

THE SKY IS FALLING
skyscrapers and the
anthropocene landscape

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THE SKY IS FALLING

Skyscapes and the anthropocene landscape

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

Michaelis School of Fine Art
Faculty of the Humanities
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DECLARATION

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

*“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.”*

Robert Frost (1920)



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Catherine Ocholla

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2. *Nu Pogodi!*, 2022. Oil on board. 180 by 180 mm.

Introduction

The future present

“Deep histories tumble in unruly graves that are bulldozed into gardens of Progress”
(Nils Bubandt in Tsing, Swanson, Gan & Bubandt, 2017:G6).

In her essay, “Life Imitates Art: Cyborgs, Cinema and Future Scenarios”, Ramona Pringle (2013) writes that our history is “woven into our collective unconscious, interspersed with scenes from *Blade Runner*, *Metropolis* and *The Jetsons*—fictional memories that blur the line between real and imagined, between science and fiction” (Pringle, 2013:31). Her use of the term ‘fictional memories’ alludes to our collective expectations of things that may not have actually occurred¹, based on what we have read, seen, heard or experienced. She writes about the role of the artist/ filmmaker/ writer as storyteller, and how *Blade Runner*² and films, books and art like it have already visually informed us as to what to expect during or after disasters of our own making. These fictions are served at the opposite end of the potential for great technological and scientific achievement, serving to warn us of the implications of our actions, and our inaction: “How will Innovation X impact our relationships, our cities, our environment, our governments, our bodies” (Pringle, 2013:32)?

John R. Gold (2001:338) specifically outlines the development of the cityscape in earlier cinematic science fiction, noting how (for the most part) the city environment gradually transformed from the archetype of pristine high-rises set against dark streets, to *Blade Runner’s* (1982) post-apocalyptic ‘future noir city’—a city where “the sombre skies constantly teemed acid rain; and frequently a city in which the air was heavily stained by industrial pollution”(Gold, 2001:340). Suggesting that: “Every hell has a heaven against which it is contrasted” (Gold, 2001:341), Gold observes that the country—or the environment external to the city—was typically used to represent the ‘ideal’ human state (2001:341-342), an escape to freedom and/or enlightenment. This, I may argue, is also the point at which the future in the films that he alludes to (his publication was in 2001) and present interpretations of the future of ‘nature’ and landscape diverge.

In his book, ‘Landscape and the science fiction imaginary’, John Timberlake invites us:

...to think of the imaginary formed in and through science fiction as one that is fragmented and simultaneously shot through with anticipation and anxieties about the present and potential futures, and, as such, one that appeals because it resonates with the subject’s formative experiences [...] To see things through the ocularity that science fiction offers is to see the fragments of the present lodged within a fantasy of future historical time (Timberlake, 2018:6).

On accepting this invitation, one could argue that the narrative of the future has shifted - in the present climate, there is no country/landscape to escape to anymore. Recent films such as *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Io* (2019) use a combination of city, atmo-

sphere and landscape to delve into the circumstances that led to off-world colonies, alluding to climate change or some other Anthropogenic event. In *Io*, we have made our own air unbreathable and most of humankind has moved to a space station near one of Jupiter’s moons to use as a launchpad to a habitable planet (Horton, 2019). That we will have to abandon Earth and ‘colonize’ other planets—the act of which is often symbolized³ in removing the space helmet—is subverted through the main protagonist’s choice to remain and subsequent act of removing her helmet and breathing in Earth’s ‘new’ environment.

A future of ‘off world’ colonies runs parallel to conversations about our future as human beings on this planet, which are rather suggestive of dystopian eventualities. Citing a study by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Alan Braddock and Renee Ater (2014:5) write that even as attempts are being made to tackle greenhouse gas emissions, conditions ranging from the effects of increasing heat waves to rising sea levels and extinction rates are bound to become more cataclysmic. Bearing this in mind, they note the growing prevalence of art and ‘ecocriticism’, suggesting that:

Delayed engagement with ecocriticism on the part of art historians undoubtedly owes something to enduring disciplinary boundaries. For some scholars, ecology and sustainability are categorically different from aesthetics. For others, environmental concerns probably retain an aura of elite, white, liberal privilege and, therefore, constitute a distraction from seemingly more urgent issues involving human civil rights and postcolonial critique. In our view, such objections neglect the pervasive force of anthropogenic environmental change, not to mention the opportunities that ecocriticism presents for enriching the field (Braddock & Ater, 2014:6).

Engaging with an entanglement of these concerns, the practical component of this project comprises an installation of paintings exploring a narrative theme concerning the atmosphere (air, sky and space) in our future present⁴. Alluding to anthropogenic factors such as contamination, global warming, conflict, and neoliberal claims to the Commons of air and space, the premise of my project is speculative. [World] building on real life experiences that are rendered visually credible by the use of realist and photorealist painting techniques, the world that I create is familiar, partly autobiographic and recognisable, but centred around some unspecified catastrophe. Supporting the idea of a narrative still-in-progress, the painterly conceit of ‘non-finito’ serves to undercut the visual certitudes of illusionism. Here the process of painting is visibly evident, rendering the works, or world they depict, as ‘in the making’.

1. *A memory of a fictional story or a ‘made-up’ memory.*
2. *There are two Blade Runner films, the first by Ridley Scott in 1982, and Blade Runner 2049 by Denis Villeneuve in 2017.*
3. *Being able to breathe, meaning conducive to humans.*
4. *The Urban Dictionary (Future present, n.d.) defines it as the “future will one day be the present”.*



3. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.

Summary of chapters

Like the main protagonist in my work, this text sets out to take the reader on a speculative journey across a pictorial landscape that is both familiar and alien, a reflection on our future present. The chapters in the text coincide with how the works are exhibited/installed, and the accompanying essays thus centre on three Chapters/installations: 'The tooth and fairies', 'It takes a village', and 'Fly'.

The first chapter explores 'speculative landscaping' through the use of 'reality fragments', discussed in relation to Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's use of her own image and John Timberlakes' (2018) 'montaging', before reflecting on the seminal roots of storylines in science fiction relative to my work, and discussing reality fragments that informed my own speculative approach.

The second chapter defines the Anthropocene in relation to contemporary landscape painting. A discussion follows on how the installations in 'It takes a village' use 'unfinishedness' or 'non-finito', in conjunction with abstraction and (photo)realism relative to Mark Tansey's *Action painting II* (1984).

The third chapter reflects on mainly South African artists who are engaging with sky- and cloud-scapes, and how their and my work evoke invisible airborne perils through the lens of T. J. Demos' (2017) observations about Anthropogenic visualisation, John E. Thornes' (2008) cultural climatology, and Ruth Richards' (2001) reflections on the aesthetics of beauty in helping us to surmount our varied environmental crises.



4. Detail, *Specimen*, 2022. Oil on board. Three parts, 180 by 180 mm each.

Chapter I

The tooth and fairies

Tall tales.

*Expectations of gifts under pillows from mythical beings.
Disbelief—mine, theirs—suspended.*

I am 3 years old.

26th of April, 1986—Chernobyl's nuclear reactor explodes.

*The holiday is over. Irradiated air confines us to a single room for months.
Children are not allowed outside.*

*Outside looks the same. Geiger counters click that the world is changed.
Sound reminders of the unseen threat.*

Tomorrow. It is 2020.

*But for the face masks, city, land and sky are the same.
There is a virus, hanging in the air.*

Kyiv all over again.

'Hy, nozodu!'¹, translated from Russian to mean 'Just you wait!'

*The grown-ups have lost their heads. There is a child in a Go-cart marked
'KIEV'. A big, bad wolf for the journey through the forest.*

*I have a wisdom tooth pulled out. A grown up picks something up in the snow.
A child by the sea, looking far, across space-time itself.
'Specimen', or is it space-men.*

*That poem by Robert Frost. 'Melt'?
A snowman is the wilting companion of two smoke-filled skies.
There are a lot of fires.*

And with time, a lot of flies, casting long shadows.

'Stasis'.

Time stops. I am there. I am here.

1. Pronounced 'Nu pogodi!', Russia's version of 'Tom and Jerry', a cartoon in which a wolf attempts (unsuccessfully) to capture a rabbit.



5. *Specimen*, 2022. Oil on board. Three parts, 180 by 180 mm each.



6. *Melt*, 2022. Oil on board. Three parts, 300 by 380 mm, 180 by 180 mm, and 180 by 180 mm.





7. *Stasis*, 2022. Oil on board. Three parts, 180 by 180 mm, 300 by 300 mm, and 180 by 180 mm.



8. Left page: Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, *Trooper*, 2020. Pencil and oil on wooden panels, 1820 by 1220 mm.
9. Right page: Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, *The seven*, 2020. Pencil and oil on wooden panels, 1830 by 2440 mm.

Speculative landscaping

“The ability to imagine what we dread most is an evolutionary tool that nature has given us to transcend what we fear. I do not believe that imagining the worst makes it happen. Imagining the worst might be one of the factors that makes us prevent it from happening” Okri (2021).

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum’s landscapes can be said to be parts of the alter-egos of her selves. Reviewing her solo exhibition *Battlecry* (2020), Isabella Kuijers quotes Sunstrum’s own explanation of ‘Asme’, her alter ego: “My work [...] features a female figure who often stands in as the archetypal hero on a quest through landscapes that carry various significations: landscapes of discovery, of conquest, of self-sacrifice, of self-mythology, landscapes in the pursuit of home. I am interested in reclaiming and re-ordering narrative of power via an imaginative or speculative occupation of geographies (space) and histories (time)” (Sunstrum in *African Futures*, 2016, cited in Kuijers, 2020).

