden as a place of care, but also as a place of abandon, misuse and abuse. Contemporary issues of environmental exploitation, food security, migrancy, refugees and rights to land ownership underscore the contemporary relevance of human relationships to the land. I am interested in conveying the divisions that originated in my youth and, as such, in the apartheid era. However, I also want the work to resonate with a broader human experience of displacement in other times

and places. By considering the garden as a synecdoche for the entirety of the planet I investigate both the physicality of human engagement with the Earth, as well as more abstract concepts of care.

In this text I first consider historical and contemporary ideas about the garden as a synecdoche for the Earth. Secondly, I engage with issues of the land and environment in the sociopolitical context of South African history. Lastly, prior to the catalogue of works on the show, I consider more contemporary theories of interconnectedness as they relate to the conceptualisation of my work.

## Section 1: The Garden as a Synecdoche

Visualised in the paintings and illuminated manuscripts of the early 1400s, *hortus conclusus* literally translates as “enclosed garden”, and denotes a bounded space inscribed with allegorical, symbolic and metaphorical meaning within second millennium Christian ideology (Dailey, 1986: 256). An imagined, idealistic space, *hortus conclusus* served as an emblem of the Virgin’s immaculate conception in Medieval and Renaissance art and poetry, the garden wall protecting her closed womb from sin. In addition to providing an allegorical message, this early conceptualisation of the garden emphasised the idea of constructed nature as a space of spiritual contemplation. *Hortus conclusus* echoes the ideology behind historical and contemporary Japanese gardens, which considers the garden not merely as an object but also as a path into the realms of the spirit, a means by which to connect with both the natural world and inner consciousness (Goda & Roth, 2015). The bounded space of the garden thus serves not only as a natural space, but also as one that is imbued with social, political and psychological meaning. In his essay *Homeless Gardens*, Robert Pogue Harrison (1993: 48) writes that

it is our relation to nature that defines the tension at the center of which stands not only the garden but the human polis as such. This embodied

notion of human order – taking as it does many diverse forms – links the garden to the polis, that is to say to the realm of those interactions in and through which human beings, through their own initiatives, give form and articulation to their historical worlds.

This conception recasts the garden as not only concerned with the natural, but as a realm in which social and political histories and narratives are embodied and made visual. It is in this context that the idea of the garden as synecdoche for the Earth extends to the sociopolitical and ecological issues that play out on a wider scale. This



*Madonna del Roseto*. Stefano da Verona. c. 1410.

project considers the garden as a space of interconnection, a microcosm that reveals the entangled nature of sociopolitical tensions, ecological trauma and cultural histories within both global and South African contexts. It does so by engaging with conceptualisations of the garden that are imbued with more than just the stories of its natural organisms and processes. Before looking at the garden as an unbounded space open to change, I look at early conceptualisations of nature and land in South Africa's colonial history.

The quest for a rediscovering of *hortus conclusus*, of bounded Edenic space, and a return to natural innocence, was an ideological cornerstone on which colonial expansion into Africa was conceived and validated. In his text *White Writing*, JM Coetzee (1988: 1) poses the question of why this Edenic myth failed to take root in the Cape. He writes:

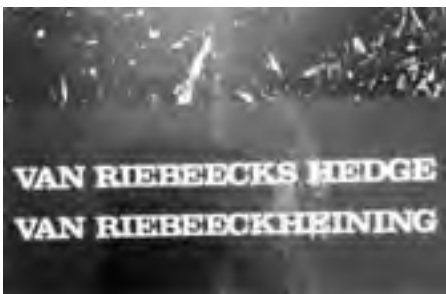
For while the promise of a fresh start on a fresh continent deeply affected

the shape of history in Europe's New World colonies, in South Africa, in many respects a *lui-lekker land* (land of ease and plenty), the only myth that ever came to exert a comparable animating force was the story of the wanderings of the Israelites in search of a Promised Land, a story of tribal salvation appropriated as their own by the wandering Afrikaner tribes.

Coetzee (1988: 2-4) elaborates on why Africa could never be the Promised Land that the earlier explorers to the West equated with Eden. He notes that the experience of the Dutch colonists to the Cape did not align with their expectations; the colonial impetus of an imagined return to innocence was soon reconceptualised as a descent into the heart of darkness. With this reconceptualisation came a control of the land (and indigenous peoples) and an appropriation and re-creation of European garden aesthetics in Africa.

Situated in the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens on the slope of Table Mountain stands a twisted, indigenous wild almond tree. Planted in 1660 by Jan van Riebeeck, the tree is a remnant of the hedge that was grown as a boundary to the newly established settlement at the Cape. Primarily conceived of as a defensive barrier in response to conflict with the Khoikhoi people, it has

Van Riebeeck's Hedge  
(Personal documentation).



been argued that the hedge marks “the first step on the road to apartheid”, an early instance of land being bounded and re-zoned based on racial and cultural division (SANBI, 2014). Van Riebeeck’s hedge serves as a living manifestation of the ideological boundary between Europe and Africa, the self and the other, in the colonial mind. It is in this context that the boundary around the garden should be considered not simply as a natural phenomenon, but as evidence of political and ideological separation or exclusion. It is this focus on the garden as embedded with not only biological, but also political and social meaning, that serves as the foundation for this project.

In recalling the garden of my childhood from the perspective of adulthood I became aware of the entangled nature of ecological, political, social, historical and imagined narratives that existed within that garden space. At the back of my parents’ low-slung single-storey house of the 1960s were a vegetable garden and fruit trees, along with the ubiquitous suburban pool and a hidden enclosed backyard where the staff lived. A well-worn fence and flattened hedges formed borders shared with the neighbour’s children. It was an appropriated English rose garden with a drought-dried grass lawn in front, deprived of water by a thirsty willow tree to the right that had a tree house in its branches and a Wendy house at its base. In this playhouse were a



Me in my childhood garden

doll’s corner, furniture and a “play-play” stove. For me as a child it was a space for

Bailey Archive, c. 1960, Johannesburg



experimentation, a space that overlapped with the nearby sandpit and hole in the fence. Through this permeable boundary I glimpsed migrant domestic workers clipping hair, socialising and home-

brewing beer under the eucalyptus trees, the scent of which floated over the fence with the sounds of voices, songs and life. Through the fence, two gardens met: my own bounded suburban garden and that open veld – a gathering place for those who tended the neighbourhood gardens and homes.

Looking back on this childhood garden it becomes clear that this was a space of entwined narratives, where the individual and the social converged with the political.

Before looking more closely at the materiality and processes involved in assembling *Through the Garden Fence*, I consider the idea of a garden as a realm that, in a South African context, reflects a history of spatial division while simultaneously garnering a sense of care, and of human relationships to the land.

Garden gate



Edgewood Avenue, Johannesburg  
First home address, c. 1960

“André Gide, explaining why he had become a communist in the 1930s, said that holding a privileged place in a society where most people were mired in poverty was like having a seat in a lifeboat after a shipwreck. ‘The knowledge of being one of those in the lifeboat, of being safe, while others around me are drowning, that feeling became intolerable to me,’ Gide wrote.”

(Glenn Frankel, 1999: 16)



## Section 2: Land and History in South Africa

Mark Gevisser's (2014) autobiographical book, *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, addresses aspects of dispossession experienced by different social groups during apartheid. Gevisser recalls finding routes in a map book as a child while riding in the backseat of his father's car. On this occasion, the map book alerted Gevisser to the huge tract of land, Alexandra, which had been left out of *Holmden's Register of Johannesburg*. Later, when he looked for an explanation for this missing tract of land in *The Street Guide to Witwatersrand*, he was given the old apartheid adage that "separate" spaces had been reserved for "equal development". In finding his way around Johannesburg, Gevisser reminisces about his relationship with his childhood nanny. He contemplates the double life she led between his home and her life in Soweto, and the route she would have taken between them. He juxtaposes this later-life understanding with how he understood it when he was younger and asks whether



*Holmden's Register of Johannesburg*

the separate development of the past is reflected in the urban sprawl that is Johannesburg today. He writes, “but as I grew older and I learned more, the *Street Guide to Witwatersrand* became evidence, too, for exactly the opposite: ‘they’ wanted us to believe that Soweto was ‘separate but equal’ to Johannesburg, a fully serviced city; when anyone could see, looking at the maps, that it was not” (Gevisser 2014: 18). The quote from Gevisser’s book highlights the separations and boundaries that informed our maps at the time. More importantly, it describes the reality of how the boundaries of apartheid were experienced through the narratives of journeys taken – as in the case of his nanny and Gevisser’s own daily encounters with those who were employed in the white suburbs as domestic workers.

Gevisser’s childhood anecdote of looking through a map book also speaks to the experience of growing up in 1960s suburban Johannesburg. The numerous boundaries that divided people by language, culture, religion, race or censorship were both physical and intangible. My own investigation into these boundaries made me think about the differences between gardens during apartheid and gardens in the post-apartheid era. For example, my

own childhood garden seemed to be about “being English”, whereby the aim was to either “tame” or exclude indigenous plants such as proteas and aloes, and replace them with English plants like roses and hydrangeas. This contrasts starkly with the present, where gardens are increasingly welcoming of and designed around indigenous flora and sustainable water and land management. The garden in this case constitutes a reflection of temporally dominant ideologies about people and place.

When looking back at the boundaries between different gardens, areas and people of my childhood, I found myself questioning the relationship between some of my Jewish ancestors’ experiences of oppression and their subsequent silence in the face of apartheid. Emmanuel Suttner explored this question himself in *Cutting Through the Mountain*, in which he presents interviews with Jewish apartheid activists. One of these activists, Anton Harber, responded to this question about silence, saying that many immigrants to South Africa wished to quietly get on with their new lives and not make any trouble due to their harrowing experiences of persecution in Eastern Europe (Suttner, 1997: 153).

