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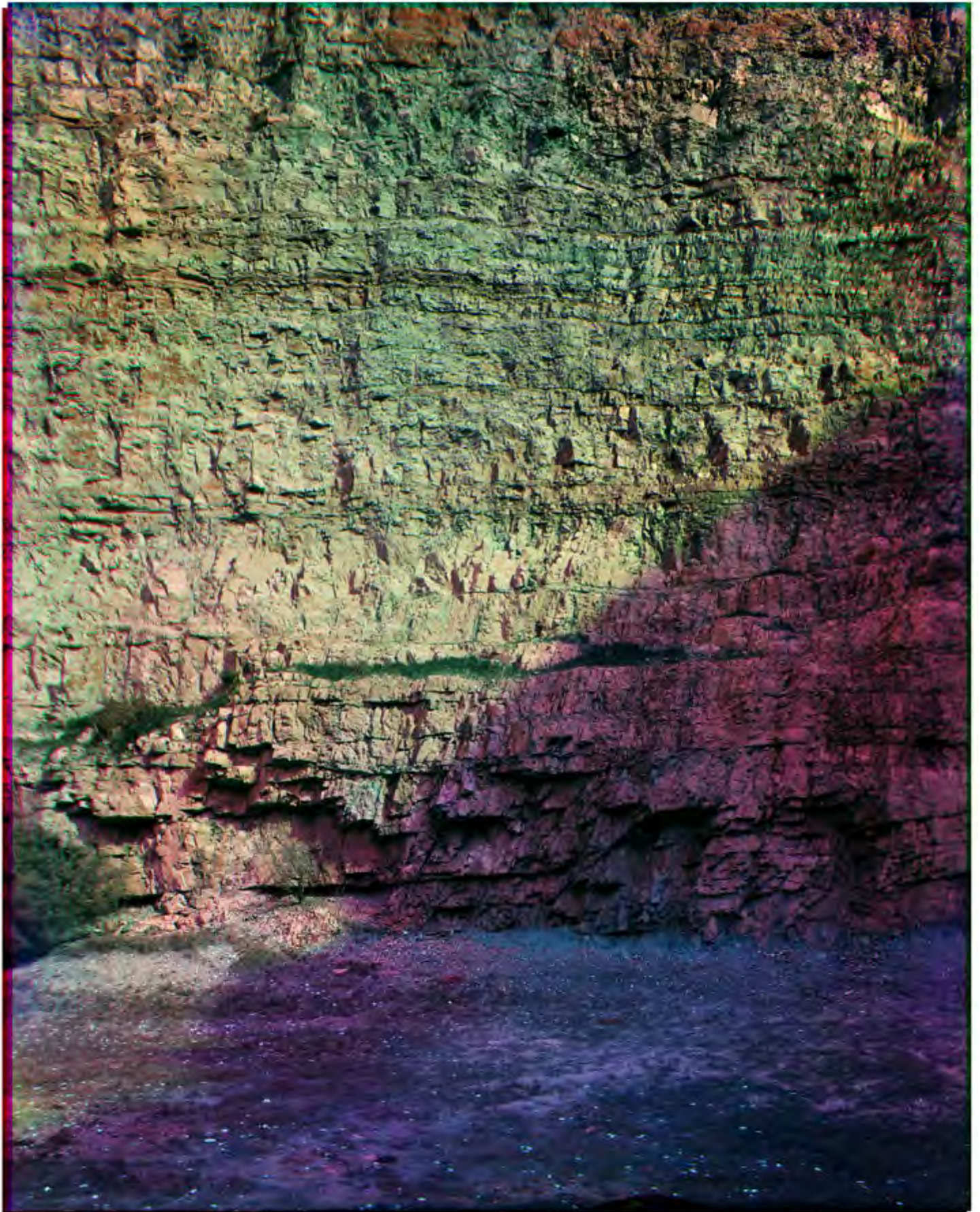
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Unstable Ground

A Photographic Reflection on the Landscape of Table Mountain

Eugene van der Merwe



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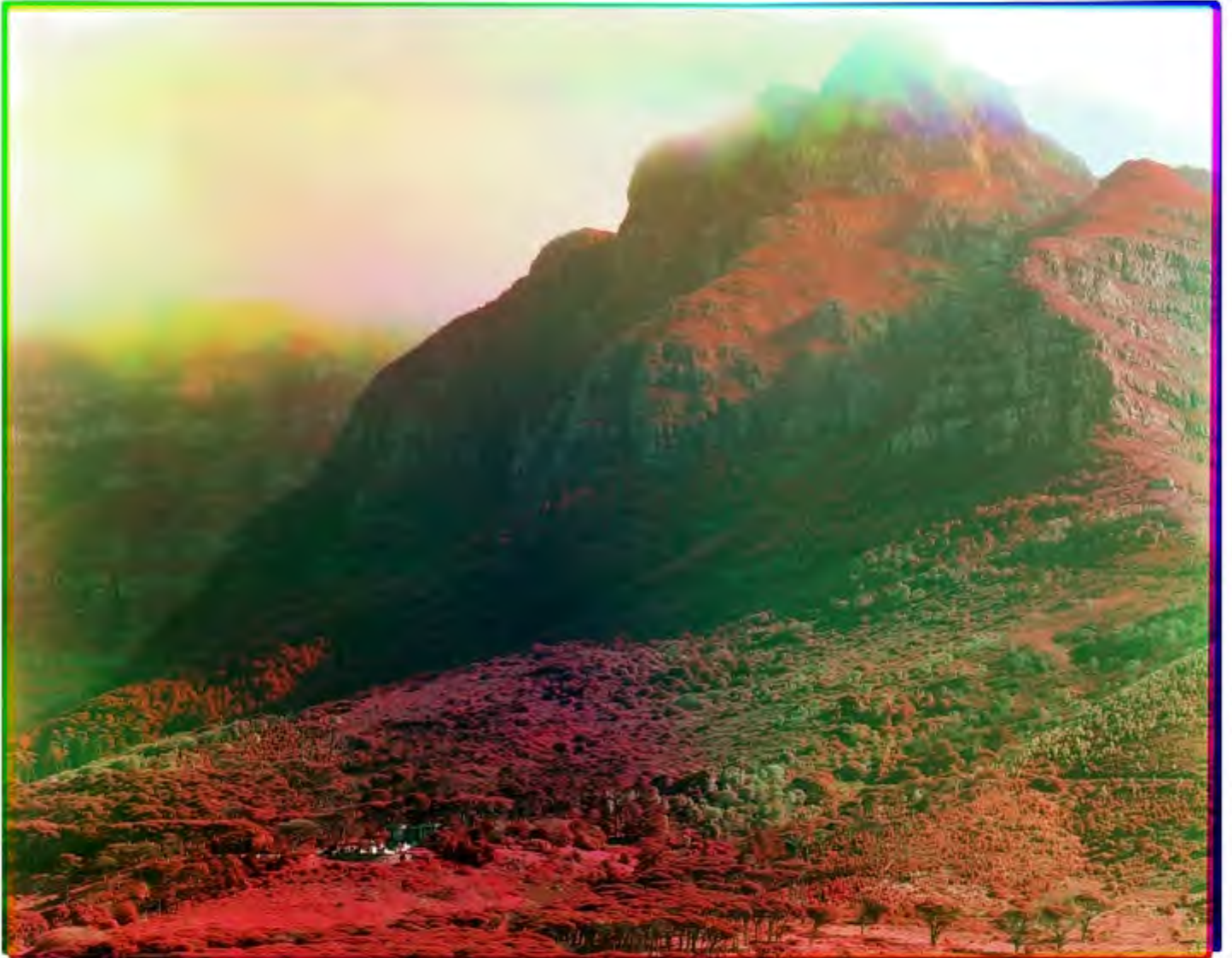


Figure 2: Rhodes Memorial from Rhodes Highschool (2020)

Abstract

In my MFA project *Unstable Ground: A Photographic Reflection on the Landscape of Table Mountain*, I have photographed the landscape of Table Mountain, surrounding parks and green spaces to reflect on the entanglements between its history, notions of nature and landscape and subjective relationships to place. I have tried to make sense of this site through my photographs, research, and writing, not looking for stability but seeking to reveal the precarious, the in-between, the unseeable, while also trying to learn more about my own relationship with this landscape and land and how it allows or denies photographic representation. Table Mountain's geology, composed of layers of rock and sediment, is overlaid on its surface with human impositions, and its cultural history is similarly composed of the sedimented layers of meaning brought to it by all those who have interacted with the site over time. These layers and erasures contribute to this project's reading of the site as a palimpsest. Each place I photographed represented multiple stories, multiple opinions, multiple histories and multiple points of view, and I have used different methods of layering in my photographs to evoke these strata and deposits.



Figure 3: North face over Higgovale Quarry II (2021)

Preface

I grew up on the highveld, a landscape of neatly manicured suburbs and towns spread over gentle rolling hills and, when those ran out, mine dumps, smallholdings and farms and, eventually, if you looked far enough, grassland dotted with suikerbos and the odd copse of eucalyptus or poplar marking a homestead. As a child, it felt to me like a landscape constructed on human terms, everything in its place – safe, benign, unthreatening. My first experience of Table Mountain was one of fascination at the idea of a mountain in the city, but also of awe and fear, where my own frailty was thrown into stark relief. From the top of the mountain, inching hesitantly closer to the edge of the north face, I remember seeing only the immense void below, my thoughts consumed by the consequences of an ill-timed slip. As a seven-year-old boy, the cable car ride was exhilarating and the pay-to-look binoculars at the top were novel, but the mountain itself evoked a fear response in me.

Table Mountain was also one of the main reasons I chose to move to Cape Town twenty-two years later: I wanted home to be a place where experiencing natural spaces did not require a full day excursion. While my interactions with Table Mountain were limited in the first few years I spent living here, in the years leading up to my MFA I was able to spend more time hiking, trail running, climbing, and photographing on the mountain (by “the mountain”, I mean Table Mountain National Park and its adjacent parks, greenbelts and green spaces). Here, however, I did not find the natural space I expected. Instead I found an altered landscape, with large tracts of the land resembling European woodlands and certain areas seeming more a simulacrum of the Lake District or the New Forest than I expected to find on a mountain in Africa. In other areas, the mountain was scarred by roads, dams, quarries and aqueducts. I also noted that most of the people I was sharing the mountain with shared my skin colour.

With these realisations I became increasingly ill at ease on the mountain; the landscape challenged my understanding of nature¹ and, as I researched its history, brought into sharp focus the ways in which it reflects South Africa’s stratified social relations and my own position. I have come to see it not as a landscape within which I am at home, but as one in which my identity is more accurately reflected by the alien trees that are such a conspicuous and contentious part of its identity, where I can see the entanglements of post-colonial whiteness mirrored in the un-belonging of things that are not from here.²

Referring to white authors writing about the South African landscape, J.M. Coetzee (1988: 8) writes that “In the words he throws out to the landscape, in the echoes he listens for, he is seeking for a reciprocity with Africa that will allow him an identity better than that of visitor, stranger, transient”. The echoes I hear in this landscape are uncanny, having the discordant quality of a place where the beauty and sublimity of nature clash with the din of human endeavour. To express that discord in this body of work, I have sought out places where photographs can be inserted into the gaps between what exists physically in the landscape and the history it represents.

1 In this paper I have drawn on Timothy Morton’s usages of the word “nature”, distinguishing between “nature” as the interconnected web of the human and non-human and “Nature” as it refers to the non-human as an entity separate from humans (Morton, 2020: 3). In my understanding of these usages, *nature* plays the role of adjective, describing places or spaces where people can interact with the non-human – essentially green spaces – while *Nature* alienates humans from the non-human.

2 I use the term entanglement in accordance with Sarah Nuttall’s usage, where it is intended to “draw into our analyses critical attention to those sites and spaces in which was once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways” (Nuttall, 2009: 20).

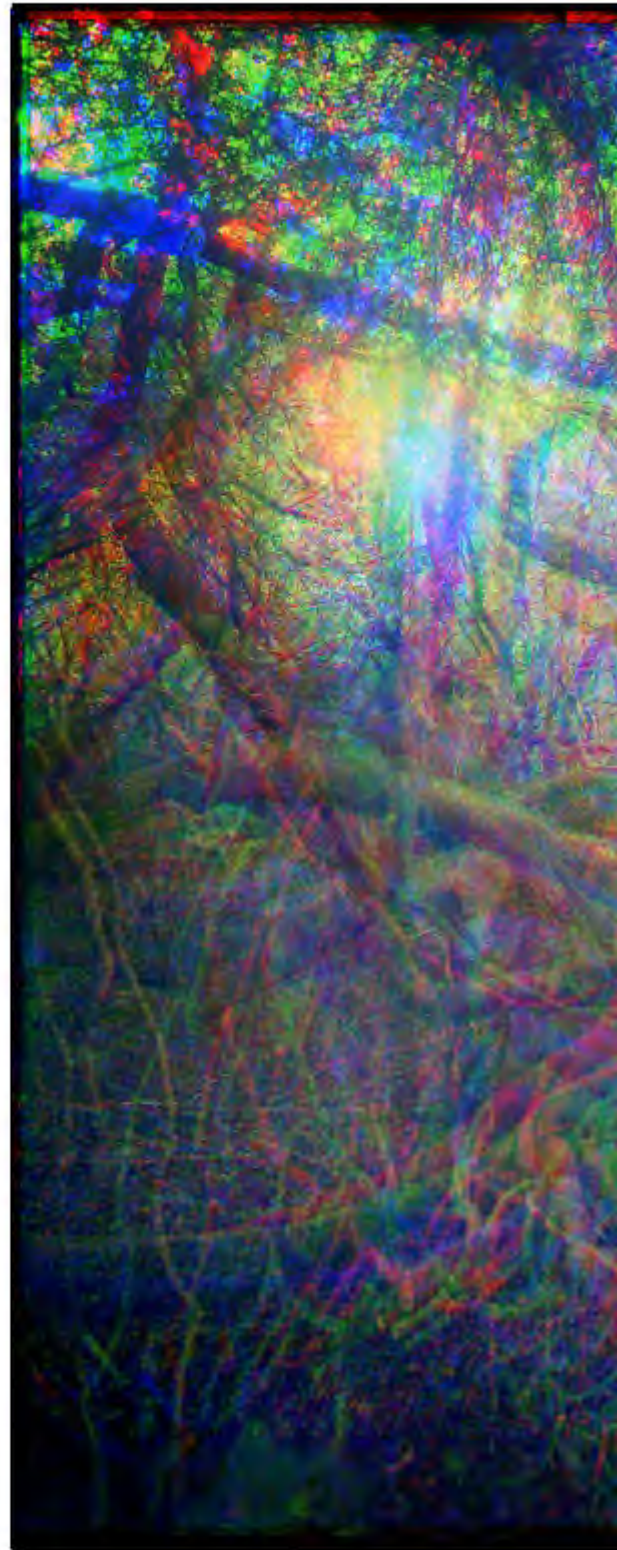
Introduction

This project reflects on Table Mountain as a symbol for and embodiment of concerns about nature, land and landscape and their representations in the context of a human-centred reading of its history. While my initial impetus was towards making work that engaged primarily with ecological concerns in the context of the Anthropocene,³ further research, discussion, critique of the work and introspection shifted my focus to the complex interactions of history, meaning and subjective association implicit in my subject matter. Probably the most prominent theme to emerge from my engagement with Table Mountain is that it does not readily lend itself to a stable understanding. Its meaning and significance shift as one considers the disparate features of its *gestalt* and, as Vergunst (2000: 22) writes, “Its symbolism is both transient and relative. Though it be a common symbol, Table Mountain has no collective or singular meaning among Capetonians.”

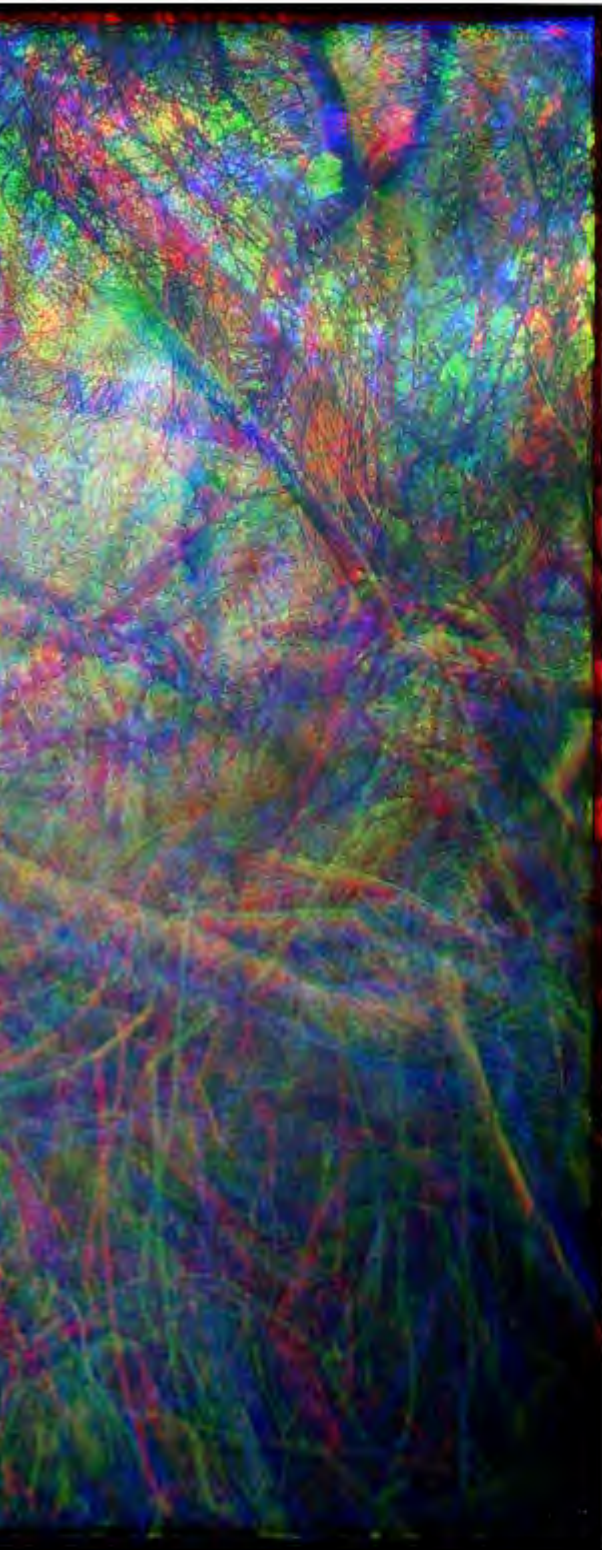
Table Mountain is a beautiful, natural landscape of crags, ravines, forest and fynbos, a defining feature of Cape Town as “City against a backdrop of nature” (Josephy, 2008: 15). It is a protected national park that some work to conserve, while others visit it to experience nature and escape the rhythms of city life. It is also a cultural landscape embedded with the endeavours, enterprises, contestations and traumas of its past and present. It represents even as it is represented: while its outline is arguably the most iconic landscape feature in South African art and visual culture, its surface bears the marks of being shaped to support settlement and familiarise and tame its strangeness to suit the settler sensibility and subsume it into the colonial imaginary, simultaneously alienating indigenous subjectivities (Goodrich & Strydom, 2014: 68).