Sunstrum’s approach to speculative² world building can be described as ‘montaging’, a term used by Timberlake (2018:79, 80) in discussing the work of Chris Foss, known for his paperback paintings and illustrations in the 70s of brightly coloured starships and futuristic landscapes that transform familiar surrounds and objects into the extraterrestrial. This act of ‘montaging’ is often a combination of the times—political, economic—and the life experiences of the artist. Timberlake quotes Peter Burger (1984:72 in Timberlake, 2018:85) in relation to Foss’s work - “it calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments” - and suggests that the “landscapes in and of themselves therefore present as charged environments, comprising shapes and forms drawn from the experiences of childhood” (Timberlake, 2018:89-90).

In *The seven* (2020) [Fig. 9], part of Sunstrum’s exhibition *Battlecry*, Sunstrum took a series of photographs of herself as Asme, which she then montaged together to create a painting of seven seated ancestral figures, evocative of the



2. The term ‘speculative fiction’ is much broader than science fiction, allowing creatives to mix different types of fiction, such as science and fantasy (*Speculative fiction*, n.d.).
3. I use this term to denote the shaping of a world through landscapes.
4. It snows quite often in parts of South Africa.

taking of a daguerrotype (Kuijers, 2020). The construct of this daguerrotype is set against a backdrop of volcanoes, a motif repeated earlier in her solo exhibition, *There are mechanisms in place* (Sunstrum, 2018), sourced from Tempest Anderson’s photographs of volcanoes from the 18th century. Alluding to anthropological imagery, the backdrop and colour—muted green landscape and fiery heads—create tension in the image, the blank stares “allowing them scepticism of the process by which they were (and are recorded)” (Kuijers, 2020).

In the same exhibition, against a backdrop of volcanoes, Asme prepares to go ‘to the stars’ in *Trooper* (2020) [Fig. 8]. The title (writ large repeatedly across the painting) borrows from an extract from Bessie Head’s (in Kuijers, 2020) ‘Why do I write?’: “I am building a stairway to the stars. I have the authority to take the whole of mankind up there with me.” With these works she seems to take on Stephen Frosh’s (2013:54 quoted by Timberlake, 2018:111) “never-having-been that continues to haunt the present”, the suppression of history of the oppressed in ‘postcolonial melancholia’, by re-writing the wrongs of the past and ‘writing’ the future, crossing landscapes that are both “futuristic and prehistoric” (Sunstrum, 2018).

Parallels can be drawn between Sunstrum’s Asme and my montaging of personal archives in the ‘landscaping’³ of my speculative world. The little girl in *Nu pogodi!* [Fig. 2] is the driver of this story. The tooth [*in Specimen*, Fig. 5] may or may not be her own. Unlike the halo around Asme’s head in *Trooper* (2020), this child cannot be approached as either good or bad; she could be the person that built the snowman and/or caused the fires in *Melt* [Fig. 6]; *Nu pogodi!* can be endearing or a threat, to the child in the painting, or of the child as an adult. Childhood and adulthood are entwined in the titles that (with the exception of *Nu Pogodi!*) are borrowed from science as opposed to magic.

The adults in ‘The tooth and fairies’, and across the body of work, are all visually obscured, rendered anonymous. The man with his hand in the snow in *Specimen* was based on an image of my father [Fig. 1], who moved to the Soviet Union from Kenya to get his tertiary education, where he also met my mother. The wisdom of tooth, of age, of learning, runs through *Specimen* [Fig. 5]. Questions are raised about identity and association - whether the snowy landscape is in Europe, or in Africa⁴. Whether these people [of colour] in Kyiv are in the past, or the present. The West and Europe are synonymous with snow. The man and the child are anomalous in the context of Kyiv and the snow. The disassociation between people of colour and representation and engagement in speculative futures is encapsulated in this first encounter and perceptions about ‘them’ in this ‘alien’ environment.

Sunstrum is of the belief that:

... the act of imagining and occupying yet-to-be-known futures is a particularly radical political action. I point here to Deleuze’s writings on ‘becoming’ in which he describes that a people oppressed is at its most powerful and most potent when it is in a state of ‘becoming’: that is, a fluid, yet-to-be-known form (Sunstrum, 2018).

Though focusing more on the projection of identity across space-time, Sunstrum’s work is also reflective of John Rieder’s (2005:374) observation that there are quite a number of plot lines in science fiction, such as alien invasions,



10. Detail, *Stasis*, 2022. Oil on board. Three parts, 180 by 180 mm, 300 by 300 mm, and 180 by 180 mm.

that are intrinsically tied to the history of colonialism, in addition to politics, morality and the sum of our anxieties in human psychology as alluded to by Susan Sontag (cited by Rieder, 2005:373). Rieder (2005:380) references ‘The War of the Worlds’⁵ by H.G. Wells, which he describes as “indignation against colonial arrogance”, a critique written at the height of British rule. The landscape described in ‘The War of the Worlds’ by the narrator—who was confined to a house for 15 days—when he finally walks outside, is “weird and lurid, of another planet” in which “he feels ‘a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under Martian heel!’” (Wells, 1898 in Rieder, 2005:380).

At the heart of Rieder’s association, is notions of progress: “Progress codes the non-European world in all it’s diversity, not simply as the Other, but in various ways as the veritable embodiment of the past” (Rieder, 2005:375). Rieder (2005:376) also speaks of ‘the fantasy of discovery’—the discovery of ‘empty’ lands by settlers that are actually inhabited—and like Pringle, writes about a technological or scientific ‘Innovation X’ that creates an economic and political imbalance in power (2005:377)—arrows versus nuclear bombs.

There is also the subsequent narrative sequence of losing control of ‘Innovation X’, which extends beyond colonisation on Earth to the colonisation of other planets, as it often stands to mean a human creation or event that turns Earth uninhabitable, a popular theme in dystopian narratives⁶.

To this end, Timberlake (2018: 111) introduces the term ‘nuclear melancholia’, “the undefined, unresolved legacy of the Cold War [...that...] leads to repeated, morbid cultural apparitions of World War III in spectral form” and “false memories” of war built on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nuclear melancholia is intrinsically tied to the horrifying aftermath of the bombings: “However, the Nagasaki survivors found themselves, not in a suddenly alien environment, but in the same place they had been before surrounded on all sides by familiar things, albeit smashed, burned or melted” (Timberlake, 2018:104). Here Timberlake is analyzing fictional dramatisations of apocalyptic events against the photographs of Yosuke Yamahata, taken within 24 hours of the bombing of Nagasaki (Timberlake, 2018:100).

Beyond landscapes “that are weird and lurid” and “smashed, burned and melted”, are those governed by invisible forces, as was the case when we were in lockdown in Kyiv post-Chernobyl. My family lived in Kyiv between August 1984 and January 1988. In 1986, we had just returned to the city from a vacation in Krasnodar⁷ [unbeknownst to us] right after the Chernobyl disaster. The word ‘Kiev’ in *Nu pogodi!* therefore activates a place in the mind, both as an autobiographic engagement with Chernobyl, and reflective of the threat of escalation to Nuclear war posed by the [‘current’] conflict between the Ukraine and Russia. This is the first of two unrelated events across space-time that feature as reality fragments behind this body of work, the second being the COVID-19 pandemic.

Timberlake (2018:79) notes that beyond the historic, most speculative artists and plot lines don’t step too far from what is scientifically known in their time, but instead build on “extant ideologically determined assumptions of progress through

extrapolation”. While Timberlake (2018:79) alludes more to the appearance of things in the use of “montaging, authenticating detail and realism” to create convincing alternate worlds, the same extrapolation can be applied to artists’ impressions about likely outcomes/events in the future.

This extrapolation of events is evident in the predictions made in the movie *Contagion* (2011), about a virus running rampant and killing thousands, which I watched for the first time during the COVID-19 lockdown. Ruth Richards (2001:78) provides an even better example of how far back this science fiction-virus story goes:

Relevant to this is investigative reporter Richard Preston’s (1994) largely truth-based novel, *The Hot Zone*. What if Ebola virus or another should escape from the African equatorial rain forest—a hot virus, highly contagious, rapidly acting—and jump the species barrier, begin to infect humans, and threaten us all? Preston’s brilliant speculation: that at some point, the immune system of the earth, of Gaia itself, could react to the strange and self-centered creatures that are paving it over and send a disease, a new plague, to restore the balance and the earth’s sustainability.

Extrapolating into the future in the context of Chernobyl and COVID-19, the girl may be the story’s driver, but the landscape is its narrator. Exploring the agency of the visual representation of landscapes in science fiction, Timberlake⁸ (2018:15) suggests that “landscape is typically a passive setting rather than a protagonist in its own right”. In “The tooth and fairies” and across the body of work, the landscape is not necessarily passive. The landscapes are ordinary, but loaded with various subtexts, both autobiographic and imagined. The man and the snow serve as symbols of my existence, and therefore of existence itself. The girl on the beach is a play on the Soviet Era war song ‘Katusha’, specifically the line “Выходила на берег Катюша”, translated to mean “Katusha/ Catherine went out onto the beach”. A child that is also a weapon. There are burning forests in *Melt*, seaweed from underwater forests in *Specimen*, and symbolic forests surrounding the wolf and girl in the hood in *Nu Pogodi!*. Fairies live in forests, that produce air. Allusions to air in ‘The tooth and fairies’ are recurring. The wind blowing through a girl’s hair on the beach, fires that require oxygen to burn, the act of flying through air: a journey of escape to freedom, or freedom to escape.

A single fly in *Stasis*, the symbol in painting of decay and death, raises questions about ‘why’ it is there [Fig. 7]. ‘The tooth and fairies’ challenges the viewer to see what is not there, a speculation of artefacts, relics of the past, inter-connected and solitary identities, and relics of the future.