Professor Njabulo Ndebele (cited in Coetzee & Nuttall, 1998: 32), on the other hand, refers to the wider English-speaking community and its complicity with the ruling National Party of the time. David Yudelman, an English historian, perceptively wrote about the extent to which many Anglophiles benefitted from apartheid legislation (cited in Giliomee, 2003: 32). Institutional apartheid was the domain of the National Party, but English speakers were, he remarked, not significantly more liberal than the Afrikaners on race questions. Yet the tendency was to present the Afrikaner as “the villain, the fanatic, who created and perfected institutionalised racial discrimination”, while whites of British extraction supposedly only passively accepted segregation and apartheid. The latter were quite prepared to use apartheid as a pretext for indirectly expressing their culturally chauvinistic distaste for the Afrikaners while continuing to enjoy the benefits of white supremacy. Of course, the complexities of these attitudes exceed this short discussion, but it is the numerous boundaries between people in the past that have in turn created further boundaries in the present, that have provided a focus for my work, as have the efforts made to conceal and reveal these past and present boundaries.

Carli Coetzee and Sarah Nuttall (1998: 20) discuss how the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) attempted to reveal the “complexities and entanglement” of our histories. In speaking of the post-TRC period, Coetzee and Nuttall stipulate that the testimony recorded at the TRC hearings “represents a ritualistic lifting of the Veil” as personal narratives provided a way in which to blur boundaries and borders. While the blame for apartheid is often laid at the door of the Afrikaners, my own experience reveals that complicity was widespread. As such, the garden is conceptualised as something that escapes bounded categories both below and above ground. By engaging with materials and processes that evoke ideas of ephemerality, restraint and memory, the work explores these remembered social and cultural boundaries of 1960s South Africa and how they are interwoven and preserved in a contemporary context.

Central to my conceptualisation of this project are the ways in which the bounded experience of apartheid is reflected in the garden. Angela Impey’s (2013) presentation at the conference *Hearing Landscape Speak* illustrates more clearly how journey, memory and land are intrinsically intertwined with cultural

identity and livelihood. She outlined how the construction of fences in Maputoland led to a loss of the cultural songs that were previously kept alive by traders on their commute. She noted that the implementation of physical boundaries in the land led to not only a loss of songs, but also a loss of income. In *Songs of the Women Migrants: Performance and Identity in South Africa*, Deborah James (1999) writes about these migrant domestic women and the song groups they organised in order to preserve some of their cultural heritage and cope with domestic service. She also touches on how people lose a means of making sense of their world when they lose their land. In a similar investigation, Mark Fleishman's 2015 adaptation of Zakes Mda's 2000 novel *The Heart of Redness* into a performance using

movement and song visualises issues of personal and public history as embedded in understandings and relationships with the land and natural resources (Toffoli, 2015). All three of these projects connect song and sound to memory and land in interesting ways, mirrored in my work by how cultural and social history and identity is intrinsically rooted in physical land and environments. In my work I considered the sounds of neighbouring migrant domestic workers and birdsongs as an intangible presence that permeated physical borders and could not be bounded. In order to engage more deeply with these ideas in the context of my work, the following section considers historical and contemporary artistic responses to ideas of interconnectivity between humankind and their environment.

*The Heart of Redness* performance,  
directed by Mark Fleishman



## Personal History of Migrancy

Some of my Jewish antecedents were refugees from Latvia and Lithuania who arrived in South Africa to escape the anti-Semitic pogroms of the late 1800s. The gold and diamond rush lured some of them and one of my great-grandfathers was drawn to South Africa by the ostrich-feather rush of the early 20th century. Numerous other immigrants were pushed by more oppressive motivations – war, racial and religious prejudice, economic instability and lack of freedom on all fronts. All or most of the above affected my ancestors and led them to make South Africa their home. Adopting the English way, the Jewish refugees of my great-grandparents’ generation moved away from the small Afrikaans towns, usually working as *smouse* (hawkers) and storeowners. During this time my maternal grandfather arrived as a baby with his Lithuanian parents, traditional orthodox Jews who had a small trading store in Stellenbosch. My grandfather spoke Yiddish, his home language, and Afrikaans until he was twelve years old, and only then started learning English. Escaping the pogroms and prejudice of Eastern Europe, many immigrants experienced a new social standing; as Jews they were no longer the underdog. This allowed for a building up of commerce and prosperity



Solomon Marcus, a member of the first *minyans*.  
(Courtesy Wendy Ackerman)

among the Jewish community, where there was not much competition. Yet with the rise of the National Party a quota system was applied that regulated the number of Jewish immigrants allowed in South Africa. As such, there was economic freedom but still segregation and limitations. I consider the divisions between communities and the silent acceptance of the grids and boundaries of apartheid, the residues of which are still felt today, by engaging with objects, materials and forms that convey both separation and interconnection.



### Section 3: Interconnectedness in Theory and Practice

In his text *Understanding the Place of Humans in Nature*, historian James C. Williams (2010: 10) states that:

Our relationship with nature almost always involves technology. We cannot think about the environment without thinking about technology, nor can we think about technology without thinking about the environment. And, over time, both technology and the environment have evolved together, and each reflects the influence they have on one another in this evolutionary reciprocity. Therefore, to understand the human/nature relationship anywhere, one must look at how people, technology and nature interact.

It is this idea of technology as a point of connection between nature and humankind that I have tried to convey in my visualisation of and engagement with the garden as a synecdoche for our relationship with the Earth. By engaging with garden tools and other contemporary and obsolete found objects and technologies (both low-tech and high-tech) such as video screens, circuit boards, sound recorders and commercial product

containers (such as a Bashews soft drink box) in my work, I consider technology as a site of connection between the human and the natural. A garden immediately implies a human presence and an interaction with the non-human material world, as tools become an extension of the human and a means of connection with both the earth and those who previously used the tools. It is important to note that the consideration of “human-nature” interconnection through art practice has a historical precedent in the work of early practitioners of ecological art and deep ecology.

The work of Joseph Beuys has been a particularly useful example for me. In his essay *Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology*, David Adams (1992: 26) notes that

Radical ecology sees [ecological systems] in connection with larger patterns of human life: social forms; economic theories, practices, and interests; political and legislative history and method; control of information and communications media; and, indeed, the underlying philosophies and teleologies of Western civilisation.

Adams lays out Joseph Beuys's evolution towards radical ecology by tracing his early interest in science, his rejection of the Enlightenment idolisation of science and human advancement at the expense of the environment and his renouncement of 1960s capitalism for its lack of concern for the natural. Adams considers Beuys's engagement with the interrelatedness of human, sociopolitical and environmental concerns through the use of found objects and conceptually significant materials. By

engaging with the specific materiality of Beuys's work, Adams argues that Beuys not only engaged with the core tenets of radical ecology, but was the pioneer investigator into the specific role of art in forging radical ecological paradigms for the relationship between human beings and the natural environment.

Beuys believed that art could be a transformative voice for society, and through his work he attempted to draw

Joseph Beuys, *The Pack*



attention to the contradictions between the high capitalism of the 1960s and emerging environmental concerns. His work *The Pack* (1969) consists of a Volkswagen kombi, extending out of which is a trail of twenty-four wooden toboggans, each containing a felt blanket, a piece of animal fat (later replaced with gelatin and beeswax) and a torch. Each material has symbolic value that relates to the “concept of human survival in the face of technological failure” or extreme natural

or human-made disaster (Tate Modern, 2005: online). The kombi is emblematic of 1960s counterculture and encompasses student and anti-war activism. As a vehicle, an aged machine that no longer performs its function, the kombi becomes a vessel for ideas of human mobility, transformation and stagnation in the context of an environmental disaster. As Adams (1992: 28) notes on Beuys’s consideration of the relationship between the human and the environment, “there was, he said, a



Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*

sense in which human interiority was also outside in the environment, a sense in which human consciousness and the outer world were interdependent.”

In *The Pack*, this transition between interior and exterior spaces is visually manifested. The arrangement of the twenty-four toboggans is reminiscent of a team of sled dogs. The low-tech wooden sleighs move out and away from the open back door of the kombi as if they are departing for a mission into the uninhabited and the unknown. This idea is furthered by the survival kit strapped to each toboggan. As a whole, the installation combines elements of the machine, the human and the animal in a way that highlights the vulnerability of the human and the care that must be taken for survival.

In an effort to similarly illustrate a disconnection between humankind and place or environment in a contemporary context, and with reference to issues of migrancy, my work echoes Beuys's visualisation of a conflation of internal and external space. I engage with materials



David Hammon, *Bliz-ard Ball Sale*

and forms that speak of an internal human space and an experience of flux and placelessness. While the works of this project do make reference to the human displacement manifested by apartheid policies of the 1960s, they also reflect a concern for the idea and experience of displacement across culture, religion and space throughout history, as well as in the contemporary moment. In other

words, I am interested in expressing the division that originated in my youth, in the apartheid era, but I also want the work to resonate with a broader human experience of displacement in other times and places. In considering the images and stories of human migration due to war and climate change in the present, when the statistic of displaced people is recorded at over 60 million (Sengupta, 2015), Beuys's *The Pack* begins to read as an eerily accurate premonition.

*The Pack* is a precursor to Beuys's seminal work, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), in which he spent three days in a Manhattan art gallery with a wild coyote. He attempted to highlight how the capitalist ethos of the 1960s lacked concern for nature. The coyote was also a symbol of historical disregard of the indigenous American ecologies and Native American communities. The performance functioned as a stand against the war in Vietnam as well as an effort to bridge what Beuys considered to be a gap between the physical and the spiritual by means of engaging with the traditional

Native American symbolism of the coyote (Tate Modern, 2005). This work instigated much debate with regards to the origin and capture of the coyote involved, but one might argue that this debate also raises interesting issues of domination – between human and nature, and more broadly between different sociopolitical groups. In this light I find the work particularly relevant to the conceptual concerns of my practice.