In reading the mountain and its surrounds as landscape, this project reflects on it as a place whose identity and cultural significance is intimately bound with the ways in which it has been represented. It is positioned at the intersection between the particularity of this site’s history and landscape representation as a subjective interpretation of place. The interaction between the complexity of the landscape and the indeterminacy inherent in the photograph mean that it can suggest but not state, and I remain mindful that any meaning ascribed to or drawn from the photograph is subjective and contingent. One might argue that a photograph of the mountain is a signifier with many signifieds, a sign rendered unstable by the tension between the different traces that contribute to its meaning. As I have made photographs, I have sought out places where they might suggest this instability and point to my own uncertainty in understanding this place and my relationship to it.

Because of the complexity of Table Mountain and its history, time plays an important role in my interpretation of it. I have attempted to make photographs that draw together its past and present; my concern is not with a particular moment but with the accumulation in the landscape of the countless moments that have contributed to its shaping. I am concerned with the build-up of traces – of actions and affects – encountered independently of their origins. David Company (2003) calls this approach “Late Photography” and likens it to “a trace of a trace of an event”, writing: “One might easily surmise that photography has of late inherited a major role as an undertaker,



³ The ever-increasing scale of human impact on the Earth has ushered in a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, where anthropogenic actions are the dominant geological force (Boettger, 2015: 3). Human influence on the Earth has become so significant that there is now no place on Earth where human activity has not resulted in some measurable change in the condition of the environment (McKibben, 2006: xxi).



summariser or accountant. It turns up late, wanders through the places where things have happened totting up the effects of the world’s activity”.

The traces that I have photographed on Table Mountain are, to a large extent, those left over from the colonial era. The mountain’s conserved status from the mid-20th century onward has preserved both colonial interventions in the landscape and natural biodiversity. As Goodrich and Strydom (2014: 73) explain, the territorial ontology central to coloniality is defined in part through how landscape has been represented and is reiterated by the persistence of these representational strategies in contemporary South African culture. In considering Table Mountain as a physical representation of colonial thought about landscape embedded in the larger post-colonial landscape of Cape Town, the project’s interpretation of this place and its history is complicated by the tension between obvious, *visible* markers of colonial and post-colonial interventions, such as the presence of a multitude of alien trees, and the relative *invisibility* of pre-colonial history and of present-day social realities in the landscape. As such, a white man of Afrikaans background making landscape photographs of a multifaceted, iconic and *contested* site like Table Mountain is a fraught exercise that has led me onto increasingly unstable ground.

This instability can in part be attributed to South Africa’s history of landscape representation, by which white men have represented landscape in the culture in ways that have supported colonial and apartheid ideologies. My practice originated in a context where the deleterious consequences of such representations remained unacknowledged, but over the last few years my practice has evolved from superficial engagement with landscape to a concern with history, human relationships to nature and land, *nature* as a concept that alienates humans from ecological thought⁴ and the capacity of photography to interpret and reflect those concerns.

Making this body of work has required me to reflect critically on South Africa’s history of landscape representation and my own practice and positionality and to attempt to move beyond representations that privilege sectional interests. I have chosen an unconventional approach to photography while referencing older representations to question and subvert those representations. My aim has been to move the photographs away from the traditional expectations of realism, beauty, clarity and description associated with the landscape photograph and try instead to reveal the dis-ease that this historical site evokes.

Grappling with the complexity of this landscape has made it clear to me that, as much as its physical stature might suggest otherwise, Table Mountain occupies *Unstable Ground*. In this body of work I try to understand the site through my photographs and my writing – not looking for stability but hoping to reveal the shaky, the in-between, the unseeable, while also wanting to learn more about my own relationship with this landscape and land.

4 “Ecological thought” refers to simultaneously considering the human and non-human to conceive of the interconnection between subjective experience and understanding of the world around us and the physical realities manifest in the world. Ecological thought places emphasis on coexistence between humans and between humans and the non-human world. For a deeper interrogation of the concept, see *The Ecological Thought* by Timothy Morton (2020).

Figure 4: *Brabajum Stellatifolium* (2020)



Figure 5: (top): *Holiday time in Cape Town in honour of the expected arrival of the Governor-General of UNITED South Africa (1891–1899)* by James Ford. (Vergunst, 2000: 83)

Figure 6: (2nd): City of Cape Town logo (capetown, n.d.)

Figure 7: (3rd): 1975 15-cent stamp promoting Table Mountain as a tourist destination (colnect, n.d.).

Figure 8: (bottom): Homepage of SANParks' Table Mountain National Park website (SANParks, n.d.). Table Mountain was proclaimed a natural and historical monument in 1951, a national park in 1998 (Vergunst, 2000: 28), a World Heritage Site in 2004 (Unesco, 2006) and a "New 7th Wonder of Nature" in 2012 (tablemountain.net, n.d.).

History

In this section of the document, I consider the history of Table Mountain and the surrounding landscape and how understanding of the mountain has been shaped and interpreted through its representation in art and visual culture. Table Mountain occupies a unique position and status among South African landscapes owing to its extensive representation in indigenous histories and myths, colonial historical records, maps, art and documents (Vergunst, 2000:13), apartheid-era stamps, postcards and tourism publications (Van Eeden, 2011: 4), as conserved space, in tourism and in contemporary visual culture.

William Mitchell considers landscape a “medium of cultural expression” (2002: 14), where culture, identity, power and value are expressed through how land is shaped, used and represented. In understanding how this might apply to an interpretation of Table Mountain as cultural and natural landscape, Mitchell’s fourth thesis (of nine) on landscape is illuminating:

Landscape is a natural scene mediated by Culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package. (Mitchell, 2002: 5)

This complexity, where each interpretation of place is merely one layer among many, contributes to the importance of sedimentation and the palimpsest in my reading of Table Mountain. Like the mountain’s physical composition of sedimentary layers of sandstone, granite and shale, its cultural history is composed of the sedimented layers of meaning brought to it by all those who have interacted with it over its history. Similarly, its physical construction through human intervention over the centuries can be read as a palimpsest where human interventions have erased and replaced what was there before, and the interventions imposed on the landscape by older generations are erased and replaced by later interventions. This project’s reading of the mountain can be seen as a search for the overlaps and interactions between these layers, and the layering of my photographs is intended to both reflect its layers and suggest the complications implicit in their origins.

Considering the history of Table Mountain and its surrounding landscape draws on vastly different timelines, including geological, pre-colonial, colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid timescales – all have shaped Table Mountain, some physically, others socially and psycho-geographically. The geological record of Table Mountain extends back 560 million years, with continental collisions, lava flows, Ice ages, erosion and other forces shaping it over millennia (De Witt & MacPhee, 2003).⁵ Against this geological backdrop, Table Mountain hosts extraordinary biodiversity: roughly 1 400 of

⁵ As described by De Witt and McPhee (2003), the known geological history of Table Mountain starts 560 million years ago, with the deposition of the Malmesbury group of sedimentary rocks. Not long after the deposition of these rocks, the collision of present-day South America with Africa folded the Malmesbury group, creating distinctive bands still visible today around the peninsula, and the Saldanian Fold mountains. This collision forced the Malmesbury sediments deep below the surface of the Earth, where some of it melted before slowly rising again to cool and form solid granite around 540 million years ago. A period of relative geological calm allowed erosion to take place when the mountains stopped rising, effectively erasing the Saldanian Fold formations and depositing part of what is now known as Table Mountain group sandstone (comprising Peninsula formation sandstone and Graafwater formation sandstone) on top of the Malmesbury group and granite base along the coastal plain. This deposition happened between 500 and 450 million years ago, when the rock and sediment that would become Table Mountain still formed part of the coastal seafloor. Massive climate change around 450 million years ago covered southern Africa in ice and deposited the final layer of Table Mountain group sandstone, the pakhuis formation, remnants of which can be found today at the very top of Table Mountain. Another major mountain forming event, the Cape Orogeny, created the Cape Fold mountains along South Africa’s south and west coasts 250 million years ago; Table Mountain did not undergo the same folding but was uplifted to its current elevation. Once the Gondwana supercontinent split about 130 million years ago, further erosion and uplift shaped the peninsula and Table Mountain, a process that continues to this day.



Figure 9 (top): *Glencairn Quarry*. 2020. Table Mountain group sandstone is visible at the disused Glencairn quarry, now a shooting range.

Figure 10 (bottom): *Climbers in Higgovale Quarry*. 2020. Granite for Rhodes Memorial was quarried at Glencoe quarry, now used for sport climbing (Bell, 2013: online).



Figure 11: Chappies bubble gum wrapper (n.d.).

the more than 8 500 fynbos species native to the Cape floristic region grow on the mountain (Fuller, 1999: 99), as do more than thirty tree species in areas of Western Cape Afrotemperate forest and coastal milkwood forest mostly confined to fire-safe ravines and sandy coastal areas respectively (Poulsen, 2013: 5-6). Fossil evidence exists of fynbos-like vegetation here as long as 2 million years ago (De Witt & MacPhee, 2003), while archaeological evidence suggests human habitation in the Cape at least 73 000 years ago (Mellet, 2020: 23), and Khoena people are believed to have arrived in the area as long ago as 1 000 AD (Mellet, 2020: 55).⁶

The establishment of a permanent Dutch settlement in the Cape by Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 ushered in a period of marginalisation, exploitation and violence against the Khoena and other indigenous peoples.⁷ While their history, including that of co-operation and conflict in early interactions with Europeans at the Cape, has been documented, it has been largely overshadowed in colonial accounts by the post-1652 narrative of settlement, in which they are positioned as peripheral actors (Mellet, 2020: 88). Today there is little visible evidence of the Khoena: no heritage sign boards, no preserved artefacts on the mountain surface this pre-colonial presence. A notable exception is the remnants of Jan van Riebeeck's hedge of bitter almonds (*Brabajum stellatifolium*) in the Kirstenbosch botanical gardens on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain. The hedge, planted circa 1659, formed part of a barrier around the Dutch settlement, denying entry to the indigenous population, interrupting traditional grazing routes and denying access to perennial water sources that flowed from the north face of the mountain (Van Riebeeck's hedge, n.d.; Mellet, 2020: 153). In claiming territory for Europeans and excluding indigenous people, the hedge can be seen as the genesis of the segregationist practices in South Africa that culminated in apartheid almost 300 years later (Reynolds, 2020).

6 Before the arrival of Europeans, the indigenous Khoena people had established a cohesive society at the Cape, described by Mellet as "somewhere between the large form of 'state' or 'kingdom', with stratified subjects on the one hand and small micro-communities or clans on the other" (2020: 59). Some of the Khoena people led a pastoral life, grazing livestock around the mountain (known to them as Hoerikwaggo, meaning mountain of/in the sea) during summer and moving up the West Coast during winter (Mellet, 2020: 60), while other communities fished and hunted.

7 European presence at the Cape began in 1488 with the arrival of Bartolomeu Diaz and was formalised with Jan van Riebeeck's establishment of a settlement in 1652. Among the first formal interactions between Khoena people and Europeans at the Cape before 1652 was the supply of fresh drinking water to visiting ships. Table Mountain was a reliable source of water, with the perennial stream fed by springs and tributaries known as //kammis ssa ("Sweet water for all", creolised to "Camissa"). Early conflicts included the defeat of Portuguese naval commander Francisco de Almeida by the peninsula Khoe in 1510 after an unsuccessful raid against a Khoena settlement by the former (Mellet, 2020: 95).

This period of settlement also marks the first point of contact in my own positionality relative to this landscape, as my ancestors were among the early settlers at the Cape. According to my family's oral history, Willem Schalksz van der Merwe (c. 1640–1716) is the progenitor of my paternal family line, arriving in 1661 as a *bosskieter* (rifleman). He was made a free burgher by the Hollandse Oost Indische Kompagnie in 1677 and was granted permission to farm at Kronendal in what is now Hout Bay, becoming the legal owner of that property in 1681 (Willem Schalksz van der Merwe, n.d.). While specific details on Willem Schalksz's life are scarce, available accounts indicate that both he and his son, Schalk Willemsz, who was *Kompanjie-kommandant aan die Kaap teen inheemse rowers* or "Company Commander at the Cape against indigenous robbers", were involved in violence against Khoi people (Van Rensburg, n.d.). This family connection to the Cape landscape is a further complicating factor in my positionality; as the descendant of an original settler on this mountain, I am implicated in the site and the acts that occurred on it.



Figure 12: *Hout Bay (after Kronendal)* (2021). Direct positive silver Gelatin Photograph.

8 Accounts of the distribution of forest on Table Mountain prior to the early 1800s are incomplete and in some cases contradictory, but it is widely accepted that the most substantial forests at Newlands, Orange Kloof and Hout Bay were originally far more extensive than they are today. By 1699, however, a mere 47 years after permanent settlement, harvestable timber resources in the peninsula had been exhausted (Poulsen, 2013: 7). While indigenous forests were being harvested, alien species were being planted: oak, pine, ash, alder, poplar, spruce, and other species were introduced to the Cape before the end of the seventeenth century, with the now ubiquitous stone pine (*Pinus pinea*) likely first established in the Company's Garden around 1690 (Shaughnessy, 1980: 83–97). Both the introduction of characteristically European species by settlers and the way resulting landscapes are experienced today can be interpreted through the concepts of landscape restorativeness and place attachment (Joye & Van der Berg, 2011). Both concepts contribute to an understanding of psychological benefits of exposure to natural landscapes: place attachment investigates the bonding of people to places and, like other kinds of attachment, helps to fulfil individual psychological needs (Colley & Craig, 2019: 71), while landscape restorativeness refers to the role of landscape in psychological recovery from stressful or dangerous situations and supports the notion that humans recover from stress more quickly and thoroughly in natural environments than in urban spaces (Joye & Van der Berg, 2011: 261). These two concepts complement each other in interesting ways: place attachment, for example, has a positive effect on landscape restorativeness, and individuals find familiar natural landscapes more restorative than urban spaces or unfamiliar natural spaces (Menatti et al., 2019: 41). Accordingly, it can be surmised that introducing European vegetation would have improved the landscape in the eyes and experiences of the early Cape settlers and made it easier for those arriving later to form place attachments and would also likely have alienated the local people who had already formed a place attachment to the indigenous landscape.

The establishment of a settlement at the Cape also marked the start of European alterations to the Table Mountain landscape. To early settlers, the mountain, lying beyond the borders of the settlement and hence outside the control of the Dutch East India Company, was considered a wilderness where dangerous animals and fugitive slaves lurked. Despite an absence of attacks against those who ventured onto the mountain, excursions were considered feats of bravery (Van Sittert, 2003: 162). As such, the most ubiquitous interaction with the mountain landscape by early settlers was through slaves, who well into the eighteenth century were daily sent to collect timber and firewood on the slopes and summit (Van Sittert, 2003: 163).

Timber was a valuable resource, both to the settlement itself and to ships stopping in Cape Town to resupply, so Van Riebeeck and his successors invested considerable effort in finding and harvesting timber. Extensive deforestation due to the early settlement's appetite for timber necessitated the establishment of extensive plantations in the 18th and 19th centuries, but this was not an entirely pragmatic enterprise: "In part this ecological transformation was about domesticating the foreign landscape for the colonial sensibility" (Swanepoel, 2013: 21), with these trees and other species, such as starlings, fallow deer, thars and grey squirrels making the landscape look more like "home" to the settlers.⁸

While practical interventions facilitated the establishment and growth of the city, aesthetic interventions softened or civilised the landscape previously viewed as wild and alien (Fuller, 1999: 81). As a case in point, plantations established along the lower slopes of Table Mountain and Devil's Peak were lauded for their beautifying effect, greening a prospect considered by some to be a barren eyesore (Van Sittert, 2003:171).⁹ This can be read as an instance of the mastery of landscape for aesthetic purposes, which manifests in idealised landscape imagery in both art and in the physical shaping of the landscape (Wolloch, 2011: 248–251). The appearance of these quasi-natural places, having been moulded in the image of European landscapes, suggests an understanding of the indigenous as inferior to the Eurocentric ideal of the picturesque that these constructed landscapes symbolise.¹⁰

As the landscape changed under human influence, conceptions of the mountain shifted: the wilderness became pacified and no longer presented the prospect of mortal danger to the individual, becoming instead an object of aesthetic enjoyment and adventure – at least among the privileged classes not physically engaged in its construction (Van Sittert, 2003: 163). Around the turn of the eighteenth century, the transfer of control of the Cape Colony to British hands coincided with a shift toward romanticism in the northern hemisphere. Mountains came to be seen as subjects of scientific enquiry and places where the sublime could be experienced, and ever larger numbers of the more privileged inhabitants of Cape Town ventured to Table Mountain's summit.¹¹

9 While alien trees, particularly large plantations and the roads and forestry track required to access them, are arguably the most visible examples of alterations to Table Mountain, it has also been subject to a multitude of other interventions. The mountain provided stone for the construction of Cape Town's early buildings, with Malmesbury slate being quarried as early as 1666 for the construction of the Castle of Good Hope and granite and Table Mountain sandstone quarries providing stone for kerbs and buildings from the mid-1800s (Cole, 2018: 305). The need for a reliable water supply grew as the city grew, and from 1891 extensive hydraulic engineering projects on the summit produced tunnels, pipelines, a hydroelectric installation and five dams (Van Sittert, 2003: 170).