5. *Published in 1897, Martians invade England.*
6. *Films such as Avatar (2009) (Earth has plundered its resources, humans mine another planet on which they circumvent the poisonous environment through avatars, indigenous community (Na’vi) is one with nature, humans try to take over their sacred space, and a human stands up to other humans to rescue the Na’vi) and the Star Wars franchise exemplify how more recent science fiction in popular culture encapsulates progress, the fantasy of discovery, ‘Innovation X’ and colonialism, and the resulting destruction of habitats and peoples.*
7. *The birthplace of my mother.*
8. *Who does, however, mention that his book’s focus is not on Fine Art but on more commercial modes of representation.*



11. Detail, *The bottom falls out*, 2022. Oil on Belgian linen. Ten parts, 400 by 400 mm each.

Chapter 2

It takes a village

There is cause for alarm.

March, 2018. Sergei Skripal and Yulia Skripal are allegedly poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok in Salisbury, England¹.

Espionage plot turned science fiction thriller.

They make quite the impression, those lime green hazmats in that small town.

*Transposed onto a Belgian linen landscape, 'The bottom falls out'.
Two greet each other as if to say everything is fine. This new normal is fine.*

A girl on a couch looks out across at the opposite wall at a small landscape.

'The stare down' could be petulant. Or just annoyed.

In real time, Russia has taken Chernobyl, and is marching towards Kyiv.

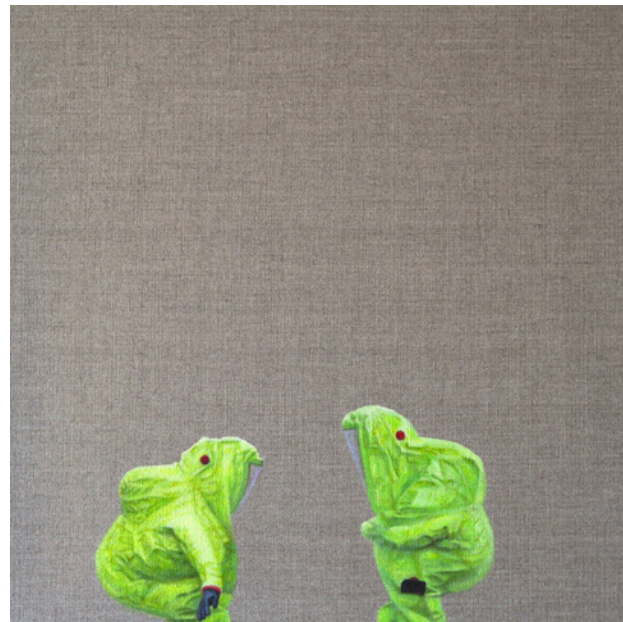
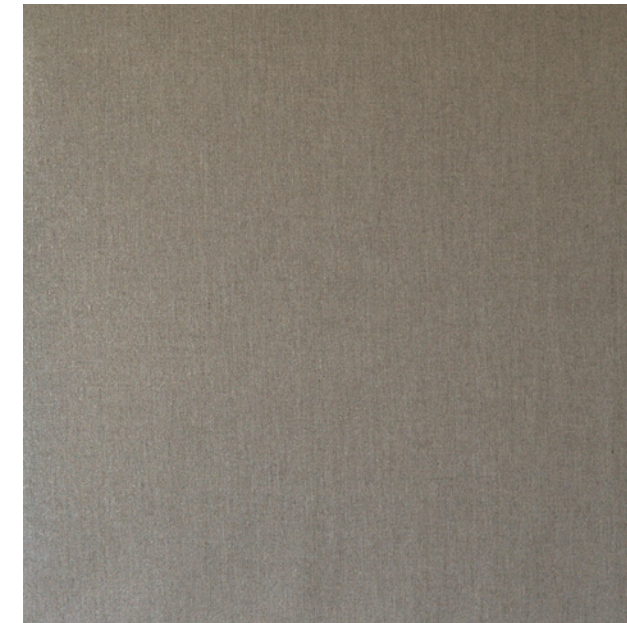
'Perseverance'² makes an entrance.

1. *Vale et al., 2018.*
2. *Name given to the principal hazmat figure.*





13. Detail, *The stare down*, 2022. Oil on board. Two parts, 180 by 180 mm each.



14. *The bottom falls out*, 2022. Oil on Belgian linen. Ten parts, 400 by 400 mm each.

Prologue and promise

“If modernity dreamed of the future, the Anthropocene dreams of the present as seen from the future...” (Nils Bubandt in Tsing, Swanson, Gan & Bubandt, 2017:G137).

“How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?” (Rob Nixon, 2011:3 quoted by Demos, 2017:13).

The future looks bright in Robert McCall’s *The prologue and the promise* [Fig. 15], a mural commissioned by Disney and completed in 1983³. Renowned in science fiction circles, the uninitiated may have encountered McCall’s work in the posters advertising Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), whose tale featuring [in part] the perils of Artificial Intelligence runs counter to the idyllic technological Utopia in *The prologue and the promise*. McCall’s treatment of the landscape is one of manicured perfection—even the sky seems perfectly ploughed—littered as it were with artefacts from our collective past and even more impressive and expansive monuments of the future. Perhaps symbolically, the central figures have their backs turned to the archaic natural world.

Conversations around ‘the promise’ have since shifted; we turn to face the natural world, and it’s reliable, presumed eternal, rhythm has shifted. The term ‘Anthropocene’ acknowledges that while we were not looking we were changing the shape of our environment by our fixation on the world of progress and technology. ‘Welcome to the Anthropocene!’, the first chapter in T.J. Demos’ (2017), “Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today”, borrows its title from a film by Globaia, a non profit foundation dedicated to science and art, which suggests that we are living in the Anthropocene⁴ epoch (Demos, 2017:7, 8), defined as the changing of Earth’s geological behaviour through human action, particularly that which is “bringing about many destructive ecological transformations that are at the forefront of current ecological and political debates concerned with how to mitigate and/or adapt to their impacts” (Demos, 2017:10).

Towards the end of his book, Demos (2017:85) offers an alternative definition of the Anthropocene, as “the geological impact of colonial and industrial activities on Earth’s natural systems”. For Demos and others, the Anthropocene “enables the military-state-corporate apparatus to disavow responsibility for the differentiated impacts of climate change” (2017:19), thus avoiding ‘climate justice’ (2017:21). Zoe Todd surmises it thus:

The current framing of the Anthropocene blunts the distinction between the people, nations, and collectives who drive the fossil-fuel economy and those who do not [...and] not all humans are equally invited into the conceptual spaces where these disasters are theorized or responses to disaster formulated (Todd in Turpin & Davis, 2015:244, emphasis added).

Demos (2017:54) therefore argues that the term Capitalocene is more appropriate, “the geological epoch created by corporate globalisation”. And he is not alone; other prominent voices, such as Donna Haraway, agree:

The mass extinction events are related to the resourcing of the earth for commodity production, the resourcing of everything on the earth, most certainly including people, and everything that lives and crawls and dies and everything that is in the rocks and under the rocks (Haraway, interview with Martha Kenney in Turpin & Davis, 2015:259).

On how to tackle this ‘resourcing of the Earth’ in the visual arts, Braddock and Ater cite Timothy Morton, a literature theorist, that our generally held view of “nature’ keeps the environment at arm’s length or even farther away in the background, like a romantic landscape painting hanging on a wall” (Morton, 2009 quoted in Braddock & Ater, 2014:6). One could extrapolate from this that the ‘romantic painting hanging on a wall’ is somehow inadequate in engaging with ecocriticism and the Anthropocene. The authors highlight the work of Xavier Cortado, specifically a small work of blue washes on paper entitled *Astrid* (2007) [Fig. 16] that uses the medium of painting to address climate change (Braddock and Ater, 2014:2). The work belongs to a series in which the artist used soil and water samples provided by climate change scientists to create images that resemble aerial maps of a landscape. The artist, who is based in Miami (where sea levels are rising), states: “The works were made in Antarctica, about Antarctica, using Antarctica as the medium (provided to me by the very researchers who inform us about Antarctica)” (Cortado in Braddock & Ater, 2014:3). The authors suggest that this type of work tackles Anthropocene arguments, emphasizing “materiality, change, strangeness, and intimacy” (Braddock & Ater, 2014:6). They do, however, acknowledge that every “creative artifact has environmental implications of some sort, intentionally or otherwise” (Braddock and Ater’s, 2014:5).

In his essay, ‘Painting with the Flow of the World’, Barry Schwabsky (in Bradway, 2019:13) is of the opinion that landscape painting’s trajectory has been sidelined, largely because of abstraction and the emergence and popularity of genres such as “conceptual works, performance, installations” and land art in the late twentieth century. Yet he (Schwabsky in Bradway, 2019:14) suggests that “landscape painting was the most abstract form of painting before abstraction”, because “it shifts the accent away from the human and divine as sole agencies toward the interplay of all entities in the whole space”. There is perhaps irony in the fact that despite so many efforts to break away from the pictorial in the late 20th century, many artists today are engaging with the pictorial, remixing different genres for different reasons. These artists are thinking about our interactions with our surrounding environment, and conveying these thoughts to themselves and others; a ‘pictorial’ picture nevertheless creates an experience for the artist and viewer, a ‘species of metaphor’: “a landscape painting is not necessarily a representation of a landscape, but rather something that, in being constructed out of pieces of representation, or possibly just echoes of representation, kindles an experience of its own” (Schwabsky in Bradway, 2019:22).

Schwabsky (in Bradway, 2019:13, 14) is, however, quick to note how “a picture of natural scenery”—the traditional interpretation of landscape—is problematic: “It means that the nonhuman world is conceived from a purely human vantage point, the land becoming mere setting, a sort of stage set for human action or human perception or material for exploitation.”