I wish to elevate my work beyond the personal and to locate it in relation to wider sociopolitical circumstances, with particular sensitivity to a South African history and context. In numerous individual works I considered the potential of soil and, by extension, land and environment as free or existing outside of the boundaries of ownership. In 2015, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations named 2015 the International Year of Soils in order to “raise awareness among civil society and decision makers about the profound importance of soil for human life [...] specifically in relation to food security, climate change

adaptation and mitigation,<sup>3</sup> essential ecosystem services, poverty alleviation and sustainable development” (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2015). Drawing on Fluxus actions such as David Hammons’s *Blizzard Ball Sale* (1983), in which the artist sold snowballs on a New York sidewalk for 5 cents each, through my engagement with soil, I considered ideas of ownership of natural resources as well as established a reconsideration of the connection between humankind and the Earth. In a broader sense, my soil works are made to inspire a sense of connection that counters the violence and disconnection often embedded in experiences of migrancy and detachment from land and place.

Beuys’s insistence on the primary role that artists can play in addressing urgent ecological and social issues, which considers the artist as social activist, was echoed nearly thirty years later by philosopher Felix Guattari in his text *The Three Ecologies*. In this book Guattari states that in order to address the social and natural crises spurred by Western consumer society,

we need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange – a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns. And yet, ultimately, we will only escape from the major crises of our era through the articulation of: a nascent subjectivity, a constantly mutating socius, an environment in the process of being reinvented. (Guattari, 1989: 68)

Guattari calls for a re-evaluation of the collective consciousness that spurred on the project of modernisation and industrialisation despite the cumulative strain placed on natural systems and loss of indigenous cultures and peoples. He argues that a shift towards an awareness of the interconnectedness of individual, social, economic and natural systems requires an approach that is rooted not in an attitude of domination, but in a “new gentleness” (Guattari, 1989: 51). This shift towards care and human emotion in addressing the ecological crisis forms the foundation upon which many contemporary theorists and artists have subsequently based their ideas.

3

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (2015), “climate change mitigation” refers to “efforts to reduce or prevent emission of greenhouse gases. Mitigation can mean using new technologies and renewable energies, making older equipment more energy efficient, or changing management practices or consumer behavior.”

## Contemporary Approaches to Interconnectedness

In his book *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy and the World*, economist and ecological philosopher Jeremy Rifkin (2011) draws on theories of interconnectedness in order to critically analyse ecological entropy as intricately linked with and spurred on by industrialised contemporary consumer society. He considers economic, environmental, social, technological, spiritual and political systems as interdependent and equally subject to disintegration if strategies towards sustainable development are not urgently

devised. Echoing Guattari's call for a "new gentleness" and similarly considering the ecological crisis as spurred by the modernist disregard for emotion in favour of a compulsion towards reason, progress and industry, Rifkin argues that a nurturing of human virtues such as care, empathy and humility is required in order to mitigate this ecological crisis. Although initially arising out of philosophical discourse, this call to renegotiate the role of emotional and caring relationships with the natural world has surfaced in ecological, artistic and scientific approaches in recent years.



Thrombolites in Lake Clifton – “living rocks”

Synthetic biology, for instance, a contemporary interdisciplinary field of study that engages with art, design and technology, subscribes to the idea that artists can forge radical change and sustainable development by working with biological processes as subject matter in a way that differs from traditional scientific and industrial viewpoints (Catts & Iwasaki 2014: 196, 202). Through this thinking, synthetic biologists do not make art for art's sake, but rather in response to the ecological crisis to find new ways of thinking

about human relationships to other natural life. As artists/scientists Oron Catts and Hideo Iwasaki (2014: 195) note, “in the light of increasing human intervention and influence on geological and biological processes, there is a need to question the underlying hubris of human intentions to control life.” In an attempt to “consider human hubris and humility in relation to shifting geological processes”, Iwasaki’s project investigates the thrombolites, or “living rocks”, in Lake Clifton, where hundreds of rocks have been formed over thousands of years by a specific bacteria called cyanobacteria. The interconnection of humankind with other natural life processes is highlighted through the documentation of the rocks and in-depth analysis of the bacteria. Although working in a much more low-tech fashion, this idea of seemingly inert matter being alive relates strongly to the conceptual underpinnings of my engagement with soil as being alive and integral to all life processes. Similar to Iwasaki’s work, my works renegotiate the historically instated idea of human domination and control over nature in favour of a conceptualisation of human and natural histories as interconnected.



Wangari Maathai

Drawing on similar ideas that relate to the importance of preserving natural resources and fostering a sense of care for the Earth, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai (1940-2011) founded the Kenya Green Belt Movement, a grassroots non-governmental organisation that provides economic opportunity for men and women by planting trees in order to slow deforestation and soil erosion (The Green Belt Movement, 2015). In addition to slowing erosion, the permaculture methods of planting preserve water in water-scarce areas.

In order to describe the philosophy of her work, Maathai drew on the fable of the hummingbird that flew back and forth to try and put out a forest fire with the few drops of water it could hold in its beak. All of the other animals laughed and said it was wasting its time, but this did not stop the hummingbird from continuing its mission. Maathai relates her work to that of the hummingbird, highlighting the idea that an individual can make a difference towards positive change, which in Maathai's context relates specifically to climate change mitigation (The Green

Belt Movement, 2015). Through the simple act of planting trees, Maathai's work holistically brings together economic, social and environmental systems in a way that highlights sustainable development as reliant on the interdependence of those systems.<sup>4</sup>

Sarah Sze's *Still Life with Landscape (Model for a Habitat)* (2011-12) in the High Line park, New York, similarly engages planting practice to consider the interconnectedness of ecological, economic and social systems. The work constitutes a stretch of abandoned train track in which a sculptural installation attracts wildlife and serves as a living garden laboratory and interactive point of connection and observation between human visitors and animal inhabitants (High Line Art, 2015). The manner of the sculpture's construction and the seasonally adaptive nature of the work encourages the viewer to become aware of social systems within the natural world that stand in opposition to the urban environment. Visually speaking, the materiality and form of the sculpture merges the architectural and the organic, as thin interconnecting

4

My interest in Maathai lies not only in interconnectedness as it relates to this project, but also to my work in community gardens and development over the last twenty years. My future intention, as I continue to make art and work in the development sector, is to bring these two processes together, possibly in the form of social sculpture.

metal rods prop up bird and insect houses. Sze's sense of interconnection between the different parts of her garden installation is reflected in my own use of space in the installation of *Through the Garden Fence*, in which all the works form part of a visually connected system through an awareness

of geometric forms and the points of visual and physical connection between different works. Based on this discussion, Beuys, Iwasaki, Maathai and Sze all inform my thinking about how to visualise and shift ideas about human connection to the natural world.



Sarah Sze, *Still Life with Landscape (Model for a Habitat)*

“It was a modest four-bedroom cottage in a leafy, backwoods neighborhood just a ten-minute drive from downtown – 154 Regent Street in the eastern suburb of Observatory. There was no thatched roof or split-level flourishes, just a rust-coloured, triangular roof of corrugated tin atop a plain, whitewashed, one-story building whose walls always seemed in need of paint. There was a small swimming pool out back where the children seemed to live day and night in summer. But the trees were the real prize. They graced both the front and back, ranging from the six great jacaranda that lined the driveway to the clusters of lemon, fig, apricot, quince, wattle, apple, peach and plum trees scattered throughout the grounds, to the vine that yielded black grapes in summer. Their daughter Frances, who had just turned twelve, thought of it as her own little Garden of Eden, a perfect African paradise. The back yard was not large, but it sloped downward to merge with several others in a long, continuous field with only a low wire fence separating them. The ground was hard and dry and brittle as bone in winter, but the powerful summer rains softened and massaged it and coaxed dark sweet smells from the rich red earth [...] And like most white South Africans, they had African servants, Bessie and Claude, to help with domestic chores and child care.”

(Frankel, 1999: 11)



## Visualising Connection: Process and Materiality

In her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry (1985: 325) notes that “artefacts contain an element of the mental and materialised action of making” – the object is a product of both imaginative and physical processes of generation. She argues that imagination is not only “massive and continuous”, but is “bound up with compassion” (1985: 325). In the context of my practice, imagination fills in the gaps blurred by the “garden fence” in order to better and more compassionately understand the memory and experience of my relationships with people around me. This body of work was formed through conscious material choices and intuitive processes of making in which the continuous and fluid aspect of the imagination was allowed to manifest.

I have engaged with a mixed-media practice that draws on artist Cathy Malchiodi’s (2002: 52) approach to materiality, which is based on the idea that in order to find the most powerful and appropriate way to get a message across, an artist may work in various media simultaneously. By engaging with materials that are inherently fragile and prone to processes of disintegration, many works convey a sense of melancholy and demand

the pathos one might normally extend to a human. Considering fragility as embedded in artworks, artist Edmund de Waal (2015: 24) writes that “breaking and remaking call to each other.” Similarly, writing in relation to her practice, artist Bracha Ettinger (1993: 24-7) notes that “creating a trace is also to erase it; erasing the trace is also to make it appear.” This subtle boundary between existing and not existing is relevant to a discussion of the breaking down of ecosystems and points to the interconnectedness of organisms, histories and events. In consideration of this disintegration and regeneration it is important to consider more closely the relationships between objects, meaning and memory. De Waal (2014: 3) states that “you can reclaim objects as a central part of being a human being. It’s not that they define you but the objects that have been made through history have always been made with something extra in them.” In line with this idea of the object as extending beyond its physicality and existing in the realm of human experience, Scarry (1985: 323) notes that

the solitary artifice has been described here as a “lever” because it is only the midpoint in the total arc of action, and

because the second half of that arcing action is ordinarily vastly in excess of the first half. It is this total, self-amplifying arc of action, rather than the discrete object, that the human maker makes: the made object is simply the made-locus across which the power of creation is magnified and redirected back onto its human agents who are now caught up in the cascade of self-revision they have themselves authored.