10 The introduction and proliferation of alien species on the mountain has not only changed the appearance of the mountain but has had profound effects on the local ecology. In each place that new species have been introduced, indigenous species have been displaced by the continuing spread of pine, wattle, Port Jackson willow and other species, posing one of the most significant threats to local biodiversity (Parker-Allie, 2004: 804). Where these species become invasive, they form dense areas of monoculture, crowding out indigenous species and using substantially more water. They also alter nutrient cycles, facilitate the introduction of invasive invertebrates and disrupt local fire cycles. As a case in point, trees such as gum and pine increase the fuel load as much as fivefold compared to fynbos and are thought to have significantly contributed to the severity of the fire that ravaged areas of the mountain in April 2021 (Van Wilgen & Van Wilgen-Bredenkamp, 2021; Uys, 2012: 3).

11 The most popular prospect in the 18th and 19th centuries was the edge of the north face, where the sheer drop served as a reminder of the viewer's mortality and their gaze could take in a panoramic view of the settlement of Cape Town and the inner reaches of the colony still awaiting settlement and cultivation, situating the viewer relative to other landmarks of the empire (Van Sittert, 2003: 164–166). Climbing the mountain became so popular that within forty years, from the early 1880s, the number of routes to the summit multiplied from four to over two hundred, while maps and organised hikes removed much of the risk and uncertainty that accompanied earlier excursions; attaining the summit or merely walking along the lower slopes became a favoured outdoor pursuit in the Cape (Van Sittert, 2003: 172).



Figure 13: *Van Riebeeck's Hedge (Brabajum stellatifolium)*, *Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens* (2020). I photographed the *Brabajum stellatifolium* in Kirstenbosch to show its density as a boundary and its thorns as a deterrent to the Khoena people. This hedge was in a sense the first apartheid barrier, intended to keep some people in and others out (Galt, 2014). The red colouration characteristic of infrared film signifies danger, making a usually green and lush scene appear unnatural and threatening.

12 While the mountain itself was not subject to segregationist legislation, forced removals moved people of colour out of areas close to the mountain, making it a visible reminder of their displacement from their new homes on the Cape Flats (Donaldson et al, 2016: 136). The establishment of the Table Mountain National Park in 1998 has arguably been the most significant single event to shape interactions with and perceptions of the mountain, but efforts to create a park that protects biodiversity while being racially and socially inclusive are complicated by conflicting interests in financial and ecological value, economic and spatial inequality and apartheid legacies of racial segregation and the alienation of people of colour from environmental appreciation (Swanepoel, 2013: 64; Fuller, 1999: 104).

Despite these issues around the park and its history, Table Mountain remains an immensely popular place to experience “nature” for Capetonians and visitors alike: around 4 million people visit the park annually, making it the most visited South African national park (Swanepoel, 2013: 63; Donaldson et al., 2016: 136). Those privileged enough to access the mountain seek out a variety of experiences that are often shaped by earlier interventions in the landscape. Roads and paths constructed for earlier forestry and waterworks projects are widely used to access the mountain, while many plantations are popular walking destinations, and quarries have been repurposed for rock climbing and target shooting. The popularity of the mountain for recreational purposes and the need for personal transportation for access is evidenced by overflowing parking areas at popular access points on fair-weather weekends, while a multitude of formal and informal groups exist to facilitate hikes, climbing excursions, trail runs, mountain bike rides, environmental education, clean ups, foraging, alien clearing and other activities.

13 Kramats, or sacred Muslim burial sites, are a notable exception – there are 20 on or near Table Mountain National Park (South African History Online, n.d.), an important historical marker of the history of Islam in Cape Town (Donaldson et al., 2016: 135).

14 Donaldson et al. (2016) have demonstrated that white people from relatively affluent suburbs near the mountain make up the majority of visitors to Table Mountain National Park, an enduring legacy of apartheid-era spatial planning that is upheld by contemporary market forces. That access is further complicated by potential users’ lack of knowledge about and exposure to the park. Physical separation from Table Mountain represents a significant factor in defining the socio-economic realities of communities in Cape Town, with property values typically diminishing the further properties are from the mountain. Considering that the Group Areas Act reserved areas close to the mountain for white people and moved people of colour away, it follows that past policies of racial segregation have led to the present-day realities of class-based exclusion from the mountain (Donaldson et al., 2016: 134–137).

15 Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden is an example of what Goodrich and Strydom (2014: 57) refer to as “a white monopoly on the production of landscape” formalised by the 1913 Land Act. Established in the same year as the Land Act, on land bequeathed to the colonial government by Cecil John Rhodes, Kirstenbosch was from the outset envisioned as a space to serve colonial interests:

When Kirstenbosch was established in 1913, it was not envisioned as an apolitical space. On the contrary, Harold Pearson, the first director, positioned his argumentation for the establishment of the new botanical garden to appeal to both proponents of British imperialism in southern Africa and to the Cape-based elite and evolving South African nationalism after the Union of South Africa was established. Pearson described Kirstenbosch’s aim as contributing to science, economic development, and conservation, but importantly also to white settlers’ citizenship formation and emotional attachment to the country. (Reynolds, 2020)

In the twentieth century, the mountain became ever more important as a leisure space for white middle-class Capetonians, even as apartheid legislation imposed limitations on black people’s access to and interaction with the mountain (Donaldson et al., 2016: 135).¹² Today, the relatively small number of people of colour visiting the mountain can be ascribed to a number of factors, most significantly a lack of representation of indigenous people and their histories,¹³ economic constraints¹⁴ and a lack of accessible transportation (Donaldson et al., 2016: 135). Nevertheless, Table Mountain National Park remains a valuable resource for environmental education, and the urban location of the park may mitigate against the separation of people from recreational and other pursuits in nature (Swanepoel, 2013: 6).

I interviewed Andrew Jacobs (2021, 29 April, Cape Town), tour guide and communications officer at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, to better understand the experiences of people of colour in relation to the mountain. Jacobs calls Table Mountain “the heart of Cape Town”, but his family were forcibly removed – “kicked out” in his words – from Protea Village, a former coloured community in what is now Bishopscourt, to Lotus River on the Cape Flats in 1968. Aside from the material hardship stemming from forced removal, Jacobs describes being cut off from the mountain and from nature: “The beauty and the nature that we had was just taken away, it’s solid gone.” But even before then he recalls walking from home as a child to bring his father lunch at Kirstenbosch and thinking “This place is for white people.”¹⁵ While he concedes that more black people visit the mountain now than in past years, he still considers it more welcoming to white people than to black people, primarily because the mountain is more difficult to learn about and access from more distant suburbs and townships. Speaking with Jacobs brought into sharp focus how my positionality in the cultural landscape of Table Mountain, and the ways in which I have made photographs for this project, have been shaped by the privilege to access it easily and by having the means to participate in many of the activities that make it such a popular destination.



Figure 14 (above): Engraving by Peter Kolb for "Naaukeurige en Uitvoerige Beschrijving Van De Kaap De Goede Hoop" (1719), as featured in "Hoerikwaggo: Images of Table Mountain" curated by Nicolaas Vergunst. From the catalogue caption: "Pictured here are farming implements and iron rods being exchanged for cattle, sheep, elephant tusks, and tortoise shells ... Scenes like this appear to testify that barter was an amicable and reciprocal transaction and not fraught with abuse or violence" (Vergunst, 2000: 24).

Figure 15 (3rd right): *Cape of Storms* (1988) by Billy Mandindi. (Vergunst, 2000: 22)

Figure 16 (top right): *Cabo de Goede Hoop* (1711) by Abraham Bogaert. (Vergunst, 2000: 23).

Figure 17 (2nd right): *Milnerton* (1998) by Katherine Bull. (Vergunst, 2000: 23).



Representation

The shaping of the mountain, its representations and the experiences sought by those venturing onto the mountain can be interpreted with reference to Van Sittert's argument that "the eye is the determinant sense" in the formation of physical and ideological national identities in young, imperial nations. The gaze thus "either in nature or reproduction is political, and hence deeply implicated in the ultimate physical domination of the objects surveyed" (Van Sittert, 2003: 161).

Goodrich and Strydom reflect on the role of landscape representation, effectively *making* landscape, in naturalising mastery over colonised territory in South Africa (2014: 58). Drawing on Ingold, they hold that the act of representation shifts land, a quantifiable "alienated and measurable" commodity to landscape; a qualitative concept. Through the modes of representation used – the picturesque painting of empty land, the conserved space, the written text – it affirms colonial sovereignty and alienates indigenous subjectivities to "create a world of extractable and exploitable qualities" (Goodrich & Strydom, 2014: 68). These representations inscribe boundaries, defining the edge between the safety and familiarity of colonised territory and the unknown wilderness beyond, positioning the transformation of the landscape as the product of the colonial gaze (Goodrich & Strydom, 2014: 68, 69) and implicating it as the "founding violence" in co-opting the landscape to the colonial project (Mbembe, 2001: 25).¹⁶



Figure 18 (bottom right): The mural of Table Mountain and Cape Town that welcomes visitors to the Mother City at Cape Town International Airport (July 2021)

This posits landscape as a way in which culture and power are expressed: the ways in which the land is shaped, used and represented reflect the culture and power relations implicit in those acts (Mitchell, 2002: 3). Pictorial representations of landscapes are thus a kind of meta-representation, representing something that is already a representation in itself. The interest in a way of shaping and representing landscape concerned with expressing national identity coincides with the rise of expansionist imperialism in Europe. Imperial powers could symbolically cement their hegemony by imposing their own landscape conventions on colonised territories (Mitchell, 2002: 9–10).

¹⁶ Mbembe posits that colonial sovereignty is predicated on three kinds of violence: the first is the founding violence, which forms the colonised space and establishes the colonial authority as supreme power while denying the rights of other subjectivities (2001: 25). The second manifests in other activities facilitated by "domesticating" – on the mountain this takes the form of hiking, mountaineering, appreciating the scenery and so forth, which legitimises and gives meaning to the founding violence. That the resulting landscape still shapes interactions with the mountain today, and that these interactions are available to a relatively privileged (largely white and of settler descent) portion of the population, could be argued to position these interactions as a hangover of the third form of violence: that which reiterates and harmonises a colonial cultural imaginary (Mbembe, 2001: 26).

As “the most recurring icon in South African history”, Table Mountain has been represented in a multitude of forms for more than five centuries (Vergunst, 2000: 13), and its history of representation has at times both affirmed and subverted the ideological tropes of colonial landscape representation. Vergunst (2000: 20) writes:

Each depiction of Table Mountain is culturally bound and thus reveals more about the artist than it does about the landscape itself. Every depiction of the landscape is a subjective act: there is no right or wrong way of showing the landscape, no neutral naturalism, nor any objective “truth” behind a landscape – be it drawn, painted, or even photographed. Furthermore, there is no common meaning or objective framework for interpreting a cultural landscape such as Table Mountain. Instead, each and every representation adds something new to what we know about the mountain and, much more significantly, contributes to our understanding of the ever-changing socio-political relations at the Cape.

This indeterminacy of meaning has emerged as a central concern in my work, and while a comprehensive discussion of Table Mountain’s history of representation is beyond the scope of this paper,¹⁷ I consider some pertinent themes and how they have informed my reflection on this landscape. I am also mindful of the history of photographic representation of landscape and how it has influenced the development of my practice, so I will consider some examples from historical and contemporary photography as well.

Comparisons between colonial-era representations of Table Mountain and those made during and after apartheid are particularly interesting for how they ascribe different meaning to the mountain. Its representation in 17th to 19th century art draws heavily on established landscape traditions and locates Table Mountain as a symbol of Africa the “other” and as a backdrop to the concerns and endeavours of settlement and commerce (Vergunst, 2000: 25).



Figure 19 (top): *Bitter Fruit* (1994) by Julia Teal. (Vergunst, 2000: 29).



Figure 20 (bottom): *Shaun-James Mthethwa (Black Albino Artist) with Art Agent, Crossroads, Cape Town* (1998) by Gabriel Clark-Brown. (Vergunst, 2000: 29).

17 See *Hoerikwaggo: Images of Table Mountain* by Nicolaas Vergunst (2000).



Figure 21 (top): *De Waal Park #2* (2005) by David Lurie

Figure 22 (bottom): *Table Mountain from Joe Slovo Park after the Fire* (2005) by David Lurie.

18 Landscape photography has its roots in the romantic sublime and picturesque landscape painting traditions that arose in 18th century Europe, and these traditions accordingly contribute to this project's reading of the landscape (Wells, 2011: 44–50). Broadly speaking, the picturesque can be considered a nationalist interpretation of landscape, while the sublime supports the notion of nature as something apart from humanity (Kaminska-Jones, 2015: 64).

As with the physical shaping of the land, the use of aesthetic conventions such as the picturesque and the sublime served to familiarise the landscape (Goodrich & Strydom, 2014: 59).¹⁸ Writing on landscape representation in text, J.M. Coetzee argues that, in tandem with domesticating the landscape, the invented familiarity of these representations, and their tendency to alienate indigenous people, served to generate a sense of belonging, a natural right to the land. Coetzee elaborates that this sense of belonging is a product of the representations themselves and generates a schema according to which relationships to the land are understood (1988: 7, 85).

In South African landscape representation, the myth of the empty land, *terra nullius*, is generally invoked to suggest “bounded colonial worlds awaiting habitation by settlers” (Goodrich & Strydom, 2014: 64), or what Coetzee describes as “the failure to imagine a peopled landscape” (1988: 9). The result is that in early representations of Table Mountain the colonial presence is naturalised, and indigenous people, if included, are shown in ways that reinforce a separation between them and settlers. In this regard, Goodrich and Strydom (2013: 68) describe black South Africans as being positioned outside the colonial project, framing it while working in service of it.

Artists revisited the notion of Table Mountain as a symbol of the South African landscape in the 20th century but foregrounded the fraught political and social realities of the time. The mountain became a symbol of South Africa's land and cultural landscape in a more general sense, and the appropriation of imagery from older representations suggested the role of these older works in generating a cultural imaginary that normalised settlement while marginalising indigenous people. Later still, particularly in works produced from the 1980s onward, the mountain was employed as a reference point from which to consider persistent inequality in Cape Town (Vergunst, 2000: 22–29).

South African photographers have also reflected on the mountain as a backdrop against which to consider social realities in Cape Town. In *Images of Table Mountain*, Lurie views the mountain from a range of vantage points around Cape Town to surface persisting economic and social disparities (Lurie, 2005: online).



David Goldblatt (1930–2018) is one South African photographer to have grappled with concerns about South African landscape and history. Writing in response to Goldblatt's 1998 book *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*, Okwui Enwezor (2008: 95) writes that "While his photographic vision always apprehends a constantly shifting, evolving landscape, it nevertheless seeks to remind the viewer that even when constructed in the present tense, that landscape has memory". Goldblatt faced the constructed nature of the landscape head on, reading the structures on its surface as reflections of the ideologies in service of which it was shaped (Dubow, 1998: 22). A reading of landscape as record is central to my interpretation of Table Mountain, and I also contend that there is a parallel between the history of white patriarchal hegemony, which Goldblatt's work reflects on, and the emergence of contemporary environmental concerns that partly inform my own exploration of landscape.

Goldblatt's work is but one example of photography's long and complex history of reflecting on human relationships to the environment. From survey photographs in aid of expansion and settlement to images of natural splendour and environmental degradation, approaches to landscape photography have developed in concert with contemporary concerns about the world. My own practice originated in a context where highly aestheticised, technically immaculate landscape photographs presenting an idealised vision of Nature and eschewing evidence of human influence was aspired to. In recent years, however, I have moved away from this model of "perfection" to search for something more abstract in the landscape, something beyond mere representation.

Figure 23: In Goldblatt's *Suburban Garden and Table Mountain, Bloubergstrand, Cape Town, Cape 9 January 1986*, the view – and by extension, the mountain – is subsumed into affluent suburbia, effectively rendered a status symbol, and its wild nature is tamed (Vergunst, 2000: 35).

Figure 24: *Remnant of a Hedge Planted in 1660 to Keep the Indigenous Khoikhoi out of the first European Settlement in South Africa. Kirstenbosch, Cape Town. 16 May 1993* by David Goldblatt. (Stevenson, 2008: online)



Figure 25 (top left): *Cathedral Rocks*, (c. 1949) by Ansel Adams (Stillman, 2007: 274)

Figure 26 (bottom left) *Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979* by Stephen Shore. (Moma, n.d.: online)

Adams' photographs of the valley invariably evoke a spectacular wilderness, with expressive use of light and finely nuanced tonality classically rendered in black and white. Shore's colour photograph presents a more banal interpretation: avoiding the abstraction of black and white and placing people, presumably tourists, prominently within the frame gently subverts the notion of the park as wilderness, describing it instead as a backdrop for human activity.

Figure 27 (above): *Stream, Tokai Forest* (2020) references Shore's composition in *Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979*.