As installations, *The bottom falls out* [Fig. 14] and *The stare down* [Figs. 12, 13] tackle the ‘human vantage point’ and representations of landscapes differently. *The stare down* stares at/past the viewer across the room at Morton’s ‘romantic landscape painting hanging on a wall’, while *The bottom falls out* sets the stage for human action, but renders this action ‘lost’, for lack of a better word, through the landscape’s absence.

Both works in ‘It takes a village’ engage with the concept of ‘unfinishedness’ or ‘non finito’. Baum et al. (2016:13) note unfinishedness’ relationship with mortality – possibly due to the reverence, as noted by Thomas P. Campbell (in Baum et al., 2016:7), of works being treasured after the death of the artist, or after other disasters interfered with the completion of a work. There is as suggestion that mortality is a prevailing



15. Robert McCall, *The prologue and the promise*, 1983. Acrylic on canvas. 5.7912 by 18.288 m. Mural at the exit of Walt Disney World Resort: Horizons, Epcots Future World. Current status unknown.

3. *The year I was born*.

4. *The term is attributed to the chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer, who used it in 2000, although Demos points out that versions of it were in use in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was first used by the geologist Aleksei Pavlov in 1922 (Demos, 2017:9, 10).*



16. Xavier Cortada, *Astrid*, 2007. Sea ice from Antarctica's Ross Sea, sediment from the Dry Valleys, and mixed media on paper. 228.6 by 304.8 mm.

theme among those who engage with this aesthetic deliberately. Unfinishedness and mortality do have intrinsic ties in my work, particularly in *The bottom falls out* with the landscape that both is and is not there. But so does 'life in progress' the setting down of a work with the intention to return to it later; the creation of a world that is still in the making.

For Baum et al. (2016:13): "unfinishedness is not only a quality or characteristic inherent to a work of art; it also describes a practice or approach—that is, a deliberate way of making objects or pictures." According to the authors, 'non-finito' has mostly focused on the appearance of the work as opposed to what it represents (ibid). However the concept developed to include works that the artist concludes are finished yet look unfinished; works that were not intended to be unfinished but are acclaimed and accepted in this state; and works that remix states of finishedness and unfinishedness (2016:14). It has since been "radicalised" to equally apply to "a work's mode of address, its choice of materials, and its relationship to time and space as it does to its technique and appearance" (2016:15). In the case of *The stare down*, *The bottom falls out* and other paintings in my body of work, the appearance becomes part of what is represented. So for instance, Belgian linen with the faintest of chalk lines and blank linen in *The bottom falls out* are about both appearance and depiction. The figures seem somehow more accomplished and more polished in execution when juxtaposed with the chalk lines. The same can be said of *The stare down*—the painting of the girl aspires to be photographic, but at the same time bits of the sketch and underpainting are in evidence. The painting in the corresponding landscape equally seems incomplete, abandoned in its act as a painting. A similar approach is evidenced in 'The tooth and fairies' with the treatment of *Nu pogodi!*, on its way to 'becoming' an old photograph, with skeletal lines and erasure still visible.

The Belgian linen in *The bottom falls out* does not just read as a landscape. It is what it is. Belgian linen. However, its apparent emptiness also evokes 'space' and could, by proxy, evoke 'air'. The conflation of canvas and illusion activate the idea, perhaps, of sensation, as "certain properties of things are pictorially untransferable: their smells and sounds, for example" (Danto, 1992:34). This 'sensation' is like Mark Tansey's 'swooshing' (to use Arthur C. Danto's words, 1992:24) rocket in *Action Painting II* (1984) [Fig. 18]. The painting depicts an art class painting en plein air. The scene that they are painting is that of a rocket launch - an event in motion that is taking place at the very moment that it is being painted - a temporal impossibility for the time-intensive act of photorealist painting. Frozen versions of this movement are captured in all the paintings within the painting, representing something that only a camera could achieve. According to the clock, only eight seconds have passed. As such *Action Painting II* exploits "certain dissonances between our readiness to see that something is a picture of a moving thing, and our knowledge that things do not actually move in pictures" (Danto, 1992:24) or, more specifically, in paintings. Illusion is further effected through the painting technique of grissaille, the coloration giving the painting the appearance of a 'past tense' in 1984 when it was conceived in the 'then present'. A painting about a future, cemented even more visually as a past [that never happened] through the passage of time.

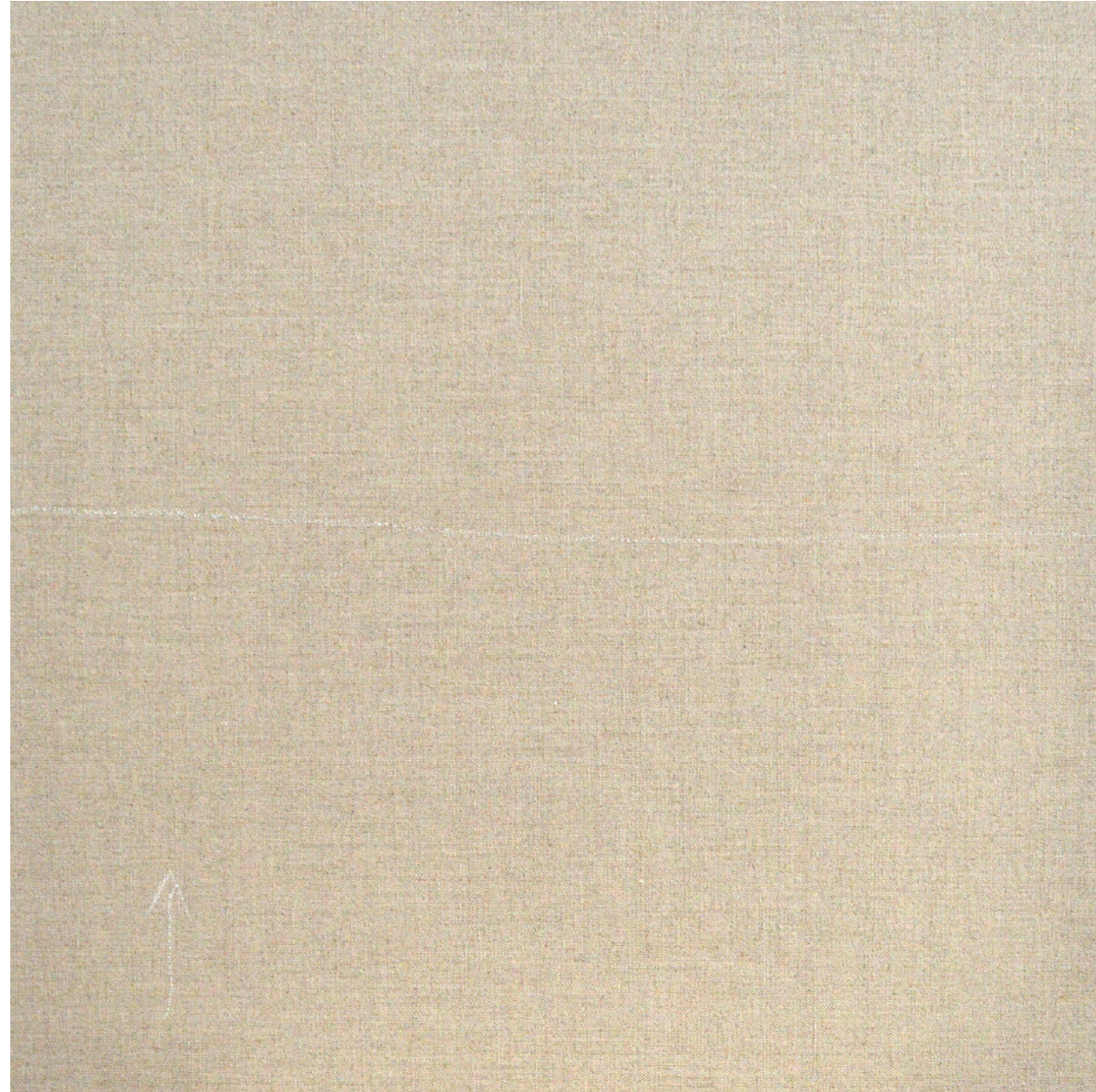
Through its title, it also evokes the abstraction of Action Painting - where paintings do not present images, but gestural traces of the artist's encounters with the act of painting, set against the 'tradition' of plein air painting. In a masterful stroke, Tansey uses photorealism to comment on both. *The bottom falls out* and *The stare down* can both be interpreted as visual puns, and as Carlo McCormick notes in relation to Tansey's works, "annoyingly resemble[s] one line visual jokes" (McCormick, 1987, emphasis added). But, McCormick (1987) notes, this functions as "part of a strategy to aggra-

vate pictorial logic". Compositionally, *The bottom falls out* is evocative of multiple-panels separated by a gutter⁵. The figures, in their hazmat suits, espouse a normalcy that masks the ludicrousness of their existing state in the paintings. Some of the figures do seem to engage with the parameters of this existence, one looking down at the faintest of chalk lines pointing upwards—a note to self to remember the right way up—another stepping 'out' of the canvas, and a third, ancestral hazmat figure in black and white, floating upside down and almost mirroring the figure that is looking down. The black and white figure is a spectre of space-time that reverts the Belgian linen back to surface, as people do not float upside down in landscapes, nor can they be black and white, but reactivates the 'sense' of air, as things do float in air. In actual fact the figures are not necessary to activate the sense of 'a landscape', in the same way that Tansey's figures are not necessary to denote plein air painting - the paintings on the easels suffice. In *The bottom falls out*, it is the skies that delineate top from bottom, and in doing so activate the concept of landscape.