In my own practice, objects, both found and made, provide a means by which to reflect on the position of the self and the human in relation to people and objects considered “other” in a contemporary context. As such, objects convey not only their physical materiality, but convey a concern for cultural and individual memory. As a symbol of connection between the human and the natural, the found garden tools in my work show a



Meschac Gaba, *Marriage Room*, 2000-09

residue of use and inspire empathy for those who experience exploitation of labour and land, in both a historical and contemporary context. Groupings of sculptures that subtly personify objects can be considered as groups of interconnected and disconnected individuals. The work reflects the discarding of marginalised peoples and places and inspires a reconsideration of human relationships to land and place. As such, there is a sense of fragility and displacement as well as entanglement and connection in the installation of the works.

The consideration and installation of objects in my work is similar to that of artist Meschac Gaba, who notes in an interview about his process that he “takes inspiration from daily life because in daily life you find new things, you find traditional things, you find everything” (cited in Greenberg, 2013: 17). Greenberg (2013: 17) continues: “in insisting on the here and now and by appropriating everyday objects in his work, irrespective of their origin, Gaba’s project acts as a corrective to the history of past centuries.” This idea of engaging with found objects as a means to reconsider the past is also central to my practice,

particularly in relation to those instances in which the effects of apartheid decision-making are still felt in relation to land and sustainability in South Africa.

As part of the National Consumer Protection Act, for instance, it is required that any fresh produce sold in the formal sector must be grown only in soil that has undergone testing. The Siyazisiza Trust, an NGO based in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal, aims to engender economic and food sustainability in local communities (Siyazisiza Trust, 2012). One community food garden project with which I was involved was run by female community members and retrenched mine workers. The produce from the garden was sold to Boxer Stores, a local supermarket chain, and the income was equally distributed between those who had laboured for the project. When the soil of the site was tested, however, it reflected high levels of toxicity and it was subsequently discovered that the garden had been planted on top of what had previously been a medical waste dump. As such the garden had to be closed. In this example, the careless disposal of medical waste under the apartheid government affected the land and lives of those dependent on it today.

Sociologist Greg Ruiters (2001: 95) states that in a post-colonial context, natural and built environments are imbued with “certain kinds of exclusions, which take on racial hues”. This idea, termed “environmental racism” in contemporary discourse, relates to the Siyazisiza garden closing, as rural land and marginalised and historically economically disadvantaged people experienced exclusion and oppression rooted in apartheid. With this in mind the obsolete objects and tools in my body of work underscore the idea that these residues of South Africa’s constraining and unequal past continue to stymie progress towards sustainability.

In addition to engaging with found objects to convey historical and contemporary issues of labour and land, I have also engaged with photographs as intimately intertwined with memory. I have used family photographs, images taken by myself and images from other archives and photographers. These images provide a blurred view into the past that reveals different relationships between people and the land.

In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1980) argues that photographs are not simply a record of the past, an inert and stable iteration of the way things were. Instead, they stand as evidence of the absolute impossibility of a total preservation of the past. For Barthes, photographs counter rather than preserve the “authenticity” of memory. They stand in for it, they replace it, they re-scribe it. The layered and refracted photographic images in my work are my attempt to convey the sense of trying to re-scribe memory by piecing together individual moments captured in photographs. While there is an element of personal reflection in the work, there is also a sense of universality in the tendency to idealise nature and the past. Reflecting upon family photographs represents a process of re-visioning and remembering ourselves, and to reflect on the figure in the landscape is to revise the relation of humankind to the land. The shadow and blurred figure in my photographic work reflect a sense of transience that is echoed in the material choices for other works. To borrow from Robert Pogue Harrison (1993: 41), the human tendency to “make room for” ourselves in nature’s midst is of primary interest in my work.

## The Installation of Works

The consideration of the place of humankind in nature is established by the layout and positioning of individual pieces in relation to each other. The exhibition is installed in three main spaces in and around the Egyptian Building (Michaelis School of Fine Art, Hiddingsh Campus): the main large space, a small video room at the back and the courtyard in front of the building. The courtyard serves as the entry point to the main exhibition and consists of a construction of sand and rock entitled *Stone Dream* that is installed at ground level. The main exhibition space houses the majority of the body of work and is constructed around the central installation piece, *Encapsulated Memory*. Occupying the remainder of the space are groupings of standing sculptures, prints hung on the walls and suspended fabric works – a wire grid is installed across the space and serves as a type of second ceiling from which sculptural works are suspended.

I used different levels of space within the gallery to create a spatial and visual sense of layering and connection between different parts of the exhibition. For instance, suspended *papier mâché* tools cast shadows on the surrounding walls and visually interconnect with the anthropomorphised standing sculptures below, as well as the

two-dimensional cyanotypes and copper works that run as a refrain at floor and ceiling level. In conceptualising this installation I considered the theory of the bio-dynamic form based on the structure of the human body, with a head at the top, lungs on the sides, heart in the centre and limbs at the bottom. I also considered the installation as a type of garden in and of itself; the layout of the exhibition is specific, as if leading one down a garden path and, as such, the works create a space that enables contemplation on the relationship between one's self and the environment.

In their book *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*, which engages with “ghetto gardens” or gardens consisting of a combination of objects and natural matter made by the homeless, Balmori and Morton (1993: 4) note that gardens are “*compositions* made in open spaces ... that have been constructed from a variety of elements and that, through their detachment from the usual conditions in which gardens are made, liberate the word garden from its cultural straightjacket.” I aimed to create a sense of interconnection and relationship to the earth and the objects that the works make reference to by considering the garden as a composition or orchestra of various parts in its installation.

### *Encapsulated Memory*

*Encapsulated Memory* forms the central feature of the exhibition and consists of a 2 x 2 m floating circular platform. The surface of the platform is divided into quadrants and textured with traces of grid lines similar to those on a map and further treated with soil, sawdust, stones and paint. Various made and found objects, some existing under their own titles, are displayed on top of the platform. These objects include beeswax and *papier mâché* hand tools (*Shared Tools*), plaster and porcelain works (*Bound Hands*), old found garden tools, plant detritus, small assemblage sculptures made of copper and plant materials and objects made of Perspex, plant matter and gold leaf. The circular platform refers to both the microcosm of the garden and the macrocosm of the globe, with grids and boundaries instated on its surface and objects permeating these boundaries in an interconnected manner. The work evokes a tension between an imposed, human-created order and the organic “chaos” of the natural world, similar to an overgrown garden in which interconnection and symbiosis are primary.















*Bashews Home on Wheels*

In an effort to bring to light the contemporary lack of connection between humankind and place or environment, and with reference to issues of migrancy, *Bashews Home on Wheels* consists of a recycled Bashews Box (a found Bashews-brand soft drink packaging container, circa 1960s) painted with shoe polish and with skateboard wheels attached to its base. On top of the box sits a makeshift house-type structure made of sticks, basketry, string and found objects. An old wooden shoehorn attached as a handle can be used to open the box. This assemblage echoes Beuys's visualisation of a conflation of internal and external space. The mobile, make-shift home that travels on the Bashews Box – an object harking back to 1960s Coke culture – speaks of an internal human space, as well as an experience of flux and placelessness. The work is positioned in the main gallery space on the floor near *Encapsulated Memory*.





“If there is any substitute for love, it’s  
memory. To memorise, then, is to restore  
intimacy.”

(Brodsky, 1987: 150)



### *Free Soil*

In *Free Soil* I responded to the outburst of xenophobic violence against migrants in South Africa that occurred in May 2015. Balls of soil were scooped into paper cones and distributed to visitors at the Play Saturdays event (a monthly initiative of the City of Cape Town) (*SA Art Times*, 2015). Participants were invited to dress the soil cone with plant seeds and take it away to plant in a place of their choosing. By performing this action I considered the potential of soil and, by extension, land and environment as free or existing outside of the boundaries of ownership. The final iteration of the work in my show is a photograph of the soil cones at the place of performance and the physical cones with soil balls. In the installation of the show both the print and the cones are installed in the main gallery space, near the door. In the same spirit as in the original performance, the gallery visitor is invited to take a cone as they exit.





### *Transitory Homes*

*Transitory Homes* consists of small balsa wood boxes that house natural and man-made detritus attached to thin rough bluegum rods. The rods balance against the wall in the main gallery space. The objects in the boxes include plant matter and small remnants of glass and bronze. By framing the detritus in the boxes they become fragments of memories of home or another environment, and as such contemplate loss of place and connection. The fragile balsa wood boxes are symbolic of home. The bluegum rods (an alien species and a threat to South Africa's indigenous ecology) convey a sense of precariousness and instability as they lean against the wall, further contributing to a consideration of issues of migrancy and loss of home. The position of the rods against the wall also refers to a garden fence and is intended to give a sense of bounded space.



*Strawberry Days* is a silkscreen print that is stained with tea. The image was taken from an old family photograph from the 1960s with a childminder in the background. The figure of this woman was indistinct in the original photo and, blown up in *Strawberry Days*, becomes a shadowy, faceless figure. I layered an image of my four-year-old self on top of the photograph, alluding to the care and relationship I had with caregivers. There was very little photographic evidence in my family archive that documented this relationship between child and caretaker as one of intimacy but also distance. The work is installed near *Transitory Homes*, as the small shadow figure of the domestic worker in *Strawberry Days* conveys a similar sense of the nature of human relationships to place.