Contextualising Landscape Photography

While my purpose here is to contextualise my work within broader contemporary fine art practice, it is pertinent to note earlier figures in the history of photographic landscape representation and the long shadows they have cast over my own practice. The reason for this is twofold: firstly, the evolution of my practice mirrors some aspects of the development of landscape photography as medium. Secondly, approaches that were fundamental to landscape photography in the early and mid-20th century remain prevalent in popular culture today, and I consider my work to be a continuation of, and a contrast to, such representations in particular ways. I discuss a small number of the many contemporary photographic artists grappling with landscape, focusing on those whose concerns complement or contrast with my own in interesting ways.

I initially studied at the National College of Photography and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, where American photographer Ansel Adams was revered and emulated.¹⁹ I later came across more critical photographers, such as those involved in the “New Topographics”²⁰ exhibition, who influenced me differently. A comparison between one of the many photographs Adams made of Yosemite National Park and one by Stephen Shore (one of the New Topographics photographers) serves as an introduction to the evolution of concerns in my work.

Robert Adams, whose work was also in “New Topographics”, photographed what had come to replace the wilderness so revered by Ansel Adams. His photographs portray the landscape of the American West with far less veneration, showing the signs and structures of urban development and treating them with severe, unsentimental formalism (Dennis, 2015: 6).

While both Ansel Adams and Robert Adams made black and white photographs in the American west, there are critical differences in the intent of their work. In celebrating the grandeur of wilderness without acknowledging the presence or impact of humans, Ansel Adams contributed to the construction of utopian myths of wilderness (Wells, 2011: 138). Conversely, Robert Adams deconstructs wilderness myths by foregrounding the human impact on the landscape. The superficial similarity in form and the contrasts in content and discursive intent between Robert Adams’ and Ansel Adams’ work mirrors the development of my own practice over the last decade.

I have also been influenced by the work of a number contemporary photographic artists who engage with notions of nature, land, landscape and history in a variety of contexts. Considering the stature of Ansel Adams, it is perhaps unsurprising that his work remains a point of reference among some of these artists. I consider photographs by Catherine Opie and David Benjamin Sherry made in response or reaction to Adams to be useful reference points for my own interpretation of Table Mountain.

19 Kelly Dennis describes Adams’ work as an “unwitting embodiment of the false dichotomy between humanity and nature at the root of our continuing legacy of environmental destruction” (Dennis, 2015:6). While his interpretation of the landscape and humans’ position in it may be considered problematic from a critical perspective, his legacy of technically exact, aesthetically pleasing photographs of seemingly wild landscapes is firmly entrenched in western visual culture (Dennis, 2006: 1). Adams also spent considerable time and energy advancing environmental causes, including the establishment of the Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park in California and lobbying the American Congress on other environmental issues. A peak in California’s Sierra Nevada mountain range was posthumously named after him in recognition of his contribution to conservation causes (*Ansel Adams: A documentary film*, 2002). While discussions of American artists may seem out of place when considering work that addresses particularly South African topics, parallels between the history of landscape representation in the two countries exist, particularly the invocation of *terra nullius* in support of settlement and the imposition of European aesthetic traditions on colonised landscapes. See “The Picturesque and the South African Landscape: American Landscape” in J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing*.

20 “New Topographics” was curated by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York and featured work by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, Henry Wessel, Jr. and Bernd and Hilla Becher (Adams, 2010: 35). This exhibition is considered to have been singularly influential in shifting the concerns of landscape photography toward critical reflection on human action and presence in the landscape (Dennis, 2015: 6).



Figure 28 (top): *Frame for a Tract House, Colorado Springs* (1969) by Robert Adams,

Figure 29 (bottom): *Along Interstate 25* (c. 1969) by Robert Adams. These works featured in the significant group exhibition "New Topographics". The show heralded a shift in landscape representation to an approach less concerned with the grandeur of unspoiled wilderness and more aware of human influences in the environment. (Adams, 2000: 27)



In “Yosemite” (2017), Catherine Opie made photographs of Yosemite Valley with the intent of exploring a gendered perspective through the experiential relationship between the body and the wilderness (Albrecht, 2018). Photographing Yosemite because of its association with Adams and the masculine tradition of landscape photography, her work goes against the aesthetic norms associated with the genre by employing bland lighting, soft focus, inverted compositions and technical “errors” (Tam, 2018). Opie’s rendition of the landscape avoids the spectacular, and through the breaking down of the image frees it from the conventions of the landscape photograph, requiring the viewer to decode the scene (d’Arenberg, 2018). Opie (in Albrecht, 2018) explains:

It’s not quite queering the landscape, but rather about creating a certain kind of femininity within it. We usually think about the Western landscape through the male lens. So, I think of it rather as creating a different type of intimacy and a relationship to it; that’s a cognitive relationship that’s more connected to the idea of the sublime. I’m trying to create these existential moments within the idea of landscape, versus the heroic or iconic landscape, such as Yosemite.



Invoking the notion of the sublime is of particular interest to me, as it foregrounds forces outside of human control and speaks to subjective experiences of place, contributing to a reading of the work as “existential moments” in the landscape (Wells, 2011: 49). The artist deliberately relinquishes control of certain aspects of the photographic process, resulting in photographs that would conventionally be described as “flawed” and, in the tradition inspired by Ansel Adams, would likely be rejected out of hand. This speaks of a critical engagement with – and a critique of established norms of – the photographic landscape tradition. The viewer is presented with an image that does not meet the expectations commonly associated with landscape photographs, and subjective interpretation becomes central to their understanding of the work. My own work still unavoidably originates from a male perspective on the landscape, but Opie’s reference to the existential moment in opposition to the iconic speaks to my own intention toward interpretations of landscape that foreground the subjective.

Figure 30 (top): *Untitled #1* (Yosemite Valley) (2015) by Catherine Opie.

Figure 31 (bottom): *Tree* (2015) by Catherine Opie.



Figure 32 (top): *Yosemite Valley, Winter* (1940) by Ansel Adams. (Stillman, 2007: 287).

Figure 33 (Middle): *Yosemite Valley from Tunnel View* (2007). I made this photograph on a visit to Yosemite in 2007.

Figure 34 (bottom): *Winter Sunrise over Yosemite Valley, Yosemite, California* (2013) by David Benjamin Sherry. (David Benjamin Sherry, 2013: Online)



David Benjamin Sherry's photographs are made with a large format camera, and the final colour prints are produced by hand. Straying from conventional representation, he manipulates the printing process to render his images in vivid, unnatural hues, and he often uses titles that reference climate change and other environmental concerns. While he photographs iconic American landscapes, the resulting monochromatic images both evoke and contrast well-known black and white landscape interpretations (Klaassen, 2019: 13). Sherry (in Manning: 2014) explains his intent:

I was specifically interested in revisiting the canon of photographic history to raise awareness about our changing landscape due to climate change. I thought that by revisiting these famous places and re-imagining them in bright colors all made on film and printed analog in the darkroom, it could bring to attention that our land is rich and alive yet needs to be reconsidered as we are feeling the drastic effects of human-caused climate change. Coincidentally, as a queer person, I felt it necessary and natural to inject a more queer and colorful vision of American Western photography, as I found there to be a void in the epic yet short and often straight, male-dominated, photographic history ... I hope to raise questions about the subject of photographic history, ask questions about the lack of queer vision within the history of photography while also celebrating the mysticism, beauty and natural wonder that still is present in the American West.

The practical aspects of Sherry's practice are also of interest to me. Making prints by hand and using an 8" x 10" large format camera are both activities suffused with ritual. Photographing with the large format camera requires a slow and contemplative way of working, which I liken to a meditation on the scene. It allows the photographer to immerse themselves in the process of photographing more intimately than with quicker and easier methods. Ansel Adams likened printing from a negative to the performance of a musical score (Dennis, 2015: 4), and Sherry's performances take the ritual of printing in an unusual direction through distinctive interpretations of the scores his negatives provide. The ways in which both Sherry and Opie reference older representations of specific sites employ unconventional technical approaches to shift their interpretations of landscape, and Sherry's foregrounding of environmental concerns by that means resonates strongly with my own practice.



Figure 35: *Untitled 1* (2006) by Sammy Baloji.



Figure 36: *Colonel Soleil's Boys, North Kivu, Eastern Congo* (2010) by Richard Mosse.

A common thread among the artists discussed is an interpretation of landscape that foregrounds contemporary concerns embodied in the landscape by referencing historical representation. In contrast, Congolese Artist Sammy Baloji draws together historical narratives and their contemporary affects by combining historical and contemporary photographs directly in his series “Memoire”, using the landscape as a nexus around which to gather the continued impact of colonialism and the complexity of human relationships to place (Madsen, 2019). Baloji says, “I’m not interested in colonialism as nostalgia, or in it as a thing of the past, but in the continuation of that system” (in Madsen, 2019). Baloji considers colonialism as the origin of contemporary capitalist realities in the Congo; through the combination of colonial-era photographs with his own images of present-day mines, Baloji constructs a conjoined temporality that foregrounds the interconnection between these eras (Nugent, 2019: 66).

Richard Mosse is an artist known for using unconventional photographic tools and technologies, such as thermal imaging cameras and infrared film, in his interpretations of conflict zones and other contentious sites. For his book project *Infra* (2012), he used Kodak Aerochrome, an obsolete colour infrared surveillance film developed to find camouflaged encampments during the Cold War, to photograph the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Mosse (2011: online) says: “I became enthralled by Aerochrome’s inflation of the documentary, mediating a tragic landscape through an invisible spectrum, disorienting me into a place of reflexivity and skepticism, into a place in consonance with my impenetrable, ghost-like subject”. Urs Stahel, curator of Mosse’s anthological exhibition “Displaced” (2021), elaborates: “He wants to subvert conventional media narratives through new technologies – often of military type – precisely to unhinge the representative criteria of war photography” (in Gladstone, 2021: online).

Like Mosse, I used a type of infrared film (a black and white material intended for pictorial purposes) in to make three-colour photographs for *Unstable Ground*. While there are some visual similarities in our work, I use infrared to a different end: where Mosse uses the film to reflect on the actors and actions in an ongoing conflict, conceptually leveraging the film’s history as a tool of war, my use of infrared film is intended to use the invisible spectrum to indicate invisible aspects of the history of the landscape and the violence implicit in its construction (signified by the red colouration of the photographs). Similarly, in instances where I have used infrared to photograph alien species and other interventions in the landscape, I use the notion of invisibility to indicate the absence of that which has been displaced.

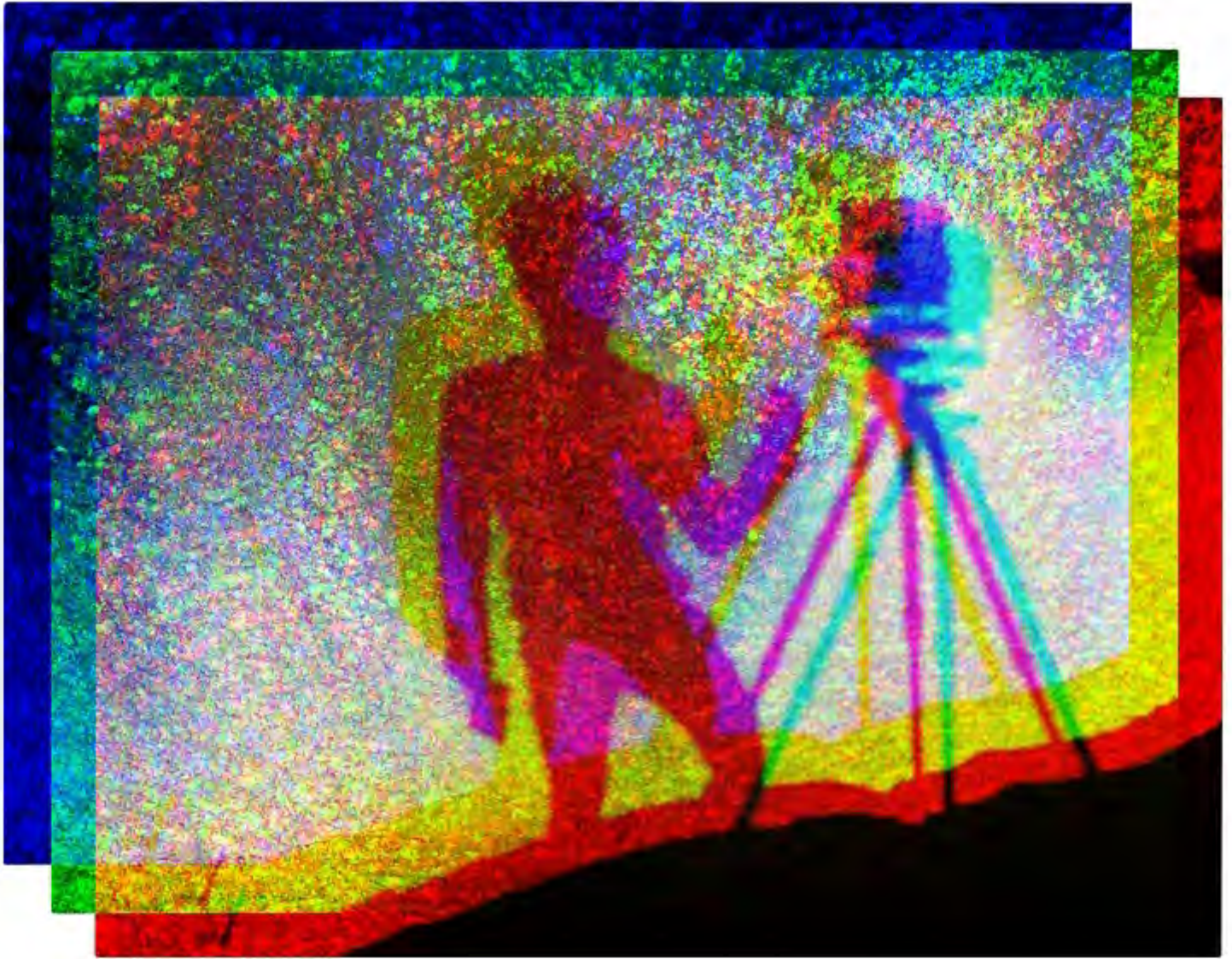


Figure 37: *My Shadow* (2021)

My Practice on Unstable Ground

This project emerged from the many experiences I have had of Table Mountain over the thirteen years that I have lived in Cape Town. While I spent much time on the mountain, it was several years before I felt I could respond to my experiences through photography. My observations of the mountain in my daily routine and while running, hiking and climbing awakened me to the fact that it was not simply a beautiful, “natural” backdrop to Cape Town. Layers to it seemed so convoluted that I doubted I would be able to reveal much beyond its surface appearance, and it was only through pursuing a more in-depth engagement with this place for the project *Un/Natural: The Curated Landscape of Table Mountain* (completed for my Postgraduate Diploma in 2019) that I came to imagine ways of expressing the complexity of the landscape and my own shifting, uncertain understanding of it.

My initial experiences of Table Mountain were as a place to escape from the city and to be in nature, but as I became more familiar with the mountain,

my understanding of it became complicated by tensions and entanglements between the myriad factors that have played a role in its shaping. Among the first points of complication was my realisation that this ostensibly “natural” place was far from pristine, and I saw that there were hardly any places on the mountain that human actions had not changed. Even in some of the most remote areas, I found pines growing among fynbos and Afromontane forest, where manicured paths facilitated my access, while in other areas plantations, dams, quarries and roads had transformed the landscape, leaving little trace of what had been erased from the palimpsest.

In researching the history of the mountain, I became interested in the parallels between its shaping by human actions and larger ecological narratives. I saw how the historical construction of the mountain and the disregard for indigenous biodiversity implicit in these interventions were rooted in attitudes similar to those that have given rise to anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity collapse. Similarly, I saw that individual perceptions and experiences of the mountain reflect social realities in the surrounding landscape,²¹ and each instance of human intervention in the landscape can be read as a nexus around which a range of concerns converge to produce meaning. I came to see the mountain as a living, *curated* landscape constructed for consumption, with its shaping and use contrived in service of sectional interests and formalised by its conserved status and its representation as an icon of *Nature*.

Discussion of the project during seminars and Tierney fellowship critiques²² brought into sharp focus a range of different subjective interpretations of these interactions. It became apparent that the particularity of my own position (and the implications of my ancestral connection to this place) was central to the project’s reflection on this landscape and that it was at the root of the unease the place evoked in me. This complication notwithstanding, Table Mountain remained a ubiquitous part of my daily experience of living in Cape Town: I saw it from my home, from my studio, on my commute and, even when not photographing, I regularly walked its slopes. Its position on my horizon marked my physical and social position in the landscape, and through my making and writing the mountain became a reference point for my reflections on the entanglements implicit in my positionality and my understandings of nature and the history and social geography of Cape Town.

As I delved deeper into what the site represents, I worked toward finding ways in which photographs could express the complexities represented by the scenes I encountered on the mountain. As each scene brought something different to my interpretation of the mountain, my methods evolved to foreground the various sources of complication I found in the places I photographed. In this section of the paper I discuss examples to unpack how my methods were guided by the subject matter, and how they reflect on the histories and associations of the mountain and the photographic medium.

21 Nathaniel Wolloch (2011: 247) argues that the current global environmental situation, marked by the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity collapse, has its roots in conceptions of human relationships to nature that emerged from the scientific revolution and enlightenment periods. During this time, increasing control over natural forces and resources became instrumental in and was facilitated by the building of increasingly complex, secure societies. Nature came to be seen as a resource to be marshalled for the advancement of humankind, a line of thinking that suggests nature has no meaning without human intervention. In the context of Table Mountain, the systematic introduction of alien species speaks of a disregard for indigenous biodiversity, while its use as a recreational space by the city’s more prosperous citizens from the 18th century onward (Van Sittert, 2003:163) can be considered a foundation for the privilege that access to the mountain represents today (Donaldson et al., 2016: 136). Even the preservation of nature is not without complication, as an emphasis on biodiversity conservation, a key aspect of the governance of the mountain as national park, precludes practices such as herb and bark collection, which represent different understandings of nature rooted in indigenous knowledge practices.