Tying back to Robert McCall's *The prologue and the promise*, *Action painting II* was painted in the 80s, but strikes a more sombre note about the future at the time, pointing to the space race and the Cold War with a rocket launch alongside the American flag. The large clock shifts the painting from a clever pun about abstraction and photorealism, to an invocation of a doomsday countdown. That it is plein air painting deceives the viewer into accepting that it is merely a 'painting of painting' (Danto, 1994:12) from nature, and yet it is simultaneously unnatural, somewhat staged for this violent explosion to take place in such a peaceful setting, with water that barely shimmers. Here photorealism, coupled with the normalcy of the figures and landscape, is used to tell an entirely different story of unseen and unwarranted threats, which is why the work resonates so strongly with my approach to speculative storytelling.

The relationship between the installations in *The bottom falls out* and *The stare down* is addressed in the Chapter's title, 'It takes a village'. Read together, 'It takes a village' is a deconstructed take in my own mind on the future present state of affairs, the space race in *Action painting II* compounded with the COVID_19 pandemic, Novichok, threats of nuclear war, and irreversible Anthropogenic consequence. The phrase is borrowed from the African proverb: 'It takes a village to raise a child'—the task of raising a child as communal construct, wherein all the individuals collectively influence the child's development. The adults here stand in contrast to the familial scenes in *The prologue and the promise* as espoused by McCall in Disney World. Children tend to get swept up in adults' fantasies about their futures. Clearly the child in *The stare down* has misgivings.

5. *In comic books, a frame is a panel, while the white division separating panels is the gutter.*



17. Left page: Detail, *The bottom falls out*, 2022. Oil on Belgian linen. Ten parts, 400 by 400 mm each.



18. Right page: Mark Tansey, *Action painting II*, 1984. Oil on canvas, 1930 by 2794 mm.



19. *Outer limits*, 2022. Oil on wooden panel. 700 by 440 mm.

Chapter 3

Fly

The dust never settles.

An old mask hangs on a wall. A parallel universe of 'Outer limits'.

*I watch old re-runs of Star Trek.
Mr. Spock, 'Energize' me, now.*

I put on my 'Ruby slippers' to fly to Oz, and keep ending up on dry riverbeds and roads.

*A history of life in the skies, like stars, I give them names.
'Rapture', 'Sentinel', 'Descent', 'Magnitude', 'Spectrum', 'Tentacular ones'.
Pairing them as I go, a matchmaker of lost souls.*

Some for science, some for fiction, some for religion. Some for fun.

My 'Covenant' floats.

This planet, becomes other planets.

Down the 'Wormhole' I go, ruby slippers in tow.

20. *Ruby slippers*, 2022. Oil on wooden panel, 400 by 700 mm.





21. *Energize*, 2022. Oil on board. Two parts, 300 by 300 mm each.



22. *Rapture*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.





23. *Sentinel*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.





24. *Magnitude*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.



25. *Descent*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.



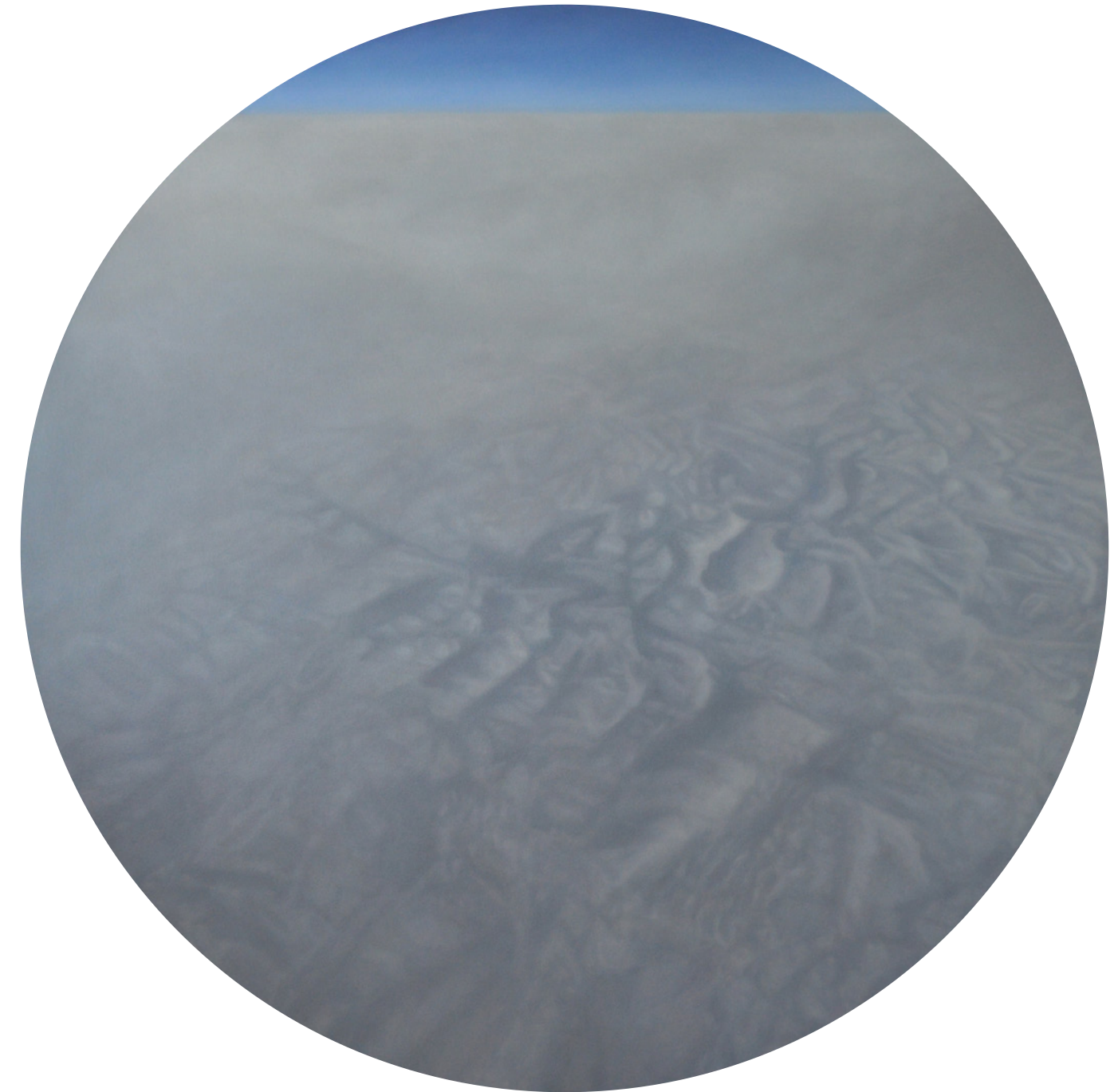


26. *Spectrum*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.

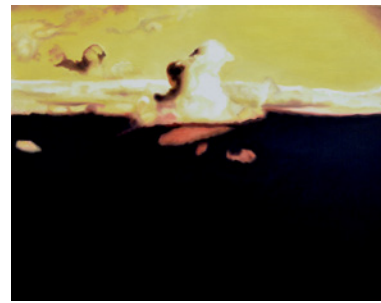


27. *Tentacular ones*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.





28. Covenant, 2022. Oil on canvas. Two parts, 1800 by 1800 mm each.



29. *Warmhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.



30. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.
31. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.





32. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.
33. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.



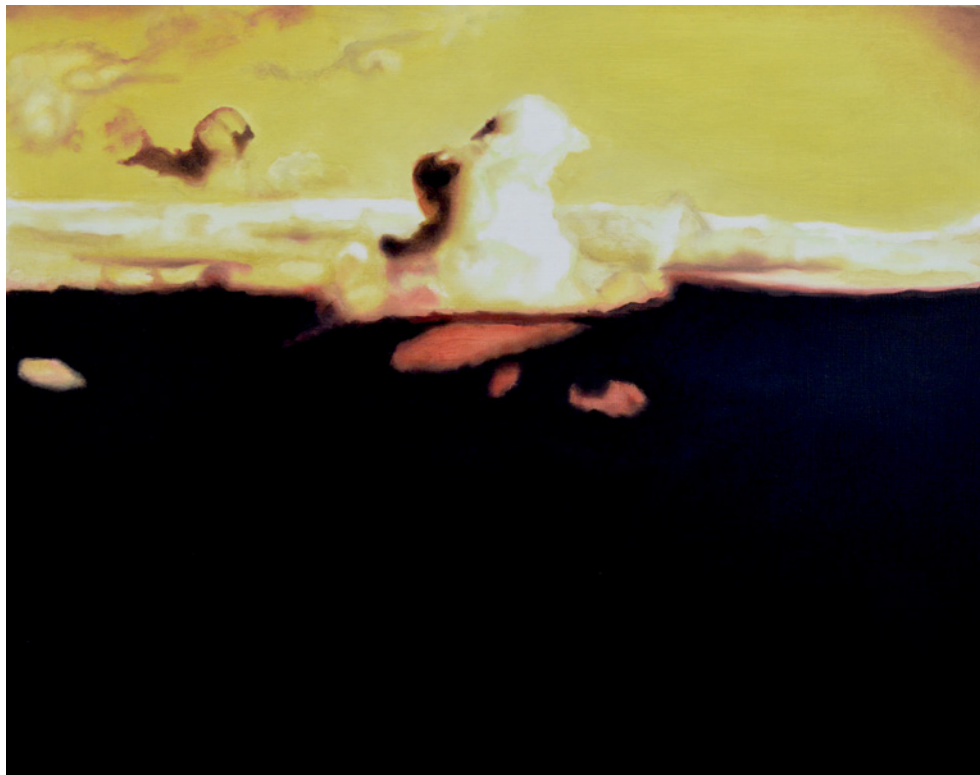


34. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.
35. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.





36 Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.
37 Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.



38. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.
39. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on board. Ten parts, 300 by 380 mm each.

The sky is falling

The voice of nature loudly cries,
And many a message from the skies...
(extract from Robert Burns, 1790, quoted by Richards, 2001).