*Expendable Series*

The first work in the *Expendable Series*, *Put Out to Pasture*, consists of a single cloth work glove that was found abandoned, half-buried and covered in mud on a community farm in Goedgedacht (in Riebeeck West), and was subsequently dipped in cretstone and displayed atop a hand-hewn wooden pole. The pole and glove are attached to a wooden stump that serves as its base. When read against the title, the single glove becomes personified and tragic, referring to someone or something that has become obsolete and been discarded. This work sits in the main gallery space near a collection of standing sculptures.







The second work, *Bound Hands*, consists of moulds of my hands made by dipping strips of fabric in plaster. The fragile plaster and form of the work convey a sense of helplessness and loss of agency. The hands sit on the circular platform of *Encapsulated Memory* and may be read off of other works that reference human touch, such as *Shared Tools*. In placing these works near each other it is my intention that the ideas of connection and disconnection become primary.



Conveying similar ideas to *Bound Hands*, *Porcelain Gloves* consists of working gloves cast in porcelain and displayed on the central circular installation base. A tension is generated between the work gloves, which are associated with rough labour, and porcelain, a material that conveys a sense of refinement, value and domesticity. As a whole, the *Expendable Series* refers to the memory of the work done by a particular person and prompts a reflection on the function of the uniform as one that creates social divisions. Each piece is disembodied, however, with the gloves and bindings from the hands enacting memories of those who were once connected to these objects.





To all the gardeners  
Whose gardens you have tended  
Yet whose garden is it?  
Whose land?  
A garden is tended for  
Few to admire.



*Shared Tools/Earth*

*Shared Tools/Earth* constitutes a series of bronze garden tools that, together with the papier mache and ceramic tools, elevate and evoke an intimate connection between the human and the Earth by means of the tool as an intermediary. The sculptures are installed in the main gallery space and stand in mid-space to be viewed from all angles.







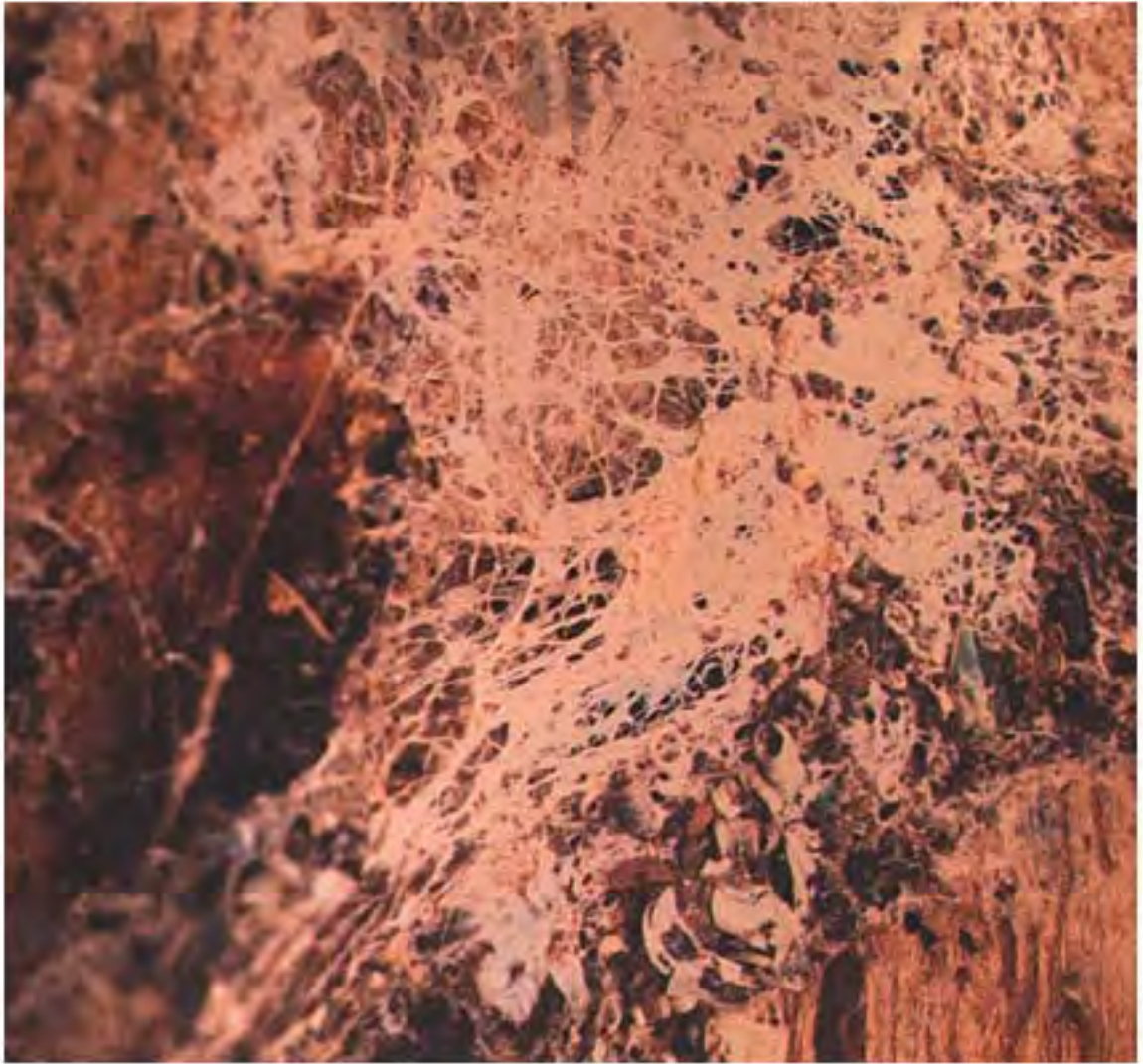
### *Print Series*

*Print Series* consists of three small series of prints, including monoprints, photographic prints and cyanotypes. The works are intended to evoke a consideration of natural cycles that happen continuously in spite of imposed human conditions. Seeds, flowers, fibres and other plant matter are visible in the images. The first series, *And the light comes up each day*, is a series of five monoprints that have been worked over with wax. The second, *And the pod and seed travelled on my journey with me*, consists of four photographs



of seed pods printed on copper plates. The third series, *And the stars come out and the seeds scatter as the songs of the night continue*, is a series of three groups of cyanotypes. The process of cyanotype printing was unpredictable in that the sunshine and lighting needed for the exposure affected the intensity of the colour and the resulting images. Placing loose plant matter on the surface of the paper also garnered unpredictable results, as the matter was often blown around during the exposure time. In addition to the unpredictability of this process, the history of cyanotype printing – particularly the use of this method for spatial planning before photocopying and computer printers – is conceptually significant in relation to my concerns regarding the planning and ordering of natural spaces. The installation of the works refers to sky and sea, as some prints are framed on the wall and others are installed horizontally and slightly raised off the floor so that one peers down onto them.





















In humility,

In anger,

In grace,

In sadness,

In care,

In pride,

A garden is tended for

Few to admire.

(Kathy Ackerman Robins, 2015)



### *Copper Series*

A meditative and performative work in which I embodied a practice of compassion and care, *Tending My Copper Garden* involved tending to strips of copper in the same way that one would care for a garden. This process involved “planting” the strips in the earth, watering them daily and weeding out bits that had blown onto the surfaces. Through this exposure to the harshness of the elements, the copper sheets began to reflect the residues of rain, soil, wind, sun and stone. This process contrastingly juxtaposes harshness – of the elements themselves and of the industrial extraction of copper from the Earth – with a sense of nurturing and care towards inanimate materials.