22 The Tierney Fellowship is a mentorship programme supported by the Tierney Family Foundation that recognises the importance of creating opportunities to cultivate the development of photographers and photography as a medium and helps photographers develop a body of work through financial support and mentorship. Partner institutions include the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, Market Photo Workshop and WITS School of Arts. I was the 2020/2021 Tierney Fellow.

The View Camera

Photographing with large-format view cameras has been central to my practice for nearly two decades, and their use has been a defining aspect of my approach to making photographs for this body of work.²³ Among other factors, I prefer the view camera because it requires total immersion on the part of the photographer (described in greater detail below) and because the film or paper exposed in the camera is a tangible trace of that which has been photographed. I see the negative as a physical example of Company's "trace of a trace of an event" (2003: online): the camera's lens refracts light reflected from a scene onto the film to create a latent image that is made visible through chemical processing. Essentially, the scene inscribes its own trace on the film through the camera. While the same may be said of any film negative, the sheer scale of the large format negative and the detail it is able to reproduce allows the work to reflect on subtle details as much as large structures in this landscape. My treatment of the originals in the final presentation of the work is intended to foreground their materiality, for example through the inclusion of film edges in the image.

Owing to its widespread use in colonial-era photography, the large format view camera has its own problematic history, and I imagine it was precisely this kind of camera that was used to make the first photographs of Table Mountain. For a white man to be making photographs of this landscape with this particular kind of camera is in itself a contentious act, but I have sought to make photographs that contrast historical tropes of landscape photography to destabilise associations between my work and colonial-era photography. While I remain mindful of the entanglement of this technology with colonial-era photography, I argue below that the deconstruction of the landscape using colonial-era tools and its subsequent reconstruction using contemporary methods reflects an amalgam of the history and present-day reality of the landscape.

The view camera is technologically simple compared to modern cameras, and that simplicity (particularly its lack of any automation) requires the photographer to actively consider every detail of the image-making process. View cameras are also large, heavy, cumbersome and expensive to use, and they require the photographer to be very deliberate in their decision-making and detail-oriented in their working methods. The haptic, mechanical interface and multitude of adjustments allowed by this kind of camera introduce many variables each time the camera is set up, requiring a contemplative, immersed mindset to make photographs and allowing me to see more intently and work more deliberately than when using other kinds of camera.

23 The view camera has been a mainstay of landscape photography since the 19th century, when it was the only kind of camera available. During the late 19th century number of photographers using such cameras, including Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge and Timothy O'Sullivan, were commissioned by the American government and other agencies to make survey photographs to document the development of the American West and simultaneously produced landscape photographs for private companies, marketing the latter as "views" for sale to the public (Wells, 2011: 266). The view camera remained in widespread use throughout the 20th century but was supplanted by digital technologies in the early 2000s. It has recently undergone a resurgence in popularity and is still widely used by contemporary photographers, including Andreas Gursky, David Benjamin Sherry and others. I have used view cameras in three different formats (film sizes) to make photographs for this body of work, the bulk of the images being made with a large format field camera using 4" x 5" sheets of film, while a smaller number of images were made with a 6 cm x 7 cm medium format view camera and an 8" x 10" field camera that I built specifically for this project.

The complex, highly physical ritual of setting up and *making* rather than taking photographs has, over time, become instinctive and has entered my muscle memory. The mental processes of camera operation and seeing become separate but parallel actions; I see and photograph *through* the camera rather than *with* it, and what I see is defamiliarised by the image being back to front and upside down. The meditative ritual of operating the camera allows me to contemplate the scene before me and visualise its appearance in the photograph in a way that is abstracted from but still informed by the technical characteristics of my tools.

Visualisation of the photograph takes on an additional dimension through the processes I use to construct images in-camera. While “straight photography” allows for deliberate and predictable visualisation of a result, the methods I have used introduce unpredictability to the process, so the appearance of the final photograph is always to some degree a surprise. Accidents and mistakes at different stages of the process also add to this unpredictability and often shift the final images away from my visualisation. The uncertainty inherent in this way of working mirrors the complexity of the landscape represented in the photographs and the instability I feel in working here.

The uneven terrain of this landscape is characterised by its verticality, and in my sense of the mountain, quarry walls, trees and other elements of the landscape looming over me has been prominent in my experience of the places I have photographed. To accentuate this verticality I have used perspectival adjustments on my cameras to ensure that the vertical elements remain upright. While this allows for a more “accurate” rendition of the forms photographed, it also helps evoke a sense of what it is like to physically occupy these spaces: rock faces really seem to loom and trees remain tall and vertical. This formal, upright perspective contrasts the disruption brought to the photographs by the various methods of layering I have employed, and I see this juxtaposition as mirroring the tension between the rigid physical form of the mountain and the instability of meaning that surrounds it.

The relative immobility of the view camera stands in contrast to the instability of the terrain on which I have worked: the large format camera cannot be handheld and is dependent on a tripod for stability. For each photograph, I must select the appropriate point or points of view where the tripod will be set up, and as I put the legs of my tripod down into soft soil and loose rock, I am reminded of the unstable ground below me. That instability was compounded from the start of the project by the history of the view camera as a tool of 19th century landscape photography, and it became critical that I find ways to destabilise this view. To shift the photographs away from the expectations of landscape photography and evoke the complexity I saw in this landscape, I looked to three-colour photography.

Figure 38: (top to bottom): The 4" x 5", 6 cm x 9 cm and hand-made 8" x 10" cameras used to make photographs for this project.





Figure 39: From left to right: Individual red, green and blue images and the final composite infrared three-colour photograph *Game camp with fence, after the fire* (2021).

Three-Colour Photography and Infrared

The notion of a palimpsest and lamination has been central to this project's interpretation of Table Mountain, as it speaks to the sedimentary layers of the mountain itself, to layered histories and to the erasures and replacements that I encountered here. I used interventions in the photographic process to suggest the layers of meaning I found in the landscape. I also sought to draw out the parallel between an understanding of the photographic image as a constructed visual text and notions of landscape and Nature as cultural constructs used to define the relationship between humans and the world around us. To suggest the layers of the sediment and palimpsest and foreground the constructed nature of the photograph, I adopted three-colour photography as my primary method.²⁴ By exposing black and white film through coloured filters, I recorded each primary colour component (red, green and blue) separately to deconstruct the scene into layers, effectively photographing the same scene three times. I then reconstructed these digitally in the post-production stage.

While three-colour photography and the view camera I used to make the photographs are both fundamentally analogue technologies, the digital reconstruction required to produce the final photographs integrate these methods into a larger hybrid process: I was able to generate the raw material for the final image using only the camera and film, but the final photograph could not exist without the digital intervention. The "final" photograph is thus a hybrid of different processes, times and images that aims to reveal a more complex version of the landscape than the ordinary landscape photograph can. The three colours destabilise one's looking, with the result almost like looking at a 3D image without 3D glasses. This "expanded" vision is intended to alert the viewer to the complications of nature in an urban setting, the presence of European influence in an African landscape and to contemporary experiences shaped by past interventions.

I have not cropped the edges of the image, so the uneven, colourful edges created by minor misalignments between the sheets of film remain visible. This foregrounds the constructed nature of the images – and photographic images in general – by referencing the act of framing: historically, photographs (especially documentary ones) were often presented with the edges of the frame visible to indicate that the photographer had not cropped or altered the image. The frame functioned as a mark of veracity or even photographic truth; the obviously inconsistent borders of these images bring into question the notion that the limit of the photographic frame has any claim on truth.

Time is a central consideration in how and why this method is used: drawing together three "indecisive" moments of time indicates a conception of historical time suffused with contingency and interrelation, where the past can be seen in the conditions of the present and the present suggests the shape

24 Three-colour photography is one of the earliest methods by which colour photographs could be made. Its best-known use is in the work of Russian photographer Sergey Mikhailovich Prokudin Gorskii. Gorskii conducted a survey of the Russian empire between 1905 and 1915, making more than 1 900 three-colour photographs of a wide range of subjects, including people, religious sites, industrial sites, landscapes, public works and agriculture (Prokudin Gosrky Collection, n.d.). This method was also used in German colonial landscape representations, where Robert Lohmeyer produced colour landscape photographs for a photobook of the colonies of the *Keissereich* entitled *Die Deutshce Kolonien* (1910). Contributor to the book, anthropologist and racial hygienist Gustav Fritsch described three-colour photography as instrumental in creating "nature's own autoportrait" and "In doing so, three-color photography was purported to emanate from Nature itself and to mimic the victory of the colonial project" (Hannoun, 2021).

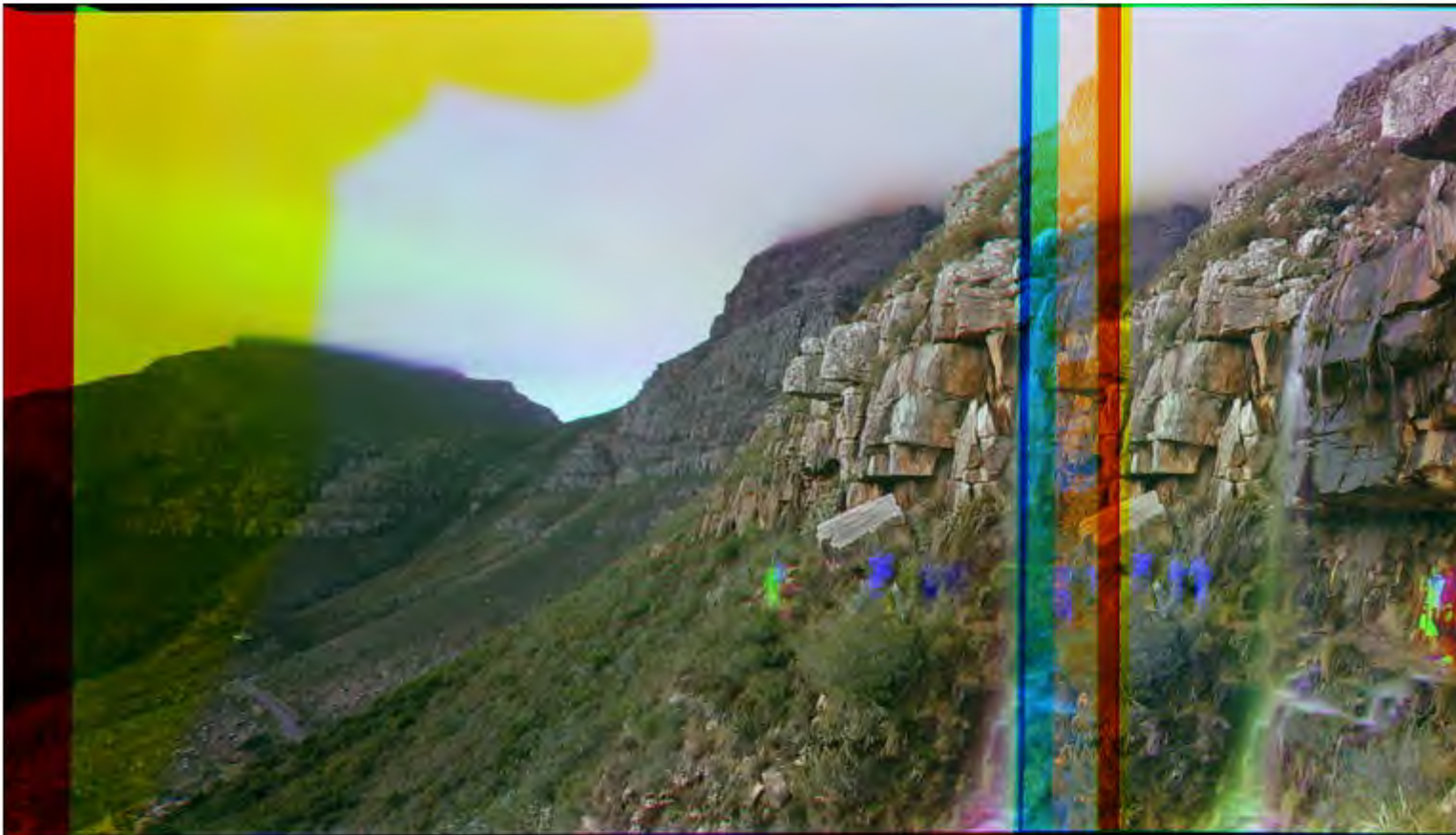


Figure 40: *The Contour Path* (2020).

of the future. These images are not intended as a snapshot of a *particular* time but instead infer a lamination of time. Because of the delay between making the separate exposures, movement in the scene being photographed and minor misalignments between sheets of film, the photographs made by this method combine optical realism with a range of visual markers that suggest the processes that made them. Movement, especially of people or in patches of light and shade, create a range of marks or results, ranging from ghost-like figures to coloured fringes around objects to areas of mottled colour resembling bruising.

These results may be read in a variety of ways, but collectively they describe the landscape as dynamic and always in flux, with the passage of time simultaneously generating these marks and being foregrounded. The tension between the descriptive nature of the photographic image and the optical effects occasioned by this approach mirror the tension between interpretations of Table Mountain as a place of nature or Nature and the reality of centuries of human intervention in the landscape. Furthermore, making mostly colour photographs for this body of work avoided the nostalgic associations of the black and white landscape photograph. I also considered it important to make photographs that would not simply read as documents of a scene, and this was facilitated by the distinctive visual characteristics of the various interventions I employed.

In *The Contour Path* (2020) I reflect on the history of human action in the landscape, suggesting it as a site haunted by the ghosts of its past. These are not the kind of ghosts occasioned by death, however, but the presence of the past in the traces and affects that remain. I surfaced the notion of haunting through the ghostly human figures that feature in a number of photographs in this body of work, rendered in vivid hues by the three-colour process. While the notion of ghosts or haunting may read as a deathly metaphor, I see it as operating in a binary of presence/absence rather than alive/dead: the person in the photograph is present at one moment and absent the next, and the ghostly figure signifies both presence and absence. These figures destabilise the notion of *terra nullius*, while the ghostly rendition suggests the transience of individual human experiences of the mountain to express the interrelations and discontinuities implicit in considering the landscape across different timescales.

The spectres that haunt the mountain are from different generations: pre-colonial, colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid ghosts who have walked these paths and considered the mountain's forbidding rock face. The join is not seamless in this image, and while part of the image resolves as "naturalistic", other parts clearly disturb this photographic mimesis – for example, the red band on the left and the band in the middle where the images do not line up. I also accidentally captured my own hand in the image, which shows as a yellow form in the top left. While this was a technical "mistake", I was drawn to it because it foregrounds my own hand in the process.



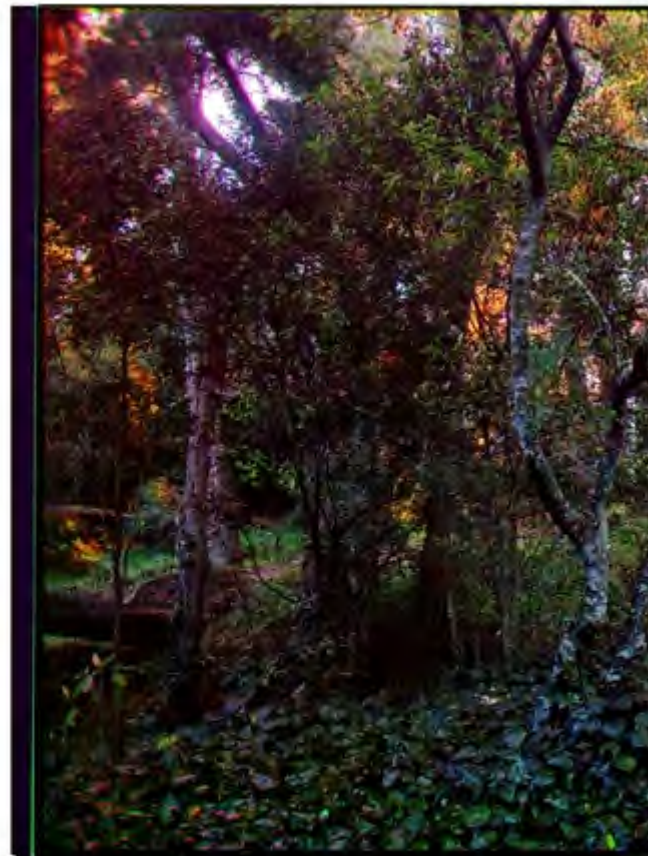
The notion of invisibility is important to my interpretation of Table Mountain: in many instances, such as the absence of evidence of indigenous history or the absence of indigenous vegetation in areas dominated by alien vegetation, that which is invisible is as important to an understanding of the place as that which is seen. To allude to such absences, I made photographs of the invisible by employing a variation on the three-colour method, using infrared-sensitive film to record the red component of the composite. The contribution of “invisible” infrared light shifted the colour of the image, with live foliage being rendered in vivid red and pink hues, as seen in *Die Hel*. The plant life in the photograph is comprised almost entirely of alien species, hence the choice of the unnatural, unsettling rendition.

Red recurs regularly throughout this body of work as a marker of instances of violence or to warn that the image may be better understood through closer scrutiny. The intention is not to be didactic: red does not necessarily represent danger or a warning but marks where that which is on the surface may obscure other layers of the palimpsest.



Figure 41 (above): *Die Hel* (2021).

Figure 42 (left): *Forest Path, Klaassenbosch Greenbelt* (2020). I felt a subtler use of red was required here, so I used a polarising filter to mediate the relative brightness of reflective surfaces between the different colour separation negatives when making the three-colour photographs. As a result, parts of the scene are subtly overlaid with red, while other areas are unaffected.