On why the atmosphere should be viewed as a global commons¹, John Volger argues:

...that the atmosphere can also be regarded as a commons, exploited by all yet owned by none. Most significantly the atmosphere has been abused as a common sink. Until relatively recently it provided a completely free waste disposal system for a whole range of anthropogenic pollutants. It also constitutes the ultimate public good, that is to say if resources are expended on improving air quality, it is impossible to exclude people from enjoying the benefits (Volger, 2001:2427).

Our ability to breathe is an unconscious one, one that is critical for life, and yet one that we take for granted in what constitutes as [our] freedom. I have experienced two different versions of that freedom being lost in my lifetime².

‘Fly’ elucidates on our dependence, and the sky’s indifference.

To make his point about Anthropogenic visualisation, most of the images Demos selected for his book are photographs of landscapes taken from the air, before he proceeds to bring us down to the work of activists on the ground. Demos (2017:28) argues that ‘Anthropocene visibility’³ (referring specifically to satellite and photographic imagery) acts in support of geoengineering that “we” have indeed mastered nature’. Such a view, noting that science and technology have served to warn us about climate change, champions the hope that geoengineering will also therefore save us. Demos, however, argues that these geoengineering projects will be backed by big corporates and business, not the “human” that the Anthropocene alludes to (ibid), and considering the current behaviour and unaccountability of these corporations and businesses, are likely to result in spiralling, worse outcomes (Demos, 2017:29-30).

A photograph by David Dodge of tar sands in Alberta, Canada, is described as “a massive wound of industrial mining” (Demos, 2017:52) [Fig. 42]. Edward Burtynsky’s photographs, on the other hand, are “more about dramatising in spectacular fashion the perverse visual beauty of a technological, and even geological, act of mastery devoid of environmental ethics” (Demos, 2017:61-64) [Fig. 40]. Demos takes issue with Burtynsky and Louis Helbig’s approach, suggesting that this aesthetic is less effective ‘against the Anthropocene’ and ‘Capitalocene violence’ because it ‘naturalizes petroculturalism’ (Demos, 2017:65). As my work relies so strongly on photographs as construct, I would argue that while Dodge’s landscape ‘resembles’⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien’s Mordor, Burtynsky’s landscapes are ‘fictional memories’, reminiscent of dystopian science fiction, because I do not conceive his aesthetically pleasing use of light and composition as innocent — I recognise it in post-apocalyptic terms. In Burtynsky’s photographs, appreciating aesthetics does not mean that the viewer is deceived, or even docile: we see the encroachment of human (Demos concedes that “many of us drive cars and live in energy-consuming homes” (Demos, 2017:55)) and capital endeavours overtaking the landscape, and recognise that the naturalization is in fact, unnatural, our own landscape turned alien. In both cases there is a sense of abandonment - the human in the landscape is the artefact, the natural world is lost. The wound in Dodge’s work is still a wound in Burtynsky’s landscape. Helbig’s work [Fig. 41] is criticised for its ‘visual splendor’ (Demos, 2017:65) and ‘visual pleasure’ rendered by its abstract composition, which disconnects it from the reality of the photographed landscape (Demos, 2017:66).

Comparisons are also made between Burtynsky and Helbig’s works and Richard Misrach’s (Demos, 2017:70) on the ground, “pollution filled apocalyptic landscape” [Fig. 43]. As with David Dodge’s image, Demos does ascribe to visual representations that typify an ‘apocalyptic landscape’, not unlike the Mad Max film earlier criticized in the book for “post apocalyptic futures reveling in [...] drought ravaged, violence obsessed, and resource-scarce narratives” (Demos, 2017:50). Furthermore, Misrach’s photographs do not escape from being pictorial and hauntingly beautiful, and there is a “perverse enjoyment” we get from “images of our own annihilation” (Demos, 2017:70) that carries across all the works.

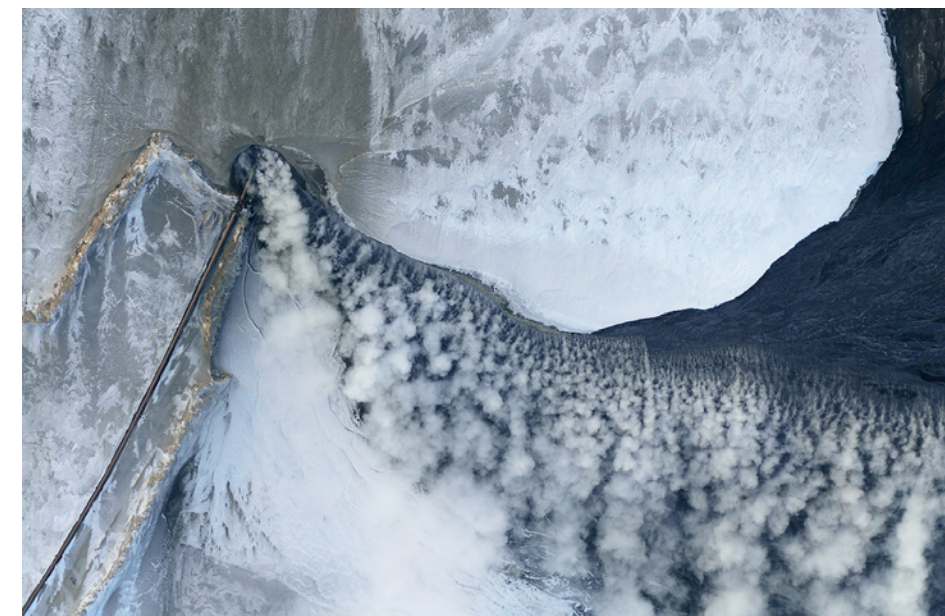
‘Fly’ toys with the idea of ‘images of our own annihilation’ in two parts, beginning with the *Outer limits* [Fig. 19], a realistically painted, life-size gas mask that is remnant of a bygone, airborne threat. In close proximity on the floor, sit *Ruby slippers* [Fig. 20], a pair of pink gumboots that are ostensibly for a child due to their size. The mask and the boots are both ownerless, floating in white voids that mimic catalogue displays of objects for sale via Amazon, e-Bay or other delivery companies⁵. As discussed in Chapter II, titles function to engage with the subject and further illusion. The titles *Outer limits* and *Ruby slippers* borrow from speculative fiction, the former taken from a TV series exploring different speculative and science fiction stories, and the latter referencing Dorothy from ‘The Wizard of Oz’.

Outside is then rendered visible in two side by side paintings, that have a Hazmat figure first on what appears to be a dry river bed, and then on a road, but somewhat disproportionately smaller [relative to the other figure and the road itself]. *Energize* [Fig. 21], the painting’s title, is borrowed from *Star Trek*, a term that was often used during teleportation. Like Tansey’s ‘swooshing’ rocket, teleportation is best approached through ‘sense’ or sensation, in this case by ‘moving’ the figure from one panel to another, and using the landscape to denote that a change has taken place. The disproportion is at odds with the realistic technique of the paintings, which make it that ‘it is so’. After all, there are no rules here: teleportation can be that a person is perfectly replicated in a new setting, or that people pop up in new settings in a somewhat altered state.

My hazmat figures bear some similarity to Justin Mortimer’s paintings of figures in hazmats walking across landscapes (e.g. *Cleaners*, 2008) [Fig. 44] or permeating backdrops of forests and other environs (e.g. *Zona*, 2016) [Fig. 45]. A figurative painter, the artist has created a murky, visually tantalising dystopian world with characters that echo our future present. His most recent exhibition, *Tomorrow* (September 24 - November 6, 2020), directly alludes to COVID-19, conflict and protest (see artist’s notes, *Tomorrow*; Mortimer, 2020)⁶. *Zona*, which was also exhibited in *Tomorrow*, suggests that we have (seen it before) in the smoke from US flares in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and hazmat figures from the Ebola outbreak (Bradway, 2019:256). *Zona* seems to pre-empt our current state, as it was painted in 2016.

Together, this section of ‘Fly’ uses (photo)realistic painting techniques to convey that a ‘real’ event has taken place that has altered our relationship with ‘outside’, and at the same time references confinement and speculative modes of escape.

The second part of ‘Fly’ consists of an installation of principally cloud and skiescapes. Skies often literally or symbolically set the mood of the scene within the framework of landscape in the arts, and are a greatly suggestive backdrop for unfolding human dramas. In the case of Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi, the turbulence of his skies are mimicked in the actions of his figures. Reviewing his solo exhibition, *Window Part II*, Ashraf Jamal (2017), a cultural analyst, sees Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ in Ngqinambi’s paintings:



40. Top left: Edward Burtynsky, *Oil Fields #19ab*, Belridge, California, USA, 2003.

41. Bottom left: Louis Helbig, *Effluent Steam*, Muskeg River Mine, Fort McKay, Alberta, Canada, 2012.

42. Top right: David Dodge, *Synchrude oil-sands mining operations with upgrader plant in the background*, Alberta, Canada, 2007.

43. Bottom right: Richard Misrach, *Abandoned Trailer*, Mississippi River, near Dow Chemical Plant, Plaquemine, Louisiana, 1998.

1. A shared property/communal resource that is used by all.

2. Lockdowns of Chernobyl and COVID-19, alluded to earlier in Chapter 1.

3. Anthropocene visualisations—charts, maps, routes—in literature are often illustrative of corporate as opposed to human endeavours (Demos, 2017:18).

4. Agreement on what things, e.g. in film, resemble in a book.

5. In the wake of COVID-19, delivery companies became a cultural phenomenon as people either weren’t allowed, or feared stepping outside.