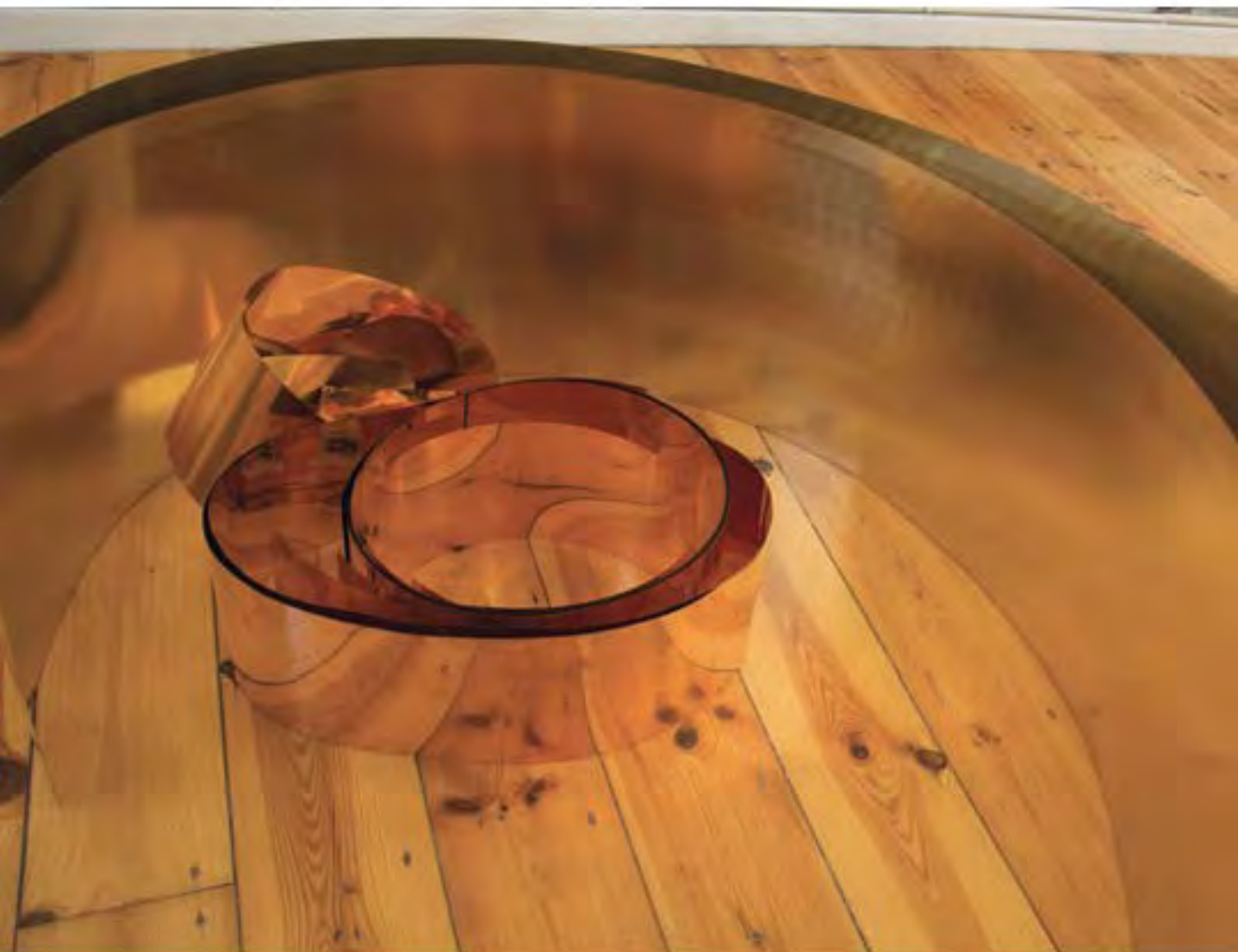


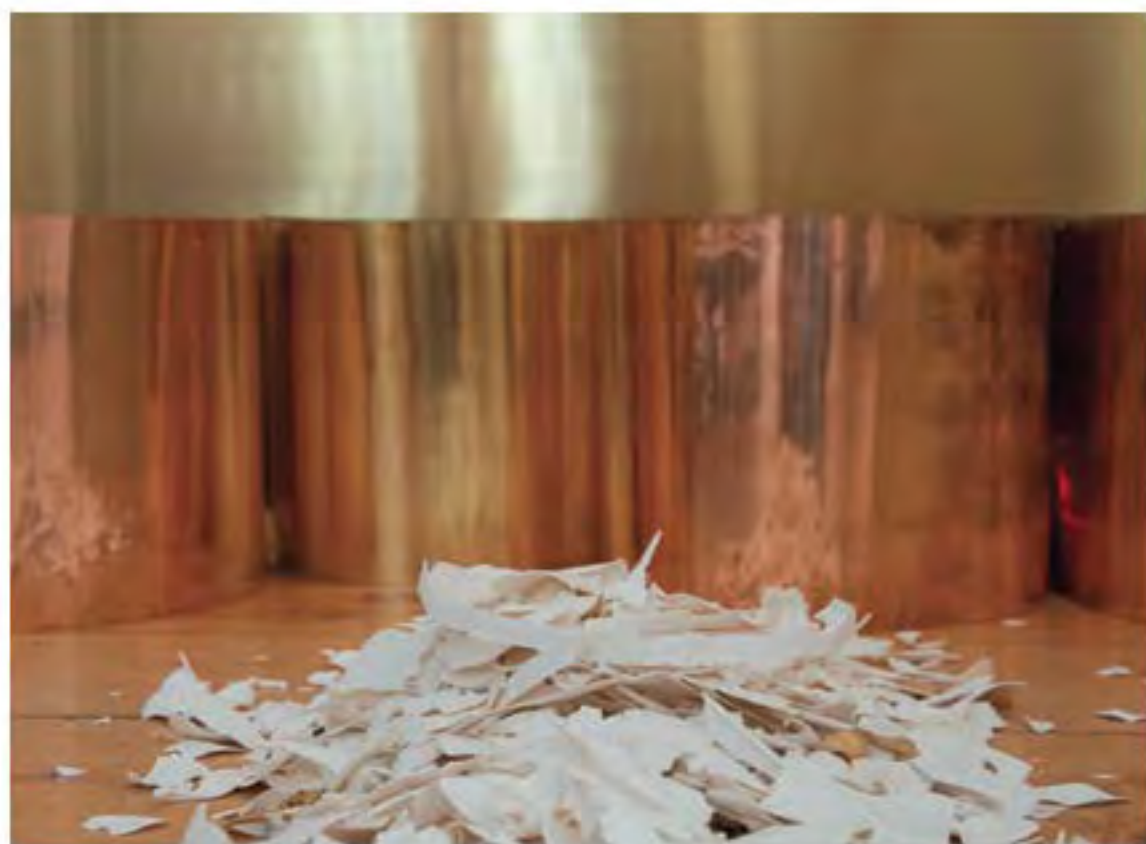






The copper strips that resulted from this performance are exhibited as *The Processional* and *Echoing Stories*. *The Processional* consists of strips of weathered copper that run along the skirting of the gallery walls. Installing the work at a low height draws attention down towards the Earth. *Echoing Stories* consists of large coils of strips of untreated brass and weathered copper that lie on the floor next to a pile of broken shards of porcelain. The piece includes a sound recording of the copper strips blowing in the wind, which is played near the floor installation. My use of copper relates to 1960s interior design, when copper fittings were used extensively in home interiors. In a contemporary context copper becomes a contentious material with regards to mining and the exploitation of labour and land. While *The Processional* forms part of the outer boundary of the main exhibition space, *Echoing Stories* is installed closer to the centre of the space near the central circular platform.









### *Whose Land?*

*Whose Land?* is a series of six works that consists of layered photographs, printed book pages, paintings and drawings on Perspex. In some places the texture of the board underneath the Perspex contributes to the layered look of the images. These works involve a process of layering photographs, paintings, drawings, silkscreens, monoprints and unprocessed materials. The natural matter was selected as representative of the plant kingdom and nature in general, and not necessarily for its natural and social significance. While there is a sense of interconnection in the visual appearance and layering of



images, the discontinuity of materials and processes behind the work simultaneously implies a sense of disconnection between humankind and nature. The works are installed on low platforms that require one to stand over them and peer down at the images. This act of looking down conveys a sense of surveying a landscape or a map, thereby reinforcing the sense of human ordering and dominion over the land. The series is installed in a sectioned-off area of the main gallery space. Other similarly layered images are displayed on tree trunks, notched so that the images can stand upright.



*Whose Land? I*, 2015



*Whose Land? 3, 2015*



*Whose Land? 2, 2015*



*Whose Land? 4, 2015*



*Whose Land? 5, 2015*

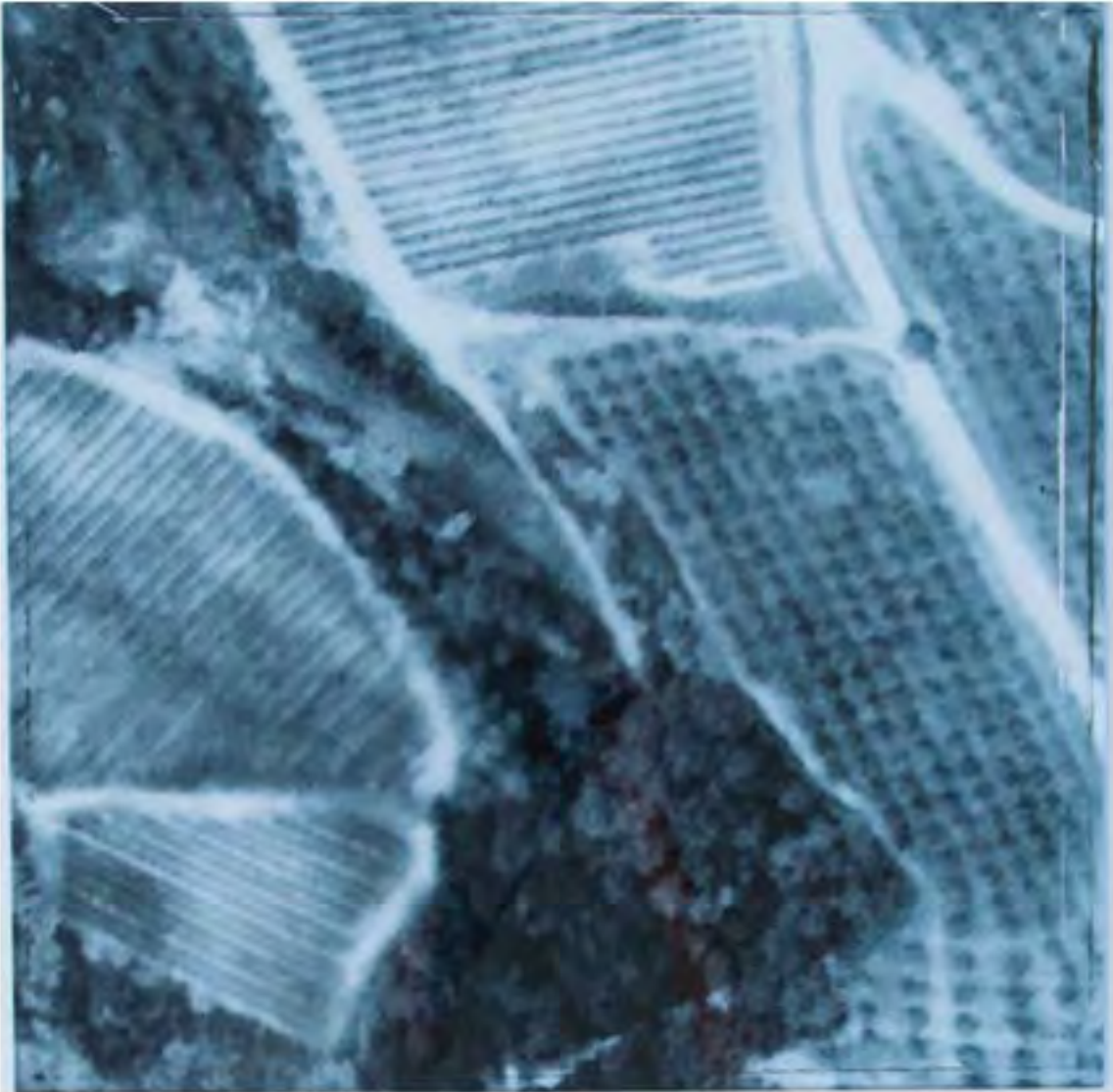
“At the end of this harrowing century we need to collect and retell such stories, if only to remind ourselves from time to time of the need to be vigilant in protecting civil society from police states, large and small.”