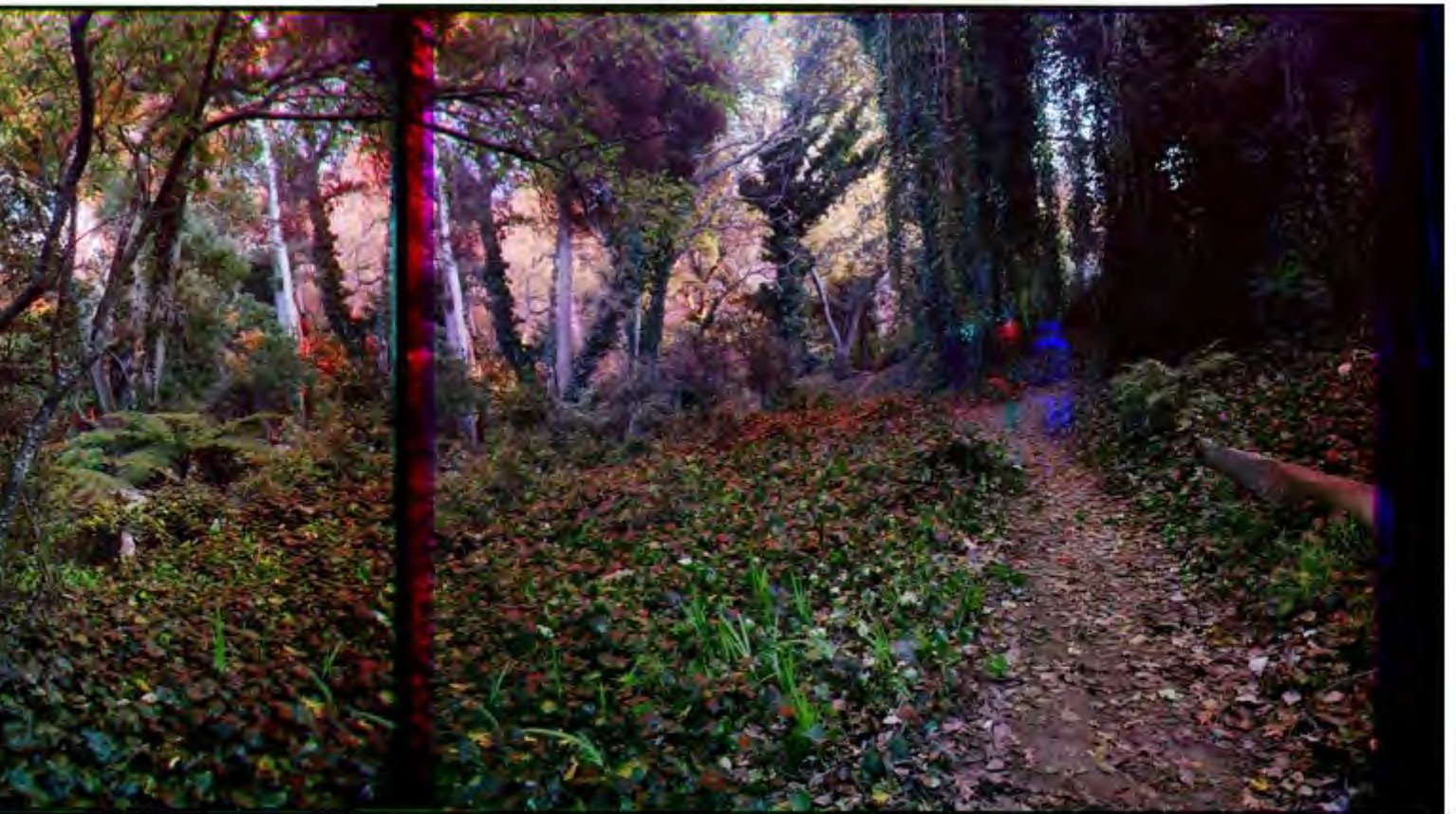




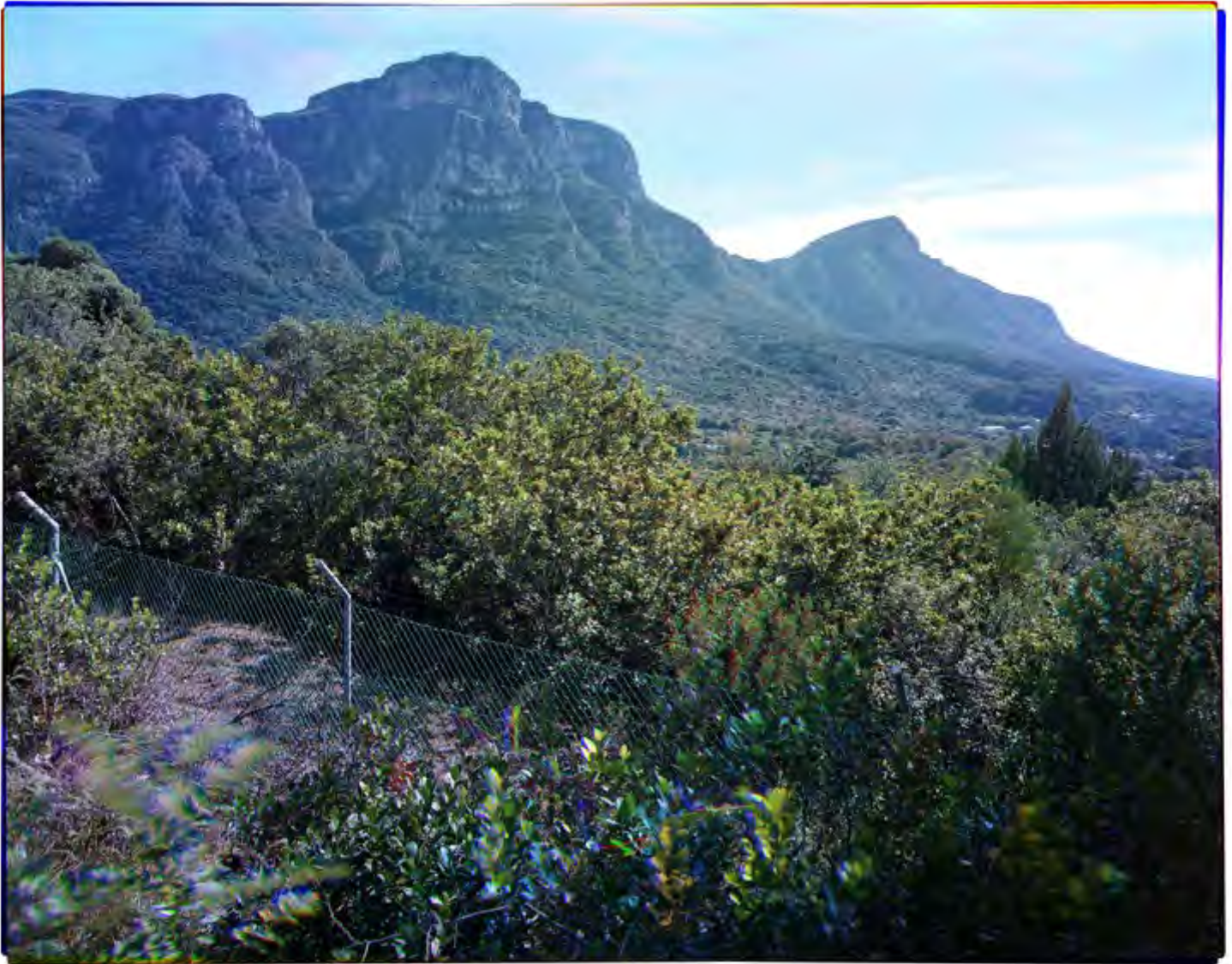
Figure 43 (left): *Kirstenbosch View I* (2020)

Figure 44 (right): *Kirstenbosch View II* (2021)

Points of View

When speaking to peers, colleagues, mentors and supervisors about Table Mountain, I have had vastly different reactions to the site and what it represents and has represented historically. To foreground Table Mountain as a complex, layered site where different individual experiences and points of view may not be reconcilable, I photographed some sites from multiple points of view. I also sought to render the landscape in ways that contrast the tropes of conventional landscape representation. Among these tropes are the easily comprehended views characteristic of the single-point perspective employed in picturesque representations.

The photographs *Kirstenbosch View I* and *Kirstenbosch View II* are both largely optically realistic and present structurally similar compositions of the mountain's outline over Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden from different viewpoints. In the first image, an almost postcard-perfect scene is presented; in the other half of the pair, the focal point is the fence that



keeps people out. Presenting these images together draws attention to the contrast in content of their respective foregrounds and reflects on conditions of access to the mountain. Through this curation, the works can be read in a way they could not be individually, while the inherent limitations of the exclusionary single-point perspective are also raised.

In response to my discomfort with the single point of view, I made *Twelve Views of a Pond, Boschenheuvel Arboretum*²⁵ by layering twelve different views of the same pond, disrupting the detail and structure of the scene and leaving the pond and its surroundings largely unrecognisable. While the title allows the viewer to “make sense” of the image, my intention is for it to foreground the instability between what the photograph is *of* and what it *looks like*. In the end, it is what could be described as impressionistic, a blur of light and colour that cannot be fixed. This inability to arrive at one fixed meaning of a site is important, as each site I photographed contained multiple stories, multiple opinions, multiple histories and multiple points of view.

25 Boschenheuvel arboretum is a wooded suburban park located in the affluent suburb of Bishopscourt in what used to be Protea Village. Andrew Jacobs and his community were forcibly removed from here between the late 1950s and 1964; more than 120 families were dispersed across the Cape Flats and all traces of their presence were removed. The community was granted a land claim in 2006 but has not yet returned due to delays caused by ongoing legal contestation (Hall, 2019: 11, 29). Jacobs is hesitant about the possibility of moving back, saying in a personal interview: “They [the residents of Bishopscourt] are not really going to be open to us, because they don’t want us to be neighbours in any case.”



Looking back to colonial and nationalist representations of the land by white men, I am aware that this same group are responsible for the dispossession of other groups' land. It is difficult to figure the land with this legacy. In trying to address this, I have looked at work by artists associated with Afrikaner nationalism, such as J.H. Pierneef, whose work drew on established pictorial traditions of the picturesque to define the landscape as *terra nullius* and “render them familiar and dominatable” and create “bounded colonial worlds awaiting habitation by settlers”, affirming white dominion over land and culture (Goodrich & Strydom, 2014: 64, 68).

In response, I referenced the pictorial conventions associated with picturesque landscape imagery to destabilise the implications of control and mastery associated with it. The photograph *Table Mountain (after Tafelberg) II* references Pierneef's *Tafelberg* (c. 1932) and was made as an infrared three-colour photograph to render the scene in vivid, optically unnatural colour.

Figure 45 (above): *Twelve Views of a Pond*, Boschenheuveld Arboretum (2020).

Figure 46 (opposite left): *Tafelberg*, by J.H. Pierneef oil on canvas (c. 1932).

Figure 47 (opposite right): *Table Mountain (after Tafelberg) II* (2020).

26 Note, for instance, ongoing and highly contentious discussions around the removal of pine trees in Cecilia and Tokai forests, where defining a clear management plan has been complicated by disagreement between parties advocating for biodiversity conservation through the removal of pines and parties advocating for the recreational value of pine plantations (News24, 2021)



My image mirrors Pierneef's image but has a blood-red colouration, with a bruised sky and the corpse-like forms of burnt trees functioning as markers of the violence in colonial and nationalist landscapes and representations.

27 The severity of the fire has in part been ascribed to the ubiquity of alien trees on this part of the mountain (Esler & Rebelo, 2021), the most common being cluster pines and stone pines. Cluster pines are remnants of alien plantations, while stone pines in the area are protected by heritage legislation (Shaucnessy, 1980: 239; Van Wilgen & Van Wilgen-Bredenkamp, 2021). The heritage status of the site is linked to the history of the Groote Schuur estate, having been owned by Cecil John Rhodes, who bequeathed it to the nation on his death in 1902, under strict conditions that it should not be developed. Exceptions to these conditions have included the building of the University of Cape Town, Groote Schuur Hospital, and the freeways along the edge of the mountain. The heritage status of stone pines, not indigenous to Table Mountain, begs the question of whose heritage is being protected, particularly as the stone pines have arguably displaced the endangered, endemic silver trees (*Leucadendron argenteum*) that grew here before colonial settlement. Tensions between biodiversity conservation and human relationships to the mountain were also sharply highlighted in the aftermath of the recent fire. Debates in this regard typically focus on the need to balance preservation of the ecological integrity of the park with access and recreation (Donaldson et al., 2016: 133), and in this instance manifested in contentious exchanges on social media and elsewhere, in which blame for the destruction caused by the fire was apportioned to poor fire management strategies by the South African National Parks board (SANParks), fires lit by homeless people living on the mountain, improper management of invasive aliens and other factors (Friends of Table Mountain, 2021). There was also an outcry from people who felt their access to certain areas of the mountain was being unfairly curtailed by the rehabilitation efforts that followed the fire, resulting in instances of violence and racial abuse against SANParks rangers (Madhomu, 2021).

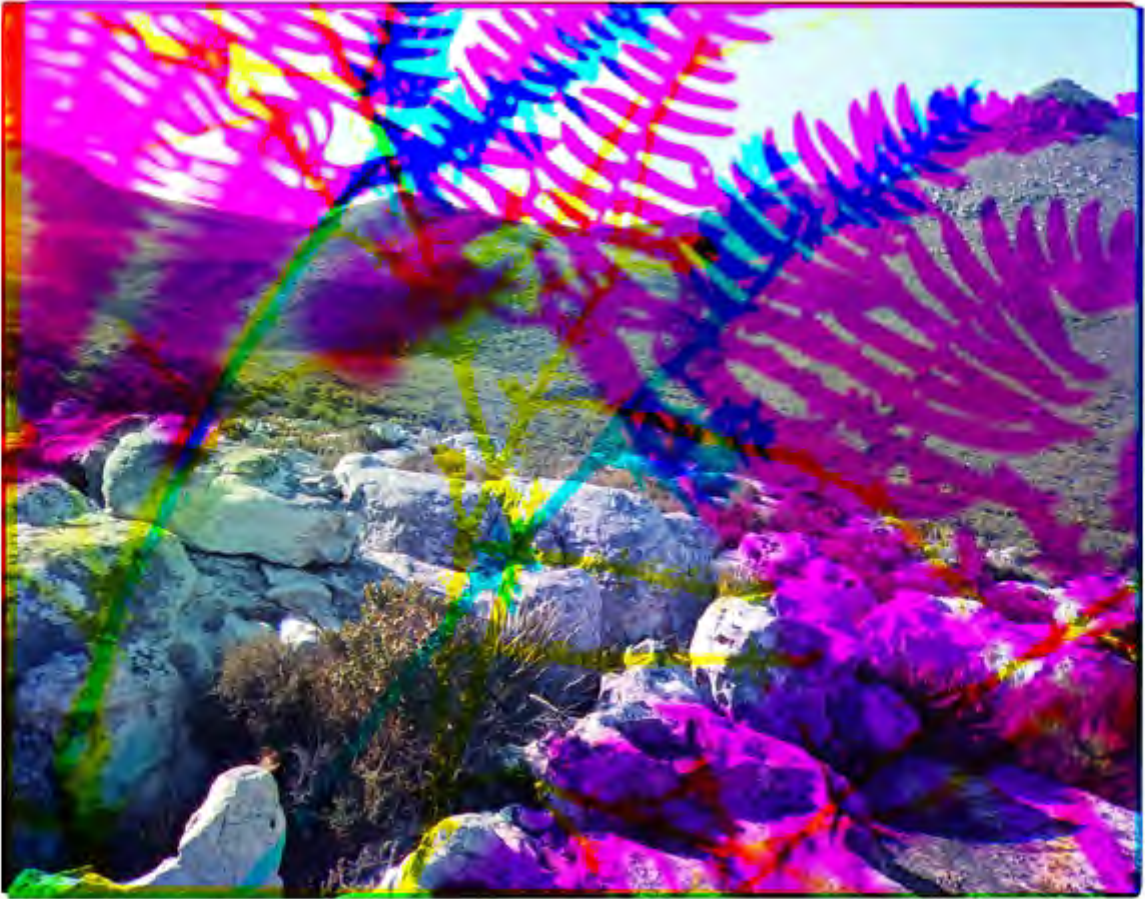
In reflecting on the violence manifest in the landscape, this project considers a continuum between the more obvious manifestations of metaphors for violence in the land (such as quarries, fire and uprooted trees), the less obvious (such as plantations and hiking paths) and the subtle (such as naturalised alien vegetation that has *displaced* indigenous species). My approach to making photographs of these instances of violence was not always to make such instances initially apparent, as they arguably become so normalised in contemporary conceptions of the mountain that they are not obvious.²⁶ Instead, I tried to render them in ways that are unsettling or strange, giving a sense of dis-ease or discomfort.

The 2021 UCT/Rhodes Memorial fire in *Game Camp Fire* is one of the more obvious reflections on violence in this body of work. Here the three-colour process introduces strange colour shifts, with some areas resembling the mottled colours of old bruising. My intention was to allow the passage of time to become evident, suggesting a reading of this instance of obvious violence (signified by the fire) as part of a temporal continuum rather than as an isolated moment. Here as elsewhere, the allusion to a continuum suggests a causal relationship between the present and the past.²⁷ The "bruising" arises from the elapsed time between the exposures, making the movement and progression of the fire and smoke apparent and foregrounding the passage of time.



Figure 48: *Game Camp Fire* (2021).