6. See *Tomorrow* (exhibition, September 24 - November 6, 2020).



44. Top left: Justin Mortimer, *Cleaners*, 2008. Oil on panel, 610 by 800 mm.
45. Bottom left: Justin Mortimer, *Zona*, 2016. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 1830 by 3050 mm.
46. Right: Detail. *Magnitude*, 2022. Oil on board. Two parts, 300 by 300 mm each.





“We have fashioned our own hell - Ngqinambi seems to suggest”. The symbolism of heaven or damnation in *A grand way to fall* (2016) [Fig. 49], figures falling down a stained canvas into a sea of clouds, as Jamal (2017) observes, can be universally interpreted, but also allude to South Africa’s woes. Ngqinambi’s approach to clouds in his storytelling is reflective of Mary Jacobus’ (2006:220) suggestion that clouds “provoke ideas about both transcendence and inwardness”, therefore: “The sky, then, functions both as an organ of sentiment, and as a form of free association (2006:224).”



This assimilation could perhaps be challenged through juxtaposition and the distortion of the image. MJ Lourens’ industrial-cityscapes focus as much on the skies above the cities as the cities themselves, and his works therefore document both the Anthropocene and the cultural climate of the present. The series, ‘Views on Entropy’, shows the evolution of his practice towards the inclusion of digital/pixelated elements (such as in *Pataphor*, 2018) [Fig. 48], either partly blurring sections of the painting, or functioning as objects in their own right: “Lourens begins to consider the ways in which digital media affect the way we view representations of space. The pixel, as a piece of visual information which has not successfully rendered and thus remains inaccessible, denotes a fractured image. It disrupts the viewing process, frustrating the viewer, concealing something from our view, obstructing our automatic assimilation of the image” (Barnard Gallery, 2018). With this act, Lourens introduces a speculative element, a virtual realm that toys with what is real and what is fabricated, both within the landscape and in the act of image-making itself.

In ‘Fly’, seven of the skyscapes are paired: *Rapture* [Fig. 22], *Sentinel* [Fig. 23], *Magnitude* [Fig. 24], *Descent* [Fig. 25], *Spectrum* [Fig. 26], and *Tentacular ones* [Fig. 27], with *Covenant* [Fig. 28]—two round, back-to-back canvases suspended in the centre of the space—being the largest. The pairings juxtapose different scenes based on contrast and continuity, colour and composition, and explore inter and intra-connections in a manner already espoused in ‘The tooth and fairies’. So for instance, *Rapture* plays on the contrast between dark and light across two skyscapes, except the light emanating from one is evocative of a white out, the cause of which is unknown. Conversely, the play here is on escaping from the future-noir city into the country, but as birds usually symbolise land in the near vicinity, the paintings are also indicative of a ‘voyage in search of’ [‘there is no nature to escape to anymore’]. This voyage or great trek continues across all the skyscapes in ‘Fly’. Colour is used to transform Earth into Martian territory, notably in *Sentinel* and *Tentacular ones*, and pink/blue lands in *Spectrum*, where the back of a billboard still roots them on Earth. Non-finito is also used alongside realistic painting in *Sentinel* and *Tentacular ones*, to juxtapose seemingly sketched, plein air studies next to oppositely finished paintings.

John E. Thornes’ (2008) approach to the sky in painting argues for viewing the work of John Constable and other artists who create work about the atmosphere that blends “the social and physical sciences”, referred to as “cultural climatology”. Viewing paintings from this perspective allows one to interpret both climate/ changing weather and the cultural signifiers of the time, such as the level of air quality, which points to the level of industry and other cultural cues embodied in the atmosphere. In particular, he discusses (2008:575) Monet’s obsession with how atmosphere affects the objects that it surrounds in his London series (1899 - 1905), whose beauty belies their reliance on Victorian fog and pollution.

Monet has a contemporary equivalent in Luan Nel’s (The Poseidon Adventure: S.O.S, 2018) daily posts on Instagram of the view from his Cape Town studio, which he translated into a solo exhibition, *The Poseidon adventure: S.O.S.* Nel (The Poseidon Adventure: S.O.S, 2018) unpacks the lack of context that Instagram images, and indeed the medium of painting, both have, and relates his paintings to colonial landscape paintings’ act of ‘Europinizing’ scenes by omitting the indigenous population and altering the actual landscapes. For *Poseidon adventure: S.O.S* (2018), Nel opted for misty, atmospheric scenes in the early morning and late evening, such as in *In time* (2018) [Fig. 47] which, Thornes would tell you, inadvertently also documents the air quality relative to the distant lights of the town.

Thornes’ observations underscore the fact that a beautiful sunset may actually be an ‘Anthropogenic act’, lending itself to a different way of approaching representations of the sky and surrounding landscape. This Anthropogenic act is twofold: the sky is polluted because of human/industry in the painting; and we accept the painting of the pollution, as beautiful. Nicholas Mirzoeff (2014:220 quoted by Demos, 2017:69) suggests that aesthetically, due to our assimilation—“it comes to seem natural, right, and then beautiful”—Claude Monet’s work is the ‘anaesthetization’ of “the perception of modern industrial pollution” (Demos, 2017:70).

The allusion to flight is evoked differently across the works, from the telescopes in *Sentinel*, to direct visual and literal references in *Magnitude*, *Descent* and *Covenant*. *Descent* descends from the pictorial of a slanted bird’s eye view of a floating cloud, to abstraction with a white line for a landing strip, reminiscent of Allan D’Arcangelo’s series of flatly painted highways that show “the highway itself as a kind of inherently abstract place” (Schwabsky in Bradway, 2019:19). *Magnitude* features one painting with a distant, lone figure looking out across a vast landscape, evocative of Casper David Friedrich’s “‘Rückenfigur (German, back figure)’” (Timberlake, 2018:19), while the second painting is of a vast cloud, rendered gigantic relative to the small figure:

By counter-posing the anonymous individualised figure to the ‘visual’ field of the landscape, Rückenfiguren of contemporary science fiction qualitatively differ from those of an earlier age: no longer opening potential new horizons for humanity, but rather delineating the horizon of humanity’s potential just as so-called ‘archeological horizons’ define the epochal extent of vanished civilisations within the strata (Timberlake, 2018:19).

In an attempt to subvert Demos’ Anthropogenic visualization, the two *Covenant* paintings, which are clouds as seen from the air, hang at eye-level, ‘floating’ mid-air. The large photorealist paintings of clouds (such as *Wolken (Fenster)* 1970) [Fig. 51] that Gerhard Richter produced between 1968 - 1979 relate to *Covenant* relative to scale, abstraction - “the tension between the finite (figurative) and infinite (abstract)” (Lotz, 2017:210), and use of photography to “transcend the painting to become a placeless experience of Nature” (Elger in Richter, 2011:27). The paintings in *Covenant* contrast in mood, but in both cases the cloudscape are evocative of landscapes, one carved in the desert, one in ice. Carved, because there is a mathematical quality to the patterns of clouds, everything specifically placed, governed by unseen forces.

47. Top left: Luan Nel, *In time*, 2018. Oil and spray paint on canvas, 1000 by 1000 mm.
48. Bottom left: MJ Lourens, *Pataphor*, 2018. Acrylic on board, 400 by 600 mm.
49. Right: Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi, *A grand way to fall*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 1500 by 2000 mm.



50. Detail, *Wormhole*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.



51. Gerhard Richter, *Wolken (Fenster)*, 1970. Oil on canvas. 4 parts, in total: 2000 by 4000 mm.
 52. Cynthia Daignault, *I love you more than one day*, 2013. Oil on linen. 365 parts, 254 by 381 mm each.



'Fly' concludes with *Wormhole*, an installation of a sequence of 10 smaller paintings, reminiscent of the artist Cynthia Daignault's use of serialization (Bradway, 2019:29), specifically in the skyscapes in her installation, *I love you more than one day* (2013) [Fig. 52]. This is the only installation in 'Fly' that features an interior setting. A figure in a hazmat suit sits inside a rustic room next to a telescope, while the rest of the series mostly features skies with little to no contextualising landscape. The cabin evokes a frontier sensibility to the painting, a 'Wild West' out there, and/or a time capsule in the contemporaneity of the figure inside this antiquated interior. It is also the only work other than *Ruby slippers* that features the pink boots, worn by a child walking behind an adult. *Ruby slippers*, standing alone in a corner, thus functions to ground all the skies, menacing in its presence and its owner's absence, promising as it is of stepping into a magical wonderland.

The skies and juxtapositions in 'Fly' demonstrate that 'fire and brimstone' representations and scenes of wanton destruction are not the only way to allude to environmental crisis, a catastrophic event, or an 'Innovation X' that has led to catastrophe. The aesthetics of Chernobyl, Novichok and COVID-19 have shown that 'normal' is what things look like when the threat is unseen. I am not alone in this approach. In her exhibition *Paradise Lost* (2017), Robyn Penn includes varied interpretations of clouds in juxtaposition with other images - in particular portraits⁷ - that allude to climate change (Barnard Gallery, 2017). Clouds, such as her work *Cloud* (n.d) [Fig. 54], function both as a "symbol of beauty and hope and an ominous, haunting warning", and stylistically range from mark making and abstraction to fleshy, sublime forms, "painted [...] using thin oil glazes that cause them to glow from within" (Penn, interview with Lindi Meiring, 2017; Barnard Gallery, 2017). The interplay between portraits and clouds establishes an interesting dynamic between the perceived 'judges' and the 'judged' in the climate debate, reversing the position of "climate misinformers", for instance, through a "visceral approach" to how they and the clouds are rendered (Marange, 2016).

7. *Cloud of Unknowing* (2016), which preceded *Paradise Lost* (2017), was first to depict contorted portraits of "climate misinformers", such as the Koch brothers, Frederick Seitz and William Nierenberg (Marange, 2016), while *Paradise Lost* continued the narrative of the 'bad guys' of climate change and introduced the 'good guys', depicting the arrest of climate activists (Penn, interview with Meiring, 2017).