(Glenn Frankel, 1999: 7)



*The grass did not grow until the humans came*

*The grass did not grow until the humans came* is a photographic diptych of natural materials and landscapes, printed on glass that was found under an abandoned house. One of the images is an aerial photograph of the Hemel en Aarde Valley and the other is a photograph of grass and soil taken in my own garden that was painted over with layers of soil and water. By combining photographs and raw natural matter, the work hints at a disconnection between a “represented” nature and “actual” nature. The rough edges and surface of the found glass also convey a sense of disintegration and abandoned living spaces.





*Memorialised and My Garden*

*Memorialised* and *My Garden* are assemblages of found garden tools, timber and metal that serve as a type of monument to the people who tended the garden and came into contact with the found tools. Both works are installed in the main gallery space and lean against the wall.







*Through the Looking Glass*

*Through the Looking Glass* is a group of five kaleidoscopes mounted on bluegum rods standing on stumps. The viewer is invited to look through the kaleidoscopes with a sense of child-like play. One kaleidoscope is installed outside the entrance to the gallery, and as one walks through the gallery one is guided on a type of path marked by the other kaleidoscopes.







*Planet* consists of a series of photographs of natural materials taken through the lens of a kaleidoscope and reflects on my own blurred vision of my memories of my childhood garden. The photographs are printed on one copper sheet installed on the wall in the main gallery.



*Displacement II* is a set of two bronze wheels that move, cast from existing wheels and attached to two metal rods.





“Weaving involves the fabrication of a continuous surface by entwining disparate materials, and as both a practice and a metaphor, it has stood as an enduring principle of written and graphic creativity uniting words and images.”

(Brotten, 2011)



The *Birdsong* series, composed of the visual sound waves of recorded birdsongs embroidered in gold thread on transparent industrial fabric, constitutes my own attempt to pin down and fix that which is transient. By embroidering the bird song in gold thread, I aimed to elevate and preserve that which is fleeting and fragile and thereby reflect on the interrelatedness of political, social and natural events. Additionally, the migration and movement of birds suggests the traversing of sociopolitical boundaries. In the *Birdsong* series the fabric floats above the viewer, enveloping them and establishing a sense of interconnection and immersion through this proximity to the work.





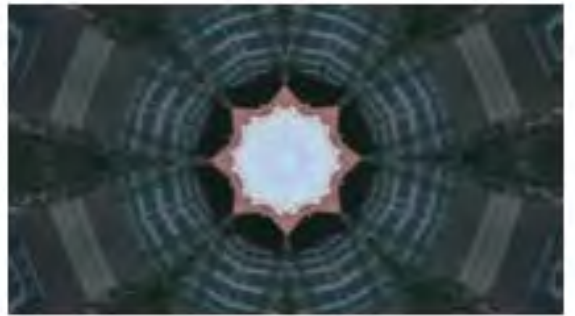






*Displacement* is a video piece that shows burning *papier mâché* houses floating on a copper sheet made buoyant by a lifesaver. The work evokes a sense of universality of loss of home and place. *Hope* is a video that is shown in conversation with *Displacement* and was made by transforming the frames of *Displacement* with a kaleidoscope. As such, the two videos work in conjunction with each other and visually juxtapose disintegration and despair, in *Displacement*, with growth and renewal in *Hope*. There is a contemplative quality to both videos as the flames and the metamorphosis of the kaleidoscope images encourage a meditative viewing experience. The videos are projected in the small video room at the back of the main exhibition space.

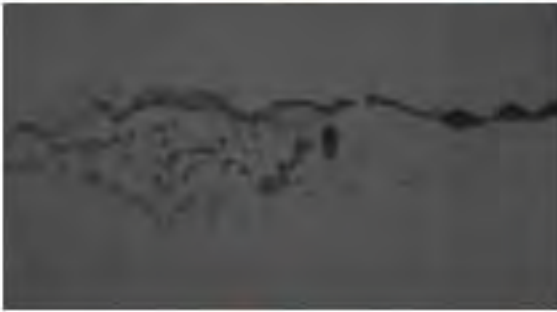








*Erasing the trace is also to make it appear* is a video piece that documents my process of painting landscapes, which are simultaneously erased. The painting video is layered with other footage and images of me walking. The piece is installed on a small screen in a small wooden wagon with wire mesh on the sides. The viewer must bend down and peer through the mesh into the box in order to watch the video. This installation and action reinforces a sense of something being contained and bounded.



*Through the Garden Fence* is a video work that consists of a compilation of video footage from the late 1950s and early 1960s from my extended family archive. The piece is installed in the small video room at the back of the main exhibition space and runs on a loop.





“I have spent all my life in Johannesburg. School, university, studio, are all within a three-kilometre radius of where I was born. So when my pictures are set in Paris or New York, in the end they are about Johannesburg - that is to say, a rather bewildered provincial city. These pictures are not all little morals or illustrations of apartheid life.

But they are all provoked by the question of how it is that one is able to construct a more or less coherent life in a situation so full of contradiction and disruption”

(Kentrige in Enwezor & Bester, 2013)

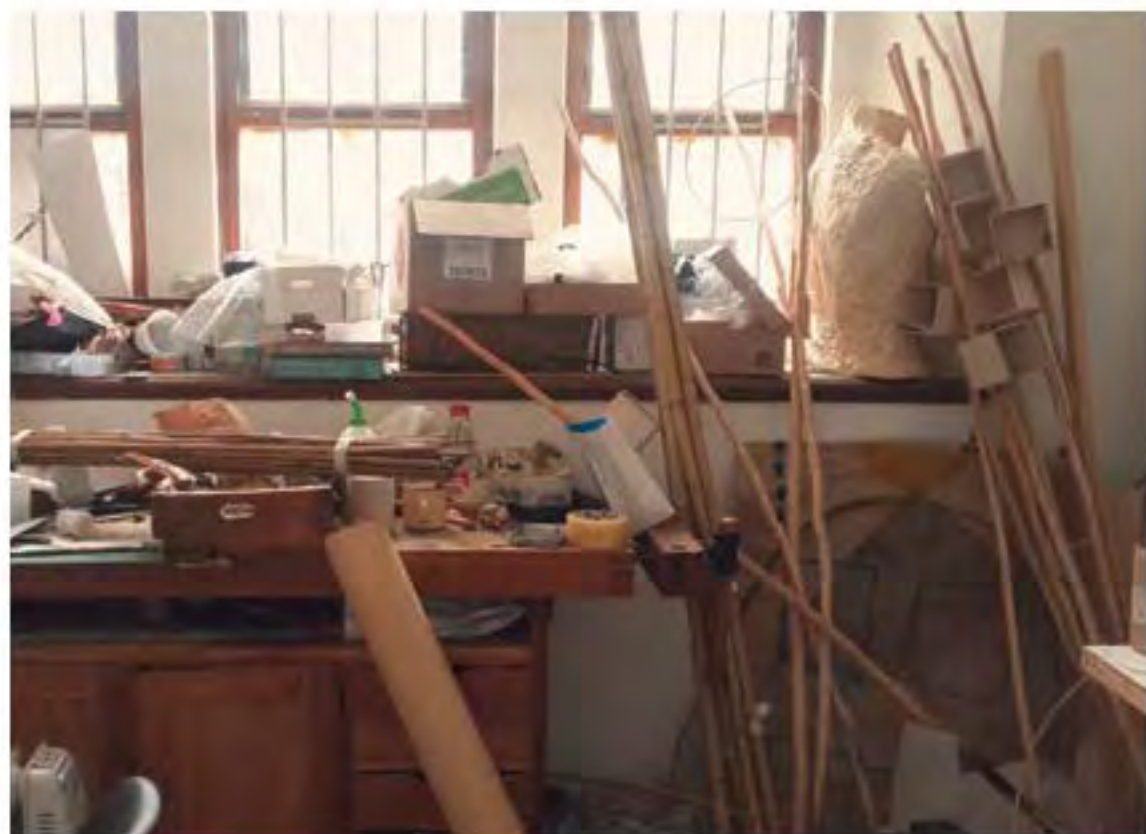


## Concluding Thoughts

Upon reflecting on the process of making this installation, I was struck by the realisation that the final “garden” has nothing growing in it. Having worked with community gardens *in situ*, I am aware that in the context of my exhibition I am doing something quite different. The materials I have engaged with have a sense of temporality – paper, wood, wax, porcelain – imbued with a sense of fragility and potential for disintegration and, as such, speak of loss. Yet at the same time their vulnerability requires special care. Many of the materials are by-products or detritus of a growing garden that suggests both a memory of their being when they were nurtured by a direct connection to the Earth, and of their expulsion from the garden. I have given these “refugee objects” special care; I have responded to an impulse to preserve the trace and memory of what once was and a need to offer hope, as if these fragments, like seeds, might take root and grow. A seed is carried, along with personal and cultural histories, in the pockets of migrants as they traverse the land. I consider my final

garden installation, with its collection of objects, garden tools, seeds and dead plants, as evocative of displacement, but also of potential for future growth in new contexts.

Reflecting on my personal development through this project, I see the significance of my years of working in development as a possible compensation for the guilt of growing up in privilege. Through the lens of adulthood I question how many core sociopolitical and environmental issues have changed significantly since my childhood – the dictum *plus qu’il change, plus qu’il reste la meme* (“the more things change, the more they stay the same”) comes to mind. However, the project has reignited my passion for finding innovative solutions that combine my art with other parts of my life and hinge on interdisciplinary and collaborative thinking, and that serve as responses to the continuing inequity of land distribution, environmental support, education, economics and access to resources in South Africa today.