A contemporary reading of Table Mountain should also consider the mountain's status as a national park, which can be read as a physical representation of landscape, a bounding practice that contributes to the erasure of indigenous histories by positioning it as a place of natural heritage (Swanepoel, 2013: 7). How the mountain is protected and located also imposes limitations on the interactions people can have with the landscape, manifesting in conditions such as hidden and obvious barriers to access. To reflect on this, I sought out instances where I could surface the presence and effects of these barriers, as in *Van Riebeeck's Hedge (Brabajum stellatifolium)*, *Kirstenbosch View I* and *Kirstenbosch View II*.

In addition to physical barriers to access, I considered barriers to understanding the mountain, and I became aware that Table Mountain's image as a "place of nature" could act as one such barrier. Morton's (2020: 3) notion that the idea of Nature could disrupt an understanding of the interconnectedness of the forces that shape landscape reflected this realisation and informed my understanding of the tensions between biodiversity conservation and the social realities entangled with this landscape. In *Silvermine I* and *Silvermine II*, I placed fynbos, twigs and leaves from the site I was photographing in the camera to allude to this obstruction.

In the later stages of this project I understood that to describe the state of the mountain as entangled with the socio-geographic realities of Cape Town and to point to the differences in place that still define contemporary social relations around Table Mountain it would be necessary to position the mountain in this larger landscape. To this end, I photographed views of the mountain from various residential areas to emphasise how the position of one's living space relative to the mountain reflects a history of segregation and inequality and shapes one's opportunities to interact with it.

In contrast to the three-colour method, I made these photographs using direct positive black and white photographic paper and a handmade camera built especially for the project. This medium generates images that are reversed from left to right, and I chose points of view where this reversal would render the distinctive outline of the mountain unfamiliar and strange, unsettling a straightforward reading of the images. The resemblance to historical photographs suggests that the roots of the present-day state of these places reside in the history of the landscape. Furthermore, unlike almost all current and historical photographic processes, photographs made with this medium are not intended to be reproduced – the image made in camera is final and unique, mirroring the individual subjective reading each viewer brings to Table Mountain and the photographs. The materiality of the prints, being the actual sheets of light-sensitive paper in the camera at the time of exposure, positions them as a direct material trace of the places depicted.

Figure 49 (Opposite Top): *Silvermine I* (2021).

Figure 50 (Opposite Bottom): *Silvermine II* (2021).



Figure 51 (Left): *Table Mountain and Devil's peak from Mowbray (2021)*. I see this view of the mountain from my home.



Figure 52 (Right): Devil's peak from District Six (2021).



Figure 53 (top): *Table Mountain* (2021).

Figure 54 (bottom) : *Panorama of Table Mountain* by W.F.H. Pocock (1884)

The Exhibition

In curating the exhibition of this body of work I sought to present work that would allude to the complexity of the site and its representation while still being emotive (rather than didactic) in its expression of the unease I experience in the landscape. The work is divided between four spaces, with each space curated to surface different concerns in the project's interpretation of Table Mountain. I used unframed direct positive and digital prints, books, projection and a lightbox as modes of display, and the work is sequenced to surface the different tensions and concerns that became prominent in my making and thinking about the project.



The first photograph the viewer encounters when entering the gallery is a direct positive black and white diptych that shows the iconic outline of Table Mountain as seen from Signal Hill. This photograph situates the work on Table Mountain and, while it directly references colonial-era representation, the reversal of the image destabilises the reference and the familiarity of the mountain's outline. On closer scrutiny, the viewer can also see the modern buildings of the city, situating the image in a contemporary context. As the photograph is relatively small (8" x 20", or 204 mm x 508 mm) and very highly detailed, it also serves to set the tone for a close reading of all the photographs.

Following this work is a book containing more direct positive photographs of contemporary views of Table Mountain, sequenced to trace an arc around the mountain – starting from the south at Silvermine, moving east and then north through the Cape Flats, southern suburbs and the city bowl to Blouberg before turning west to view the mountain from Camps Bay, and finally south again to Hout Bay. These images were made at various distances from the mountain, with some showing views close to the mountain, like the wealthy area of Bishopscourt, while others show the mountain as a small speck on the horizon, as from Khayelitsha. I present the original direct positives to position the photographs as material traces of the landscape and foreground the social realities of the places they depict. Some of these original photographs are “flawed” because of mistakes or accidents in the making and processing of the photographs, and I interpret these flaws as additional markers of the medium's materiality and its fallibility in representing this complex landscape. These photographs function as a foundation for the rest of the exhibition, placing the project not only on the mountain but also in the larger social landscape of Table Mountain. The cover of the book is red, referencing the red safelight used in the darkroom where these photographs were processed and introducing the project's use of red as a marker for work that rewards closer scrutiny and consideration.

On moving into the first room of the gallery, the viewer is presented with a selection of black and white photographs spread over three walls. In contrast to the direct positives, these photographs are made from multiple exposures that render the depicted scenes somewhat abstracted. The impressionist blur of the multiple exposures destabilises the expectation of realism set up by the direct positives and introduces the complexity of the site presented by the more prominent use of layering and obviously constructed images that follows.

In the passage, the viewer encounters a selection of colour photographs. The first, *Undergrowth*, depicts a close-in view of dense undergrowth subtly overlaid with red to disturb the otherwise “natural” subject matter. While the textural rendition of the undergrowth echoes that of the preceding multiple exposures, the introduction of colour shifts associations away from the more nostalgic black and white work, and the more descriptive renderings invite the viewer to contemplate the content of the photographs. The subject matter in these photographs may at first glance seem idyllic, but the use of infrared film, multiple exposures and the presence of ghostly figures unsettle such a reading.

In contrast to the introductory spaces, the photographs and books presented in the main gallery space point more directly to the dis-ease embodied in the landscape. The smaller end walls of the gallery each feature an oversized diptych: on entering the gallery, the viewer sees *Game Camp Fire* on the wall opposite, while *Die Hel* is positioned on the wall behind the viewer, to their right. These two photographs set the tone for the space, highlighting the violence signified by the fire and the strangeness and impenetrability of the alien forest in *Die Hel*. In positioning these two photographs opposite one another, I also highlight the tension between obvious instances of disruption to the landscape and the relative subtlety of other forms of disruption, with one image stating clearly and the other suggesting or questioning.

The other photographs in this space explore a range of themes that further expand the interpretation of the site. Among these photographs is the triptych *Table Mountain (after Tafelberg) I, II and III*. The Table Mountain triptych foregrounds the change that has occurred in this place over time, subverting the timeless association of Pierneef’s rendition. This reference to historical representation of the mountain also establishes a tension between the mountain as “image” and the markers of physical shaping of the landscape depicted in the other photographs.

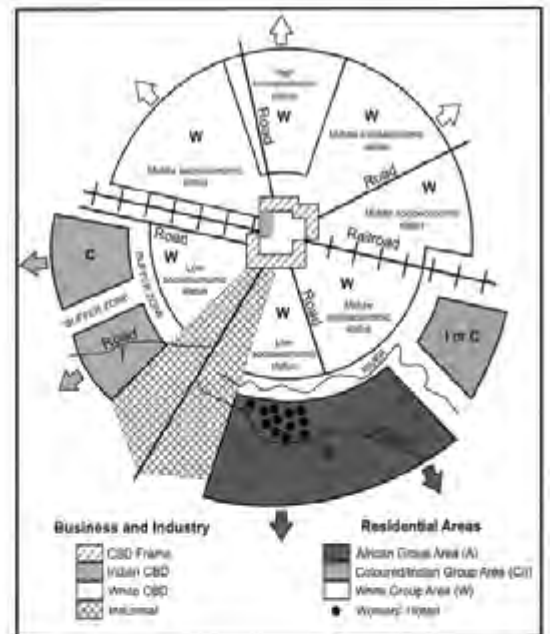
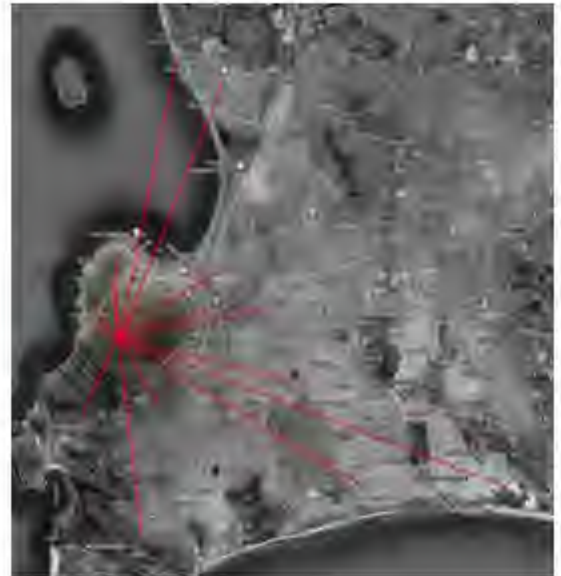


Figure 55 (top) & Figure 56 (bottom): The sequence of images in the red book, illustrated by the lines of sight shown in the map (top), reference the Burgess Urban Land Use model (bottom) used in apartheid city planning. This model was used to determine group areas through a combination of concentric zones radiating from the urban centre and areas defined within the zones through radials emanating from the city centre (Planningtank, 2020: online). In Cape Town, natural barriers such as rivers and mountains and humanmade structures such as roads, railways and industrial areas were used to separate population groups.

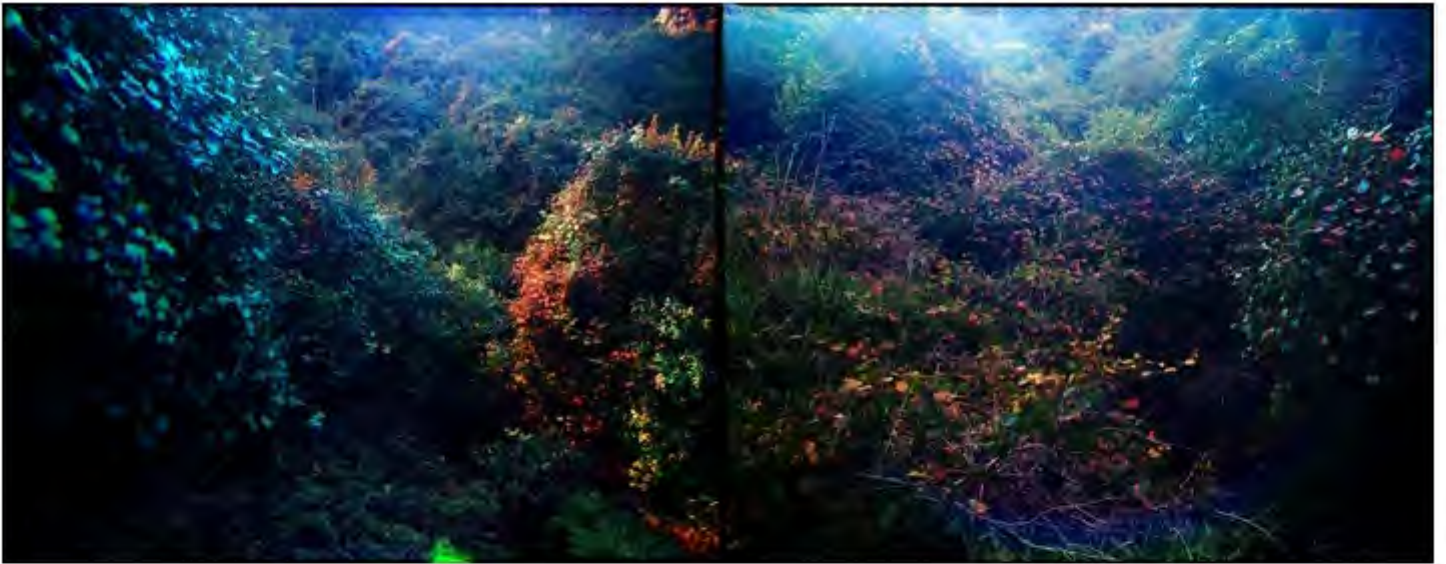


Figure 57 (top left): *Four rows of Pines, Tokai Plantation*. (2020).

Figure 58 (top right): *The Pond, Boschenheuvel Arboretum*. (2020).

Figure 59 (bottom): *Undergrowth* (2020).

The signification of violence by fire, introduced by *Game Camp Fire*, is repeated in several photographs in this space, including *Diepriver*, which evokes fire through accidental fogging (exposure to unwanted light) of the film, and *Burnt Pines below Rhodes Memorial*, which depicts the smouldering aftermath of the UCT/Rhodes Memorial fire. Again, the veil of smoke creates bruise-like colouration here, suggesting the destruction caused by the fire and the violence it signifies.

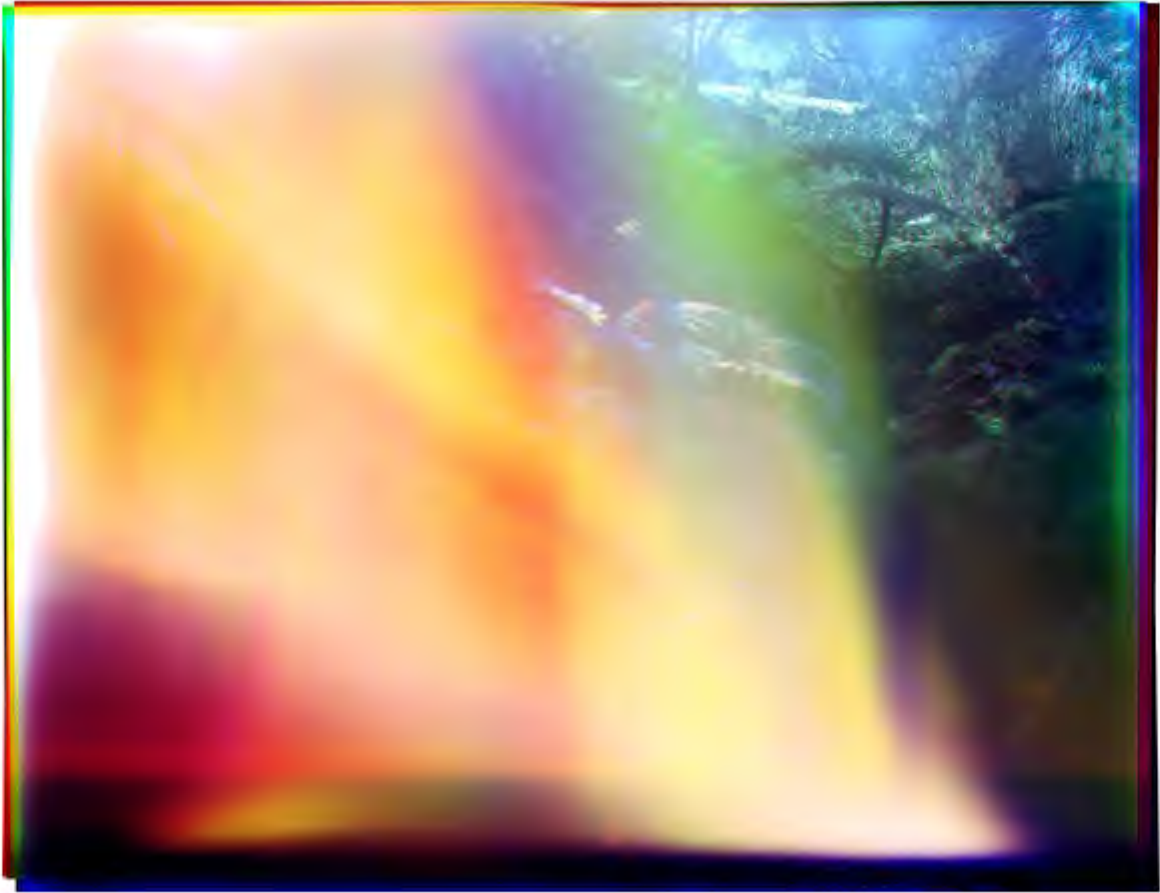
Higgovale Quarry and *Fallen Eucalyptus* depict other obvious interventions in the landscape in the form of granite and sandstone quarries along the mountain's periphery and the massive forms of fallen eucalyptus trees in an abandoned plantation in Newlands Forest. In these images, the quarries and alien trees are markers of human alteration to the landscape, with the infrared alluding to the invisibility of that which was there before. Interspersing these photographs with those depicting the fire surfaces the tension between those alterations that have run their course and those that continue to strain the environment.

The final photograph before *Die Hel* is *Forest Walk, Die Hel*. Here, red- and cyan-coloured figures walk along a stepped path surrounded by dark, dense, monochromatic vegetation, with stray sunlight creating a luminous red glow along the top edge of the photograph. A high point of view causes the path to seemingly come from nowhere and lead to nowhere, and the figures appear to be walking either up toward the light or down into inscrutable darkness. In positioning this photograph before *Die Hel*, I suggest a reading of that scene as ominous and unsettling.

Positioned between the photographs in this space are two books that expand on the project's themes. In contrast to the book of direct positives, which can be viewed as a visual journey around the mountain, these two books are sequenced to evoke journeys through the landscape. While the book of direct positives interprets the mountain as most Capetonians experience it on a daily basis – as a backdrop to the city – these two books place the viewer on the mountain and allows them to see it as they might if they were walking on its trails. Having spent countless hours walking and looking for places to make photographs, the act of walking on the mountain became central to the making of work for this project, and I considered it important to allude to this in the presentation of the work. As such, the sequences of images presented in the books draw on visual and subjective similarities in the photographs to lead the viewer through the landscape, with the recurring presence of people in the photographs reinforcing the notion of an embodied experience of the landscape through walking.

Figure 60 (top): *Diepriver* (2020)

Figure 61 (bottom): *Burnt Pines below Rhodes Memorial* (2021).