Ruth Richards', "A new aesthetic for environmental awareness: chaos theory, the beauty of nature, and our broader humanistic identity", interrogates our relationship with beauty, questioning Immanuel Kant's view that "beauty is disinterested" (Richards, 2001:61, 63). In arguments as to whether beauty can "help us adapt, evolve, and cope with environmental crisis" (Richards, 2001:59), she suggests that interactions with beauty can: alter us psychologically and lead to conscious awareness (Richards, 2001:62); lead to transcendence (Richards, 2001:63); and lead to knowing (Richards, 2001:66) and the filing away of information that may serve us later (Richards, 2001:68).

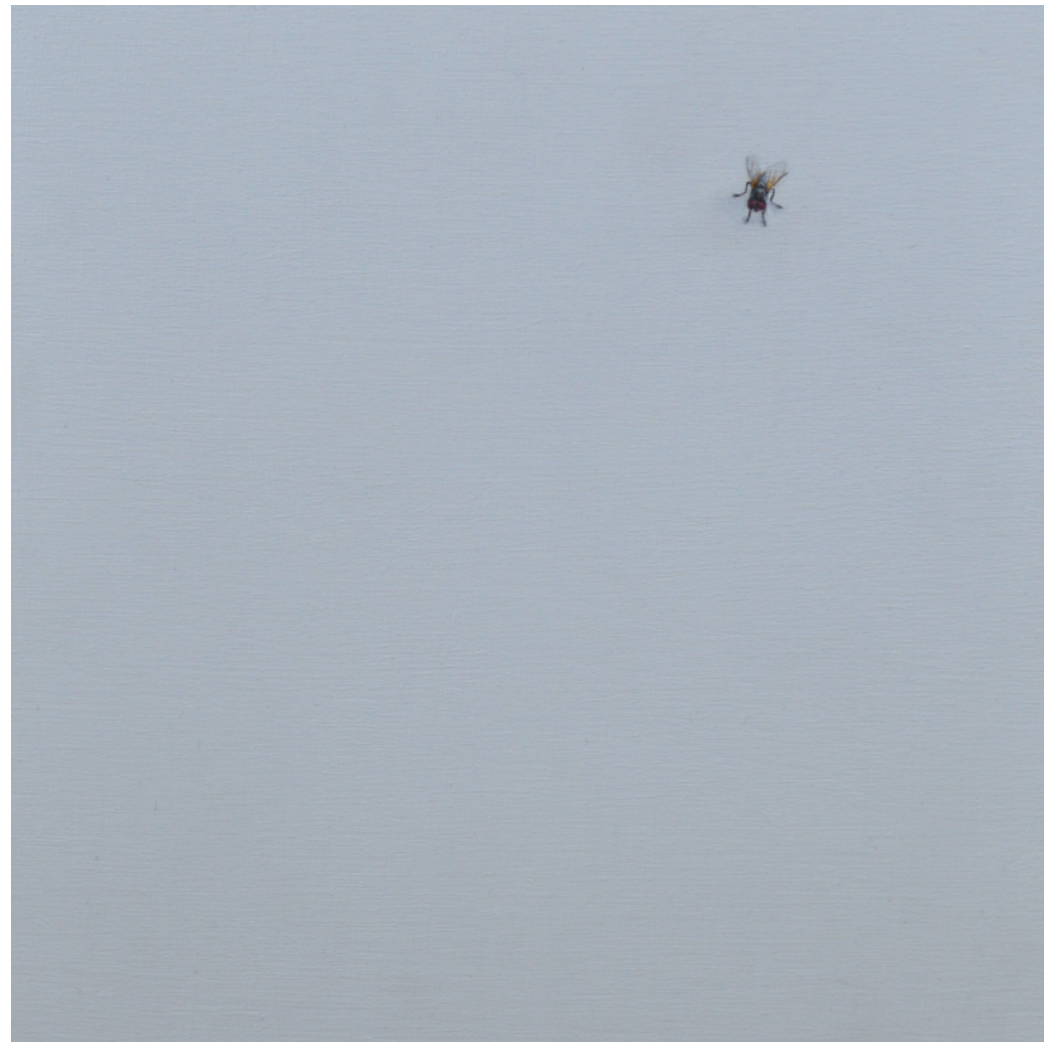
Kant differentiates between beauty and the 'boundless' sublime (Richards, 2001:70), and here Richards observes that: "Kant's dynamical sublime involves forces that appear to wield absolute power over one—consider earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanoes" and "in each case, people are confronted with hints of infinity, conveyed in size, number, power, destructiveness, or in some other way" (Richards, 2001:71). Reflecting on this observation by Richards, landscape in the visual arts and literature, particularly in the genre of speculative fiction, does not need to rely on these Kantian forces to drive home the point of environmental or (if one goes with Anthropocene arguments) ultimately human-engineered catastrophe; identifying ourselves in relation to nature through the appreciation of a 'simple' cloud may serve to have the same effect.



53. Detail, *Tentacular ones*, 2022. Oil on wooden panels. Two parts, 400 by 700 mm each.



54. Robyn Penn, *Cloud*, n.d. Oil on canvas. 1005 by 1005 mm.



55. Detail, *Stasis*, 2022. Oil on board. Three parts, 180 by 180 mm, 300 by 300 mm, and 180 by 180 mm.

Conclusion

One giant leap

In an attempt to rally artists and writers into action against climate change the author, Ben Okri, muses about the feeling of living at ‘the end of time’:

Maybe the sages of Pompeii, if there were any, felt it in advance. Maybe those ancient civilisations whose societies were about to be wrecked by invaders from the sea felt it. But I can't think of any who had the data that it was coming, who had the facts pouring at them every day, and yet who carried on as if everything was normal (Okri, 2021).

‘The sky is falling’ was initially conceived as an engagement with climate change and the Anthropocene in some foreseeable future, but this concept was overtaken by the speed at which world-changing events have occurred since 2020, when I started this project. The project does not specify a catastrophe, precisely because these events are running concurrently, each one in a race to outdo the next - pandemic to a potential World War. There is a great deal of disassociation with the magnitude of these events, and for that, I must admit [much as I admire it], I partly blame speculative fiction, as too many fictional memories abound, and nothing surprises, in the true sense of ‘I can't believe this is happening’. What I argue here is that there is a play-book to follow if Wells’ aliens landed tomorrow, a role in a science fiction film, one that has made us somewhat complacent and ready to accept that a pandemic that imprisons us at home is ‘the new normal’.

Okri (2021) calls for an ‘existential creativity’ that focuses all attention on preventing the ‘end of time’, “a new art to waken people both to the enormity of what is looming, and the fact that we can still do something about it” - a language that more can understand, and act upon. In the context of ‘new art’, I wonder if it is possible, even with the scope and reach of Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgement*. The COVID-19 pandemic has been testament to society’s disbelief and impatience with dealing with a threat that it cannot see. The world stays the same; if you are not ‘directly’ affected, then it is not your problem. If this is the reaction to an immediate threat, then the ‘Impossibility of Death’¹ is compounded when the unseen is forecast into the future, as with Climate Change.

As a whole, this body of work does attempt to engage with issues that concern our atmosphere through the seeming indifference of the landscape. It is not the landscape that will “be weird and lurid, of another planet” (Wells, 1898 quoted in Rieder, 2005:380), it is us who will be extraterrestrial wanderers. I specifically use (photo) realistic painting to get this point across. Much as ‘the romantic landscape hanging on a wall’ may be intellectually cast off in the Anthropogenic battle, I am of the view that like speculative film, it has far greater reach and appeal beyond academia, thus expanding the circle of conversation and addressing Zoe Todd’s (in Turpin & Davis, 2015:244) observation that “not all humans are equally invited into the conceptual spaces where these disasters are theorized or responses to disaster formulated”. Dietmar Elger, writing about how Richter’s landscapes were largely ignored, describes this cast off as critics’ “helplessness or speechlessness [...] in the face of such romantic scenes, which so very obviously seem to fulfil the wider public expectations of recognisable images in art (Elger in Richter, 2011:20-21)”. Turning the tide on the issues raised by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (in Alan Braddock and Renee Ater, 2014) requires greater inclusiveness in what constitutes as eco criticism, as achieving real change requires everyone’s participation.

In the context of Climate Change, the young activist, Greta Thunberg (in Meyer, 2019), makes a simple point: “We are not the ones who are responsible for this, but we are the ones who have to live with these consequences, and that is so incredibly unfair”. Demos (2017) makes impassioned arguments for activism on the ground, and here I agree with how Thunberg’s concerns have filtered down into my paintings, and therefore into my life.

Which brings me to *Perseverance*, the name given to the actual lime green hazmat suit that I purchased on e-Bay, a name borrowed from one of NASA’s Mars Rovers. I opted to get the suit to take my own photographs in the Karoo landscape, specifically in Sutherland, which houses the South African Large Telescope (SALT), just as Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson successfully launched ‘space tourism’. Whether it is under the umbrella of progress and the fantasy of discovery, or the Capitolocene, the space race is back on, with billionaires and countries vying for stakes on other planets.

As we are pushed over the realm of the ‘what if’ to the ‘when’, *Perseverance* has started wandering the Earth, art imitating life, and has transmuted out of the paintings into the real world. And in doing so already garnered reaction, from everyone who has come into contact, up close and incidentally from afar. It is therefore conceivable that in some version of the future, as we leap onto breathless Mars or off a cliff, *Perseverance* might visit their own exhibition as if to ask “To what purpose?” (Pratchett and Baxter, 2012:14).

1. Referring to Damien Hirst’s ‘*The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living*’ (1991), an artwork of an actual dead shark floating in formaldehyde.

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