## References

- Adams, D. 1992. Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology. *Art and Ecology*. 51:2. 26–34. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777391> [27 March, 2015].
- Archive and Curatorship [ARC]. 2011. *Historic Hiddingh Campus*. Available: [http://www.arc.uct.ac.za/the\\_visual\\_university/?lid=344](http://www.arc.uct.ac.za/the_visual_university/?lid=344) [16 November, 2015].
- Balmori, D & Morton, M. 1993. *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Barthes, R. 1980. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Brodsky, J. 1987. *Less Than One: Selected Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Catts, O & Iwasaki, H. 2014. In *Synthetic Aesthetics: Investigating Synthetic Biology's Designs on Nature*. A. Ginsberg, J. Calvert, P. Schyfter, A. Elfick, D. Endy, eds. Cambridge: MIT Press. 195–202.
- Coetzee, C & Nuttall, S. 1998. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coetzee, JM. 1988. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Radix.
- Dailey, B. 1986. The “Closed Garden” and “Sealed Fountain”: Song of Songs 4:12 in the Late Medieval Iconography of Mary. In *Medieval Gardens*. E. Macdougall, ed. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks. 255–257.
- De Waal, E. 2014. Lunch with the FT: Edmund de Waal. *Financial Times* (Cape Town). 29–30 March: 3.
- De Waal, E. 2015. Openings. *Financial Times* (Cape Town). 10–11 October: 24.
- Enwezor, O & Bester, R, eds. 2013. *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*. USA: International Centre of Photography.
- Ettinger, B. 1993. *Matrix: Halal(a) – Lapsus: Notes on Painting*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art.
- Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. 2015. *2015 International Year of Soils*. Available: <http://www.fao.org/soils-2015/en/> [27 October, 2015].
- Frankel, G. 1999. *Rivonia's Children: Three Families and the Price of Freedom in South Africa*. Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Gevisser, M. 2014. *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*. Jeppesstown: Jonathan Ball Publishers.

- Giliomee, H. 2003. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. Cape Town and Charlottesville, VA: Tafelberg Publishers and the University of Virginia Press.
- Goda, T & Roth, D. 2015. *Japanese Garden Journal*. Available: <http://www.jgarden.org/rothteien/philosophy.htm> [10 March, 2015]
- Goodman Gallery, nd. *Rosenclaire: Investing in the Immaterial*. Available: <http://www.goodman-gallery.com/files/upload/news/5451Newsrosenclaireinvestingintheimmaterial.pdf> [29 October, 2015].
- The Green Belt Movement. 2015. *Wangari Maathai*. Available: <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai> [29 October, 2015].
- Greenberg, K. 2013. *Meschac Gaba*. London: Tate Publishing.
- Guattari, F. 1989. *The Three Ecologies*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Harrison, RP. 1993. Homeless Gardens. In *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- High Line Art. 2015. Sarah Sze: Still Life with Landscape (Model for a Habitat). Available: <http://art.thehighline.org/project/sarahsze/> [27 October, 2015].
- Impey, A. 2013. *Hearing Landscape Speak*. Available: <https://musiclandscape-conference.wordpress.com/podcasts-and-photographs/> [29 October, 2015].
- James, D. 1999. *Songs of the Women Migrants: Performance and Identity in South Africa*. London: Edinburgh University Press.
- Malchiodi, C. 2002. *The Soul's Palette: Drawing on Art's Transformative Powers for Health and Well-being*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Perec, G. 1997. Approaches to What? In *The Everyday Life Reader*. B. Highmore, ed. London: Psychology Press. 176.
- Rifkin, J. 2011. *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy and the World*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.

- Ruiters, G. 2001. Environmental Racism and Justice in South Africa's Transition. In *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 28(1). 95–103. Available: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02589340120058120> [3 October, 2015].
- SA Art Times. 2015. *Cape Town Central Play Saturdays, Cape Town*. Available: <http://arttimes.co.za/play-saturdays-cape-town/> [16 November, 2015].
- SANBI. 2014. *Kirstenbosch NBG: Van Riebeeck's Hedge*. Available: <http://www.sanbi.org/gardens/kirstenbosch/virtualtour/kirstenbosch-nbg-van-riebeecks-hedge> [12 August, 2015].
- Scarry, E. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sengupta, S. 2015. 60 Million People Fleeing Chaotic Lands, U.N. Says. *New York Times*. 18 June. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/world/60-million-people-fleeing-chaotic-lands-un-says.html> [25 October, 2015].
- Siyazisiza Trust. 2012. Available: <http://www.siyazisiza.org.za/> [26 October, 2015].
- Suttner, E. 1997. *Cutting Through the Mountain*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Tate Modern. 2005. *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments*. Available: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/joseph-beuys-actions-vitrines-environments> [29 October, 2015].
- Toffoli, H. 2015. Zake Mda's "Heart of Redness" Hits the Stage as an African Opera. *Mail & Guardian*. 14 August. Available: <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-14-magnet-attracts-new-heart> [29 October, 2015].
- Tromp, B. 2015. SA's Must See, No-show Documentary. *Sunday Times* (Cape Town). 11 October: 13.
- United Nations Environment Programme. 2015. Available: <http://www.unep.org/climatechange/mitigation/> [26 October 2015].
- Williams, J. 2010. Understanding the Place of Humans in Nature. *ICON: Journal of the International Committee for the History of Technology*. 6. 7–20.



## Acknowledgements

It took a village to complete this Masters and I am deeply grateful to the following people for assistance with various components of this project:

My supervisors, Carine Zaayman and Professor Pippa Skotnes, for walking this two-year journey alongside me, for their hugely beneficial insights and advice on my document and studio production. For this input and support, I am grateful.

Associate Professor Virginia MacKenny for her ongoing care and support as Head of the Masters Programme at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT.

Professor Jane Alexander, for sculptural input and installation advice, as well as support on all levels.

Kurt Campbell and Andrew Lamprecht for guiding the Masters reading group and providing literary references, unfaltering support and input on all levels.

I am grateful to the following academic, technical and support staff members of the Michaelis School of Fine Art for practical and theoretical insights:

Associate Professor and Michaelis Director Fritha Langerman

Doctor Nomusa Makhubu

Associate Professor Johann van der Schjiff

Professor Stephen Inngs

Associate Professor Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz

Svea Josephy

Jean Brundrit

Fabian Saptouw

Associate Professor Berni Searle

Professor Penny Siopis

Professor Jay Pather

Doctor Rael Salley

Andrea Steer for printmaking support.

Moeneeb Dalwai for video filming, sound and lighting assistance.

Stanley Amos for woodwork and carpentry.

Charlie van Rooyen and Shannon Brand for woodwork and metalwork.

Ray Du Toit for photographic assistance.

Delice Reich for ceramics.

Afiefah Rajap and Sharon Werthen for administrative support.

Thomas Pienaar for those broken windows and lost key moments.

Solvej Vorster (Head Librarian)

Kashiefa Shade (Assistant Librarian)

Peter Vries (Library Assistant) for deep knowledge of all the books and their hiding places in the library.

I would like to thank the following people for support in various areas of this project:

Sethimbile Msezane and Gerald Muhona for writing and photographic support in the first year of my Masters.

Quanta Gauld for excellent assistance in editing, writing, design and general conversations, and support in preparation for my final submission.

Jody Paulsen for silkscreen assistance.

Philip Roth for cyanotype assistance.

Hugh Solomon for installation assistance.

Dr Linda Price for writing support.

Andrew Putter for interest and insights.

Anna Stielau for cyanotype advice and theoretical references.

Jade Mulvaney for videography and video editing for *Through the Garden Fence, Displacement* and *Hope*.

Turid Bergstedt for kaleidoscope construction.

Lucille Bestall and Charity for mould-making assistance.

Richard Mabusa for studio assistance.

Hannah Fleischman for papier mâché and video assistance.

Bronze Age Foundry for casting of bronze tools and sticks.

Cara van der Riet, Amy Tertiens and the Orms team.

Avic Hindmarch for conversations on biodynamic and sustainable gardens.

Katherine Glenday for ceramics.

Jane Zimmerman from the Siyazisiza Trust.

Lynette de Villiers for embroidery and weaving assistance.

Sepideh Meribahn for general support and installation assistance.

Lauren Jacobsen for theoretical references.

Rosenclaire for guidance and space for creativity in their workshops at Goedgedacht, Riebeeck West.

Carlos Mariza for catalogue design, binding and installation assistance.

Thomas Cartwright for editing and proofreading.

Hansa Press for printing.

My fellow MFA colleagues for intellectual and personal support:

Zyma Amien

Ingrid Bolton

Nicole Shaer

Buhlebezwe Siwani

Olga Speakes

Anna Stielau

Gina Niederheimer

For general support throughout the duration of the project:

Leonora Sauls

Hilary Cloete

Sam Byrne

Innocent Dulanya

Monica Humani

My family, for encouraging me to go on this journey and supporting me throughout:

My husband, David Robins, for care, encouragement and support as well as photographic, performance and video assistance, and general schlepping.

My children, Gus and Arielle Robins.

My parents, Raymond and Wendy Ackerman.

My siblings and extended family, both local and abroad.

Cecelia Robins for family archive video footage.

Debby Robins for family photos.

Professor Stephen Robins for conversations and reference advice.

Anne Graaf for permission to use Photo in Whose Land.

I am hugely grateful for the immense support I have received on this journey, as I have attempted to give voice to that which is often mute.



**Photography**

Michaela Limberis

**Design**

Carlos Marzia

**Proofreading**

Thomas Cartwright

**Printing and Binding**

Hansa Print

All rights reserved 2015