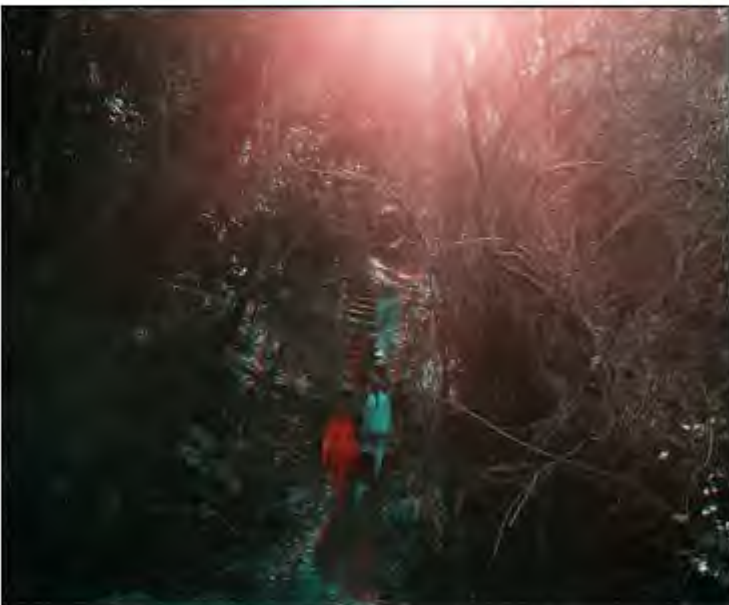


Figure 62 (top): *Higgovale Quarry* (2020).

Figure 63 (middle): *Fallen Eucalyptus* (2020).

Figure 64 (bottom): *Forest Walk, Die Hel.* (2020).

While there is considerable overlap between the themes presented in each book, they nonetheless stand as separate artworks, each presenting a journey with its own particular character, just as each walk on the mountain is a singular experience. Considered together, these books add detail and nuance to the project's interpretation of Table Mountain, broadening its scope beyond that of the work on the walls. Like the book of direct positives, the size of these books (roughly 8" x 10") reflects the aspect ratio and size of the cameras I worked with, while their covers – green for the first book, blue for the second and the red cover of the earlier book of black and white images – reference my use of three-colour photography in this project.

In the last space, the projection room, the viewer encounters a mural-sized print overlaid with projected video, and *Game Camp, after the Fire*, an infrared photograph printed on red plexiglass and presented in a lightbox. The mural photograph, *The Hedge*, was one of the final photographs made for this project and depicts a stand of Brabajum stellatifolium, the same species planted by van Riebeeck. I selected this subject for the work because as one of the first large-scale human interventions on the mountain, and the first structure intended to separate people, van Riebeeck's hedge is arguably the most unequivocal marker of the contentious history of this landscape. The video overlay is made up of different variations of the printed image interspersed with photographs of this scene and others on the mountain and as the video plays, the print appears to become animated by movement and shifts of light and colour, and it is disrupted by other photographs of Table Mountain flickering into view. At certain points the projection lines up with the mural and the scene appears largely natural, but as the video plays, alignment shifts and other scenes distort or disguise the underlying image. The disruption of the image caused by the projection represents the impenetrability of the hedge and suggests the alienation it would have represented to the indigenous people excluded by it. This means of presentation is intended to evoke my reading of the mountain as palimpsest, with the movement of the video evoking the passage of time and the distortions of the image indicative of the indeterminacy of meaning I have found in this landscape.

Game Camp, after the Fire shows the tire tracks of fire trucks in the ash below Devil's Peak in the aftermath of the fire. The overlay of traces left by tires in the burnt grass suggests the interconnection between different interventions in the landscape. The static, red glow of this work contrasts with the more subtle colour and movement of the projection, setting up tension between the simple, single photograph and the shifting complexity of *The Hedge*. The curated sparsity in this space positions it as a place in which to reflect on the exhibition, and the evanescence of the projection piece and the insistent, glowing stillness of the lightbox suggest the limitations of the photographic image to grapple with a landscape as complex as this.

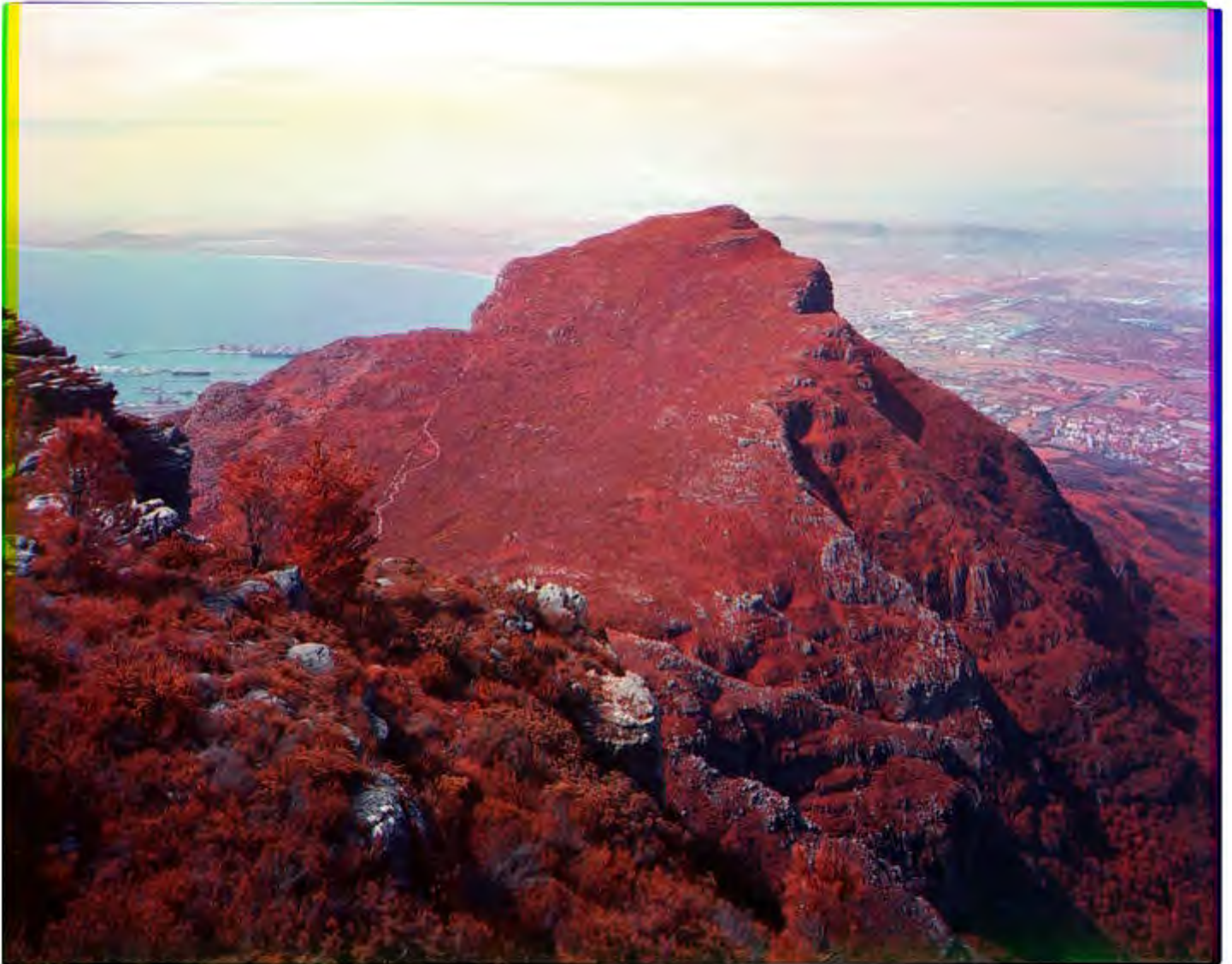


Figure 65: *Devil's Peak from Table Mountain.* (2021).

Conclusion

As the culmination of three years of research and photography on Table Mountain, *Unstable Ground* is an attempt to gain a better understanding of the complexity of this site and landscape. For as long as I have lived in Cape Town, the mountain has been a constant, looming presence in my experience of the city. While my experiences of the mountain have been shaped by my positionality and the privilege of easy access, I also came to see how the mountain's shaping and position in Cape Town's cultural landscape reflects larger social and historical narratives. Evolving from my initial concern with the ecological state of the mountain, the project shifted as varied interactions of meaning, history, representation and positionality came to the fore in my research and discussions about the project.

As I sought to unpack these interactions, I became increasingly aware of the interconnectedness of the multitude of factors that have contributed to the mountain's status as cultural and natural icon. The idea of layering became important to my interpretation of this site and to my understanding of the interconnected factors, and in each place I photographed I found the geological layers of the mountain, layers of alien vegetation that had displaced the indigenous vegetation, and layers of history and meaning that complicated interpretation. Rather than attempting to excavate specific meaning from the layers I encountered, I embraced the indeterminacy of meaning brought to the site by their interactions.

As I made photographs, I was drawn to places where these layers could be read in the traces of human presence and intervention in the landscape, and I resolved to surface them using various modes of layering to make photographs. Three-colour photography became the primary photographic method for this project, as the construction of photographs by layering different images echoed the layers I found in the landscape. The practical intricacies of the method also allowed me to position the passage of time as a marker within the photographs to foreground connections between the past and present of the landscape.



Similarly, I used infrared three-colour photographs to allude to the invisibility of displaced indigenous species and obscured histories. I used multiple exposures to reflect on the varied points of view one might take on this landscape, overlaying photographs made from different points of view to disrupt the familiarity of the single-point perspectives characteristic of traditional landscape photography. In the later stages of the project I started making direct positive black and white photographs to position the mountain within the larger landscape of Cape Town. These photographs, echoing the appearance of colonial-era photographs, draw out the connections between the history of Table Mountain and its current position in Cape Town's cultural landscape.

Photography, and specifically large format photography, has a rich history of reflecting on interactions between humans and the world around us, and while I have drawn from that history in my reflections on this landscape, I was also mindful that large format photography has often been implicated in one-sided interpretations that privilege sectional interests. I have worked to question and subvert such associations and, by using the methods outlined above, I have attempted to position my photographs as subjective interpretations rather than objective documents.

Through the research and photography conducted for this project, Table Mountain has also become a reference point from where I can consider my own positionality. The ways I, as a white man, have been able to interact with it reflect a history of exclusion and inequality that has shaped the landscape. I came to see the mountain not as a site that could be understood in a detached and abstract way but as one for which understanding is subjective and where cultural and historic complexity contribute to an always-shifting palimpsest of meaning and association. As such, this project has not attempted to come to any definitive conclusions about the meaning of Table Mountain but reflects on the connections between a multitude of factors that have contributed to its shaping and cultural significance.

I hope that this work contributes meaningfully to the discourse on landscape and its representation in South Africa. There is much ground left to cover and many avenues left to explore in unpacking the complexity of this landscape, and I hope to continue working on this topic beyond my MFA.

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Figure 63: Van der Merwe, E. 2020. *Fallen Eucalyptus*. Three colour photograph, archival ink on True Fiber paper. 644 mm x 500 mm.

Figure 64: Van der Merwe, E. 2020. *Forest walk, Die Hel*. Three colour photograph, archival ink on True Fiber paper. 626 mm x 500 mm.

Figure 65: Van der Merwe, E. 2021. *Devil's Peak from Table Mountain*. Infrared Three-colour photograph

Figure 66: Van der Merwe, E. 2020. *Two stands of pines*. Infrared Three-colour photograph.

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To my parents, Herman and Marietjie, my deepest gratitude for everything.

Catalogue of Photographs



Eight poplars

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

408 mm x 500 mm



Four views of an ivy covered pine

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

608 mm x 500 mm



Four pines, Tokai plantation

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

408 mm x 500 mm



The pond, Boschenuvel Arboretum

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

611 mm x 500 mm



Eighteen views of six alien trees I

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

397 mm x 500 mm



Table Mountain

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

508 mm x 204 mm.



Four rows of pines

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

400 mm x 500 mm



Undergrowth

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

1270 mm x 500 mm



Kirstenbosch View I

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

633 mm x 500 mm



Kirstenbosch View II

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

633 mm x 500 mm



Twelve views of an oak, Groote Schuur Estate

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

527 mm x 650 mm



Brabajum Stellatifolium

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

900 mm x 1147 mm



Climbers, Higgovale Quarry

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

530 mm x 650 mm



Eroded gorge, Newlands forest

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

520 mm x 650 mm



Stream, Tokai plantation

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

650 mm x 516 mm



Table Mountain (after Tafelberg) I

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

403 mm x 500 mm



Table Mountain (after Tafelberg) II

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

407 mm x 500 mm



Table Mountain (after Tafelberg) II

Archival ink on True Fiber paper

397 mm x 500 mm



Leaves floating on a pond
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
610 mm x 500 mm



Burnt pines below Rhodes Memorial
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
636 mm x 500 mm



Diepriver
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
649 mm x 500 mm



Higgovale Quarry
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
634 mm x 500 mm



Rhodes Memorial from Rhodes Highschool
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
639 mm x 500 mm



Fallen Eucalyptus
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
644 mm x 500 mm



Smoke over tRhodes Memorial
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
2 x 1148 mm x 900 mm



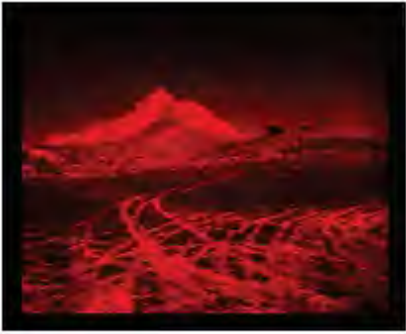
Forest walk, Die Hel
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
626 mm x 500 mm



Glencairn Quarry
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
644 mm x 500 mm



Game Camp Fire
Archival ink on True Fiber paper
2 x 1148 mm x 900 mm



Game Camp, after the fire
Print on plexiglass mounted
in lightbox
565mm x 460 mm



Forest walk, Die Hel
Archival ink on True Fiber
paper
626 mm x 500 mm



The Hedge
Inkjet print on eco-freindly
wallpaper with video
projection overlay
3000 mm x 2400 mm



Table Mountain from
Wtestrige, Mitchell's Plein
Direct Positive silver gelatin
photograph
508 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from
Silvermine
Direct Positive silver gelatin
photograph
254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Baden
Powell drive, Khayelitsha
Direct Positive silver gelatin
photograph
254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from
Bishopscourt
Direct Positive silver gelatin
photograph
254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from
Hanover Park
Direct Positive silver gelatin
photograph
254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from
Rondebosch Golf club
Direct Positive silver gelatin
photograph
254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Athlone
Direct Positive silver gelatin
photograph
254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Rondebosch Common

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain and Devil's peak from Mowbray

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Mowbray King David golf club

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Black River

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Langa

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Lion's head from Higgovale

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Pinelands

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Maitland

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Kalksteefontein

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from District Six I

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from District Six II

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Signal Hill

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Devil's peak from District Six

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Table View

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Vredehoek

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Blouberg

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Bo-Kaap I

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Lion's Head

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Bo-Kaap II

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Table Mountain from Camp's Bay

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

254 mm x 204 mm.



Hout Bay (after Kronendal)

Direct Positive silver gelatin photograph

508 mm x 204 mm.



View through the canopy, Newlands forest

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Forest path, Klaasenbosch greenbelt

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Pine and saplings

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Rock and Clay

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



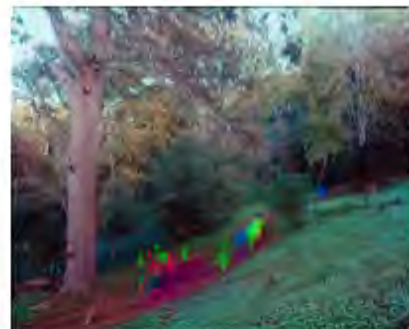
Paradise ruins, Newlands forest

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Rock and Clay

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Lockdown walk, Klaasenbosch greenbelt I

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Remnants of a Plantation

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Lockdown walk, Klaasenbosch greenbelt II

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Pond in the mist,
Boschenheuvel Arboretum

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Hikers at Hely-Hutchinson
reservoir

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Indigenous forest and oaks

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Pines at the edge of the Table
Mountain's east face

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Eucalyptus skeleton, Cecilia
forest

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Woodhead and Hely-
Hutchinson reservoirs from
aqueduct trail

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Vredehoek Quarry

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Fire from Signal Hill

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Northface over Higgovall
Quarry I

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Aftermath of the fire, Lower
Devil's peak

Included in "Unstable
Ground" book



Oak, plane and pines, Tokai forest

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



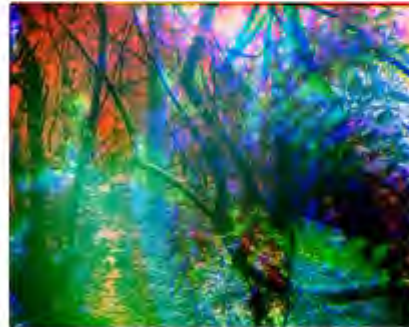
No entry, Lower Devil's peak

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Walking in the plantation, Tokai.

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Bush in the camera

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Fence and Burnt trees, below Devil's peak

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Hikers at Skeleton Gorge waterfall

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Trail crossing, Cecilia forest

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Hikers in Newlands forest

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Camera in the bush

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Van Roebbeck's Hedge

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Thirty six views of a pine plantation

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Thirty six views of a stand of indigenous forest

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Pines and Fynbos

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Ivy covered oaks, Klaasenbosch

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Paradise

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Ferns, Kirstenbosch

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Pines and stump, Newlands forest

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Twenty four views of a pine

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Gum trees along Rhodes drive

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Row of pines, Tokai

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Pond, fynbos and pine plantation, Tokai

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Woodhead dam

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Catch fences, Chapman's peak drive

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Silvermine I

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Lion's head, looking down

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Silvermine II

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Lion's head, looking up

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Twelve views of a pond, Boschenheuveld Arboretum

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Eighteen views of six alien trees I

Included in "Unstable Ground" book



Contour path

Included in "Unstable Ground" book